

Kit the Intern

by
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This is a work of fiction. None of the Characters or events described in this story are real.

Kit has just got himself a job as an office boy, while he waits to join the army and learn a trade. Young, naive and eager to please, he soon ends up in hospital, the victim of a hit and run. The office administrator offers to rent him her loft apartment; her husband, a self-employed handyman has left her; a mystery that she doesn't want to discuss, so when Kit unearths drawings hidden amongst his tools that hint at a planned heist, Kit isn't sure what to do, and finds himself on the target list of a murderous organised crime gang.

01

I liked Shelagh from the first moment I met her. There was something about her. It was my first day at work, and I had been sent to get some new box files by one of the secretaries. I was told to go to the Administrator's office and ask Mrs. Sullivan.

She was making herself a hot drink in a tiny kitchenette.

"Mrs. Sullivan?" I asked after knocking on the Administrator's open door.

“Just call me Shelagh,” she said, her head poking out, “You must be the new man, Kit. Do you want a cup of something? I’ve got English breakfast tea and instant coffee.”

I shook my head, “No thanks... I’ve been asked get some box files by ... Sorry, I can’t remember her name, the secretary in the...”

“Mindy... she called,” said Shelagh stepping out from the kitchenette. She had one of those faces that looked like it was made to smile. Green eyes and reddish brown hair. Nice figure.

“You don’t sound very British,” she said, “Are you Australian?”

“Zambian,” I said... “Used to be one of your colonies... Northern Rhodesia.”

“Not one of mine... I’m Irish,” she said with a smile, “Well, you are a fine looking young man, don’t go breaking too many hearts.” She pointed, “Help yourself to files.”

I thanked her and took a stack of box files.

A couple of days after that I was late getting to the canteen for lunch after spending the morning running around and ensuring that a busload of teenagers on a school trip stayed together and didn’t get into any trouble while they were shown around the workings of Turnkey Consultants.

They took up a lot of space in the canteen. I fetched my food from the counter and was looking for somewhere to sit when Shelagh waved an arm, “Here Kit, you can sit with us.”

She introduced me to the three other women at the table. I immediately forgot their names.

“Kit is from Zambia,” she told them all, “He started here on Monday - Kevin’s replacement.”

The other women were clearly unimpressed with me joining them. They all left within a few minutes of me sitting there.

“I’m sorry... I have chased all your friends away,” I said to Shelagh.

She laughed, “They aren’t my friends... but I would rather talk to you anyway. What brings you all the way here from Zambia?”

I told her I was waiting to join the army, and had been offered work at TurnKey. She seemed quite shocked that anyone would want to join the army. I told her it was the only way I could get the engineering qualifications I wanted.

“You could end up in Ukraine,” she said, “Soldiers are killed there every week.”

I shrugged, “People get killed and maimed every day in car accidents... do you drive to work?”

Shelagh smiled and nodded, “You are right... fear should not be allowed to get in the way of living your life. So what is Zambia like?”

I didn’t get to tell her much because my phone rang - I was wanted at the receiving bay.

I did not get to see Shelagh for over a week after that. I had come in early on Friday. She was getting out of her car when I cycled in.

“Hello Kit,” she greeted me and waited while I chained my bike to the car park railings, “Do you live close by?”

“About twenty minutes by bike if I don’t get any punctures,” I said, “None today.”

We signed in and went our separate ways. I showered in the med centre and then went to the canteen for coffee and a toasted sandwich. There were only a few people there so I had a table to myself.

Shelagh sat herself down opposite me, “I hope you don’t mind?” she asked.

My mouth was full. I managed to shake my head.

“What are you planning to do this weekend?” she asked.

I gulped down what I had been chewing, “Looking for cheaper digs,” I said, “What about you?”

“I’ve got to find someone to sort out the bloody washing machine... its leaking and ruining my kitchen cupboards. I’ve got a loft you can rent. It’s full of junk at the moment, but I can do cheap - it’s small but self contained. What sort of price are you looking at?”

I shrugged, “Cheap, as in as little as possible. I’m hoping to get something for twenty quid a week or less. If you have tools I can take a look at the washing machine for you.”

“Know about plumbing do you?”

“A bit, we do all our own plumbing and electrics on the farm. I’m not a qualified anything, but I’m quite handy. The only tools I have are my Swiss Army knife and my bike tools.”

“Well come and have a look after work,” said Shelagh, “If you’re prepared to get your hands dirty, I’ll do you a good deal. There are tools in the garage - I have no idea what sort of tools. Come to my office before you leave, I’ll draw you a map of how to get to my place.”

Shelagh lived a lot closer to the office than I did - it was an easy ten minute ride with a good cycle path the whole way. I was there before her, and cycled around the block.

Thatcher’s Ale House wasn’t thatched and looked quite good - a short walk from Shelagh’s. There was a fish and chip shop, a bike repair business, a barbershop, a Spar mini grocery and a Fusion Take Away, which boasted Indian, Thai and Sechuan food all on a strip mall around the corner from Thatcher’s Ale House.

Shelagh’s car was parked in front of her garage, and she was talking to an older lady on the pavement.

“Hello Kit, this is my neighbour, Mrs. Ash, she was just telling me that a young man on a bike knocked on the door earlier. I guess you got here before me.”

I greeted Mrs. Ash, who studied me suspiciously, “You’re a foreigner ain’t yer?”

“From the colonies Mrs. Ash... he’s come to join the army and working at TurnKey while they sort out the paperwork.

“Army? What regiment you joining?” asked Mrs. Ash, “My Jim was in the Artillery he was... twenty two years he did and proud of it. He was stone deaf because of it mind you.”

“Engineers,” I told her, “If I pass all the exams.”

“Douglas from number twelve was a Sapper,” said Mrs. Ash, “He’ll be tickled pink to know you want to join up. I’m pleased to meet you Kit... but I have to go now and check the brisket.”

She waggled her fingers and smiled.

“She sees everything,” said Shelagh chuckling, “She’ll be phoning everyone now, before she forgets. Come on, put your bike in the hallway for now.”

I had a look at the washing machine and then spent an hour rummaging around in the very cluttered garage. There were a lot of tools, mostly good ones, but they needed a bit of TLC. I found thread tape and used some WD40 to free up a pair of water pliers and an adjustable spanner, then spent another hour battling with the plumbing. I managed to get the leak stopped but told Shelagh that the plumbing had been really badly done and offered to redo it and replace the water damaged woodwork.

“How much will it cost me?” she asked.

“I haven’t got a clue,” I admitted, “You have a lot of tools - probably everything I need, but I’d have to buy pipe and fittings and more wood, screws and glue.”

“Come and look at the loft... see what you think?”

I followed her up the stairs. The loft was nicer than anything I had ever lived in. It was filled with boxes but it really looked great.

“I like it,” I said, “How much would you want?”

“Fifty quid a month,” said Shelagh, “Strictly cash and up front. I don’t want to pay tax on it, so if anyone asks, you are my live-in help, OK?”

I nodded, “When can I move in?”

“As soon as you like,” she said smiling, “I don’t expect you to start paying till all this stuff is gone... do you have a driving licence?”

“Yes...”

“Excellent. I rent a storage container, but I ... well I’m not ready to explain. If you want to move in, you can clear out all the boxes from the loft and get them to the storage container - there are some in the spare room and the garage too. I’ll rent a van for you to use. I’ll give you three months rent free for getting that done, and another month if you sort out the plumbing and water damage around the washing machine... I’ll pay for anything you need to buy.”

“Its a deal,” I said with a grin, “Can I start tomorrow?”

Shelagh was in bed when I rang the doorbell the next morning.

“Christ on a Cross Kit, don’t you sleep in on a Saturday? What time is it?”

“Seven I think,” I said, “Sorry.”

“You don’t bloody look it,” she muttered, turning away, “Do you want coffee?”

By nine, when the Budget Rental van was delivered, I had all the boxes from the Loft down in the hallway. By eleven the van was filled to capacity and I still had about a dozen boxes in the garage.

Shelagh kept me supplied with coffee and brought me a toasted sandwich mid-morning, “You aren’t afraid of hard work,” she said approvingly, “Don’t hurt yourself, some of those boxes are heavy.”

“I like physical work,” I told her, “I miss working on the farm.”

“Why didn’t you stay in Zambia... why come all the way here to join the Army?”

“Its a really long and boring story,” I told her, “But being white and of South African descent is a bit of a handicap in Zambia. Hopefully things will get better but for now... Zambia isn’t good for my health.”

“I think I understand,” she said, “Well, I’ll let you get on with it.”

Shelagh came with me to the storage unit, which was just outside Braintree. She used a code to get us into the yard and unlocked the storage unit, which was a forty foot shipping container.

“There’s not much inside...but I think there are some tools. You can bring them back to the house if you want. I really do not want to go inside. I’ll walk to the Lamb and have a drink. I’ll buy you lunch when you’re done.” She handed me the keys and told me the code to get out.

Offloading took me another hour. I loaded all the tools; nice looking power tools in boxes, into the van, and locked up. It was two PM when I got to the pub. Shelagh was drinking Guinness. She told me to order whatever I liked and the same for her.

“It’s all my husband’s stuff,” she told me when I returned to the table, “He walked out on me... didn’t say a word. Just left a note saying I could have whatever I liked and asked me to put everything I didn’t want in storage. He left the keys and code. Said he’d meant to do it all himself but he ran out of time.”

“Sorry, that must be hard for you?”

Shelagh grimaced, “You think?” She shook her head, “Sorry Kit, it’s not your fault. At least he paid off the bloody mortgage and the loan on the car...It could have been worse.”

I could tell she was a little bit drunk, “I just wish I knew why?” she said quietly.

“Do you know where he is?” I asked.

Shelagh shook her head, “I paid one of those agencies to try and find him... he’s not in UK unless he has changed his identity. The police aren’t interested. His sister...unless she is lying, is as baffled as I am. He left a message on her answer phone saying that he was leaving me and starting a new life. They were not especially close, but... Well, I just wanted to explain Kit. Now you know. Please do not ask me about it? It is not something I care to talk about.”

We got back to her house just after four PM, I loaded the last of the boxes and asked Shelagh if I could use the van to bring my stuff to the house after delivering the last of the boxes to the storage unit. She just nodded and gave me a set of keys. She’d had another pint of Guinness with her lunch, and had been very quiet.

By ten PM I was fast asleep in my sleeping bag in the loft.

02

I crept downstairs and spent the morning cleaning the Garage and tidying the tools. There were a lot of tools, I guessed that Mr. Sullivan had been a handyman of sorts. I found a receipt stapled to a warranty card in one of the boxes that contained a contractor’s table saw. It was made out to J. Sullivan. It was only six months old and was from Latimer’s Building Supplies in Braintree.

Shelagh came into the garage just after nine and asked if I wanted breakfast.

“You’ve been busy,” she said looking around the garage,

“There’s space for your car now,” I said.

“I’d rather keep it outside under the car port,” she said, “You can keep your bike in here... use it as a workshop.”

“Are you going to work all day Kit?” asked Shelagh over breakfast.

“It’s not really work, just cleaning up and settling in,” I said.

“I’m not criticising, just interested,” she said, “I’m heading out to visit a friend. I’ll probably be late back. You can use the washing machine and tumble dryer down here. There’s a vacuum cleaner, cleaning materials, towels and bed linen in the cupboards under the stairs, just help yourself. I expect you to do your own cleaning and laundry OK?”

“Sure... I’m house trained,” I said with a smile.

“One last thing Kit... I don’t want you bringing friends here... not boyfriends or girlfriends... no friends allowed.”

“Well I don’t have any friends here yet, but that’s perfectly OK too. This is your home.”

“Well it’s your home too, but I’m new at this lodger stuff... and for now at any rate... no friends allowed.”

I helped with the washing up, thanked her for breakfast and went up to the loft. I didn't hear Shelagh leave, but she was gone when I went to empty the vacuum cleaner bag and return it to the closet under the stairs. By two PM I had cleaned and organised the Loft the way I wanted it. I was really pleased with it.

I went to Thatcher's and ordered a toasted sandwich and a coffee. There was a vacancy for part time barman there, I asked at the bar how to apply.

"I'll tell the boss," said the girl who took my order.

A tall woman brought the coffee to my table, "Jules said you were looking for a job?" she said, "Have you worked in a pub before?"

I shook my head and got to my feet, "No... but I'm willing to learn."

"Sit yourself down," she said, "You're a customer on this side of the counter, "May I sit with you?"

She asked how old I was and where I was from before asking me how many nights I could do a week.

"I have a day job," I said, "I work seven AM to four PM Monday to Friday. Maybe I could work Saturday and Sunday night?"

"How about you come in on Monday at seven PM? It's quiet and I can show you the ropes. I'll pay you nine pounds an hour and feed you... and we can talk after that?"

I nodded and she held out her hand, “I’m Leslie. I’ll see you again on Monday...”

“Kit,” I said, standing and shaking her hand , “Thank you Leslie, I’ll be here.”

Jules brought me my toasted sandwich, “Hi Kit, I’m Jules. Welcome to Thatchers. I think you will like working here.”

She brought me a piece of cheesecake and another coffee before I had finished my toastie, “On the house Kit.”

I enabled mobile data on my phone and did a search for hardware stores and then cycled to B&Q - it was a long cycle.

I got what I needed for the washing machine plumbing and had a look at the laminated mdf. They offered a cutting and delivery service and I got prices for that then cycled back to Shelagh’s.

By nine PM I had done the washing machine plumbing properly and cleaned up, but I was filthy, sore and exhausted. I showered and went to bed. I didn’t hear Shelagh come home. I think she was up and showering when I left on my bicycle for work.

I spent all of Monday in the archives shredding old documents. The shredding machine kept jamming and over heating. I found a manual inside the cabinet door and read that the cutters needed regular lubricating with light machine oil. Nobody in the Archives seemed to know what that was so I went up to Shelagh’s office to ask her if she had any or could get some.

“Sorry Kit, we don’t have any but I can get some delivered,” she said, “Leave the manual with me. You were away early today. I was going to suggest you come in with me, unless you prefer cycling?”

“I like cycling, but thank you for the offer. I’m working at Thatcher’s tonight... trying out as a barman. I think they close at eleven.”

Shelagh looked surprised, “You are a workaholic Kit... Well, I hope you have fun there... are you a drinker?”

I felt my face going red, “Not a very good one.. I tend to fall over.” I said.

I managed to knock off early, and put the tools I thought I would need to service the Shredder in my panniers before showering and getting ready to go to Thatchers.

I walked there and was half an hour early. Leslie was behind the bar.

She smiled and told me to come behind the bar. She showed me where things were and how to use the till. There were only five customers in the taproom.

Leslie let me serve the customers, and steered me right when I went wrong. I had no real trouble apart from dispensing a Guinness... which Leslie had to show me how to do properly. The bar was well laid out and it was just a matter of remembering where everything was. She was impressed that I knew how to operate the espresso bar,

though I didn't have a clue how to do artful designs with the foam.

The evening passed quickly and I quite enjoyed it.

“Sundays are busier,” said Leslie, “Jules and Amy take turns on Sunday. I'd like you to do Wednesday and then Friday as well if you feel up to it? Friday is really busy, Jules and Amy are both on then.”

“Sure,” I said, “It's better than watching TV.”

Leslie laughed and said she'd fetch my food.

We both ate at the bar with Alan and Helen, from the kitchen. Alan wasn't much of a talker, but Helen made up for that. I got home just before midnight.

At work the next day, Shelagh brought me a cardboard box with six, one litre spouted plastic bottles of light machine oil.

I had the shredder in pieces and was cleaning the mechanism with an old paintbrush.

“Goodness Kit, are you going to get it all back together?”

I laughed, “Yes, it's easy enough. It kept overheating and switching off.” I opened the box and took out a bottle of oil. “It will be working again in less than an hour... and then I have days of shredding to do...Joy.”

Shelagh laughed, “Well I'm going to the canteen, do you want a coffee? I'll bring it down if you like?”

“No, I’ll come with you,” I said, “This paper dust is horrible.”

“I didn’t hear you come in last night. How was the bar tending?”

“I enjoyed it. They want me to do Wednesday, Friday and Sunday.”

“Don’t overdo it Kit. Don’t work yourself too hard. Life is for living.”

I nodded, “Living is also quite expensive in this country. I need to earn a bit more if I want to go gadding about.”

Shelagh laughed, “Gadding about? Oh Kit, I wish I were younger. I’m sure you will do well and hope you can afford to go gadding about soon.”

Over coffee I told her that I had redone the washing machine plumbing and had worked out what material was needed to replace the water damaged bits of her kitchen units. I said B&Q offered a cut-to-size and delivery service.

“Don’t use them Kit,” she went red, “Sorry... don’t ask me how I know this, but Latimer’s in Braintree is cheaper and much better. You can borrow my car to go there. They will deliver.”

“Thanks... I’ll try them.”

“If you like them, I’ll open an account there so you don’t have to pay for things you use on my house. Where did you buy the plumbing stuff for the washing machine?”

“B&Q, sorry,”

Shelagh laughed, “There’s no need to apologise. Don’t forget to give me the receipt? Just put it on the entrance hall table if I’m not around?”

I managed to get the shredder working and got through several piles of de-stapled paper before it was time to go home.

The pub was quiet and Leslie sat at a table doing her books while I tended the bar. There was a car parked behind Shelagh’s when I got home. I could hear a woman laughing as I crept up the stairs. I didn’t hear the car leave; it was gone when I left for work in the morning.

I spent the week shredding and was finished early on Friday afternoon. June, the archivist, didn’t believe I had finished and actually checked and counted the bags of shredded paper that were waiting to be collected. I heard later that she also asked security to check that I had not put stacks of paper in the general waste skip.

She did seek me out and thank me for cleaning up nicely after doing the work.

On Saturday Shelagh came with me to Latimer’s and opened an account. They cut the boards there and then, and we managed to get them all into her car. I also bought some iron-on edging and screws.

By eight PM I had finished replacing the water damaged sections and thought the job looked pretty good. Shelagh was impressed.

“That’s quite impressive Kit,” she said, “You are good with your hands. I’ve got a few other jobs you can do if you feel up to it?”

The guest bathroom wall cabinet and the sink cabinet were made from laminated chip board and looked horrible, with water swollen edges. The one in the master bedroom was not as bad, but was made of the same stuff and heading that way. There were a lot of broken shelves in the cupboards and a lot of the drawers had loose runners and thin masonite bottoms that were badly bowed and likely to fall out.

There was enough work there to keep me busy for a while.

“I haven’t seen anything I can’t fix or replace,” I said, “But there’s a lot needs doing.”

Shelagh shrugged, “Do what you can and put a list on the fridge, so I can see what you are up to and how long you are spending on it? I guess you will be living rent free for a long time!”

Leslie wanted me to work on Saturday night and, in the end, agreed to pay me twelve pounds an hour to work Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights.

The following Saturday I cycled to Latimer's early in the morning and had coffee and an omelette in a weird little cafe that was open early. I really liked it and the dreamy looking young girl that worked there.

I spent several hours in Latimer's trying to decide on what to use for the bathroom cabinets. One of the salesmen had been a joiner and he was quite helpful. In the end I decided on pineboard and a water based sealant that could be applied with foam rollers. Delivery was a problem, they didn't deliver on Sundays and Saturday afternoons. I asked them to deliver the following Saturday morning.

I got soaked cycling back to Colchester that afternoon, and Thatcher's was really busy that night. I began to realise that Amy was a bit of a lazy cow, and I saw her pocketing tips. Leslie said we should put our tips in the Staff box along with a list of what we had received. She gave a quarter to the two kitchen staff and we got the rest. I usually got around ten quid in tips on a good night. Friday and Saturday nights were usually good.

Jules was great to work with and always cheerful.

On Sunday night while I was getting fed, Leslie asked if I could work on Wednesday to cover for Jules, who had an exam. I learned that Leslie was Jules's mum. She had left soon after cleaning up. Amy looked a bit sour but didn't say anything.

The week at work went well enough. I was asked to help the IT guy... Bob, to get the network cables run for some office changes that were being done on the first floor. He really stank. Stale body odour and bad breath, and he struggled to run the cables under the false floors. It wasn't particularly hard work and I did most of the actual work, including terminating and labelling the cables. Bob spent most of the time in his cluttered little room next to the server room. I

found a stash of hard core porn under a box while searching for more connectors.

I was surprised when he said he would need to work all weekend to “configure” the server. Sounded like bullshit to me.

I was left to do the bar by myself on Wednesday night, including cashing up. Alan and Helen were surprised, saying she never let anyone but Jules do the cashing up, and then rarely.

Latimer’s delivered the stuff I had ordered at ten on Saturday morning.

By Sunday evening I had made and fitted the guest bathroom cabinet, using the glass shelves, hinges and mirror from the original. Shelagh loved it.

It didn’t take me as long to make the cabinet for Shelagh’s bathroom. I put it up on Tuesday night.

I was really nervous about replacing the basin cabinets, the basins were built into them. I asked Shelagh if she minded me removing the basin to use the original cabinet as a template, and warned her that it might take me a while to make the new one.

She laughed and told me to take as long as I liked. She wasn’t planning on having any guests.

The job was not as hard as I thought, though I made a few mistakes. I took me all week to make and another week to

apply six coats of sealer. I fitted it on the Monday evening and was finishing up when Shelagh came into the room.

“Mrs. Coombes called to ask if you can stand in for her at Thatcher’s tonight. She sounded desperate.”

It took me a while to register that Mrs. Coombes must be Leslie.

“I’ll just finish off here,” I said, “What do you think?”

“I think you’re a bloody genius Kit, but I wish you hadn’t told Leslie Coombes that you live here.”

“I don’t think I did,” I told her, “Sorry... is it a problem?”

Shelagh shook her head, “Not really... just don’t believe everything you hear.”

03

Leslie practically rushed out of the bar when I got there. The taproom was surprisingly busy for a Monday. A birthday party.

Alan and Helen had no idea why Leslie had to rush off. I cashed up again.

I had to take the doors off the bathroom cabinet and cut a bit off the bottoms. It was not difficult, but sealing the bottom edges took a long time. I didn’t want them to soak up water.

It didn't take as long to make the bathroom cabinet for Shelagh's bathroom, but I had a lot more trouble removing the basin and ended up having to do a lot of plumbing work. Shelagh seemed amused by my dismay.

"It's not your fault Kit. I'll use the guest bathroom till its done. Take your time."

Leslie was there on Friday night and ended up behind the bar with me and Amy as it was so busy. She thanked me for standing in for her and asked if she could have my cell phone number.

"Shelagh Sullivan probably doesn't want me calling her," she said quietly, "I promise not to be a nuisance caller."

"How did you know I was lodging at Shelagh's?" I asked.

"Gossip Kit - you'll hear more than you want to when work behind a bar, just remember that less than half of what you hear is true and almost all of it is malicious. Shelagh Sullivan is a good person."

I managed to get the basin plumbing finished in Shelagh's bathroom on Saturday and fitted the basin and cabinet on Sunday. She had gone out and said she wouldn't be back till late.

Saturday and Sunday night were busy nights at Thatcher's. Jules and Amy had a bit of a spat because Amy was spending more time chatting up customers than serving them. Amy stormed off as soon as the bar closed and didn't help with the cleaning up. She hadn't put any tips in the box.

I struggled to get up on Monday, and left after Shelagh, but got to work just before her. She waited while I locked my bike and thanked me for fitting the new basin cabinet.

I was asked to go to a local construction site with one of the planners. She wasn't much of a talker, but she was pleasant company. At the site she handed me a clipboard with a list of names on and asked me to get contact details for each person. I started at the site office and asked if there was anyone there with staff records. A woman gave me a number to call, and I got most of the contact details over the phone talking to the personnel manager in Southend on Sea. The names she had no numbers for were sub contractors - she told me their company names and suggested I look them up on Google. I was finished by 10:00. The project planner looked surprised and handed me the car keys and fifty quid, and asked me to get her a pizza from McCann and Usher. She said it was programmed into the GPS. She told me to get what I wanted and pay the difference myself if it came to more than fifty quid. "I'll message them with my order," she told me when I asked what type of pizza she wanted.

I had never really liked Pizza. Most of the Pizzas I had experienced looked like they had been overcooked from frozen mini pizzas and nothing like what I had seen in the movies.

McCann & Usher pizzas looked great. I had one with minced beef and chilli peppers. It was really good.

I also learned the planner's name from the Pizza shop - Dawn Kemp.

Dawn was scraping mud off her boots with a stick outside the site office when I arrived. She thanked me and suggested I eat in the canteen. She was going to eat in the site office. She looked a bit annoyed, but was pleasant enough to me.

An hour later she messaged me asking if I was up to driving back to the office. She was on the phone the entire journey, telling someone that the contractor was seriously inexperienced and that it would be better to have an on site presence to avoid problems. She suggested someone called Sally.

I started on fixing drawers that night. I removed the masonite and replaced it with plywood that I glued and pinned in place using a fancy cordless pin nailer. I ran out of nails after the third drawer, which was irritating. I went on line and found them at Latimer's, and found that I could have them delivered to Turnkey for a small fee. I ordered a thousand. They were delivered by a guy on a motorbike and turned out to be quite heavy. I asked Shelagh to take them home in her car and she gave me the keys to put them in the car.

By Friday I had fixed all the drawers and started on the broken shelves. It took me a while to perfect a way to fix the wooden strips to the front of the shelves, but once I had that right, I was able to work really fast. The shelves had been pinned with thin wire nails, I decided to use pocket hole screws. I had never used them before but there was a fancy looking pocket hole screw gadget in the garage and after watching a couple of YouTube Videos and practising on some scrap I found it quite easy. I still used glue and the pin nailer, and found it was better to let the glue set before

screwing in the screws. I decided to fill the screw holes on the shelves where they could be seen, which took a bit of time. Later I found a drawer filled with inserts in the garage, that could be used to fill the holes. Much quicker but too late.

Easter was really busy at Thatcher's. Leslie asked me to work some days. I thought she was going to sack me when I refused but she just grimaced and walked away.

Shelagh went away for the Easter long weekend and told me I could use her car while she was away. A taxi collected her on Thursday night.

On Friday night I plucked up the courage to ask Jules if she fancied coming with me to Colchester Zoo. She had already told me that she liked it.

"OK - we pay our way?" she said.

"Do you like Pizza?" I asked, "Can I treat you to a pizza for lunch?"

"Does Shelagh Sullivan let you drive her car?" asked Jules when she climbed in at eight AM. She had walked to Shelagh's.

"Sometimes," I said, "She's gone away for Easter and said I could use it. I'll clean it and fill it up before she gets back."

"What's she like?" asked Jules, "As a person I mean."

"I like her," I said, "She's polite and kind."

“Do you work for her at TurnKey?” asked Jules, “She’s one of the directors there isn’t she?”

“She’s the Head of Administration... I don’t know if she’s also a Director. I’m a general dog’s body, an office boy. I run errands and get sent to work in different departments. This week I’ve delivered documents, collected stationery from the printers, collected people from Stansted and helped to shift an office.”

“Do you like it?”

“I need the work,” I said, “And I’m learning lots, which makes things more interesting.”

“Mum says you are waiting to join the Army...why do you want to be a soldier?”

“I want to be an Engineer, and the army will train me,” I said, “What are you studying?”

“Public administration and finance,” said Jules, “I’m doing the civil service exam in May.”

“Wow! That’s got to be a tough job.”

“My dad was a civil servant. He loved it. He died a few years ago.”

“I’m sorry, you must miss him.”

“I do... mum too. The pub keeps us busy. Too busy for mum I think. Her dad owned the pub. She was thinking of selling it when grandpa died, but then dad died...”

“For what its worth, she is doing a great job, its a wonderful pub.”

“Its really hard to get good staff,” said Jules, “I’ll be leaving soon, if things go to plan, and I guess you’ll be gone before long.”

“I have no idea how long I’ll be here,” I said, “Everybody I know who knows the army says Hurry up and Wait is a way of life in the military.”

The zoo was a lot better than I had expected it to be. Jules was a great guide. It got quite crowded around midday and we decided it was time to leave.

Jules had never heard of McCann and Usher Pizza in Marks Tey. We ate at the small counter and she really liked the pizza she had. I could not begin to imagine pizza with pineapple. She took half of hers to go. I finished mine.

We were back in Colchester before five PM. I walked with her to the pub where she ate the rest of her pizza. We played darts and drank coffee till our shift started.

Amy was a pain, teasing us both incessantly, and calling us lovebirds. Luckily it got really busy and Leslie had to help out behind the bar. Amy and Jules didn’t stay for food. Leslie didn’t eat; she just cashed up and left.

There was a fight outside while we were eating. Alan locked the door and called the police. The brawlers fled before the police arrived. I left Alan talking to them and walked home.

I went off on my bicycle on Sunday morning and buckled my front wheel on the Layer road when a truck scared me off the road. It took me hours to get back to Shelagh's house. The bicycle repair shop was closed but I sent a message asking when they would be open. I was surprised when they called back while I was walking to Thatcher's. The voice sounded foreign and asked what the problem was. I explained that I had a buckled front wheel and he said he could look at it at eight on Monday morning, but said he didn't want to work the whole day as he had visitors in the afternoon.

When I got to Thatcher's I realised that the background noise during the call had been from the pub.

Jules pointed out the bike shop owner to me and said he was from Slovenia, she didn't know his name.

I managed to serve him when he came for a refill and recognised his voice.

"You must be the Bike repair shop owner!" I told him, "I'm Kit, you called me earlier this evening!"

He shook my hand with a rough, strong palm, "It is a pleasure to meet you Kit... I am Marius, from Slovenia. You are a local boy?"

He laughed when I said I was from Zambia, and said he had worked on the mines there when he was a young man. I paid for his drink... a half pint of Guinness, and he said to come at seven instead of eight in the morning.

By ten on Monday morning Marius had straightened my bike wheel and gave my bike a once over. He refused payment and said it was a pleasure to help me. He had told me a lot about life in the Copperbelt of Zambia, and knew some of the people I had known, including my step father's dad, who had died before my mum married my step father.

Leslie asked me to work on Monday night as Amy was unable to. Luckily it was not busy.

Shelagh was home when I got back. She was up and coughing a lot. I made her a mug of ginger, lemon and honey tea, which seemed to help her. She said she was not going into work in the morning.

I was paged and told to go to an office on the top floor. Dawn was there with a man I had not seen before.

"Hi Kit," said Dawn, "Kit, this is the Managing partner Kevin."

Kevin stuck out his hand and shook mine, "Nice to meet you Kit," he said with a smile, "Forgive me, but I need to dash."

He thanked Dawn and left. Dawn looked up at me, "Kit, I hate driving and I need someone to drive me for the next two weeks. The company will pay for all your meals, accommodation and overtime... can you do it?"

"Umm... I need to make some calls... I work nights in a pub. When do we need to leave?"

"I'd like to leave now, but realistically I probably won't be ready till after midday. Can you drive an automatic?"

“I’ll make the calls and fetch some clothes,” I said.

“Give me your cell phone number,” she said, and held out a set of keys. “Its a Pajero - can you fill it up, we have an account at the Layer Road BP. I think its a diesel engine. Be back here by twelve please?”

It was a very fancy Pajero, much nicer than the one I had driven in Zambia. I went to Shelagh’s first.

She was up and still in her dressing gown.

“That tea you made me is marvelous Kit,” she told me, what are you doing back so soon?”

I told her that Dawn Kemp wanted me to drive her around for two weeks. I needed to pack some clothes and call Leslie to let her know I wasn’t able to any work at the pub for the next two weeks.

“Give me her number, I’ll call her... we were friends at school.”

“I asked her how she knew I was lodging here and she said Gossip. She said you were a good person,” I said, handing her my phone, “Call her on my phone.”

She was still chatting to Leslie when I came down with my backpack.

“He’s rushing off Leslie, I had better give him his phone back. It was nice chatting.”

I took the phone and apologised to Leslie, she told me not to worry and to have a good trip.

04

I filled the Pajero with Diesel after a bit of confusion at the filling station. They called TurnKey to make sure it was OK and made me sign for the fuel.

I was back at Turnkey well before eleven. Dawn was gone, according to security.

I checked my phone and there was a message from Dawn asking me to collect her from the Hythe when I was ready to leave. She sent a location Pin and told me to send her a live Pin as there was nowhere to park and she would have to come out and flag me down.

I didn't know how to send a live pin, but the security guard did. Fifteen minutes later Dawn waved me down, she was a small, neat woman, and her backpack dwarfed her.

“Where to Boss?” I asked after she had climbed in.

“Head for Cambridge, the A604,” said Dawn, giving me a strange look.

“I can drive but I don't really know my way around England,” I told her.

“No worries, we'll use the GPS, take the next major road left while I set it all up.”

The GPS was easy enough to follow, and as soon as I was on the right road, Dawn told me she was getting in the back as she needed to make calls. She reclined her seat and pulled herself into the back seat with what seemed like practiced ease. Moments later she was talking on the phone with her earbuds on.

I pulled up outside a construction site gate just before two, I had no clue where I was. Dawn got out and spoke to the security guard, who raised the barrier. She got into the passenger seat and directed me to the site office.

“I hope you brought a book or something Kit. The staff canteen is over there, make yourself comfortable. I’ll be at least a couple of hours.” She fetched a folder from her pack and gave me a wave before going into the site office.

The canteen was clean enough, I had a pie and coffee and used my phone and earbuds to watch some YouTube videos to learn more about some of the tools in Shelagh’s garage. There was a nice looking mig welding machine that I wanted to practice with. I could weld... after a fashion, but wanted to get better at it.

I wanted to go for a walk but decided I had better wait. I did the sudoku and was doing the crossword on a newspaper someone had left in the canteen when Dawn came in and asked what the coffee was like. Five minutes later we were on the road again. She was in the back on her phone and I was following the GPS to another site. We were only there for half an hour before we were back on the road again. This time Dawn sat in the passenger seat.

“One more site visit, then we can get a meal and a room,” said Dawn, “Thanks for doing this by the way... Kevin doesn’t like me using my bike for work and I hate driving. Do you ride a bike?”

“I did ride a farm bike... it was a clapped out thing that spent more time being fixed than working. I don’t have a licence and don’t think I have the guts to drive a road bike.”

“I see you cycling - that’s statistically far more dangerous on UK roads than motorbikes,” said Dawn.

“I don’t know much about that, but I stay off the roads as much as I can,” I said.

“Kevin said you are waiting to join the military,” said Dawn, “What regiment?”

“Royal Engineers,” I said, “If I can get in.”

“Good choice, I was in the Engineers before I joined TurnKey. Great bunch.”

“How long did you do?” I asked.

“Nine years. What do you want to do in the Engineers?”

“Plant operator mechanic,” I said, “I’d like to do civil engineering as well but that will do for a start.”

“You shouldn’t have any trouble doing plant operator mechanic, but civil engineering takes time... how old are you?”

“Eighteen,” I said, “I’m not in a hurry... I’d like to do the full twenty two... maybe more if I can get a commission.”

“Well you are more likely to get what you want if you have a plan,” said Dawn, “There’s a lot of BS in the service, but if you are determined and keep your nose clean, you should be OK. Was your dad in the forces?”

“No, but my best friend’s dad was a National Service Sapper. He was in North Africa, Hong Kong and Cyprus. A combat engineer.”

“Is your friend joining up?”

“He’s busy flying helicopters around USA for some rich property developer.”

“Nice job!”

I laughed, “Flying chauffeur... I wouldn’t want to do it.”

“Sorry... this driving job is only two weeks. You’ll be doing lots of duty driver work in the Engineers Kit. I hated it too, got constipation,” she laughed briefly, “I’d forgotten about that. Get yourself some good laxatives.”

“Constipation from driving?”

“Sure... You spend hours on your arse driving and then waiting. You live on crappy sandwiches and you can’t just use the bog when you want to. Sorry, I’m not trying to put you off.”

“Why did you leave?” I asked.

Dawn didn't answer for such a long time that I was about to apologise when she spoke, "There's no one single reason... I suppose I had reached my capacity for compromise. Being a woman in the military has its own problems. If you screw around, you are a slut, if you don't you are a dyke. When you get promotion there's always those that say it was because of who you screwed." She laughed briefly, "I didn't get promoted past lance corporal, and reckon it is because I'm not interested in sex... with anyone, but it worked out for me in the end. I love this job."

"What did you do in the Engineers?" I asked.

"Construction planning and management, they call it BIM now I think, Building Information Management. How did you end up working at TurnKey?"

"I answered an advert in the Colchester Observer asking for a general office assistant. Apparently nobody else applied."

"So Kevin had nothing to do with it?"

"I never met him before today," I said, "But I guess if he is the managing partner, he would have had to approve. Why do you ask?"

"He was born in Rhodesia I think."

"I didn't know that," I said, "On Sunday I met a guy who owns a bicycle repair shop around the block from where I live - he worked on the mines in Zambia and knew my step-father's father. The Zambian copper mines employed thousands of people from all around the world for several

decades. Its all a bit of a mess now. Things fell apart in the mid-seventies when the mines, and many other industries were Nationalised.”

“Elon Musk’s father apparently made his money mining emeralds in Zambia.”

“Zambia and Brazil produce the best quality emeralds in the world,” I told her.

“Will you go back to live in Zambia do you think?”

“Yes, its a beautiful country and the people are fantastic; most of them anyway.”

“What’s holding up you joining the army?”

“Idiots... sorry, but the King’s Regulations allow commonwealth citizens to join the Armed forces as long as they pass the educational, physical and security tests. Non-commonwealth citizens have to be resident in UK for five years before they are eligible to join. The idiots at the Recruitment Centre insist that I have to wait five years. I have given up arguing and am applying for UK citizenship. My mum and her parents were born in UK.”

“Well good luck with that,” said Dawn, “We are nearly at Dovecot... slow down a bit I think there is a...”

The GPS told me to take the next junction to the left. Ten minutes later we were at the next site. I was not allowed to park inside. I glimpsed an armed military guard when the security guard opened the gate for Dawn to enter on foot. There were no signs indicating what was there.

My phone was almost flat, I turned off bluetooth and wireless and made a mental note to get a power pack and a car charger, reclined the seat and listened to the radio.

By the time Dawn returned, I was desperate for a piss. It was nine PM and she looked tired.

She directed me to a small hotel on the outskirts of Dovecot. It looked very posh.

“I’m bushed Kit,” she said before we got out of the car, “You can eat in the dining room or order room service and have a couple of drinks, but behave yourself OK? Don’t touch anything in the minibar. Breakfast at seven and we need to be ready to leave by nine.”

I put my phone on charge and went for a long walk. I didn't feel like eating, and it was almost midnight when I got back to the hotel.

Dawn was tapping away at a laptop when I got to the dining room at five to seven. It was a buffet style breakfast - I thought about what Dawn had said about constipation but decided to live dangerously and loaded up my plate. Dawn had a big appetite for such a trim figure.

It was a two hour drive to the next site, and Dawn sat in the back using her phone. The site was basically a huge bare piece of land with piles of rubble where buildings had been demolished. Dawn got impatient because the contractor and architect were not on site and after a few terse phone calls she got back in the car and used the GPS to find somewhere to get a coffee and use the loo, it was a grimy

looking shopping centre with underground parking. Dawn took her laptop with her and advised me not to leave anything valuable in the car. I decided against taking my back pack.

The coffee shop was pretty good. Dawn got a call and moved away to answer it. When she returned to the table she grinned, “You can have the day off Kit,” she said, “They are coming here and I’ll get them to drop me at the hotel. I’ll send you a Pin. Go there, and chill, but keep your phone near in case I need you? If all goes well I’ll be finished by five PM.”

“Do you need anything from the car... hard hat, wellies, waterproof?”

“Thanks, I do, let me have the keys?”

She returned a short while later with a small day bag and her hard hat and wellingtons.

I got a car charger and a booster before making my way to the Hotel. It was a four star “Country Spa”, and had a nine hole golf course, swimming pool and gym. It sold swimming costumes and goggles. I had the first good swim I had had for months and then went for a long walk around the golf course. It started raining and I ended up having to run for shelter.

I had another swim in the afternoon and settled in the lounge with a book from their guest library. Dawn messaged to ask me to book a table for seven PM for four, including me. I felt nervous enough about eating in a dining room with

Dawn. She was older than me, but really attractive. I went for another long walk after booking the table.

Dawn was tapping away on her laptop in the reception lounge when I got back from my walk at six PM. She looked surprised to see me and asked if I was OK.

“I’m good,” I told her, “I don’t have a tie or anything like that,” I said, “For dinner I mean.”

Dawn smiled, “It’s just a meal Kit, you don’t have to impress anybody, but don’t overdo the booze please? I can’t stand drunks.”

I nodded, “I’m not a good drinker. I think malaria ruined my liver.”

Dawn squinted at me, “You sound just like Kevin... are you sure you are not related?”

I showered and put on clean jeans and a polo shirt that wasn’t too crumpled and berated myself for not using the laundry service.

I went down to the reception lounge and carried on reading until Dawn came down and told me the others were already in the dining room. It was five to seven.

I recognised Sally Jones from Turnkey, a long-legged Welsh woman. Fred was the Operations manager for one of the big building contractors. He looked tanned and fit despite his age.

The meal was really pleasant. Fred had just returned from a stint in Australia managing a big building project. Sally was engaged to his youngest son, a Qantas pilot. It was clear they were all good friends. I stuck to coke and coffee, Sally didn't drink alcohol but Fred and Dawn managed a bottle of wine between them.

Fred asked what my plans were, and approved when I told him I was going to join the Army. I excused myself when Fred and Dawn asked for Irish coffee... mostly I really needed to pee after so much coffee.

05

Dawn was busy on her laptop when I joined her for breakfast at seven.

“A long drive today Kit, we were supposed to go to Dorset, but the project is on hold because of some protected bats and owls... So we are going to St Austel in Cornwall.”

She sat in the front, but reclined her seat and put on headphones. She was snoring within half an hour of setting off.

It was an easy enough drive and by one-thirty we had checked into a small hotel. They only had one room, as we were a day earlier than expected. Dawn shrugged and said that would be fine. I didn't want lunch but sat with her and had coffee while she ate, then drove her to a site about thirty minutes from St Austel. Dawn told me it was a world war two submarine base that was being revamped and suggested I go in with her. It was guarded by a detachment

of Marines who were friendly enough. We did not have to wear hard hats. There was an older woman there, who seemed quite reserved, I think she was the MOD architect. A very tall man who looked like the actor Clive Owen walked around the base with us. One of the Marines stayed with us.

I stayed out of the way but enjoyed looking around at the base. The marine, who introduced himself as Dinger, quietly pointed out things of interest to me. Sadly there were no old submarines down there. The submarine pens were quite small. Dinger did tell me the type of submarine, but I forgot the designation. He said they were often used to deliver and collect agents from occupied France. I got lost looking for the toilet, or “heads” as Dinger called them when giving me directions. It was easier to find my way back once I had found them. We emerged at around three PM and Dawn seemed keen to get away. She practically ran to the Little Chef toilet before I had switched the engine off.

We drove back to the hotel and Dawn went to use the business centre. I went for a short walk and got back before the rain fell, then went for a swim in the tiny pool. I was worried sick about farting in my sleep while sharing a room with Dawn.

We ate together, Dawn told me that she would be working late in business centre, and would probably work most of Saturday morning too and said I could go sight seeing if I wanted to. They had lots of tourist brochures in the reception.

I didn't hear her come in that night and managed to get up and showered without waking her the morning. I went for a short walk; it looked like it was going to be a rainy day. I had

coffee in the residents lounge and went through the brochures, The duty receptionist, a gorgeous looking girl with a German accent recommended Tintagel.

Dawn came down for breakfast at seven. She said she had visited Tintagel and liked it, and encouraged me to visit it. She said she wanted to finish and submit a draft project plan for the submarine base work before she forgot the finer details that had been agreed but not put in writing.

“Do you mind sharing a room with me again tonight?” she asked, “You don’t snore, so I am OK with it.”

“I’m fine with it if you are. May I use the laundry service?” I asked.

Dawn nodded, “Of course you can, we are a day ahead of schedule, so we can stay here tomorrow if necessary.”

I ran up to my room and stuffed my used underwear, socks and shirts into a laundry bag and filled in the form, then took my waterproof and set off for Tintagel.

The orange low fuel warning light came on, and I thought I was going to run out of fuel. I put in fifty pounds of diesel and got a receipt, and was at Tintagel just as it was opening to the public. It looked like it might rain so I put on my waterproof cycling jacket and bought myself a ticket. Fifteen minutes later the rain came down and the wind picked up. For some strange reason I loved it. I practically had the place to myself. I spent an hour getting totally drenched and did not take a single photograph for fear of having my phone blown out of my hand. I slipped and fell twice, grazing my shin and the palm of my left hand, but it was worth it.

The car fogged up and it took me a while to figure out the fancy controls before I could see through the windscreen. I spent at least half an hour waiting in the car park for the worst of the storm to pass before heading back to St Austell. I stopped at a nice looking pub and had two Cornish Pasties - they weren't as good as I had expected, but they were alright.

I messaged Dawn to say I was back at the Hotel just after one, and she asked if I wanted lunch. I wiped the mud off my trainers and jeans and put on a clean shirt before joining her in the dining room.

“What have you done to your hand?” she asked as soon as she saw me.

“Slipped and fell, it's just a graze,” I said, “A storm came up while I was at Tintagel... it was fantastic!”

“Well you had better get that seen to, you don't want an infection. Have you had a tetanus jab?”

“I'm good,” I said, “I'll get some peroxide if I can find a chemist open this afternoon and clean the grazes. I'm all up to date on my jabs.”

“Peroxide? As in the stuff for dying hair blonde?”

I nodded, “Its great for disinfecting wounds. Better than veterinary wound spray.”

Dawn shook her head, “The army will suit you just fine Kit. If your hand goes bad, do not expect any sympathy from me.”

The receptionist referred me to the concierge, who listened carefully then fetched me a small bottle of Hydrogen Peroxide from the Hair and Beauty Salon.

“I didn’t think you young’uns knew about peroxide, I was a crabber... crab fisherman... used it all the time to clean nicks and cuts.”

I wanted to go for a walk, but it was still raining and I didn’t want to get more clothes wet. The pool was too short to swim in and I never did like gyms, but I decided to use the stationary bicycle and took the book I had swiped from the last hotel. I had a good view of the pool and was fascinated when I saw a woman swimming with a strap around her waist, the other end of which was tied to the pool steps. It looked like stretchy rubber tubing. The woman was a good swimmer and swam for over half an hour.

I told Dawn about it over dinner. She nodded, “Tethered swimming - you can buy tethers online. I have one somewhere, it has probably perished by now. I should get another one and get back into swimming. Are you a swimmer?”

I nodded, “Not a super fast swimmer, but I like it.”

I woke when Dawn came to bed, but went back to sleep before she came out of the shower. She was gone when I woke at six. I went for a long walk as it wasn’t raining and was back at the hotel by seven. Dawn was having breakfast and seemed preoccupied. I ordered a huge breakfast and Dawn apologised and excused herself from the table before it arrived, saying she needed to knuckle down and get the

planning done. She asked me to ask reception to extend our stay for another night. I asked her if it was OK for me to take the day off and explore St Austell and she said that was fine.

I saw the German girl from reception looking through a bookstore window and said hello. She grinned and apologised for not remembering my name. I told her I was Kit and she stuck out her hand, “I am Hilde and very pleased to meet you Kit.”

“Are you having a day off?” I asked.

“Just the morning, I am back on duty at two this afternoon. Where are you going?”

“I thought I would have a look around St Austell... it’s a tourist attraction apparently and my boss doesn’t need me today.”

“ Ms. Kemp is your employer?”

“Well she is a manager at the place I work, I am her driver for a few days.”

“You are not English Kit?”

“What gave me away?”

“The way you speak... and your manners are better than English boys.”

I laughed, “My mother is English, my father South African, I am from Zambia. Where are you from?”

“I am German from Hannover. Have you been to Germany?”

“No, it is something I am looking forward to. How long have you been here in St Austell?”

“Since December. I go back in June. Have you had Cornish scones with clotted cream?”

“No, but my mother says it is really nice...is there somewhere you recommend?”

Hilde nodded and we walked to Trinity Cafe, which was just opening. Hilde asked for tea and scones and I asked for coffee and scones.

“Traditionally they have scones with tea,” said Hilde, “I do not usually drink tea.”

“Tea gives me heartburn,” I told her, “So what will you do when you go back to Germany?”

“I will have a short vacation with my parents and then I am going to study Hotel Management in Bern, Switzerland. I came here to practice my English.”

“Your English is excellent,” I told her, “What other languages do you speak?”

“I studied French and Spanish and I want to learn Italian... it is important to have many languages in the Hotel business.”

Our scones, tea and coffee arrived. We both laughed when we got cream on our lips and fingers. Hilde told me that her mother was half English, her mother’s father had been a

British soldier stationed outside Hannover. He was from St Austell. Her parents managed a large hotel in Hannover, close to the city zoo. She told me I should stay there if ever I came to Hannover. We agreed to split the bill, and Hilde asked me if I would walk with her to visit her grandfather's grave.

"I am not very religious," she said, "My mother is a practicing Catholic and very disappointed with me, but I have cleaned her father's grave and I visit every Sunday. I don't remember him; he died when I was a baby."

She showed me the Grave of Simon Porter, and told me that her grandfather's son, her uncle, owned the Porter Hotel and Spa. She said he lived in Spain, where he had two more hotels. We walked to Cemetery park and got ice creams from a vendor in a van.

"Thank you for the company Kit," said Hilde, "But I must go and get ready for my shift. It was very nice meeting and talking with you." She held my wrist and pecked my chin with a light kiss before grinning and walking away.

I got lost wandering around and ducked into a Costa coffee shop when there was a brief rain shower. I got fish and chips and lost a chip to a cheeky seagull before going back into the fish and chip shop and eating at a counter.

I bought a book from a second hand book store and walked back to the Hotel around five PM and had a shower. I was reading in the guest lounge when my phone rang. it was Dawn. I told her I was in the guest lounge

"Do you dance?" she asked.

“Well... sort of, but not.... you know, properly.”

“Never mind that... the thing is, and please feel free to say no; I like to dance and I want to go out and dance and have a few drinks. Will you drive me and stay sober? Don't worry, I wont get drunk and silly.”

“OK, I can do that.”

“Are you sure? I can get a taxi, but I would prefer ... I'll come to the lounge. Wait there.”

A few minutes later she was there, “Hi Kit... have you had a good day?”

“Yes thanks, can I go dressed like this?” I asked standing up.

“Yes... its just a pub, but... well, I've had my drinks spiked before, and I would feel safer leaving my drink with you while I dance... dancing is how I deal with... well, everything. It's a great place with great food.”

She asked me to give her half an hour to shower and change. I sat and read my book and then drove us to the Pol Gooth pub. It was busy and lively.

Dawn really could dance... She completely lost herself to the music. People gave her space and watched. It was really strange watching her dance. I mean, she is really pretty, and when she danced she was beautiful. It wasn't erotic or anything like that. A few people started dancing around her. A long-legged woman danced with her for a

while, grinning widely. Dawn must have danced for half an hour before she came and gulped some of her drink, a pint of cider.

“I feel much better for that,” she said, her face shiny with sweat, “Thanks for watching my drink. Have you ordered any food?”

I shook my head, “Not hungry yet, you are an amazing dancer.”

“Thanks, it keeps me sane.” She put her glass down, “I’ll be back in a while.” She headed for the loo. A short while later she was dancing again.

“Is she your sister?” asked a voice, “She’s a great dancer.”

I was about to shake my head, but nodded, “Yes,” I told him. A biggish guy wearing aviator sunglasses in a bar at night.

“What’s she drinking? I’d like to buy you both a drink.”

“That’s kind of you,” I told him, “She has a drink and never has more than one a night. I don’t drink.”

The guy smiled and nodded, “Well OK then, I was just being friendly.”

“Thanks, I appreciate that,” I said, “But she just likes to dance.”

“Yeah... I can see that,” said the man, looking at Dawn. He nodded then moved away.

It got me thinking then, about how hard it must be for good looking young women to just get on with their lives while surrounded by male predators. I felt ashamed then, of being male. The tall woman was dancing with Dawn again. When the song ended they headed towards me.

Dawn finished her drink and shook her head when I asked if she wanted another one. "I forgot how strong the cider is in this place," she said, "I'll get some water. Do you want anything Kit? This is Petra by the way... Finnish?"

Petra nodded and stuck out a sweaty hand. She gave me a big smile, "Is good to meet you."

They went to the bar and returned with two bottles of water and a coffee. Petra was on holiday, cycling the length of Cornwall with a group of Finns. She pointed them out, "They like to drink very much," she said, "Tomorrow they will be sorry I think."

Petra and Dawn returned to the dance floor. The DJ made complimentary comments about the two dancers.

A woman spoke to me, "Hi...I am Marte, a friend of Petra..." she poked a thumb over her shoulder towards the dancers, "You can come and sit with us... we are Finns."

She was very pretty and had a nice smile, I stood and thanked her. "Thanks Marte, that would be nice."

I followed her to the table and was introduced to everybody. They were all very polite, and stood and shook my hand. I immediately forgot all their names. I was offered a drink, but declined, saying I was driving and had drunk more coffee

than I could stand. They were really friendly and all of them spoke really good English. Marte told me that they were all physiotherapy students, and were taking a holiday while they waited for their final exam results.

“Your girlfriend is a very good dancer,” said one of them, “You don’t like to dance?”

“Dawn is not my girlfriend,” I said, “We work for the same company... she asked me to drive so that she can have a drink and dance. She really likes dancing.”

I ended up explaining that Dawn was a consultant and I was just working as a gopher while I waited to join the army. That led to talk about Ukraine. Two of the men were army reservists and wanted to know what I thought. I told them that I thought UK and Europe should help Ukraine because Putin was a menace. They liked that and asked me if I wanted a drink. I liked that they were not pushy, though they did seem more than a little drunk.

“What is a gopher?” asked Marte after a long pause in the conversation, “You said you were a gopher?”

One of the Finns spoke in Finnish, and Marte frowned, she made doggy paddle-like digging motions with her hands and spoke in Finnish. They all laughed.

“Yes, it is an American burrowing animal,” I said, “But is is also English slang for someone who ‘Goes for’ this and ‘Goes for’ that... Go For...Gopher?”

It took a while, and when Marte got it and started laughing she almost fell off her chair. When the others got it they all laughed... very loudly.

“What’s going on Kit?” asked Dawn over my shoulder. I hadn’t heard her approach. She was with Petra who was listening to Marte explain the Gopher tale.

“Just a bit of fun,” I said, “Do you want me to get you a drink?”

Dawn shook her head, “No thanks, I’m ready to go if you are. Would you mind dropping Petra off? They are at a campsite somewhere near here.”

We ended up taking all the Finns to the campsite. Petra sat up front with me and kept apologising for the drunken singing coming from her friends crammed into the back with Dawn.

It was not far to the camp site. The Finns all said thank you and I got a really smoochy kiss on the lips from Marte.

“Well, you seemed to have made a big impression on her,” said Dawn, who had climbed into the passenger seat and was buckling up. She seemed very amused. “The Finns are heavy drinkers. I spent a couple of weeks doing Arctic Warfare Training in Finland. I could live there I reckon. Nice people.”

I thought she had fallen asleep and turned to look at her, but she was wide awake and looking a bit sad.

“Do you play music?” I asked.

“What? Me? No; what made you ask that?”

I shrugged, “You dance really well... I mean, its like you really feel the music... I just thought that maybe you were a musician.”

“No... I’ve never done anything musical... unless you call karaoke musical, and apparently I sound terrible,” she smiled, “Thanks for driving me Kit. I appreciate it.”

She was asleep when got to the hotel. Her sleep face was sad.

06

Over breakfast Dawn told me that she had submitted the plan before we had gone out and was waiting for confirmation on a meeting in Plymouth. I went for a walk after putting all my stuff in the Pajero and got a message from Dawn saying the Plymouth meeting had been postponed and we were going to Helford. She told me not to rush, but to let her know when I would be back. I messaged back fifteen minutes and was back in ten.

“I thought you might have gone to check on that hot little Finnish girl,” said Dawn with a smile. She apologised before I could say anything. Half an hour later we were on our way.

Dawn told me that she didn’t know much about the Helford job, and was waiting for the information to be emailed to her.

She called the office while we were driving, and spoke to Shelagh. After ending the call she told me that the job was a restoration for the Duchy of Cornwall and that the Architect would come to us when we had found somewhere to stay.

We ended up in an AirBnB “lodge” which was basically a one room cabin with a shower, toilet and basin, a kettle and mini fridge. The big problem for me was the double bed. Dawn laughed and told me not to worry, she would sleep on the two seater couch. The agent, a middle aged woman looked surprised and said she could arrange twin beds.

I had never used an AirBnB before, but thought BnB meant Bed and Breakfast. Apparently this is not the case when there is an Air in front of it. For some reason that made Dawn laugh.

“It’s only one night Kit,” said Dawn, “Well I hope it is only one night, and we can get breakfast out easily enough.”

I went for a walk. The lodge was in a wooded area surrounded by farms. There was a large stone built house that had been converted into offices in the wooded area, and a lot of beehives. I walked along the narrow road and after having to leap out of the way of a large black RangeRover I decided to walk back and stayed off the road as much as I could.

The black RangeRover was parked behind the Pajero, blocking it in.

Dawn introduced me to the Architect, who didn’t seem that interested and just nodded at me. I left them to it and used my phone to look for somewhere I could sit and read a

book. I ended up back on the road and walked to the Holy Mackerel Cafe, which took half an hour.

I was into the book and my second coffee had gone cold when Dawn called. She asked where I was and asked me to send a location pin. Ten minutes later she was ordering lunch.

She looked grumpy and I asked her if she was OK.

She looked surprised, “Yes I’m OK... I’m not looking forward to having to deal with Mr. Anderson... the architect. He seems a bit of a creep. I shouldn’t have said that. Please forget it Kit?”

“I had to jump into a ditch to avoid being hit by his car,” I told her, “If I had met him somewhere else I would have had a go at him. I didn’t think I should make a fuss when I met him.”

She nodded, her mouth compressed into a hard line, “Thanks for holding back, he’s an arrogant prick.”

“I’ll forget you said that,” I said with a grin, “So what’s next?”

“He’s going to call me to let me know when he can take me to the site... there’s someone living in the house and he needs to clear it with them.”

“Do you want me to come with you?” I asked, “I’d be happy to.”

“Thanks Kit... I can look after myself,” she smiled, “I’m a veteran.”

The food was pretty good. Dawn's phone rang while we were eating. She got up and went outside to answer it. When she came back she looked serious.

"He wants to pick me up at six PM... Would you mind coming with us?"

"I'd like to go with you and I would prefer to drive than to go with that man, I've seen him drive. Can we take our vehicle there?"

She nodded and went outside with her phone. She smiled brightly when she came back in. "He wasn't at all happy about that. Thank you Kit."

The house did not look very lived in, but it was clear that someone had been working on it. Mr. Anderson, the Architect, ignored me but I stayed close as they walked from room to room. Dawn asked a lot of questions and made notes. It seemed to me that he had done a half arsed job and struggled to answer many of Dawn's questions. By ten we were done on the inside of the main house. There were no lights in the keeper's cottage, barn or gate house. Dawn thanked the Architect, who was looking very grumpy. He drove off spraying gravel everywhere.

"What a twat!" muttered Dawn, "Well... we've done as much as we can. Homeward Kit!"

We stopped at a pub. Dawn had a pie and chips and a cider. I wasn't hungry. She suggested we go back to the house first thing in the morning and then do breakfast at the same pub, which served breakfast from nine AM.

We had cleared out our stuff from the AirBnB and were at the house before seven. I had slept well enough despite the damp smelling beds that had replaced the double bed. Dawn called the agent and left a voice message complaining about the smelly beds while I was driving to the house.

A man arrived on a bicycle while we were at the house. He greeted us cheerfully and said he was “making good” some of the issues the last tenant had agreed to pay for. He had a list and Dawn asked me to copy it. I photographed it with my phone. I walked around with Dawn, and she explained that she was comparing the Architect’s scope of works with what she could see to eliminate, as far as possible, any mistakes. There seemed to be a lot. We were done and having breakfast at the pub by ten AM.

Dawn checked her phone and told me that the next stop was Plymouth.

She sat in the back and made some calls and when we stopped to refuel she set the GPS for the Mountbatten hotel in Plymouth and told me a driver would collect her from the hotel at six PM and take her to the Naval base where they would hopefully finalise the plan for the submarine base.

We got to the Hotel just before two PM and I had a room to myself. Dawn told me to have fun and meet her for breakfast at seven AM.

I had fish and chips, watched a movie, bought a book and got back to the hotel just after ten PM.

Dawn looked exhausted when she joined me for breakfast and said she had got to bed at two AM. She said the next stop was near Bangor in Wales, and said she would probably sleep in the car. We left just before nine and she was fast asleep before we made it out of the city.

An accident and diversions had me driving around in what felt like circles for a while, and around noon I pulled into a motorway services place to refuel and reluctantly woke Dawn so that she could pay as I did not have enough cash.

Dawn asked me how I coped without a credit card.

“I have my Zambian debit card, which I can use for emergencies,” I told her, “But transferring money from UK to Zambia is a real pain. Sorry.”

“Stop apologising Kit, how much have you spent on this trip? For food and fuel I mean.”

“I bought fifty quid’s worth of fuel... I didn’t spend much on food.”

“Well make sure to claim expenses when we get back to the office. Have you got receipts?”

“For the fuel, yes.” I fetched it out of the centre console cubby.

“I’ll give you fifty quid and claim this back,” said Dawn, “Get receipts for any food you buy, so you can claim it back. You don’t each much, except at breakfast, but TurnKey will pay for it. OK?”

“Yes Boss!” I said with a smile.

“I’m not your boss Kit, even if I am bossy. Do you have a bank account... an English one?”

“Yes, with Barclays in Colchester.”

“They are crap... stay away from Barclays, Coutts and Lloyds Bank. Especially when you are in the army. Overdrawing your account is an offence in the military, and those banks will inform your unit pay office the minute your account goes into the red, and you’ll be fined three months pay. I like HSBC. Why don’t you have a credit card? Are you... no, you aren’t a Muslim, you eat bacon.”

I laughed, “My step dad was Jewish...he said breakfast without bacon and sausage was an abomination. I asked Barclays for a credit card and they said I had to wait at least six months before they would consider it. They have to assess my credit worthiness.”

“Arseholes,” muttered Dawn. “Barclays are rubbish.”

Dawn was asleep before we crossed into Wales. I took a wrong exit on a dual carriageway and spent almost an hour getting back on track and reached the Hotel in Bangor a little after three PM. Dawn was still fast asleep and it was pouring with rain, so I stayed in the car till she woke around three thirty.

“Where are we?” she asked.

“The Premier Inn, Bangor,” I told her, it’s bucketing down.”

We ran and got soaked.

“Thanks for letting me sleep,” said Dawn, “I was bushed. Are you hungry? You didn’t get lunch.”

“Not especially. What’s the plan?”

“I don’t know Bangor,” she said, but if there is somewhere I can dance...”

I nodded, “OK, I’ll come and tend your drink for you.”

She grinned, “Thanks Kit, I’ll call you in say... an hour?”

“Will we be here long enough for me to use the laundry service?”

Dawn nodded, “Yup, two nights at least and you are free to do as you please tomorrow.”

I had only just come out of the shower when she called and said there was a students’ union bar near the university and she would take a taxi because finding parking was a problem, but she said she would still appreciate my company. She said they served food and it was, according to the receptionist, pretty good. We agreed to go at eight.

The rain had weakened to a light misty drizzle so I went for a walk and got myself really nice fish and chips. I was back at the Hotel by seven and read my book in the reception till Dawn came down.

There weren't many people at the Student Union Bar when we got there. Dawn got pizza for us both and a cider for herself. I decided to stick to coke, even though I wasn't driving. The pizza was great, Dawn gave half of hers to me and started dancing. She was the only one on the dance floor. Two girls joined her, both were dark skinned and great dancers. It wasn't long before there was a small crowd dancing, mostly they were dark skinned and women but there were a few men, one was a really good dancer. He was brown skinned and looked sort of asian and african.

By ten the place was packed, and Dawn was lost in a crowd of dancers. I didn't dare leave the table I was at for fear of losing my seat. A couple asked to sit at the table and the remaining chair vanished while I was straining to hear what the couple were saying to me. They were both Welsh and students, but conversation was hard because of the volume of music and chatter.

Dawn came to the table, glistening with sweat and carrying a cider and a coke. She waved me down when I stood to let her have my seat and drank down half of the cider before shouting in my ear, asking if I was OK to stay a while longer. I nodded and gave her a thumbs up and she put her cider mug in front of me and headed back to the dance floor. I watched her for a while before she danced her way out of sight. I didn't like the volume, but there was quite a nice feel to the place. I started getting cramp in my right leg and pushed back from the table. The couple that had been sitting at my table gave up their seats to two women with Pizzas and a bottle of wine, they looked like twins from The sound of Music, wearing bib style dresses with blonde hair, pig tails and braces on their teeth. They indicated that I

could share their Pizza and wine and made sad faces when I smiled and shook my head.

A very drunk girl sat on my lap and put her arms around my neck. She kissed me and stuck her tongue in my mouth when I tried to talk to her. A second later she jumped back looking horrified.

“I’m so sorry,” she shouted, “I thought you were my ...” A hand took her wrist and a tall, laughing man pulled her away, shaking his head. He gave me a thumbs up and grinned. He was as tall as me and dark haired. I returned the thumbs up and realised that his shirt was the same colour as mine.

Dawn’s cider had been knocked over. One of the twins was mopping the cider up with bits of the pizza box. She winked and me and smiled. She swivelled around and put her feet on my chair when I asked her save it for me. When I got back to the table with another cider and a coke, Dawn was sat there and drinking from the twin’s bottle of wine. She thanked me for the cider and got out of the chair, insisting that I take it.

“I’d like to dance a bit more before we go... is that OK?” she yelled.

I nodded she drank half her cider and pushed the rest toward the nearest twin, who nodded and grabbed it. Seconds later Dawn was dancing again.

“Your girlfriend is hot!” yelled the twin and drank some cider.

I just nodded and sipped my coke.

I had a stinking headache by the time we left, and had a bad night. By morning I knew I had a cold.

Dawn was already at the table and looking fresh and cheerful.

“You OK?” she asked.

“I got snogged by a very drunk girl who mistook me for her boyfriend,” I told her, “I think I caught a cold from her.”

Dawn grinned, “The Heidies told me,” she said, “I think they fancied you. Go get some Sudafed from Boots, it’s good stuff.” She held out her hand, “I forgot, sorry, your fifty quid. Do you need more cash?”

She dropped a tightly folded note into my hand.

“No, I’m good,” I told her.

It took me a while to find Boots. I went straight across the road to a Costa Cafe and took the tablets and had a coffee and a Danish. It took me longer to find a Barclays branch, and then an hour to get a cheque cashed. They really are a crap bank.

I was feeling a lot better with two hundred pounds and change in my pocket. I watched a movie, had a burger and fed the soggy bun to the seagulls then looked for and found the second book - the Girl who Kicked the Hornets Nest - and found a small cafe where I could read it. I stretched out a coffee and a huge piece of cheesecake till the cafe staff

started stacking chairs and found my way back to the Hotel. I fell asleep on my bed reading the book.

Dawn was tapping at her laptop when I went down for breakfast at seven.

“How you feeling?” she asked.

I waved the packet of Sudafed at her, “Not too bad, this is good stuff.”

I was still on my second plate of food when Dawn left, saying she would probably be finished by lunch time, but that we would stay one more night.

“Are you going dancing tonight?” I asked.

“I’d like to... are you up to it?”

“I can manage,” I said, “Let me know.”

I walked till it started to rain, then ducked into a cafe that was nicer than it looked and read till it eleven.

Dawn messaged to say that she would probably get back to the Hotel at around five PM.

It was a country and western night at the Students’ Union, and quite busy when we got there at eight. We had pizza again. Dawn got a bottle of wine instead of cider and we sat at a longer table with benches right by the band and dance floor.

I recognised the guy who approached Dawn and asked if she would partner him. The guy who looked African and Asian. He had a South African accent. They danced really well and seemed happy enough.

“Don’t worry, he’s gay... they look fabulous together, don’t they?” It was one of the Heidi twins. They were both wearing cowboy hats and had matching waistcoats, denim skirts and cowgirl boots on.

“I’m Amanda, she’s Celia... do you want a drink?” she offered me a bottle of beer, “Its Bud lite... hardly any alcohol at all. Regular Bud is like sex in a canoe... I don’t know why they bothered making a lite version.”

She had a really lovely Welsh accent.

“I’m Kit, and Dawn isn’t my girlfriend, we work together,” I said, “No beer for me thanks.”

“So you’re not students? What do you do?”

“Dawn is a consulting construction project manager,” I said, “I’m just a Gopher.”

“I’d go for her, but she said she isn’t into girls,” said Amanda, “What is she into?”

“Dancing,” I said, “Are you students?”

Amanda nodded, “Contemporary Art, it’s fucking boring, so we are trying to get into European Studies.”

I shook my head, “What’s that?”

Amanda laughed, “Less boring than Contemporary Art we hope.”

“How old are you?” asked Celia. Her voice was different to Amanda’s, deeper.

“Nineteen,” I would be in a couple of months.

“Are you a virgin?” asked Celia.

“That’s rude...”

“I’m just asking,” said Celia.

I felt myself blushing, “Why are you asking?”

“Dunno... we’ve never had a virgin,” said Celia, “So... are you?”

“For fuck sake Celia, stop it already,” hissed Amanda.

“Fuck off,” said Celia, getting up and storming off.

“Sorry,” said Amanda, “Celia gets uptight sometimes...” she smiled. “I had better go and calm her down.” She picked up Celia’s beer and her own and left.

A hand reached for Dawn’s wine. I grabbed the bottle. The hand belonged to a stocky, bearded guy, who looked about twenty.

“That’s mine,” I said.

“Aren’t you going to share?” he asked, he sounded Irish. He did not let go.

I shook my head and started to get up.

A hand pressed down on my shoulder, I grabbed it and twisted as I got up. The hand’s owner yelped.

“Let him go lofty,” said the Irish man.

“Let go of the bottle and back off,” I warned.

“Or what?” the bearded Irishman suddenly dropped to his knees. I saw Dawn standing behind him. Her face was hard and determined.

“What’s going on?” a woman’s voice.

“Nothin’,” said the Irish man, his voice a little strained, “We was just horsin around.”

A wall of concerned looking people surrounded us. I let go the hand of another stocky man, who gave me an angry look but didn’t say anything.

“You’ve been warned before Martin... leave now and don’t come back, you too Thomas... out!” Ordered one of the women. She was not very big, but she sounded important. The wall of people surrounded Martin and Thomas as they left.

“Are you OK?” asked another woman, “Are you students?”

“We’re fine,” said Dawn... “And we are leaving. Leave the wine Kit.”

Dawn took my wrist. “It’s OK Kit... let’s go.” She smiled up at me and I nodded.

“What happened?” she asked when we were outside. She had her phone pressed to her ear and held up her hand to stop me talking while she spoke on the phone.

I waited till she put her phone back in her pocket before speaking, “The Irish one... Martin, just grabbed your bottle. When I tried to stop him the other one tried to stop me standing up.” I shrugged.

Dawn laughed, “Well you are tall... Thanks for defending my wine, but I’m glad it didn’t turn into a fight. Avoid getting into fights if you want to get into and stay in the army. They don’t care if it’s self defence... it brings the army into disrepute and they will throw you out. Unless you are a para... but only arseholes want to be paras.”

“I wasn’t going to fight...”

“No, but I could see you were not going to back down either. You do judo?”

I shook my head, “A bit of JiuJitsu. No belts or anything.”

“I learned Aikido in the Army, its handy.”

“So you did fight?”

“Not in public, but a few scores got settled in private.”

The taxi arrived. Something had changed between Dawn and me. When we reached the hotel she invited me to the bar, “Will you have a drink with me Kit?”

I nodded and asked for a dark rum, They only had Captain Morgan, but it was OK.

“Rum?” said Dawn, “That’s hardcore.” She asked for a cider. “What happened to the Heidies? I saw them at your table.”

“They had a fight and went away,” I said.

“Were they fighting over you?” asked Dawn, “I told you they fancied you.”

“Actually they fancied you too...”

“Yeah... I told them I wasn’t into girls or boys... they said they liked both.”

I nodded, “I think they are both... one is male.”

Dawn smiled and nodded, “You are probably right. So... not your thing? Have you got a girlfriend somewhere... Zambia?”

I shook my head, “No... had one for a very short while. She... her parents left for Australia a week after I met her. We email but she has moved on.”

“First loves can make good mates. My first was another orphan, from Newcastle. He’s a cop now, in Glasgow of all places. Married and with three kids. Asked me to be the god

mother to his first born.” she shook her head, “He’s very Catholic and I’m an atheist.”

“What happened?” I asked.

Dawn looked puzzled, “With Barry? Nothing really... we just realised. Well, he realised that I wasn’t into sex and told me it was OK, but he was; into sex that is. It took me a while to realise he was right. Longer to accept it. Now I am OK with it. I had tests... I don’t have ovaries... never finished puberty. There’s a long name for it, shortened to MRKH syndrome. I don’t know why I’m telling you this... I’m not even drunk.”

“Thanks for trusting me,” I told her, “I’m no expert on sex, but I know it can make life complicated... Whether you like it or not.”

Dawn laughed, “You got that right. I like you Kit. I think you will do great as a sapper.”

“What made you join up?” I asked.

“Lots of things... I had great foster parents... they were both orphans too. They told me that orphans wanted to belong somewhere, and said we should look at things like the services, including police and fire services. They were right...I did like that sense of being part of something, of belonging, in the squadron. I do miss that.”

I just nodded and didn’t know what to say.

“Did you ever see that movie ‘The Accountant’ with Ben Affleck?”

I nodded, “Great film.”

“Yeah I really like it. Do you remember that saying “Sooner of later, being different becomes being scary”?”

I looked at Dawn and she nodded, “It was like that for me.” she said quietly.

“I don’t think you are scary, well... your dancing is scarily good but you are OK Dawn.”

“Thanks,” she swallowed the last of her cider, “Do you want another rum for the road?”

We both had a rum, she grimaced when she sipped it and I suggested she put an ice cube in the glass.

“That works,” she said with a grin. “Cheers Kit!”

07

I slept well and felt a lot better in the morning. Dawn looked cheerful and said we were done with sites and could go back to Colchester.

“We’ve done well Kit... we even got the Duchy of Cornwall job!” It will be a while before everything is signed and sealed but TurnKey has enough work for a few more years, thanks to us.”

“Thanks to you...I’m just the driver.”

“Its a team effort Kit, I would have been knackered and definitely not at my best if I’d had to do all that driving, and I even managed to get some dancing in. It helped.”

Dawn sat in the front and was telling me about a practical joker who got himself stuck in a guest house chimney while they were on exercise in Germany when her phone rang. She listened for a while, saying “yes Boss” several times before telling me were going to London. She put the destination into the GPS and then reclined her seat and did her neat trick of getting into the back seat. Minutes later she was talking into her phone and tapping on her laptop.

I had never driven in London before, and was terrified and sweating by the time I reached the Russel Hotel. Dawn directed me to the underground car park.

“You look frazzled,” she said, lifting out her backpack.

“I feel it,” I said, “That was scary.”

“You did OK. I don’t like riding my bike in London... its worse than Birmingham.”

“Are we going to Birmingham as well?”

“No!” Dawn laughed, “You’ll like this Hotel, but we are eating out tonight, with Kevin and his wife.”

“Perhaps I should stay at the hotel... I don’t have any smart clothes.”

“Kevin doesn’t do posh, you’ll be fine.”

She checked us in and told me to be ready by eight.

I had a long walk, showered and used a damp cloth to smarten up my jeans and the cleanest polo shirt I had.

Dawn looked great. She smiled at me and touched my arm, “Relax Kit, its just dinner.”

There were eight people there, and I felt woefully under dressed and shabby. An older man, as tall as me, called Jim, shook my hand and asked if I played cricket. I told him I had, but very badly at school.

“You look like Marco Jansen, the South African cricketer,”

“I’ve heard of him, but he is taller than me.”

“Kevin says you are joining the Royal Engineers. Good bunch. You aren’t worried about ending up in Ukraine?”

I shrugged, “It might happen,” I said, “No point in worrying about it, just hope that I’ll have all the training and skills I need to deal with the situation.”

“Yes, that’s important... if the reports are correct, some of the Russians are being sent in without any military training at all.”

“Yes... I’ve read about the meat grinder. Perhaps Putin is using the war to get rid of their criminals and undesirables.”

Jim nodded, “Its been done before.”

Kevin's wife, Lee, was an elegant blonde lady. She was very nice. Jim's wife, Alena, was also very nice. I was sat between her and Dawn and opposite Jim.

There was no menu... small plates of food just kept coming. I was offered wine but drank coke. A lot of the talk was about Trump and Musk, I did my best to keep my opinions to myself, but everybody seemed to have much the same opinion as me. I found myself enjoying the dinner. I was quite disappointed when coffee and biscuits were served. The evening was almost over and it was past midnight by then.

"So you are the new office boy?" said a voice at my elbow

A woman who had been introduced to me while she was in the middle of a conversation with a man called David. They both barely glanced at me at the time and Dawn had drawn me past them to meet Jim and Alena.

"I'm Myra... I seldom come to the office these days. I'm semi retired. Please stay seated, you tall people make me dizzy." she had a nice throaty laugh. "I hear that you survived a week in the field with the little soldier girl. Dawn's a tough one."

"She's great," I said, 'I really enjoyed myself."

"You drove so that she didn't have to use that beastly motorbike of hers?"

I nodded, "She works while I drive. I can't read in a car... it makes me car sick."

“A perfect match,” said Myra. She turned her head when someone called her name, “Excuse me dear... it seems my ride is ready to go. It was nice to meet you.”

I got up to fetch myself more coffee. Kevin and Dawn were talking by the counter where the coffee pot was; it looked serious, so I changed direction and went in search of a loo.

When I got back Dawn was waiting for me, “Are you ready to leave Kit? I’ve arranged a taxi.”

In the taxi I asked her if she was OK.

Dawn didn’t answer for a while, and when she did, she looked thoughtful, “I’m not really sure... Kevin asked me if I wanted to be an associate partner.”

“That’s good isn’t it?”

“You chatted with Myra ... she has been at TurnKey longer than Kevin, about fifteen years I think. She is not an associate partner, and yet she does some of the most difficult and profitable projects. I’ve done three years at TurnKey, I was her assistant two years ago... what do you think she will think of me becoming an associate partner?”

“She didn’t strike me as the sort of person who cared much for anyone else’s opinions, perhaps you should not care about hers.”

“I like Myra ...she is kind and really good at what she does.”

“I’m sure she likes you too... and you must be really good at your job to be offered an associate partnership. What changes when you become an associate partner anyway?”

Dawn stared at me for a while before smiling, “Thank you Kit, you just nailed it!” she laughed, “The only thing that changes is that I don’t get paid overtime, but I get quarterly profit shares, and bigger completion bonuses. Bugger that! ... I’m pretty sure Myra said the same. She doesn’t want to be an associate or a full partner. Nor do I, I like my job just as it is. I feel like celebrating.”

Dawn offered to buy me a drink when we got to the Hotel and we ended up having Irish Coffee in the Guest Lounge.

I had trouble getting to sleep and lay awake for hours. I was late coming down for breakfast. Kevin and Lee were at the table with Dawn.

After exchanging pleasantries with me, Dawn and Kevin carried on discussing some issues about the Duchy of Cornwall project that Dawn was unhappy about - mostly the Architect.

Lee asked me about Zambia and South Africa. She had wanted to visit Zambia but said that Kevin had not been keen and suggested they visit Cape Town instead.

I told her that the Zambian wildlife safari’s were really good and ridiculously expensive, and said I would choose visiting Cape Town over almost any other place to visit.

“Dawn says you like swimming, are you keen on sport?”

“No, I played a lot of sport at school, it was compulsory. I went to boarding school in South Africa, they are sports obsessed. I enjoy swimming and cross country running, but I am not especially good at either of them.

“Jim is sports addict... and he is really nice and down to earth for a Lord don't you think?”

“He did ask me if I was related to a South African cricket player, Marco Jensen, we have similar features but he is much taller than me...did you say Jim is a Lord, as in a titled Lord.”

“Yes, Lord Jim Short, he owns Cheltenham and Ipswich football Clubs. He is the Earl Of Gloucester.”

“I feel such and idiot,” I mumbled, “He was very nice.”

Lee smiled, “You are definitely not an idiot, Kevin and I aren't interested in sport and Jim doesn't hold that against us. He and Alena are a lovely couple. How long do you think you will be at TurnKey? You really should try to get to see the site at Ulva before you join the army. Ulva Castle and Village are fantastic. I don't want the project to end, because I don't want to leave it.”

“That's the Scottish Castle that Kevin is project managing isn't it?” I asked.

Lee nodded, “On Ulva Island in the Inner Hebrides, Shannon Mackay, the actress, bought the island, she was born there. It has quite a gruesome history. The Castle is finished - we are actually living in it. The Village is really a

town, it will take a few more months... But it is already thriving.”

“What is she like? Shannon Mackay?”

“She is beautiful, but you know that, but she is also rather nice and down to earth. Very practical too, and determined to revive the island.”

Lee told me about the health centre and clinic, which she worked at and the primary school, which was nearly finished. She said Shannon Mackay had asked her to help set up the MacGuaire History Centre, which they hoped would attract Scottish school groups. She seemed quite excited about it and told me so many things about the islands history that I forgot most of them. I do remember her saying that there was a strong tie to Australia and that David Livingstone might be related to the early owners of the island.

Dawn apologised for interrupting and reminded me that I needed to check out before ten. I had already checked out and put my backpack in the car, but didn't say so... we had been at breakfast for a long time. I excused myself and followed Dawn to reception.

“Sorry,” she said, “Kevin looked like he was ready to leave and I know that Lee can get a bit carried away...”

“That's OK. I've checked out and just want to brush my teeth, then we can go. My stuff is in the car.”

“I'll be quick,” said Dawn, “We can go straight back to Colchester.”

I wasn't looking forward to driving through London, but managed without getting lost. An accident on the M25 had us sat stationary on the motorway for half an hour. I dropped Dawn outside her place in the Hythe. She pointed out the Bottled Crab and told me it was a great pub with great food and lots of interesting things happening. I parked the Pajero at the office just after three and set off on foot with my backpack. By five I had loaded all my dirty washing in the washing machine and showered.

Shelagh came up and knocked on my door.

“Welcome back Kit,” she looked me up and down, “Well you seem all intact. I'm in the mood for something spicy and wondered if you'd like to come to the Maharani with me? My shout.”

She asked me how I'd got on with Dawn, and after I said I liked her she told me that Dawn had brought in a lot of business for TurnKey.

“Are you planning on working at Thatcher's tonight?” she asked.

I shrugged, “I'll offer... Friday nights are usually busy, but Leslie might not want me; she has probably taken on someone else.”

“Well that would be me,” said Shelagh, she made a weird face, “I actually enjoyed it. Leslie will take you back, I'm certain of it.”

“You worked behind the bar?” I asked.

Shelagh laughed, “You looked shocked Kit... I’ve done all sorts of jobs in my time, being a barmaid was one of the nicer jobs I’ve done. Don’t ever do kitchen porter in a restaurant... the most demanding and unrewarding job I ever did. I had a lot of laughs working as a chamber maid one school holiday. That’s where I met...” her face clouded over. “Well, that was a long time ago.”

Shelagh parked at Thatcher’s and went in with me. Leslie gave us both a hug and asked if we were coming to work.

“Jules fell off her bike and broke her collar bone,” she said, “Please say yes?”

It was a busy night, and Shelagh was easy to work with, though she and Amy clearly didn’t like each other. Leslie was around, but wasn’t needed behind the bar. She did the cashing up while Shelagh helped me to clean up after the bar closed. The lasagna looked really good, but I was still full after the meal at the Maharani. Leslie suggested that Shelagh and I take some home and put it in the fridge.

Shelagh drove us back to her house.

“Mrs. Ash will be wondering what we have been up to,” she said nodding towards her neighbour’s house. “I usually walk when I go to the pub... she probably thinks I’m on the game.”

“What game?” I asked.

Shelagh chuckled and shook her head, “I like you Kit... soliciting... whoring.”

“Oh...” I could not think of what to say, but Shelagh just laughed and got out of the car.

She went straight to her room and called out goodnight while I moved my clothing into the drier from the washing machine.

08

I went out early on my bike on Saturday morning, and spent an hour just cycling out along the Layer road. Shelagh was out by the time I got back. By eleven I had done all my ironing and cleaning, so I set off on my bike to the Culver centre and bought the third of the Millennium Trilogy books, then went to the Community Kitchen to read it. I heard my name being called and saw Jules there, Her arm was in a sling and she had a graze on her cheek and temple. She looked cheerful enough. She waved me over to her table and introduced me to another young woman who had her back to me.

I didn't take in the woman's name... she literally took my breath away, I think it was her eyes... a lovely smokey grey.

I nearly dropped my coffee mug and felt very awkward and clumsy as I edged between two tables to sit across from the grey-eyed beauty and next to Jules.

“Kit works at TurnKey and helps out behind the bar at Mum's place,” Jules told the woman, “He can reach stuff the rest of us need a ladder to reach.”

“Jennifer has been helping me with my studies,” said Jules, “She is very patient with me.”

“You’re a bit young for a consultant aren’t you?” asked Jennifer. Her voice sent a shiver down my spine.

“I’m just a gopher,” I managed.

“Well, I’ve got a meeting to attend,” said Jennifer, “Thanks for the coffee Jules.”

She got up and left. She seemed in a hurry to me.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to chase your friend away,” I told Jules.

Jules shrugged and smiled, “That’s OK. Mum seems to get on well with Mrs. Sullivan, they were friends at school I think.”

“Shelagh is a nice lady. I think she really enjoyed working in the pub; she said it was much better than sitting at home watching TV by herself.”

“Do you know what happened to her husband?”

I shook my head, “Not a thing. Why?”

“I liked him, he was a regular, and always very nice. Handsome too. He wasn’t much of a talker. Then one day he was just gone. Nobody saw him again.”

“I don’t know anything about him. Shelagh never mentions him,” I said, not wanting to gossip, although I was curious.

“Only Shelagh said you were quite good with your hands,” said Jules, “She said you fixed tons of things at the house really nicely. Jimmy was a handyman, but whenever mum asked him to fix anything, he never did. Odd really... he had that van and all those tools.”

I shrugged, “There are some nice tools in the garage.”

“Well used are they?” asked Jules, “Or just for show?”

I laughed, “So you think that handsome, charming, quiet Jimmy was some sort of fraud?”

Jules went red, “I’m just talking nonsense, forget what I said.”

“Well they are nice tools, and they have been well looked after.”

“Mum will probably be asking you to fix stuff upstairs at the pub. It’s all a bit of a mess up there, and she wants us to move in there so she can rent out the house.”

“Great, I like fixing stuff, but I’ll have to ask Shelagh if I can use her tools.”

“She won’t mind; she told Mum to ask you... Shit! I’m going to be late!” Jules leapt to her feet and picked up her stuff, then handed me two bank notes, “Can you settle up for me? if there’s any change you can give it to me tonight. Gotta run!” and she was gone.

She'd given me seventy pounds. I had already paid for my coffee when I ordered at the counter. I could see a family of five looking for a table, and got up and offered them mine. I took my coffee to the counter paid Jules's bill, it was twenty three pounds, then went and sat in one of the high chairs facing the wall where they had power and network jacks. I stretched my coffee out and read for over an hour before my bum got too sore to sit any longer, then cycled over to the Hythe and back to Shelagh's house. She was home, and called out from the sitting room to tell me that she would be working behind the bar at Thatcher's that evening, as Amy was off sick.

We walked to Thatcher's and Shelagh told me that Mrs. Ash wanted me to put up a shelf in her kitchen. She said it was fine for me to use the tools in the garage as long as I looked after them and kept the garage tidy.

We got there ten minutes early and Leslie asked me to come upstairs and look at the work that needed doing.

It was quite a mess up there. The rooms had not been occupied for many years, some of the walls were plastered with old newspapers. I saw the date of 1957 on one of the very yellowed pages. There were stacks of broken furniture, cash registers, juke boxes and what Leslie called Fruit Machines, as well as a cigarette vending machine that looked like it should be in a museum. One room was stacked hip deep in old central heating radiators.

"Obviously I need to get all of this stuff removed," said Leslie, "I have asked one of the regulars whose brother has a salvage yard to take it all away. He says he will do it next week. Where do you think we should start?"

“Jules said you want to live up here,” I said, “So I guess you will want to make sure the plumbing and electrics all work? I know next to nothing about central heating, so you will need someone else to look at that and get that fixed up while I check the plumbing and electrics. Then I would fix up the rooms one at a time, starting with the bathroom, bedrooms and sitting room. I’m not a builder, so if you want to move walls around and stuff like that, you should get it done professionally, but fixing up what is here I can do.”

“I own the building, but I don’t want to spend too much,” said Leslie, “What will it cost me?”

“I haven’t got a clue,” I said, “I’ll charge you fifteen pounds an hour for my time, and you can pay for materials. If you like, once all the stuff is cleared out I will try to write down what I think needs doing, and you can ask a building contractor to give you an estimate. Then you can decide if you want to pay a professional or risk an amateur.”

Leslie gave me a doubtful look, “My late husband paid a contractor to do an extension on our house... it cost nearly three times the estimate he gave us, took twice as long and looks awful, but you are probably right; getting someone to do an estimate will be a good way to start. I’ll let you know when it’s all cleared out. Thank you Kit.”

Shelagh was struggling to cope when we went down, it was a lively night and we didn’t have much time to chat till after closing time.

“You don’t eat much,” observed Shelagh as she tucked into the lasagna Alan had made for us, “This is delicious.”

“It is, but I don’t sleep well on a full stomach,” I said, “I prefer a big breakfast.”

“Take a slice and nuke it for breakfast,” suggested Helen, “You’ve more than earned it tonight. I love nuked lasagna; Alan gets ever so cross because I lather it with tomato sauce.”

“Take some cheesecake home as well,” said Leslie, “I enjoy Alan’s cheese cake with a coffee on a Sunday morning.”

On Sunday morning I knocked on Mrs. Ash’s front door and told her Shelagh had said she wanted me to put up a shelf. Listening to her took a lot longer than putting the shelf up, which only took half an hour when she eventually got round to deciding where it should go. I told her not to worry about paying me, and hoped she wouldn’t be asking me to do anything else.

That afternoon she brought a small cake to Shelagh’s house as a thank you. Shelagh and I had some before we walked to the Thatcher’s arms that night. It was quite nice.

On Monday I was helping to move a pen plotter up to the second floor when Dawn told me to meet her at reception at nine thirty. I had fifteen minutes.

She handed me the Pajero keys and told me to drive to the Balkern Hill parking lot. We walked to an HSBC bank and she asked to see the manager, and told me to go with her. Half hour later I had an account and was told I could come back for my credit card on Wednesday morning.

I thanked Dawn and she told me I could buy her a coffee and led me to Cafe Med in the Culver Centre. She told me that she was flying up to Glasgow that evening to work on the Ulva Village project for a month while Kevin took a holiday. She advised me to transfer my funds out of Barclays Bank and stay away from them.

Leslie sent a message to my phone to say that the rooms above the pub had been emptied out and cleaned, and that McHenry Forbes was going to put in a heat pump for Hot-water and central heating. She said I could get keys from the bar anytime to measure up and work out what needed doing.

I spent a couple of hours there on Wednesday and Thursday night, and about four hours on my laptop writing up what needed doing. I emailed it to Leslie late on Saturday morning.

Jules and Amy were working on Saturday night, so Shelagh wasn't needed. She told me that she would probably come for a meal and a drink anyway.

Leslie thanked me for the email and said she had asked two contractors to give her an estimate for the work.

There was a nasty incident in the car park that night just before we closed. Luckily the police had been following at least one of the people involved, and quickly contained the situation. Helen told us that it was something to do with stolen cars. The police were very tight-lipped and offended Leslie by telling her not to interfere when she went to ask what was happening.

I was kept very busy at the office for a couple of weeks; Shelagh said it was because of all new contracts Dawn had brought in.

Things were quite busy in the Pub too, Amy had stopped coming in so Shelagh was doing several nights a week.

Jennifer, the grey-eyed goddess, came in on Wednesday and ordered a drink, a pint of Guinness. I was surprised that she remembered my name. She asked if Jules was coming in.

“I’ll ask her mum,” I said, handing her the Guinness, “Or you can ask her yourself... Leslie is ...”

“Thanks, I know her...Jules said you are waiting to join the Army. What regiment are you going for?”

“Royal Engineers....”

“Thank God for that,” she said with a smile, “I thought with your height you might do something daft like join a Guard’s regiment. I’m a Territorial Army soldier, Royal Signals. My Dad was in the Royal Engineers, a Surveyor.” She handed me a fifty pound note and asked me to take for a Lasagna and a cappuccino, which she would like after the Lasagna.

I placed her order and took her the change as she had gone to speak to Leslie. She smiled and thanked me, but was fully engaged with whatever Leslie was telling her.

I gathered up some glasses and wiped down some tables and returned to the bar.

She came and sat at a stool by the bar.

“So Kit, it looks like you are on your own tonight, Jules isn’t coming in.”

I nodded, “Wednesday can be quiet.”

“Leslie says you can handle the bar by yourself even on a busy night.”

“It’s not a difficult job.” I said, “Hard on the feet sometimes. I actually prefer it when its busy. More of a buzz.”

She nodded and studied her Guinness, “Yes...I know what you mean. Do you drink?”

I nodded, “But not when I’m working. Not a good drinker... that pint of Guinness would have me wobbling about.”

“Yeah... I like it, but I have to take it slow. One is my limit when I’m biking.”

“So, what do you do when you aren’t tutoring Jules, soldiering or riding your bike?” I asked trying not to sound pushy.

“Ha... there’s a question. I teach and I suppose I’m an auditor of sorts...why do you ask?”

“Just making conversation... Curiosity... that sort of thing?”

She nodded, “I like curious... is that mine? It looks and smells great; thanks. I’ll take it at a table.”

She smiled at me and followed Helen to a table to eat her lasagna.

Customers started coming in just after that; Cinema goes, coming to have a drink and a bite and discuss the movies they had just seen. The pub filled up quite quickly, but I was able to manage easily enough. Jennifer caught my eye and said goodbye before she left, which had me smiling till I fell asleep in bed that night.

The next night Leslie asked me when I could do the work I had suggested on the bathroom. I said I could start whenever she liked. She nodded and chewed her lip for a while, then said she would prefer that I do the bar Friday and Saturday nights, but she would ask Shelagh if she could do the other nights, if I was prepared to work on the bathroom at nights as well as Saturday and Sunday mornings. It was above the cold room, so noise should not be a problem. I said I would order the materials from Latimers, and she agreed to do the payment and accept deliveries.

Friday was a really busy night at Thatchers. Leslie told me that Latimers had delivered during the day.

It took me all of Saturday to remove everything from the bathroom and replace the water pipes and electric wiring to the the lights, shaver outlet and extractor fan. I managed to remove the toilet without damaging the outlet pipes, but realised that the toilet Latimers had delivered would not fit. I showed Leslie and she said she would ask Latimers to replace the one they had supplied with one with a vertical rather than a horizontal outlet.

I was late getting back to work in the pub after rushing home to shower and change.

I got all the tiling done on Sunday.

I tried to get finished Thursday night, but the ceiling really needed one last coat of paint, which I managed to do after closing time on Friday night.

I went for a long cycle on Saturday morning, and had a late breakfast at the Bottled Crab. It was really good and much cheaper than I expected. Just as I was unlocking my bike I heard a familiar voice; it was Jennifer. She was with three others, two men and a woman, all on bikes. They went into the Bottled Crab. I don't think she noticed me. She sounded angry about something.

I spent some time familiarising myself with the Mig Welder, and made a list of the things I needed to get it working, I thought I would check in the storage unit before trying to buy anything. It needed a gas bottle, preferably a Carbon Dioxide and Argon mix and spare bits for the welding head. There was a reel of welding wire wrapped in wax paper that looked nice and shiny.

Thinking of nice and shiny, I realised that most of the tools showed very little sign of wear and tear. Some were a bit rusty and grubby, but when I cleaned them with WD40 and wire wool, most of them looked unused.

Shelagh walked with me to the Thatchers for the evening shift. She told me I could take her car to check to the storage unit in Braintree. She asked me how I had got on with the work on Leslie's bathroom and was surprised when

I said it was finished and I was just waiting for Leslie to let me know if she was happy with it.

Leslie was behind the bar when we got to the pub, Jules was unwell. She thanked me for the work on the bathroom and said she was very pleased with it but wanted to talk privately about it later.

It was a busy night with a few unpleasant incidents. Nobody got physically hurt but Leslie called the police when one fellow refused to leave the premises. He did leave just before the police arrived but it left everyone feeling very shaken.

I went upstairs with Leslie while Shelagh had supper. She looked a bit worried and I asked her if anything was wrong. She shook her, "Oh no, nothing's wrong...I'm delighted with the work you have done, only you never said how much I owe you?"

"I kept track of the hours I did, just the actual labour and not writing up the work for you to get a quote on or ordering the materials and that sort of things, and its forty hours..." I said.

"Well that's six hundred pounds Kit," she said looking worried.

"I'm sorry... I don't think I could have done it much faster than that... not without cutting corners and ..."

"The cheapest quote was two thousand pounds for labour plus fifteen percent on top of labour and materials for P&G, whatever the hell that is, and that was just for the bathroom"

“It stands for Preliminary and General,” I said, “A sort of catchall term for the incidental expenses incurred by the builders.”

“You didn’t add any P & G’s to what I owe you?”

I shook my head, “I told you I would charge fifteen pounds an hour for my labour, you paid for everything else.”

Leslie shook her head and turned away, her body language all wrong. It took me a while to realise she was crying.

“I don’t need the money straight away....” I said and stopped when she put up a hand that clearly meant stop.

“Oh Kit... I’m sorry... it’s just that I’m so used to everybody taking advantage... or it seems that way, ever since Brian died... like vultures. You have been Godsend. I’ll have your money ready tomorrow, and you can go ahead with the rest of the work. You don’t need to rush Kit, I don’t want you making yourself ill.”

Shelagh asked what was wrong when we came downstairs. Leslie told her to take a look at the bathroom I had just fixed up for her, and persuaded me to have some coffee and cheesecake while they both went up the stairs, Alan and Helen went up too.

“Did Leslie tell you that she’d asked my husband to fix up their flat?” Shelagh asked me while we walked home.

“No, but Jules did,” I answered.

“I could never get him to fix anything around the house,” said Shelagh, “They say you should never judge a mechanic by his car.”

“Not where I come from they don’t,” I said with a laugh, “Our family doctor smoked like a chimney and drank like a fish. He looked like death having a bad day... I didn’t have much confidence in him and went to our farm services Vet if I needed any medical advice or attention.”

Shelagh laughed at that, “Well, Leslie is really pleased at what you’ve done on the bathroom. I hope she pays you properly.”

09

The next morning I went to the storage facility in Braintree and found two cylinders, they were both CarbonDioxide and had heat shrink sleeving over the outlet-valves. I assumed that meant they were full. They were bloody heavy but I managed to get them into Shelagh’s car after putting the back passenger seat down. There was a roof rack at the end of the container, it looked too big for Shelagh’s car and I guessed it was for a small truck or van. It had a neat folding ladder strapped to it and two long black plastic tubes with end caps on. I took off the folding ladder and got it into Shelagh’s car, and, out of curiosity, I opened the tubes to see what was in them. The caps at one end were screwed and glued, but at the other end they could be twisted and pulled off. One was packed full of drain clearing rods. They looked a bit manky. The other had a tripod and a surveyor’s elevation levelling staff. They looked good quality and well used. I hadn’t seen a dumpy level amongst Mr. Sullivans’s

tools in the Garage or the Container. There wasn't one in the tube with the staff and tripod, so I pulled out all of the drain clearing rods, thinking it might have been stashed behind them. They are small and expensive things.

There was another tube inside the the tube that the drain clearing rods had been in, I could only just see it, but it wouldn't slide easily down towards me when I tilted the rack. I managed to pull it out using a drain clearing rod with a helix on the end. The tube looked a bit nasty and coated with the dried remnants of whatever foul stuff had come off the drain rods. Inside there was a small and very expensive looking dumpy level in a protective case inside a roll of schematics. I unrolled them, just out of curiosity, and saw that they were civil engineering drawings for the Folkestone & Hythe District Planning Office.

I put the dumpy level in with the tripod and staff, and the schematics in the smaller tube. I wanted to have a closer look at them and took them with me back to Shelagh's house.

By midday on Sunday I had managed to weld two short bits of angle iron together with the mig welder and a lot of help from YouTube. There was not a lot of scrap metal to practice on.

I cleaned the plastic storage tube that the schematics were in and took it up to my room, then cycled off to the community kitchen in Castle Park, to get something to eat. I was also hoping to see Jules or Jennifer there. Instead I saw the Managing partner Kevin Coombes and his wife and daughter. Kevin recognised me and invited me to sit at their table. The place was full and busy.

He shook my hand and was very pleasant. Lee smiled and apologised for their daughter, who she said was teething and a bit grouchy. They both looked tanned and relaxed and said they had just returned from a fantastic holiday in Lanzarote, in the Canary Islands. When they got up to leave, a small group of Japanese or Chinese looking people asked if they could have the table. I took my coffee and went to sit at the counter along the wall facing the Castle. I left my cycle helmet on the stool and went to tell the girl at the counter I had moved. She just smiled and said she'd noticed and would ensure my food got to me.

By the time I'd had the cottage pie and a huge bowl of apple crumble and custard and another coffee, I had finished the paperback and it was time for me to head back to Shelagh's house to shower and change and go to Thatchers.

Leslie handed me an envelope and asked me to sign a receipt. She'd given me a thousand pounds! When I protested, she shrugged and tapped the receipt with a pen, "I added P&G's," she said with a smile, "And I can claim tax relief on renovation work. You earned it."

When we walked home after the pub closed that night, Shelagh told me that I would have to complete a self-assessment form in April to account for any extra money I'd earned. She said she would help me with it, as she would also have to do a self-assessment. Leslie deducted PAYE from our bar earnings, but it would skew her tax code, so it was always better to do self assessment every year. She said she wasn't going to charge me rent so didn't have to worry about dodging the tax on that. She warned me that the revenue authorities were ruthless bastards.

I started on the rewiring of the flat on Monday night. It wasn't particularly difficult. Leslie wanted a few additional ceiling lights and an extra double socket in each room and two in the hallway. I did the sockets first, so that I could use a lamp for lighting when I did the lights. On Friday I took a towel, soap and a change of clothes, and used the bathroom I'd fixed up to clean up and change to work behind the Bar. It saved a lot of time.

I finished the wiring on Sunday morning, then cleaned up and cycled to the Bottled Crab. Jennifer was there with the same people I had seen there before, all in cycling gear.

She came over to say hello when they all left, "Hi Kit, Jules says you are a bit of a star in her mum's eyes. She says you are doing a good job of fixing up the accommodation above the pub."

I had almost knocked my plate off the table when I stood to greet her. I managed to mumble something inane and she just grinned and said she would keep me in mind for any work she needed doing on her "little loft hideaway."

One of the men called her and said it was time to go, so she just smiled and wriggled her fingers as a goodbye.

Shelagh told me that she would not be working at Thatchers that night, as someone was coming to visit her. I took the Schematics with me and cycled to the pub, getting there an hour early. I took the schematics upstairs and had a quick look at them on the makeshift table/work bench I had set up in the kitchen.

The schematics covered all of Folkestone, but one of the schematics looked as if it had been exposed to more attention than others. I saw some small red x's marked on the schematics. The schematic the most westerly and southern area was the one that looked most worn and a house on Radnor Cliff Crescent was ringed in pencil. There were three red x's close to the house and if the x's were joined together, the line joining them would pass through the front yard of the ringed house.

Jules and Leslie were working behind the bar with me that night. Jules told me she had a job and would be leaving for Cheltenham the next day. She didn't seem very excited, and admitted that she was nervous about being on her own.

I started on the kitchen plumbing on Monday night. It was a lot harder than I expected. Leslie wanted a dishwasher as well as a washing machine plumbed into the new kitchen. I managed to get that all finished and done on Friday night.

On Saturday morning I got started on tiling the Kitchen floor and managed to get that finished just after midday on Sunday.

It took me two weeks to finish the kitchen. Leslie insisted that I take a break after that, which happened anyway because Dawn asked me to be her driver and assistant for two weeks. We spent a week in Berkshire inspecting a huge development that had been halted some months before and was now being taken over by Alliance Construction, a company that TurnKey liked working with. The first three days we worked so late that we just went back to our hotel, showered and slept. I lost count of the buildings we'd measured and inspected, making notes on what had been

done, what needed redoing, what materials, fixtures and fittings were in place and generally building a clear picture of what needed to be bought and done to complete the works. Dawn liked my idea of chalking an Identifier and details on each building as we worked. She went out dancing on the fourth, fifth and sixth nights at the Leather Bottle in Wokingham. I was happy to tag along and keep an eye on her drinks while she was dancing. On the Sunday night we were invited out to dinner by the owner of Alliance, Jade, and her husband Mick. It was at a show in Reading at a place called the Hexagon. The food was pretty good, and the show was pretty good too. A couple of comedian's and much to Dawn's delight, a band, which had lots of people dancing, including Jade and Mick.

The next day I drove to Oswestry where we stayed in a Travel Lodge. Dawn had three sites to visit, each about an hour's drive from Oswestry. One was a military project, and we spent two days there. There was nothing much for me to do. The other two sites were similar to the first. The works had started and stalled, and KeyStone had been asked to take over project management on the sites. I really enjoyed the work of assessing what needed doing. Dawn didn't get to do any more dancing, but seemed quite cheerful when we were on our way back to Colchester on the Friday morning.

I worked in Thatcher's that night, and Shelagh told me that Leslie had taken on a new full time barmaid as we walked to the pub.

Aggie, the new barmaid, didn't talk much and seemed a bit aloof to me. She wasn't unpleasant but I got the very clear impression that she had no interest in small talk with me.

Leslie asked if I was going to work on the flat on Saturday and Sunday, and suggested that I bring a change of clothes, in case it got too busy in the bar for Aggie and Shelagh.

I worked till ten PM on Saturday and Sunday nights laying the flooring in the entrance hall, passageway and bedrooms. When we walked back to Shelagh's house on Sunday night, she told me that she was not enjoying working with Aggie and had told Leslie that she would probably stop at the end of the month.

On Monday morning I was asked to go and see Mrs. Parsons. She asked me to sit and offered me coffee, then asked me how I was enjoying my work. I told her that I was enjoying it. She said that Dawn Kemp had said I had done good work on site with her and they had decided to increase my pay. I thanked her and, after leaving her office I looked for Dawn and was told she had gone to a planning meeting.

Shelagh congratulated me that night as we walked to the pub. I worked on fitting the skirting boards and got the entrance hall, passageway and one bedroom done by ten PM. By Wednesday I had finished with the skirting boards and on Thursday I started on preparing the walls and ceilings for painting. Getting the wall paper off the walls was a lot harder than I expected.

Leslie asked me to work behind the bar on Saturday and Sunday night. Aggie seemed a bit friendlier, but we were so busy it was hard to tell. Shelagh said she was getting used to Aggie and said she thought she was probably a bit autistic.

On Monday morning, one of the planners, Dave, asked me to help him with an assessment in Ipswich. He drove and explained what we had to do on the way. He was a very quiet man, but quite pleasant. It took me a while to figure out exactly what he wanted me to do, but he seemed happy enough and we worked without stopping for lunch as he wanted to leave before 15:00.

By Friday I was ready to get started on the painting, but Leslie wanted me work behind the bar on Friday night. Aggie was off sick.

On Saturday morning I started on the painting, and by Sunday 10 PM it was beginning to look nice and bright. I did two more coats and on Thursday night, I started on the doors and window frames. It was a lot easier with the little foam rollers the guys at Latimer's had suggested I use. I actually enjoyed it. I usually dislike painting doors and door and window frames.

I worked behind the bar on Saturday night, and on Sunday morning I started on the outside of the window frames. I really didn't enjoy being up on the tall ladders. I worked behind the bar on Sunday night and finished the outside window frames on Tuesday night. Leslie had already started moving in and by Friday night she was fully moved in.

I was invited to lunch with Leslie and Jules on Saturday in their new home. Jules said that she had more or less settled into her job, which was as an office gopher at GCHQ. She had started running and wanted to do a half marathon. She had put on weight and blamed the staff canteen.

Leslie asked me to take a look at their house, the one that they had just moved out of, and give her a list of what needed fixing. She wanted to rent it out.

On Tuesday, Leslie called me to say not to bother with the work on her house, AirBnB had agreed to take over the property and fix it up. She said she would pay me for any time I had already spent there, which was just four hours on Monday night.

Dave asked me to help with another project, and gave me an address in Norfolk, a set of drawings and a folder with lists of what he wanted checked, measured and reported on.

He smiled when I asked if he was coming with me, “You are perfectly capable of doing it without me Kit, but feel free to call me if you have any questions.”

Shelagh arranged a car for me, and booked a room for me at a bed and breakfast that actually served breakfast near to the site, which was an eight bedroomed double storey house with a two bedroomed gate house and a stable.

I set off at five AM on Wednesday, and was finished by nine PM. I contemplated driving straight back to Colchester but was worried that I had forgotten something, so had a night at the B&B, and a very nice breakfast at seven the next morning. I went back to the site and double checked that I had done and checked everything Dave had asked for then drove back to Colchester. Dave was surprised that I was finished and thanked me politely when I handed the file and papers back to him at midday.

I spent Thursday night cleaning up the tools and garage. Shelagh worked at Thatchers that night and came up to my room when she got home - I was in the shower, and she asked me to come down for cocoa and a chat when I had showered and changed.

“Leslie is worried that you are upset about not getting to fix up her house,” she told me, “She asked me to tell you that AirBnB insisted that they have their own contractors - she showed them the work you had done in her flat above the pub, but they refused to budge.”

“I’m not upset at all,” I reassured her, “Leslie has paid me very well for the work I did do.”

“You saved her thousands of pounds... she told me that herself.”

I shrugged, “I enjoyed the work, I’m thinking of doing some studying, now that I have some money in the bank.”

“Leslie still wants you to work Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights in the Bar. Aggie doesn’t work Sundays.”

“That works for me... how are you getting on with Aggie now?”

“She’s OK... actually, I’m beginning to like her.”

10

I spoke to Leslie on Friday before working in the bar and told her I was really happy with the work she had already

given me, and that I was happy with working just Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights.

Aggie was OK too, when I got used to her.

On Saturday morning I borrowed Shelagh's car and went to Latimers in Braintree. I bought some square tubing and asked them to cut it to 2 metre lengths that I could fit into Shelagh's car. I asked if they had any small pieces of scrap I could use to practice welding on and ended up spending a couple of hours there, being shown how to Mig Weld by one of the older guys who had been an instructor at a technical college. He said I could come back the following Saturday and offered to teach me how to use a plasma cutter as well. He gave me a box full of offcuts to practice with.

I decided to make a trolley for the mig welder and plasma cutter - based on the one Fred had made for Latimer's, and bought a set of wheels for it.

There was a Stag Party at Thatchers that night, and it got quite wild. I thought Leslie was going to call the police, but we managed to deal with the guys. Aggie was great and stayed right next to me, refusing to budge when three largish men refused to leave the pub. We slowly backed them out of the pub. I had to fend off a couple of half-hearted punches, but it didn't get to an actual fight. When they got into the taxi someone else had called, Aggie giggled and said she thought she was going to wet herself, then literally ran to the toilets.

"Are you OK?" asked Shelagh, "What happened to Aggie?"

“She’s gone to the loo, we’re both fine,” I said, “I was worried but she didn’t show any fear, so I thought I had better try not to either.”

“She is a kickboxer apparently, a black belt,” said Shelagh, “Leslie told me.”

On Sunday morning I was up early, eager to get on with the welding trolley. I had it all made before I had to go back to the pub. It looked OK but needed a lot of cleaning up and painting.

On Monday I was called into Mrs. Parson’s office. Dave was there. I was offered coffee, and Mrs. Parsons told me that Dave had asked her to arrange some BIM 360 training for me. She asked me how I felt about it.

I told her that I was thinking of doing some studying but hadn’t decided what to study. Dave said he was impressed with my work ethic and said I should really think about BIM.

Mrs. Parsons asked me to think about it and said the company would consider sponsoring me, she also said she had informed Bob Chivvers in IT to configure a new Laptop for me, and it should be ready on Monday.

Dave asked me to follow him to the canteen, where he explained the benefits of getting a BIM qualification. He said BIM and business finance qualifications would enable me to work almost anywhere in the world. He told me that Kevin Coombes had studied project management though Open University, and had risen from a junior project planner to Managing Partner in two years. I thanked him and said I was convinced.

“Speak to June in HR,” said Dave, “She is great at finding the best courses.”

June was great and told me that KeyStone got tax breaks for professional development training. I told her that I had some money and could afford to pay for some training. She waved a hand, “Let me see what I can find first, we can talk about money later.”

I cleaned up and painted the welding trolley that night. It looked pretty good.

On Tuesday after work I started on a new gate for the back garden at Shelagh’s house, the existing one was was falling apart. It was a really simple job and I was finished by ten PM, including a coat of red oxide. I needed to buy green paint to match the gate posts.

On Wednesday June asked me to come and see her. She gave me a folder with courses that she suggested I do, most were free but they all were accredited and those that had to be paid she said KeyStone would pay for. She told me that I could take one day off a week to attend courses at the Colchester Institute on Sheepen road. She assured me that once I had all the certificates I would be able to apply for a Masters in Construction Management, which would include BIM.

I bought some green hammered enamel for the back garden gate on my way home that night and fitted the gate before I went to work on Thursday.

On Thursday night I had another look at the schematics I had found hidden in Mr. Sullivan's roof rack. There was a sheet of clear plastic that I realised was an overlay and it fitted over the schematic for south west Folkestone. There was a hand drawn blue line that linked all the x's and some numbers which I assumed were heights as they were followed by m's. The numbers ranged from 11 to 4. There were what seemed like random comments like "easy access?" and "too public" or "worth a look"

It took me a while to realise that there were several layers of the same area, and included schematics that showed underground water, sewerage and gas pipes, electricity cables and communications cables. The blue line had been traced from a schematic with communication cables and the cable traced was labelled FIMT on the Schematic, which I looked up; it stands for Fibre In Metallic Tube.

When I over laid the clear sheet on some of the other sheets, some of the comments made sense. Eventually I realised that Mr. Sullivan, or whoever had drawn the line and x's was looking for a way to get to the fibre optic cable, and they wanted to do it discreetly. It looked like they had decided on a house on Radnor Cliff Crescent. It was after midnight when I rolled up the schematics and put them back in their tube.

I took the tube into work with me in the morning and put it in my locker. There was a message for me at reception saying Facilities had allocated me a cubicle on the first floor.

It was close to Dave's office. There was a stationery request form on the worktop and a TurnKey mouse mat and Coffee Mug with "Kit" on it. It put a smile on my face.

I cycled to Sheepen Road to attend my first course at 10:00. I was delighted when it started; the lecturer was Jennifer, Ms. Pullen. There were only eight people attending, and most were middle aged.

Lunch was included at the Balkern Restaurant and Jennifer asked if she could sit with me.

“So Kit, it seems that TurnKey is investing in you...” she said with a smile, “You must be a super-gopher!”

“They have agreed to help me get some qualifications,” I told her, “They are a good bunch.”

She nodded, “Alena Parsons founded the company, she is a risk consultant, and clearly they think you are a good risk. How are you getting on with fixing up the flat above Thatcher’s?”

“All done and dusted,” I said, “I was thinking of using the money I was paid for a course when TurnKey offered to help me...”

“You lodge with that Irish woman, Shelagh Sullivan... she is the Administrator at KeyStone.”

I shook my head, “I don’t think she had anything to do with it... I worked with two of the project managers and one of them asked Mrs. Parsons to ...”

“They will have checked with Shelagh Sullivan... all I am saying is that you have impressed a lot of people. I’m pleased for you. How is Jules getting on with her new job?”

“She seemed happy enough the last time I saw her. Said she was settling in and eating too much. She wants to do the London Half Marathon next year.”

“So, if you’ve finished fixing up the flat above Thatcher’s are you taking on any other jobs? I want to replace the bath in my flat with a shower... can you do it?”

“I’d need to look at it before I can answer that,” I said.

“That makes sense. When can you look? Tomorrow morning... earlyish? I’m going out at ten.”

“Where do you live?”

“The Hythe, I’ve got a little rabbit hutch in Hatchers Crescent...I’ll send you a WhatsApp pin. How early can you get there?”

I laughed, “Six AM early enough for you?”

“I can probably manage Six AM, but don’t expect me to make much sense at that time of the morning... will you come? Seriously?”

I nodded, “I can come later if you prefer. Just say when?”

“No six is fine... I suspect you’ll need to take measurements and stuff. What’s your number? You’ll need to call me to let you in anyway.”

I gave her my number and she called it so that I had her number.

I asked Shelagh, when we were walking to Thatcher's that night, if she had spoken to Alena about me. She told me that she hadn't had any meaningful conversations about me with anyone at TurnKey, but said that she had heard people saying good things about me. She knew that I had been provided with a cubicle and laptop, and that I was being allowed to take a study day every week.

It was a busy night.

I got to Jennifer's rabbit hutch at five past six. She was up and looking tousle haired and sleepy in a baggy tracksuit. She told me to lock my bike in her lock up - a single car garage containing her bicycle and a few cardboard boxes at the back of the house. She had the upstairs. The house had been divided into four apartments, hers was the top right. there was a kitchen/sitting room and a bathroom with a fibre glass corner bath, basin and toilet in a sort of olive green. She said the bedroom was upstairs and had a basin and toilet, so she could cope without the bathroom for a while, but she didn't want a bath, and she wanted rid of the existing basin and toilet and wanted something white and simple.

She offered coffee and I told her that it was doable, but that I could only work nights from Monday to Thursday and during the day on Saturdays and Sundays. She would have to get the person living below to agree when I could and could not make a noise and she would have to buy the materials and have them delivered. I recommended Latimers and she knew them. I spent an hour doing measurements and told her I would send a list of materials and quantities to her, then cycled to the Bottled Crab and had breakfast. Just as I

was leaving Jennifer came in with one of the men I had seen her with before, she introduced me to him, I think his name was Graham. He did not look too pleased at being introduced to me.

By lunch time I had sent Jennifer a list of materials she needed to get and a rough plan of works. I got a thumbs up in return.

Shelagh came up to my room and thanked me for replacing the garden gate. She admitted that she hadn't noticed until Mrs. Ash commented on how nice it looked.

On Sunday I started on welding up a bicycle trailer I had found a design for on YouTube. I ordered the wheels and hitch from Amazon and arranged for delivery to the office.

I had the trailer finished by Wednesday night and fitted the wheels and hitch before going to work at Thatchers on Friday night.

Jennifer gave me keys to her lockup and flat on Friday when I attended the second Six Sigma Lecture at the Colchester institute. She said she was going away for the weekend and that Carole, the nurse that lived below her was working days over the weekend, so I could make as much noise as I wanted after seven thirty AM till five PM.

I cycled to Hatcher's crescent using my bike trailer to carry the tools I would need to strip out the bathroom.

I didn't know where to dispose of the stuff I removed from the bathroom, so basically put all the tiles and debris in the bath in her lockup. I managed to remove the basin and loo

without damaging them, and put them in the lock-up as well. It was a tight squeeze as the new toilet, basin, shower cubicle and tiles were already in there.

I discovered that the floor beneath the tiles was chipboard and it was quite rotten. It had been painted with a thick rubbery paint but that had cracked. I took a photograph and messaged it to Jennifer saying the chipboard had to be replaced with Marine ply and saying that would add about a hundred and fifty pounds to the bill. I asked if I could get the plywood from Latimers. She messaged back almost immediately telling me to do whatever was necessary.

Latimers agreed to deliver that afternoon before five PM. I called Leslie and said I might be late. I had all the chipboard up and cleared the mess below it before Latimer's truck arrived at four. The delivery guy very kindly agreed to take the chipboard - he said he could burn it in his Rayburn.

I made it back to Shelagh's before six and we walked to Thatchers together. She thought I would be able to sell bicycle trailers.

I was back at Jennifer's before seven on Sunday, and met Carol the nurse, who was really pretty and friendly. She said she had lots of things she wanted done in her apartment, and asked me to have a look when I finished at Jennifer's.

I got the plywood in and the floor tiles done by three PM. I cleaned up and left. I messaged Jennifer to ask her to get rid of the stuff I had removed from the old bathroom and suggested she offer the toilet and basin to Connor Biles Salvage in return for disposing of the bath and old tiles.

I was back at Jennifer's at six PM on Monday to start tiling the walls. The boyfriend, Graham, was there. He said Jennifer was upstairs. He came into the bathroom when I started tiling and asked me why I was tiling all the walls before fitting the toilet, and shower. I told him that was how I liked to do it. He said it was wasteful and a way of getting more money. I didn't feel like arguing with him. He was right and wrong. To me, it is better to get all the tiling done, and the only place it would save tiles was the back of the toilet and basin, which the added time and difficulty of tiling around would cost more than the money saved on tiles. I let him have the last word and decided that I didn't like him.

Jennifer came down shortly after that, said a brief hello and left with him.

I stopped at ten, with about a third of the wall tiling done.

By Wednesday night, the tiling and grouting were done. I fitted the toilet and basin on Thursday night. Graham and Jennifer came back before I finished. Jennifer said it looked really good. He nodded and said it was pretty good, but it sounded begrudging to me.

Jennifer was not lecturing on the final Six Sigma Module that Friday.

They were both home and in bed when I turned up at seven thirty on Saturday. Graham came down looking grumpy in a pair of boxer shorts to let me in. He just grunted when I said good morning, turned and went back upstairs.

Jennifer came down about an hour later while I was drilling holes to secure the shower cubicle walls and asked if I wanted coffee.

I had never fitted a shower cubicle before and was a bit nervous about getting it wrong. It took me all day but I was very pleased with it.

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On Sunday they were both up and in cycling gear when I arrived at seven thirty. I got the mirror, bathroom cabinet, towel rails and loo roll holder all fitted and gave the bathroom a good clean before letting myself out just after midday. I cleaned up in the lockup, then posted the keys through the letter box and cycled back to Shelagh's. I had knocked on Carole's door but there was no reply.

I sent Jennifer a WhatsApp with a breakdown of the hours I had done and the cost of the marine ply and sealer I had bought and told her that she could claim against taxes for renovation.

Jennifer messaged asking if she could pay the money into my account, and I sent her my bank details.

Shelagh walked to Thatchers with me and told me that she was taking the last two weeks of the month off to visit family in Ireland. She asked me if I would make a bike trailer for her to take for her nephew. I decided to make two and used my phone to order wheels and hitches from Amazon while we were walking to the pub.

The pub was very quiet. Leslie and Shelagh went upstairs and told me to call if I needed help.

Carole, the nurse that lived below Jennifer turned up with another young woman. She told me that she'd seen on her Ring Camera that I'd knocked on her door while she was at work. She said Jennifer had showed off her new bathroom to her, and Carole wanted hers done too, but she wanted some other jobs done first.

I gave her my phone number and said I could not do anything for her till September. She shrugged and said September was probably good, as she would be away for most of September. I agreed to come and look at what she wanted doing on Monday night at six PM.

I spent almost three hours at Carole's flat measuring up and making notes off all the jobs she wanted doing and trying to get her to decide on what she wanted doing first. I was beginning to wish I had not agreed to do any work for her when I finally got away.

I worked on the bicycle trailer for Shelagh on Tuesday Wednesday and Thursday night, and took it for a short test ride early on Friday before cycling to the Colchester institute.

The lecture was an introduction to project planning, and was given by a man from South Africa. He was very good.

Jennifer came to sit with me when I went for lunch at the Balkern Cafe. She told me she was really pleased with her bathroom and was saving up to have more work done on her flat. She seemed a little down and when I asked her if

she was OK she said she had split up with her boyfriend, Graham, but that also meant that his sister and her husband were not talking to her, which had basically ended all her friendships in Colchester. I told her I was sorry, and said I would happily go cycling with her on Sunday mornings if she wanted company. She asked me if I meant it, and then got up and kissed me on the cheek, saying that was really sweet of me.

Shelagh had left a note for me, thanking me for the trailer and asking me to message her how much I owed her for it and she would pay it into my account. She also told me to help myself to the food in the fridge.

I made the second bicycle trailer and took it into work with me with a “for sale” sign on it. The security guard bought it before anyone turned up for work, but agreed to leave the sign on it for the rest of the day. I got orders for two more before lunch time.

I messaged Carole and asked her to order the materials for the first three jobs she wanted doing and to let me know when they had been delivered. She called back that evening to say that everything had been delivered and that she would be home until six PM, if I wanted to collect keys and, or start working that night. I cycled there direct from work and collected the keys and said I would start on Tuesday evening unless Jennifer had objections to the noise. Carole said she had not thought to ask.

Jennifer was not in, so I messaged her, and she messaged back saying she did lectures every night except Friday and would not be home till ten PM.

On Tuesday I loaded the tools I needed into my bicycle trailer and took them to work with me. After work I went straight to Carole's and got started on altering the bedroom cupboards. It was quite messy, sawing with a powersaw and I decided to invest in a shopvac to save making a mess and speed up cleaning up. I stopped at nine PM to give me time to clean up. Carole kept her car in her lock-up garage, so there was not much room to store my tools.

I cycled home and spent an hour trying to decide on a shopvac before settling on a rather expensive Festool battery powered one. I ordered it and was promised next day delivery at TurnKey offices.

On Wednesday night I got a lot more done; the shopvac made a big difference. I used my phone to order a second battery, but the battery, which I had charged during the afternoon at the office, lasted till I was finished and still showed some charge left, despite at least four hours use.

Jennifer arrived back as I was putting my tools away in Carole's lock up. She greeted me cheerfully and said she like my bicycle trailer. She asked how much it cost and said she wanted one, whenever I had time to make one. There was no room for my trailer in Carole's lock up, so I cycled home with it.

That probably saved my life.

I felt the car hit, but didn't really register what happened, I felt an impact on my back and realised it was a car. Then nothing.

I woke up from a dream in which I was being strangled from behind. I couldn't move and had tubes down my nose and throat, my head felt bloated and soggy... it's hard to describe.

I remembered being hit by a car and landing on my back before blacking out. I felt my heart racing... it got worse when I couldn't raise my hands or legs. My whole body felt numb, a sort of tingling, sluggish numb.

Something must have alerted the hospital staff. A smiling bearded face appeared in front of me, and a young man with intense blue eyes asked me to blink once for yes and twice for no if I could hear and understand him.

I blinked once.

“Great Kit. First of all, you can stop worrying... you are going to be absolutely fine. You have some minor injuries and some brain swelling following an accident. You are responding well to treatment, and... well you should still be unconscious but we were going to reduce your meds today. Are you feeling any pain?”

I blinked twice and he nodded, “We're going to get you back to sleep... its just so that we can remove the tubes... don't worry about a thing Kit. You have been very lucky.”

I remember thinking that was a bit rich. Getting hit by a car was not my idea of being lucky.

When I woke again it was dark. My throat itched and it hurt when I coughed. My hands and arms worked, though they felt weird. My head still felt soggy and wrong. There was

someone in the room with me. I could hear them breathing. I turned my head slowly and saw Dawn Kemp asleep in a chair next to my bed. I didn't want to wake her, but she seemed to sense me looking at her and woke.

She smiled and asked how I was feeling.

I coughed when I tried to speak and she got up looking concerned, saying she would call a nurse.

The nurse, an older woman, came quite quickly. I had stopped coughing and managed to tell Dawn that I was feeling a bit weird but not in any pain.

The nurse put up the end of my bed so that I was in a sitting position and poured some water into a glass for me, telling me just to take small sips from a straw while she held the glass. Water had never tasted better.

I asked what had happened.

Dawn told me I had been hit by a car on Cowdray Avenue. The car had sped away but someone had seen it happen and called for an ambulance. She told me that my trailer and bicycle were badly damaged.

It was the nurse who told me that my cycling helmet had been shattered, and that I would probably have been killed if I had not been wearing it. She said they had put me into an induced coma and had operated on my skull to reduce the pressure from swelling. I had been in hospital for a week.

I was offered food, and when it came...mashed potatoes and a chicken stew, I couldn't eat it.

Dawn asked me if I wanted anything. She told me that my cell phone had not survived the accident and that all my clothes, apart from my trainers, had been thrown away. My keys and wallet were in the drawer next to my bed.

Dawn was gone when I woke in the morning. I didn't remember going back to sleep.

I had no hair. I had a long line of stitches along the back of my head and a tube sticking out of my head behind my left ear. It make me feel sick thinking about it.

Jennifer came to see me, and said she'd heard about my accident on the local TV news. Police were asking for witnesses or anyone with a dashcam images from the time I was hit to come forward. She asked what I remembered, and shook her head in dismay when I told her.

The police came while Jennifer was visiting. The ward sister asked if I wanted to talk to the police.

They asked me a few questions and asked me to give a statement. I was not allowed to write it, but happily signed the short statement written by the young police woman. The Older male officer said that a man walking his dog had seen the accident and gave a statement and description of the vehicle, but he wouldn't say any more than that. He did say that the bicycle trailer had probably saved my life, but it was wrecked, as was my bicycle. The police were keeping both for forensic evidence.

I had a lot of tests, and got used to having a tube sticking out of my head. I really didn't like the look of my head

without hair. I had some pain and discomfort in my neck, and had another operation to remove a bone chip. The surgeon said it shouldn't be a problem. He didn't have stitches in the back of his neck and head.

The hospital food was not as bad as their coffee. The bearded nurse, Mike, brought me snickers bars and Costa Coffee when he came on shift and refused payment.

Dawn brought me a new phone, and said TurnKey had paid for it. She told me that the TurnKey lawyer was pressing for police action on my case but wouldn't say any more.

It was Jennifer who came to see me on the Friday, just before I was allowed to leave the hospital. She told me that Graham Cooper, her ex-boyfriend, had been arrested and charged with reckless endangerment, and a slew of offences... and that he was a policeman! She had come from giving a statement to police. According to her, Graham had seen me talking to her by the lock-ups, and had followed me and deliberately knocked me off the road with his car. The dog-walking witness had described the car, a red Corolla saloon car, and there were several cctv and dashcam clips showing his car with a damaged front, bonnet and windscreen as he fled the scene of the accident.

I went to Thatchers in the afternoon, and told Leslie that I could work if she didn't think my shaved head and stitches would scare customers. She said I was a local celebrity and that patrons had started a collection to buy me a bicycle.

Marius, the Slovenian Bicycle Repair Shop owner, shook my hand with both of his, then left the pub and returned twenty minutes later with a bicycle that he brought into the bar and

insisted I try out. He handed me a new cycle helmet and a reflective jacket. Leslie laughed and told me to go with it.

It was much nicer than my old bicycle and Marius insisted on making adjustments before we took it outside. I cycled around the car park a few times with people clapping.

Ms. Parsons came to see me when I went into work on Monday. She said I could claim taxi trips to work on expenses. I had walked in. I told her I had another bike and was happy to carry on cycling. I thanked her for the phone and she waved it aside.

On Wednesday, a lady called Melanie Phillips asked me to come and talk with her in the board room. She said she was the company lawyer, and that TurnKey had asked her to act for me. She handed me some papers to sign and told me that Graham Cooper had pleaded guilty to all charges, so that there would be no trial. She asked for the value of the bicycle, trailer and tools that had been damaged.

I told her that my bicycle had cost me four hundred pounds, that I made the trailer, which I sold copies of for two hundred and forty pounds, and that my cell phone, cycle helmet, sweat shirt, jeans and reflective jacket had been destroyed, I wasn't carrying any tools, and that my bicycle, helmet, cell phone and reflective jacket had already been replaced. She told me that it was unlikely that I would be asked to appear at court for the damages hearing, but said she would be with me if that happened.

On Thursday night I cycled to Carole's and carried on with the work. I finished at ten and took a longer route home, that kept me off the road as much as possible.

On Friday the lecture at the Colchester Institute was given by Jennifer. I sensed that she was uncomfortable with me and she didn't come to the Balkerne Cafe for lunch.

I worked at Thatcher's on Friday night and got more tips than ever before. It was quite a busy night.

I got a lot done on Saturday, and was putting my tools away when Jennifer came to the lock-up to talk to me.

"Hi Kit... I'm really sorry about what happened..."

"Thanks, me too, but it happens," I said, "It could have been worse."

"I feel responsible..."

"It wasn't you that drove into me... Graham did it. He must have some issues."

"Yes... he's very insecure and controlling. I couldn't cope, but why did he attack you of all people?" she went red, "You never made a pass at me or anything like that."

I shrugged, "Who knows what goes on in the minds of others?"

"Did you mean what you said... about going cycling on a Sunday morning?"

"Yes... I like cycling. I'm not super fit or anything, I just like gadding about."

She smiled then, “OK then... I’ll buy you breakfast in Frinton. Have you been there?”

I shook my head.

“Are you OK on the roads... after?”

“Sort of... I stick to cycle paths where I can, especially at night, and my new bike has mirrors.” I pointed them out.

“What time should we set off... please don’t say six?”

“You tell me and I’ll be here.”

“Seven?”

“I’ll be here,” I smiled and got on my bike.

I felt good as I cycled back. I realised the chances of any real relationship with Jennifer were zero... she was at least three years older than me and much more worldly. I was just happy that she could be bothered to spend time with me.

12

Jennifer was waiting for me at seven and we set off straight away. I enjoyed ogling her shapely legs and rear end as we got on our way. She set a steady pace.

The cafe in Frinton was closed, so we ended up in Brightlingsea. Jennifer interrogated me gently while we waited for our order. She asked me how I was getting on with the work on Carole’s apartment and told me that Carole

was very definitely gay and enjoying a girls only holiday in Thailand. She said Carole had made several passes at her, and had warned her that Graham was a prick.

The breakfast was OK. Jennifer took a longer route back, sticking mainly to cycle tracks. She got a puncture, and didn't need any help with it. She had a very fancy preloaded gas inflator. I was home by midday, and got started on making two new bicycle trailers.

I managed to get all the jobs done, except the bathroom before Carole got back. She looked annoyed but didn't say anything. I finished the bathroom on the Saturday after she got back and used an Uber Cargo to get the tools back to Shelagh's house. The Uber driver, a woman, recognised me from the TV and asked me what happened to the cop that knocked me off the road. I told her that he was having some sort of assessment, and she snorted and said he would probably get a suspended sentence. She refused payment.

Carole came to Thatchers to pay me on Sunday night, she told me she had deducted a hundred pounds for the inconvenience of my not completing the works while she was away. I shrugged and said I would send her a receipt. Leslie had heard and waited till Carole and her girlfriend had left the counter before asking me what Carole had meant. I told her that I had agreed to do some work in her apartment while she was on holiday and that I hadn't finished before she got back, so she had deducted a hundred pounds. Leslie wanted to go and confront Carole, but I asked her not to, saying I was happy enough with the money I had earned and that I would not be doing any more work for Carole.

Leslie was still cross about it when we were having supper after the bar closed.

Shelagh was home when I got back. She noticed my short hair and scar immediately and asked me what had happened. She went very pale and swore when I finished, saying she hoped that the bastard went to jail. I said it was unlikely... policemen didn't fare well in jails, which made her swear even more. I did get a very nice hug.

She told me that her nephew loved the bicycle trailer, which was admired by everyone in the village he lived in. He was a plumber's apprentice.

Shelagh seemed distracted over the next two weeks. I delivered a trailer to Jennifer the next Sunday before we cycled to Harwich. It was quite a tough cycle ride, and we got chatting to some cyclists that we caught up with on a cycle track quite close to the town, and ended up going to a cafe they were heading for. They had come from Marks Tey and invited us to cycle with them. They were going to Dedham the following Sunday. They seemed like a nice bunch and we cycled back with them till they peeled off for Marks Tey. Jennifer had told some of them about the trailer I had made for her, and had promised to send a video of it to them. She asked me to video her and lent me her GoPro. We strapped two twenty litre water dispenser bottles to her trailer and I followed her as she cycled around the block and over the Hythe bridge. She promised to send a copy of the edited video to me.

Shelagh told me that night, as we walked to Thatchers, that one of her cousins had seen Jim, her vanished husband, in Malaga. She swore it was him, though she hadn't

approached or spoken to him. She's heard him speaking at a cafe, and recognised his voice and accent.

I asked her if she was going to look for him, and she shook her head.

"Sorry Kit, I don't know what to do. I mean... he's gone isn't he. He no longer wants to be with me... I just wish I knew what I had done wrong."

"My mum had three husbands," I told her, "It doesn't make me any sort of an expert, but I think it must be hard when someone just leaves without saying anything. I'd want answers."

"I do." she said.

"Did he ever mention working in Folkestone?" I asked.

Shelagh shook her head and looked confused, "Not that I recall.. why do you ask?"

"Just something I found among his tools," I said, "Schematics for Folkestone."

"That's Kent isn't it? Near the Dartford tunnel?"

"I think its in Kent," I said, "Something to do with an underground fibre optic cable."

Shelagh stopped and turned to face me, "Kit, what exactly did you find?"

“Drawings and notes...” I said carefully, “That looked like someone was planning to dig a tunnel to get at a huge fibre optic cable that goes from Folkestone to Calais.”

Shelagh was very still for a while. Then she nodded, “Can you show me?” she asked.

“I can show you tomorrow at work,” I said.

“Have you told anyone about this Kit?”

I shook my head.

Shelagh took hold of my arm. She had a powerful grip, “Kit, this is important... Jimmy... his family... well, there are some bad ones. I mean really bad. Whatever you do don't tell anyone else about this?”

I nodded. Shelagh nodded and let me go.

It was a busy night. Carole came in and handed me two fifty pound notes and apologised. It was too busy to chat. I thanked her and she left. After the pub closed I asked Leslie if she had spoken to Carole and she said she hadn't. Shelagh asked what it all about and was incensed, even though I told her Carole had paid me the hundred pounds and apologised. We hardly talked on the walk home.

I took the schematics to Shelagh's office in the morning. We closed the door while I showed her what I had found. She was very pale and quiet by the time I finished. She asked me to roll them up and bring them as we went to Alena's office.

Shelagh closed the door and asked me to show the schematics to Alena and tell her what I'd just told her.

Alena listened quietly until I was finished.

“Kit found these drawings amongst my husband Jimmy’s tools,” Shelagh said before Alena could speak, “My cousin Darlene said she’d seen Jimmy at a cafe in Malaga in August. You know about his uncle Liam... Kit does not, but I told him not to talk about this.”

“You don’t think this is connected to PC Cooper ...?” asked Alena.

Shelagh shrugged, “I don’t know enough about it... but Kit hasn’t said or done anything to make anyone suspicious.”

Two hours later Shelagh and I were being interviewed separately in London. The person interviewing me, a well spoken woman with a no-nonsense attitude, said she was Inspector Grey, though she showed me no credentials. She told me that everything I said was being recorded. I told her what I knew and went over it three times before she excused herself and left me desperate for a piss.

Eventually I hammered on the locked door and was escorted to a toilet by a man in military uniform.

Shelagh and I had lunch in a dismal looking windowless canteen but didn’t discuss the schematics.

We were then asked to sign an agreement that we would not discuss the matter we had been interviewed about with anyone, including each other and were told that we would

be under surveillance for our own protection and asked to call a number if we felt threatened in any way. In the car back to Colchester, Shelagh took my hand. I looked across at her and saw that she was crying silently. I felt really bad.

Kevin was at the office when we got back, he came over to my cubicle and asked if I could make ten bicycle trailers for him to take to Ulva. I asked him how quickly he wanted them, and whether it was something I could do during working hours. He said he would get back to me on that, after checking with Alena. I used my phone to order the wheels and hitches, then called Latimer's and arranged for steel tubing to be delivered to Shelagh's house and left by the carport.

I got a message from Alena before I got home saying it was fine for me to work on the bicycle trailers during working hours, and to let her know when I would be back in the office. She told me that TurnKey would pay for the trailers.

I got six done by Thursday night, and got an Uber Cargo to bring the rims and tyres from the office to Shelagh's house on Friday after my session at the Colchester institute.

I made two more on Saturday.

On Sunday Jennifer and I met up with the Marks Tey cycle club riders and rode to Dedham. There was a Kit and a Jim amongst the Marks Tey riders, so a cheeky looking girl decided that I would be called Lanky. She had a fall just before we got to Dedham and hurt her knee. She ended up riding at the back with me, holding onto the rack at the back of my bicycle, as I was the only rider with a rack on my bicycle. She asked me to call her Ames, and said she was

Amy, but didn't like the name. I told her I would call her Amy if she called me Lanky. She was quite short.

By the time we got to Dedham we were getting on quite well. She sat at the same table with me, Jennifer and two other riders, a couple whose names I didn't catch. Ames was full of beans and kept us entertained with stories about her job as a Veterinary Assistant. Our group filled the cafe and there was a really pleasant buzz. They served really nice food too. Ames persuaded me to order the double chocolate fudge cake and said she would pay for it if I didn't like it. She ended up eating half of it, but I did like it.

Ames knee was really swollen by the time we were ready to cycle back. She gamely said she would try, but after twenty minutes, said it was too sore... even with holding onto my rack. I used my phone to call an Uber Cargo for her. She didn't have the app, and promised to pay me back.

When we split off to head to Colchester, Jennifer told me that Ames fancied me. Two of the riders had told her so. She also admitted that she quite liked Alan, one of the older riders. I didn't know which one he was.

Shelagh wasn't home when I got there, and didn't come to the pub that night. Leslie told me she had called to say she needed a break.

When I got home I saw that someone had tried to call me while I was in the pub. I didn't know whose number it was and sent a message, asking who they were and how I could help. I got a call back immediately. It was Ames. She thanked me and asked me how much I owed her for the

Uber. I told her not to worry about it and she said she insisted on paying me back.

“Are you hitched to Jennifer? Only someone said you two were just pals... I..”

“No... she’s interested in someone else,” I said.

“Who?” she asked.

“None of my business... or yours...”

“Don’t be like that Lanky...”

“Don’t be like what Amy...”

“Why didn’t you answer when I called you earlier. Were you with your girlfriend?”

“I was working and my phone was on charge at home.”

“So where was your girlfriend?”

“Um... I’m not sure how to answer that without incriminating myself.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I don’t have a girlfriend.”

“Well that’s good... unless you are gay?”

“Don’t you like gays?”

“Not as boyfriends... it’s probably because you’re so tall, the blood doesn’t get to your brain.”

“What?”

“I fancy you Lanky... do you want it in writing or something?”

“That’s nice Amy... “

“Cat got your tongue?”

“Something like that... I like you too...”

“So what are we going to do about it?”

“I don’t really know. What do you want to do?”

“Smack you over the head for starters... you don’t know how to chat up a girl do you?”

“I suppose not... “

“Try...”

“OK... um...”

“Forget it - where do you work... more importantly, when do you have days off?”

I have a day job Monday to Friday, and work Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights at a pub. Sometimes I do other stuff but I try not to work on Sundays except at night.”

“What do you mean “other stuff”?”

“Jobs... I renovated Jennifer’s bathroom, at the moment I am making bicycle trailers for someone. I should finish them tomorrow.”

“You’re that guy... the one who got hurt in the hit and run by a cop...the jealous boyfriend. Was that Jennifer’s boyfriend?”

“Ex-boyfriend.”

“What did you do to make him jealous?”

“I did some work for the lady who lives in the flat below hers, after I had done Jennifer’s bathroom. He saw me talking to Jennifer one night when I was leaving just as she got home.”

“Fuck... and you’re still friends with her?”

“She’s a nice person..”

“And super good looking...”

“Yes...”

“So who does she fancy then?”

“I told you...”

“OK... OK. So will you be riding to Clacton with us on Sunday?”

“Will you be able to ride by then?”

“I hope so... unless you want to come to Marks Tey?”

“Is that an invitation?”

“I suppose..”

“What’s there to do in Marks Tey...”

“Fuckall really... there’s a Skate Park... that’s why I joined the cycle club.”

“OK, well how about you get the train to Colchester if you can’t cycle on Sunday, there’s plenty to see and do here.”

“OK... Its a deal, but one thing... do you live with your parents? Only I....”

“No I lodge with with someone from my office. I’m not allowed to bring visitors here though.”

“No that’s fine... I’m just not ready to meet parents and get judged and that sort of thing.”

“No worries there... Will you call me or do you want me to call you?”

“I’ll call Kit. Stay safe... don’t be making boyfriends jealous.”

“What about your boyfriend?”

“Oh don’t worry about him, he’s just an ape with a motorbike.”

“Oh crap...”

She laughed and hung up on me. Seconds later she sent me a hug and kiss emoji.

13

Shelagh got home really late. She got up late and came out to the garage to ask if I wanted breakfast at around nine.

Over breakfast she told me that she was taking some time off and going to visit family.

“I need to get away Kit... far away. You can use my car. It will need an MOT in November, I'll pay for everything.”

I thanked her. She smiled and put a finger to her lips. It was a sad smile.

“Don't make a fuss,” she said and “It's all a set-up.”

An hour later two cars came to the property, they were unmarked but they had blue flashing lights. There were eight police officers. They took Shelagh away and took me into the house. Telling me to stay out of sight for an hour.

I lay on my bed for an hour trying to read a book. When I went downstairs one of the police women nodded and told me I could carry on as normal, and they would be leaving in another hour. Three of them were drinking tea or coffee in the dining room, where they were assembling a pile of cardboard boxes and and taping them with red and black tape with “EVIDENCE” on it.

I went to the garage and carried on with the bicycle frames. A van with AP on the side drove up and three people came out of it. One had a camera.

The policewoman went to speak with them and told them to leave the property. They asked what was happening and got quite pushy, but she just kept telling them to move back till they were on the pavement outside the property.

The woman called out to me, and tried to persuade me to come and talk to them. I turned my back on them and carried on spray painting the last two bicycle trailers. I couldn't do it inside the garage. A black van pulled into the yard and the police officers made a show of loading the empty cardboard boxes into the van. I locked up the garage and as soon as the police left, I locked the house and set off on my bicycle, using the cycle paths and went to the office. Ms. Parsons was still there, in her office with Kevin Coombes. She asked me to come into her office and close the door.

“We know Kit... about Shelagh, you don't have to say anything. How are you?”

“I'm fine... I finished the trailers and wanted to start bringing them here, but there are reporters outside the house...”

“I'll get them collected,” said Kevin, “Will tomorrow at eight be OK?”

“I meant how are you feeling about this set up?” asked Alena.

I shrugged... “I’m not sure... I was told not to talk about it.”

Alena nodded, but looked angry, “I’m going to speak to my husband about it.”

Kevin nodded, “He might be able sort something out. This seems wrong to me.”

“Sorry... but what exactly seems wrong?” I asked.

“The police are using you as bait...well that’s what it looks like to me,” said Alena, picking up the phone.

Kevin opened the door and asked me to come to the canteen with him.

“Jimmy Sullivan’s uncle, Liam Gallagher, was a money man for the IRA... he stole money for them, bank heists, insurance scams and all sorts of illegal money making schemes. He spent time in jail and he’s suspected of being the master mind behind a lot of organised crime rackets in UK and Ireland,” He told me quietly as we walked to the canteen. “Alena thinks, and she is a very smart lady, that the police have faked Shelagh’s arrest to spook Jimmy and whoever he is working with. They have people watching her house, the storage unit and the house in Folkestone in the hope of nabbing one of them.”

My phone rang... it was Leslie. I excused myself from Kevin and took the call in the corridor outside the canteen.

“Kit? Are you OK Kit... I just heard that the police have taken Shelagh away... what’s going on?”

“I have no idea... sorry.”

“Are you OK... I saw you on TV? What did the police say to you?”

“They told me it was a police matter and wouldn't say why they took Shelagh away.”

“Where are you?”

“At work..”

“Do you want to come and stay here... above the pub? You are most welcome.”

“Thank you... that's really nice of you... do you really mean it?”

“Of course I do... Just come when you want. I'll get some keys cut for you today.”

She told me to be careful and call her if I needed anything.

I went back to the canteen and sat with Kevin who had ordered two coffees and scones.

He got me talking about the course work and how my citizenship application was going. He said he would ask Melanie Phillips to follow up on it for me. He asked me if I'd heard anything more about PC Cooper. I told him that he'd been referred to a psychiatric institute but I didn't know much else. Ms. Phillips said he would not be going to prison, but that he was not allowed to drive and had failed his probation and was no longer a police officer. I asked him

what he would be doing with the bicycle trailers in Ulva and he said that they were going to sell them to the town's tradespeople. He thought they would be popular. He liked talking about Ulva and said I should I should visit.

Alena came in and sat with us. Kevin got up to get her a coffee and she told me that her husband had told her that the Home Secretary had taken an interest in the case, and had assured him that I was perfectly safe.

I cycled back to the house and decided to carry on as normal. I tested all the trailers, cycling around the block with them. Mrs. Ash came out and asked me what had happened to Shelagh. I told her I didn't know any more than she did. She said that they were saying it was something to do with terrorism on the TV. She liked the look of the trailers and asked me how much I was charging for them. I told her that all of them were going to a Scottish Island, and that I charged two hundred and forty pounds for one. She tutted and said that was a lot of money.

My phone rang while I was locking up the garage. It was Ames.

"You're on the Telly again," she said "What happened to your landlady?"

"The police took her away," I told her, "I don't know why."

"Did they question you? What did they ask you?"

"Yes... and I really don't want to relive it all. Not now."

“OK... Sorry. You are a bit of a shit magnet aren't you...you even attracted me!”

I laughed, “Thanks for making me laugh... you definitely are not shit though. You are actually very cute...but cheeky.”

“Is that a compliment?”

“I suppose so...I like they way you look and sound... more compliments. How's your cooking?”

“I do excellent take outs... Chinese, Korean... pizza and Indian... and fish and chips!”

“Definitely my sort of girl,” I said, “What about drinking... what's your favourite tippie?”

“Um... I'm a bit boring there... I don't drink ... what about you?”

“Mostly coffee... not beer, but I like a rum every now and again.”

“Coffee is about as strong as I can take...Do you smoke... you don't look like a smoker.”

I laughed, “What do smokers look like?”

“Stupid, and you aren't stupid.”

“Thanks - I don't smoke, but my mum smokes eighty a day.”

“Shit sorry, I didn't mean...”

I laughed, “Its OK.... even she says it’s stupid of her but she just can’t give it up.”

“Passive smoking is more dangerous than actual smoking...”

“Yeah - I hated it but went to boarding school from when I was four and left home when I finished school, so... hopefully I’m safe.”

“Do you not get on with your mom?”

“I love her to bits, but I have to live my own life.”

“You’re different you know... maybe that’s why I fancy you.”

“So it’s not my dashing good looks or sparkling wit that attracts you?”

“No... its your eyes if you must know?”

“My eyes? What’s so nice about my eyes?”

“They look at me, they don’t undress me. You’ve got honest eyes.”

“Well... that’s nice. Thank you.”

“What can you tell me about my eyes?”

“They are green and full of mischief,” I replied, “How’s your knee?”

“I had ultrasound on it this morning, and the swelling has gone down quite a lot. I’m walking on it, but it is sore. What are you doing right now?”

“I’m stood in the hallway talking to you on the phone,” I said, “Why?”

“I just wanted to know,” she said, “What were you doing when I called?”

“I was locking up. I made ten bicycle trailers for my boss and someone is coming to collect them tomorrow. I tested them all and locked them up.”

“Can you send me a photo of one of your trailers?”

“I can send you a video of one. Just give me a moment.”

It took me a while to find the video Jennifer had edited and sent to me. I sent it to Ames.

“I’ve seen this before...its Alan, the guy that Jennifer fancies, its him isn’t it. She sent him this same video. He says she has a really nice bum.”

I laughed and said she was supposed to look at the trailer.

“Did you film this? You seemed to focus on her bum.”

“I was wearing a GoPro on my helmet and watching the trailer. Jennifer edited the video - its her GoPro.”

“What do you think of my bum?”

“You were riding behind me, holding onto my carrier... how was I supposed to ogle your bum?”

She laughed, “I ogled yours...its OK.”

“Thank you,”

“Are you going to bed now?”

“No... I’m going to shower and then work out how much to charge for the trailers... then I’m going to bed.”

“Didn’t you agree a price up front?”

“I did, but then they said I could work on them during work hours... I get paid for that, so I need to work out the materials and the unpaid hours that I did.”

“You’re honest...”

“I try to be.”

“Well, I’m in bed thinking about you and your honest eyes and bum, and hands and looking forward to seeing you on Sunday. Goodnight!” she made some kissing sounds and hung up.

I went around the house making sure that all the doors and windows were closed and locked, then cleaned up the mess that the police had left in the kitchen and dining room before going up to my loft. I showered and thought about Leslie’s offer of staying in the flat above the pub, and decided I’d try to stick it out at Shelagh’s house.

It didn't take long to work out how much to charge for the trailers. I printed a proforma and went to bed.

I didn't sleep well, and kept waking up with every little noise.

The Pickfords truck came at a quarter to eight and was gone by five past eight. I cycled to work and gave the proforma to Ms. Parsons. She asked how I was feeling and I said I was fine, though I felt horrible.

Dawn Kemp asked me to drive her to a site by the M25 and MI junction. We had a lot of trouble finding a way into the site. We were shown around a half demolished factory by an Architect who gave us a set of plans each. I used my phone to record what she said and take photos. We finished at three in the afternoon.

On the drive back to Colchester Dawn asked me to write up a report on what we had seen and done and a proposal on how the work should proceed. She told me to email it to her before eight AM on Thursday.

I worked on the report till ten that night and cycled into work before six and sat in the canteen waiting for them to get up and running while I worked on the proposal. After breakfast I went to my cubicle and carried on. Dave poked his head into the cubicle and asked what I was doing. He read my report and what I had written on the proposal, then said I was doing a good job. He said he would send me a proposal he had written and suggested I follow the same format.

Dawn invited me for coffee at ten, and told me to take a short break, at least ten minutes every hour, when working on reports and proposals. She asked if I had any questions.

Ames called me at eight that night and told me that her knee was a lot better. She had cycled to work and back and was sure she would be fine on Sunday. She asked me what my favourite movies were and we argued about Game of Thrones then moved onto books and argued about Lord of the Rings. Neither of us like horror. I didn't know any of the music that she liked and she said she didn't like any of the music that I told her I liked, saying it was for much older people. She was the same age as me, just two months to the day younger than me. That surprised us both.

Neither of us knew much about Art. She was into Philosophy and talked for ages about it. It was ten before I was able to rush to the toilet. I slept better that night.

14

I was up at five and made myself coffee and breakfast. I was at TurnKey at six, and by seven I had proof read my report and proposal and printed it and put it in Dawn Kemp's mail box.

David came in while I was in reception and asked me to come to site with him. The site was in Braintree, close to the secure storage yard. It was a timber processing plant that was being modernised. An engineer walked around the plant with us, explaining what they wanted to do, and saying that they wanted to get it done with minimal production disruption.

David and I walked through the processes three times with the engineer before heading back to Colchester. We then

sat in the board room where he connected his laptop to the projector and started putting together a project PERT for the wood processing plant.

First he set up the existing process and workflow then he put up the project plan showing the new plant that had to be installed and commissioned and the old plant that had to be decommissioned, dismantled and disposed of.

David was very methodical and encouraged me to make suggestions and criticisms. After a while it began to make sense to me and it then became fun. I was shocked when Dave said it was time to stop for the day. He thanked me and said we could continue on Monday, as I had a study day on Friday.

I found myself thinking about the project as I cycled home. I wrote down my ideas and set up a project plan on my laptop, using Excel to create a Pert. It was clumsy but it worked. Ames called at ten, she sounded subdued. I could hear raised voices in the back ground and she said her dad was drunk. I asked her if she was OK and she said she was just tired. She asked me about my day and listened quietly. She said she'd had a study day, but was thinking of quitting veterinary work. She said she'd chosen to work with animals because she liked them, but said that more often than not the vets were putting down pets that people couldn't be bothered to look after properly. I said I had wanted to be a cattle farmer till I realised that meant raising cattle for slaughter, and I just couldn't do it. I told her about our parrot, Sue, that I had rescued from the pot when I was ten, and her antics. I got her laughing eventually. At eleven she said she need to get some sleep.

Jennifer was the lecturer on Friday. She sat with me at lunch and said she'd seen me on the Telly and asked what had happened to my landlady. I told her I didn't know. She told me that she'd been interviewed by some people who wanted to know if Graham had any connections with the IRA. His mother was Irish. She said Graham had been taken into custody but didn't know any more than that.

Leslie said I looked pale when I got to the bar that night. Aggie asked me if I was OK and gave me a brief hug.

After we had eaten Leslie told me again that I was welcome to move into one of the rooms in the flat and gave me a set of keys. I thanked her and said I would take up her offer if the press started to bother me.

There was someone waiting for me when I got home... a woman who looked familiar. She looked miserable and said she was Sarah Cooper - Graham's sister. She told me she was really sorry about what her brother had done to me, but that he wasn't a terrorist.

I told her that he had tried to kill me... with a car. She said he was just jealous but that it had nothing to do with the IRA. When I asked her what she expected me to do, she asked me to speak to the police and explain that he was just a jealous guy and not a terrorist. I told her I didn't know that and that it really didn't make that much difference - he had tried to kill me. I asked her to leave and she started crying. I could hear my phone ringing in the house. A police car drove up to the house with its lights flashing. She left, still crying.

I went into the house and called Ames back. She said she was worried about me. I told her I had left my phone at home to charge and had just got back from the pub.

She asked about my day and I told her I'd had a study day and then worked in the pub and asked about her day. She said she'd had a really good day taking a therapy dog to the local primary school. At midnight she apologised for keeping me awake and thanked me for not snoring. I told her I liked listening to her voice.

I slept better that night and woke at seven. I didn't have a plan for the day and decided to cycle to Braintree and have another look at the Wood Processing Plant. The Engineer, Gerald Wright, looked pleased and gave me a dust-coat, ear defenders and safety glasses to wear, saying I could go where I pleased. He came with me and happily answered my questions. I left at one PM and cycled past the Storage facility. There was a police car parked outside the gate.

I went to the Lamb and had their steak pie and mashed potato, then cycled back to Colchester and spent the rest of the afternoon working on my Excel PERT.

The pub was really busy that night, and Leslie had twisted her ankle. Aggie and I worked flat out, but the session seemed to pass quickly. I didn't eat that night. There was a missed call on my phone from Ames. I called back and she picked up straight away.

She asked about my day and said I was nuts when I told her about the wood processing plant. She told me Saturdays were good at the Veterinary Practice. She did an obedience class for dog owners in the morning and a pet grooming

class in the afternoons. Somebody had brought in a woolly pig to show the others and gave a talk on caring for it.

She told me to get some sleep, and that she was looking forward to seeing me in the morning.

Jennifer sent me a live pin at six thirty the next morning and we met up and had a coffee on the A12 at a caravan that served coffee, tea and sandwiches.

She told me that Graham's sister was a bit weird when I told her she had shown up at my lodgings. The Marks Tey riders arrived before we finished our coffee.

Ames grinned at me. She was wearing a bright red cycling helmet and huge matching sunglasses with a red scarf around her neck.

I asked about her knee and she said it was fine. It looked a bit swollen. We set off and Ames pointed, "Look, Jennifer's riding next to Alan..." she grinned, "Your bum's nicer than his."

She pulled away and waggled her bum. I let her go and admired the view. She had a very nice bum.

The leaders set a fast pace and I was grateful when Ames dropped back, saying she couldn't keep up. She'd removed her scarf and I saw bruises on her neck. I didn't say anything. Five of us ended up quite far behind the others at a much more comfortable pace. One of them asked me to make her a bicycle trailer. I said I would and she held out a wad of notes.

“Here take the cash... two hundred and forty pounds right?”

“Two hundred,” I told her, “I’m getting faster at making them.”

She grinned and used both hands to remove forty pounds then handed me the wad of notes while casually cycling hands-free. I managed to take the money without wobbling.

“Bring it with you when it’s ready,” she said, “I’m Angela.”

Clacton on Sea looked a bit worn down to me, but we had a really good breakfast at a small hotel. Ames had her scarf around her neck and was limping a bit. I asked her if I could touch her knee and she made a big thing of it. Her knee felt really hot to me. One of older cyclists got involved and felt both of Ames’s knees and told her she should rest it for at least another week and take some anti inflammatory meds. She was a practice nurse. Ames and I went with her to a pharmacy the Hotel recommended and got some pills. I persuaded Ames to come with me to the railway station and we took the train to Colchester and got off at St Botolph’s, then cycled to Thatcher’s and had lunch.

Leslie hobbled over to say hello and then sat with us. She chatted comfortably with Ames and left us to eat when our food arrived.

Ames enjoyed the food and coffee, and insisted on paying her share. Leslie brought us cheesecake and said the cake and coffee were on the house.

Ames took off her scarf and then went red when she noticed me looking at the bruises on her neck. She took off her

sunglasses and I could see that her eyes were red. She said her father had grabbed her by the throat on Thursday night. She said he'd come home drunk and got angry with her for telling him he was drunk.

I told her I was sorry. She said she felt ashamed of her father, he'd started drinking heavily during the pandemic, then lost his job and kept blaming everybody else.

I told her about my first step father... how he turned violent when he drank. About him lifting me by the hair and punching me in the face when I was six. About him destroying the aviary door housing the crippled hawk I had rescued and how I had gone after him with a carving knife, making him run away and lock himself in his bedroom. He had never touched me again. I told her about my mum learning, after she had married him, that he had two teenage children in an orphanage, how she had brought them home and how he had then physically attacked my mum and his daughter one Sunday morning when my mum tried to take his daughter to put flowers on her mother's grave. I told her about the last time I had seen him, running bloodied down the fire escape behind our flats and about finding my mother lying senseless in a pool of blood in the bathroom where he'd beaten her with a towel rail and left her for dead.

She asked what had happened to my dad. I told her he had run away before I was born. That my mum, heavily pregnant with me had baked a cake for his birthday and struggled to get it to the site office outside the small mining town they lived in, because she didn't have a car or a cake tin, so she'd walked, carrying it in her smallest suitcase, in the heavy African monsoon rain, to his office late on the night of

his birthday where he was working overtime, only to be told by a laughing watchman that Bwana Chris never worked overtime except in the Ladies Hostel. I told her that my mother had gone home and used her tailoring scissors to cut all of his clothes into thin strips and laid them neatly on their bed. When he came home she offered to cut him into thin strips if he came anywhere near her again and he ran away. I told her he was still alive, with a wife and children, somewhere in South Africa.

“How do you bear it?” asked Ames.

“What’s to bear?” I asked, “My mum’s a wonderful woman, she survived that and more but she still loves life. It’s the only one we get... we should make the most of it while we can. When things go wrong... well, it happens. Just do what you can and move on.”

“Don’t you get sad?”

“Of course I do, I feel sad now, knowing that your dad is a drunk and that he hurts you. But I’m also happy that I’m with you now. Besides, I got to fondle your knee!”

She smiled, “You are weird Kit.”

“Do you feel up to cycling to the Zoo?”

She nodded, “My knee hardly hurts at all... do you want to feel it again?”

We didn’t have long at the Zoo, but it was fun. I took her hand and enjoyed the feel of it in mine. We kissed too, before she set off for Marks Tey. I cycled home and then

went to Thatcher's. Leslie told me that she liked Ames and said she was happy for me.

I had just finished spray painting Angela's bicycle trailer when they came for me. It was about eight PM on Thursday night. I felt a blow to my left side, by my kidney. It hurt like hell and I dropped to my knees.

"Where's the fooking drawings you lanky shite?" a gravelly Irish voice growled in my ear as I was jerked roughly to my feet, with my left arm twisted and forced up between my shoulder blades.

I screamed and sprayed him in the face with yellow paint. He let go and I made a run for the gate, but a body slammed into me and knocked me to the ground. Another male voice, also Irish, shouted, "Get him into the fooking van!"

I felt blows raining down on me before my lights went out.

The next thing I remembered was sitting with my head between my knees on a grassy slope, retching bile and feeling very sore and sorry for myself. There was a woman in police uniform sat next to me, rubbing my back and telling me "It's OK, Kit, you are safe now."

There were blue flashing lights and bright, blinding headlights and at least six police vehicles surrounding a small battered white van with a ladder strapped to its roof. I could hear a helicopter.

Someone brought me a bottle of water. I thanked him, drank half of it and promptly threw it up.

“The ambulance is here,” said a voice and the policewoman asked me to stand. The man who’d given me the water and the policewoman steadied me as we walked to the ambulance, my legs felt like they were made of rubber. A paramedic shone a light in my eyes and asked me to follow his finger, then nodded. “Concussion I reckon, let’s get you loaded up mate. You’re going to be OK.” Minutes later I was being wheeled into the hospital on a gurney. The police woman came with me. I was covered with grey powder which turned out to be cement, so I was allowed a shower and was given a much too short tracksuit to wear. I got shoved into a machine and told to lie still. After what felt like hours of tests I was allowed to lie down. They said I had concussion, cracked ribs and some bruising. My face looked a mess and my eyes were really red and swollen almost shut. I got a row of stitches on the inside of my lower lip which felt horrible, but all my teeth were OK.

The policewoman sat outside the room I was in, and every time I was about to nod off, a nurse would come in, check my pulse, blood pressure, temperature and shine a light in my eyes. I heard raised voices outside the door several times, but none that I recognised. I was given water but no food.

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I must have slept because it was lunch time when I next took any interest in the world around me. Watery cottage pie. I ate it all and wondered if I would throw it up. My mouth felt like a garbage can and my hugely swollen lower lip made eating a challenge. It didn’t help much with talking either. I got really angry when the nurse tried to tell me that I

had to poop in a bed pan, and got told off by the matron/sister in charge for refusing to bet back into the bed. The policeman by the door just laughed and followed me to the toilets. I didn't recognise myself in the mirror, and lifted the tracksuit top to check the bruises on my body. I could see actual bootprints.

“They really gave you a stomping,” said the policeman, “Your back looks even worse.”

I managed to get a toothbrush and toothpaste. Brushing my teeth was agony but I felt a lot better for doing it.

Ms. Parsons and her husband were waiting by my room when I returned.

“Oh Kit what did they do to you?” said Alena, looking shocked.

“Kicked the hell out of him,” replied the policeman, “Are you...”

“Jim Short,” said Jim, “Kit works with my wife, Alena... Is there somewhere here that we can get real coffee?”

The policeman offered to direct Jim to the canteen and Alena followed me into my room. The nurse followed her and reconnected the drip bag feeding painkillers to the thing stuck in my left forearm. She looked like she was still sulking.

Alena waited till the nurse left before talking to me, “I'm so sorry Kit... the police said that those men only had you for

minutes and that you were roughed up but not seriously injured.”

“I’ll live.” I managed, around my floppy lip.

“Does it hurt to talk?” she asked and I nodded.

She nodded and looked around the room, then looked at me, “Jim will tell you what he has learned from... well, he will tell you what he can tell you. I’m going to see if I can get you some clothes that fit you... is there anything you want? Can you write?” She fetched a pen and a small pad from her handbag.

I looked in the drawer by my bed for my cell phone, but it wasn’t there.

I wrote:

Please check Shelagh’s house and lock it up?

I left the keys in the garage.

My cell phone - I think it fell out of my pocket - it may be on the driveway or front lawn. The charger is next to my bed in the loft.

The book on the table next to my bed.

Alena read it, “Is that all? Do you want me to call anybody... your family?”

I nodded and wrote on the paper, “Please tell the landlady of the Thatcher’s pub that I can’t come to work for a while? No need to tell my mother - I do not like to worry her.”

Alena nodded and told me she would be back in a while. I could see she was uncomfortable and wanted to say something, but in the end she just left. The nurse came back and asked if I needed anything. I nodded and asked for more water.

I heard raised voices again. I recognised the policeman's voice. Then Jim's voice telling them to calm down.

He came in carrying a cardboard carry thing, with two cardboard coffee cups. He asked me if I wanted sweetener or sugar then handed me a cup of coffee. It smelled good.

“Alena says talking is painful for you... I'll be brief, there is no need for you to say anything. I've spoken to the person in charge of this... operation. She assured me that you were never in any danger, that you were under constant surveillance, and that the response team intercepted the vehicle and the men within minutes of them abducting you.” He looked at me and I nodded, though I wasn't sure I agreed.

“Obviously they were not fast enough and you got hurt, and I'm very sorry and very angry about that. They have not yet managed to identify the men that abducted you...so they are keeping an officer here in case there is another attempt to get at you. They want to know if you heard anything during the abduction... of course...”

“They wanted the drawings.. “ I managed and took a tissue from the box by the bed to clear the spit that dribbled down my chin. It was bloody.

“Thankyou Kit, I will pass that on. They supposedly have everything on film or disk, I suppose. Everything that happened at the house anyway.”

He eased himself into the armchair, it looked much too small, for him. I struggled to drink my coffee without slurping and making a mess. The stitches inside my lip kept catching on the rim of the cardboard cup. It was unpleasant but the coffee tasted good.

“Do you mind if I put the telly on?” asked Jim, pointing at the flat screen on the wall by his head.

I shook my head and he moved his chair so that he could see. He hunted around for the remote and eventually got a sports channel showing. I remembered that he owned two football clubs and was very keen on sport. I fell asleep.

He was gone when I woke. My book was on the table next to my bed. There was a large packet of Maltesers and a slab of Cadbury’s fruit and nut as well as a six pack of fruit flavoured yoghurts and a spoon on the table. And a note.

“Your phone is broken and in the drawer next to your bed with your keys.

I have put your crocs, and a change of clothes as well as your tracksuit in the cupboard next to your bed. Mrs. Coombes at Thatcher’s sends you her best wishes for a speedy recovery.

Get well soon

Jim and Alena

XXXX”

I had two of the yoghurts before a nurse came in with a trolley and told me to take my top off. She helped me and removed the drip thingy to get my top off then replaced it. She made sympathetic comments about my bruising and told me she was going to help with that. She used an ultrasound pen and gel. It tingled and felt quite nice. I struggled to stay awake while she did it.

Dawn Kemp came in while the nurse was doing the bruises on my back. She apologised and said she would go and get a coffee.

The nurse had finished and was helping me get my top back on when Dawn returned with two coffees and a sandwich.

She grimaced and said I looked like a bag of bruises and hoped I liked chicken sandwiches.

“Alena says you don’t like talking, so I’ll not ask you too many questions. She pulled a phone out of her back pocket and asked me if I could manage to get the SIM card out of my old phone, and offered to do it for me. I handed her my phone and she fetched a paper clip from her pocket and removed the SIM and memory card from my old phone and put it in the new one, which looked exactly the same.

She switched on the phone and handed it to me when I needed to add my PIN. She plugged the charger into the wall and into the phone, which had started to load itself from the cloud back-up. She told me to message her if I needed anything then gave me a cheerful grin and left.

I muted my phone when it started to make noises indicating that I had new mail or messages.

I got fed up with being poked and prodded by trainee doctors, but tried not to be difficult as I was already in the ward sister's bad books. The nurse must have noticed and told me that it would be over by lunch time.

My left eye got very painful and had to be flushed out. Apparently there was some cement dust in there. They gave me some sort of painkiller eyedrops, which did help.

Lunch was braised beef that tasted a lot better than it looked.

Dave from KeyStone brought me coffee and carrot cake muffins at two PM. He tried not to look horrified at the state of my face and didn't stay for long. It was really nice coffee.

I looked at my messages after Dave left and saw three from Ames. She had tried to call me and was getting worried. I messaged her to say I was in hospital, and could not talk, but that I was OK. There was a message from Leslie telling me to get well soon and let her know if there was anything she could do for me. I switched off my phone and put it in the drawer.

Ms. Armstrong, a tall and very good looking woman from TurnKey came to visit me shortly after breakfast. She brought me a huge travel mug of coffee, a bag of Maltesers and a six pack of fruit flavoured Yoghurts. I had never really spoken to her apart from exchanging greetings. I think she is a senior partner or manager.

"Hello Kit, I'm Louise," she said with a smile, "I brought you coffee and some goodies to snack on... I'm told you find

talking painful and can see why. You can keep this mug, I imagine it is easier to drink from than the disposable cups.”

I managed to thank her without dribbling - things were looking up.

She put a card on my bedside table and told me to message her if I needed anything. She lived in the Hythe, less than ten minutes from the Hospital. She picked up my book and said she had most of the Michael Connelly books if I wanted to borrow any. I nodded and managed, “Yes please - this is the only one I have read.” It was Brass Verdict.

“I’ll drop of a few before lunch... is the food any good here?”

I shrugged and she smiled, “Thought so... I have your mobile number... I’ll send you a photo from the board at the Bottled Crab. Message me back what you want and I’ll bring it with the books OK?”

I nodded and she gave me a gentle kiss on the cheek. The sensation of her hand on my shoulder and kiss stayed with me for a long time. It was like she had a magical healing touch. I switched on my phone to make sure I didn’t miss Louise’s message.

I was seen by an older female doctor later that morning. She asked me to get out of the bed and disconnected the drip line. She asked me to walk and tell her if any felt any pain. I shook my head and she helped me to remove my top and gave me a thorough once over. She asked me if I had been kicked in the testicles and I nodded. She asked if she could look and examine them or if I would prefer a male doctor.

She was very gentle and helped me to get dressed as bending hurt my ribs.

“I’d like to keep you in hospital till Monday Kit, and I think more ultrasound, including on your buttocks and legs... you have some bad bruising there. I’ll give you some Arnica cream that you can put on your testicles... it will help. Nurse William’s is the best with Ultrasound, in my opinion, but Nurse Andrews can do the ultrasound if you prefer a male nurse?”

I shook my head and she asked, “Nurse Williams? She did the ultrasound yesterday.”

I nodded.

“OK then, you are young, fit and healthy and you are healing well. I’ll see you again tomorrow.”

I took some briefs that Ms. Parsons had brought, from the cupboard, and put them on. I heard a message notification on my phone - it was from Louise Armstrong, and I asked for the Chicken Italian with Rice.

I did fall asleep during the Ultrasound this time. The nurse must have decided to let me sleep rather than wake me to get dressed. I woke when Louise came in. I felt like a moron with bloody saliva dripping from my lip. Louise looked shocked.

“Dear God Kit... you have boot shaped bruises all over your body... I can’t imagine how painful that must have been, and probably still is.”

She helped me to get my track suit on.

“They give me painkillers,” I managed and wiped my mouth with a tissue.

“No wonder...” she said and picked up a cylindrical container, “This is my partner’s Tiffin, it is really good at keeping food hot. Marrissa will want it back though. I brought a spoon, I didn’t think you would enjoy eating with a fork with stitches in your mouth.”

I nodded and thanked her.

Louise looked into my eyes, “Kit... I want to show you something, and I’d appreciate it if you never tell anyone about it... especially at TurnKey.”

I nodded and she removed a photo from her back pocket and held it out for me to see, “That was me six years ago... my husband did that to my face. It gets better Kit. Just give it time.”

I nodded and she put the photo away.

“Thank you,” I said, “My step father left my mum for dead, after breaking most of the bones in her face with a towel rail...” I had to wipe my lip, “Mum’s still a beautiful woman too.”

“Thank you Kit,” she turned away to pick up a bag from the floor, “I’ll want these back when you’ve read them. I have a lot of books, if ever you want to borrow more?”

The food was so good I wanted to lick the containers clean, and it was much easier eating with a metal spoon. I cleaned the clever stacking food container and spoon and then delved into the books, and worked my way through the maltesers. By supper time I was feeling a lot better about life.

I got a message from Ames... she was about to start working at Thatchers and wanted to know if she could visit me in the morning. I sent her a selfie and said I wouldn't blame her if she didn't want to see my face for a while, but that I would like to see her.

“WHAT HAPPENED TO YOU?” was her reply with half a dozen hugging and crying emoji's

“Too long to text and too sore to send voice mail. Will tell you when talking doesn't hurt.”

I got a message with a link to an Essex Herald article. Ames had written below it - “Was this you?”

The Article was dated Friday morning and claimed that the Essex Counter Terrorist Police forced a vehicle off the road on the Spring Lane to A12 spur road just after eight PM local time on Thursday. An anonymous source said that three individuals had been arrested and a fourth individual had been taken to hospital for treatment to injuries sustained during an abduction attempt. Essex CTP declined to comment and an Essex Police spokes person said that a material witness was being treated for minor injuries in Colchester General hospital but declined to give further details. This reporter and others were denied access to the patient/material witness and Hospital Staff refused to

comment. There was a very grainy picture of what looked like half a dozen vehicles and an ambulance surrounding a white van with a ladder on its roof.

“No comment,” I sent with a smiling emoji.

Ames came with Leslie. The police officer let them in. Leslie told me there were two more police officers outside the ward, refusing to let reporters in.

“I showed them your photo and said you were my boyfriend, so they let us in,” said Ames with a grin, “You look like shit by the way. Does it hurt?”

I laughed, which did hurt. And I got hugged which also hurt. Leslie hugged me too, but more gently.

Leslie asked if I was the abducted person rescued by police on the A12 slip road in Lexden, and I nodded. She asked me what it was about and I shrugged and shook my head.

“The coppers making sure reporters can’t get to you... this is connected to Shelagh, isn’t it?”

I shrugged and nodded.

“He doesn’t want to talk about it,” said Ames, then turned to me, “Leslie gave me a job... and somewhere to stay.”

“You can still do Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights,” said Leslie, “When you are better of course.”

“I’ve given my notice at the Vet’s,” said Ames, “I’m just doing nights for now.”

“How’s your knee?” I asked Ames and she hopped around the room on one leg to show me that it was better.

Leslie said Alan had offered to cook meals for me and have them delivered by Deliveroo. I shook my head but said Thank you, and managed to get out that I hoped to be home on Monday. That got me a painful hug from Ames and a worried look from Leslie, who told her to be careful. Leslie told me that I was welcome to stay in the flat above the pub while I recovered, but she looked quite concerned about it. The ward sister came in and asked them to leave, saying the doctor wanted to check on me.

It was the same older woman doctor. She helped me out of my tracksuit and said that I was responding well to the Ultrasound and said Nurse Williams was not working on Sunday or Monday, but that she thought I would benefit from two more sessions.

“I’m also taking time off Kit. I have signed you off at the ward sister’s discretion. Unless something shows up, you can leave after Ultrasound on Monday. I’ll want to see you in three weeks time. Please make an appointment before you leave? Lastly... I know you are in pain, but the pain medication is potentially addictive... Ribs take a long time to heal, but if you can cope without meds, you should. The Arnica cream I gave you for your genitals should help with your ribs. I’ll ask the Ward Sister to get you more, and you can buy it over the counter in Boots. They also sell it with Brufen, which might help with the pain. Now the last thing... the police want a statement from you. What you can recall from the assault and abduction. I keep telling them that talking is painful for you, but it would be a lot easier if you

could write a statement for them... do you think you could do that? Ask the constable outside to read it before signing it? Excellent! I'll get the ward sister to bring you a pen and paper. Let's get you dressed now shall we?"

Louise turned up with a lady with a Spanish accent, They had brought buttered chicken, rice and naan for me. The Spanish lady, Marissa, transferred it all into the Tiffin for me, and told me that I could keep the Tiffin. She looked on the verge of tears, and they left quite soon afterwards. I got a kiss on the cheek from both of them.

It took forever to write the half page statement using the wording that the constable recommended, which seemed rather pointless to me. However, once it was done he got the Ward Sister to witness it and make a copy for me.

The butter chicken was still warm when I got round to eating it. It took a long time, but I really enjoyed it.

I was still awake and reading when Ames messaged me around midnight to say she was glad she had seen me and sorry if she had hurt me and tired me out. Leslie had told her off for hugging me, and reminded her that the ward sister had told them I had cracked ribs and severe bruising.

I messaged back to say I was fine and glad that she had visited. I asked her if everything was OK at home with her.

She said her dad had got drunk again and she had threatened to stab him if he touched her again. Her mum got really angry and asked her to find somewhere else to stay. She said it was OK; that it was time she looked after herself.

We messaged back and forth for a while till I started to nod off and said Goodnight.

The male nurse that did the Ultrasound on Sunday was from Uganda. He was quite chatty, and didn't need me to respond, though I found talking a lot easier.

Louise brought me more coffee and fruit flavoured yoghurt. I told her I would repay her for all the money she had spent and she told me not to be silly; that sooner or later it would be my turn to help someone and could pay it then. She said I was looking a lot better, and asked if I could manage roast beef and Yorkshire pudding for lunch. She took the Tiffin to fetch it in and returned half an hour later with the food.

Ames visited at four PM and brought me cheesecake from Alan and a Get Well Soon card that Aggie had made and got all the pub regulars to sign. She said Aggie had got really cross with her for saying I was a shit magnet, and wondered if Aggie fancied me.

A woman visited shortly after Ames left, it took me a while to recognise her and remember her name. She seemed uncomfortable, as if she really didn't want to be there. She asked if I was able to talk yet, and when I said I could manage, she produced the statement I had signed and asked if there was anything I would like to add to it.

I asked what she meant exactly, and she went quite red in the face when she answered, "Will you be making a formal complaint regarding your abduction and injuries?"

"Should I?" I asked.

“That’s really for you to decide, Mr. Venter. I just wanted to know if you were considering it?”

“Is it all over or am I still bait in a trap?” I asked.

“I’m not sure what you mean by that... you were the victim of a criminal abduction...”

“Whatever... please excuse me, I don’t feel up to talking any more.”

She stood staring at me for a while before speaking again, “Very well Mr.. Venter; I advise you not to say anything to the press... that might bring about... well, it could attract the wrong sort of attention.”

I nodded and picked up my book. She was being evasive and I didn’t want to cause any more offence. Well, I did, but was worried about how it would end if I spoke my mind. Least said, soonest mended and all that.

After a while, she sighed and left. I heard her talking to the constable, but couldn’t make out the words.

16

Dawn brought me coffee early in the morning, she was wearing bike leathers and boots and grinning from ear to ear.

“They said you can go home today!” she said, expertly pouring the coffee into the travel mug and then drinking

what remained in the cardboard cup, “I’ll come and collect you at eleven. Your lip and eyes are looking better.”

“I feel a lot better,” I said, touching my lip, “My face still looks like a Halloween pumpkin that’s been used as a football.”

She smiled, “At least you can talk without dribbling blood and spit everywhere. Mouths heal fast... I bit through my lip once. When are they taking the stitches out?”

“Today I hope. Thanks for the coffee.”

“I have to dash Kit... I’ve got a conference call with a client in twenty minutes... See you at eleven.”

I was kept busy with tests and forms till Ultrasound at ten, and didn’t notice that there was no policeman outside my door till Dawn arrived looking angry just before eleven. She said there were reporters waiting to plague me outside the ward. I had to sit in a wheelchair and the Ugandan nurse wheeled me out to the Ambulance bay, where Dawn met me with a Shogun and urged me to hurry.

She looked uncomfortable driving, and I saw she was sat on a cushion and very close to the steering wheel.

“I prefer my bike,” she said going red, “Don’t take the piss.”

I laughed and it hurt, but it made her smile. She took me straight to TurnKey, telling me to hang in there. She stopped outside the front where three security guards opened the door for me and welcomed me back. Alena was in reception and smiled when she saw me.

“You look much better Kit, come with me please?”

We went to the boardroom, where her husband, Jim was talking to someone on the video conference system. Jim stood and shook my hand and asked me to sit, indicating the chair next to his. Alena brought us both coffee while Jim introduced me to Miles Ingledew, a permanent secretary in the Home Office.

“Sir Miles has taken a personal interest in your case Kit, and will answer any questions you have, but please let him explain the situation as he understands it?” I nodded and Sir Miles first thanked me for my help and apologised for the injuries I had received.

“You were let down Kit, there is no excuse for it. I have reviewed all the surveillance data and the interviews with the suspects. Apparently most of your injuries were inflicted while you were unconscious in the back of the van by the man whose eyes you emptied a can of spray paint into. I shudder to think how you would have fared if the vehicle had not been stopped before it reached the A12.

“What I am about to tell you is confidential information, and it is my duty to inform you that you have signed the Official Secrets Act ... please do not discuss this with anyone who is not in this room?”

I nodded and he continued, “We have closed down an operation that has been accessing highly confidential financial information from the fibre optic cable passing between England and France. As yet we have not fully established the extent of the damage caused by this, but we believe that several millions of pounds may have been

made by those operating the illegal monitoring station. It seems that this was mainly about money, but the data link also includes classified intelligence data, which although it is encrypted, might still find a market with hostile states and organisations. We have made a number of arrests, including Jimmy Sullivan who was arrested in France last night. Unfortunately we have not managed to locate three major figures, they are all violent, vindictive men, so until they are apprehended, we would like to keep you and Mrs. Sullivan out of sight.”

I waited, but he didn't say any more. Jim asked me if I had any questions.

“Lots,” I said, “But my thoughts are a bit jumbled... are you saying I am not going to be used as bait anymore?”

“Unfortunately, you are a target... but I would prefer that you are not exposed to any further risk,” said Sir Miles.

“There were no police at the hospital this morning,” I said, “Was that because I offended Inspector Grey yesterday?”

“I was not aware that police protection had been lifted...” Sir Miles went very red.

“I don't mind being used as bait... but I would like to know what sort of threat I am facing and what sort of measures are in place to protect me.”

“Kit... these men are killers...” said Jim.

“I grew up in a country that hosted liberation struggle fighters seeking to overthrow the white minority

governments of Rhodesia and South Africa. I carried a gun from the age of twelve and trained Rhodesian Ridgebacks to protect me and my mum because a drinking den bordering our farm was popular with freedom fighters. We had several unpleasant incidents. At least your police managed to stop those men on Thursday night, but if I'd known that I was bait, I would have been less careless.”

“I suspect...” Sir Miles spoke carefully, “The surveillance people were less vigilant than they should have been... there will be an enquiry and reprimands, not that it helps you in any way... from my preliminary enquiries, the response teams did well and should be commended, but that is a separate matter. Are you saying, Kit, that you want to be hung out as bait again?”

“I want this over with... and the sooner the better. If it would help I'm willing, but I want to know if I am deliberately being used as bait or not.”

“I don't like the idea at all,” said Alena forcefully, “Kit has suffered enough already... how hard can it be to find and arrest three well-known criminals?”

“They may be known, but they have been evading the police and security services in UK and Eire for decades... “

“Kit is right,” said Jim, “You told me that he had nothing to fear before this happened... and he got hurt. Now, either you give him real protection and get him out of harm's way, as you have done for Shelagh, or you come up with a plan that uses him as bait, and draw the Gallaghers out, that Kit understands and that he and I agree with.” The way Jim spoke seemed to get through to Sir Miles, he apologised and

said he would arrange security immediately and get back to Jim as soon as he had “Consulted.”

I needed the loo and could hear Jim and Alena arguing as I headed for the toilets. She didn't like the idea of me being used as bait, but I knew that sometimes, violence had to be confronted with force. I was scared, but I was also sore and angry. I am usually more stubborn when in pain.

Jim and Alena were not in the conference room when I returned. I walked back to the reception and saw that there were two police cars parked outside. One of the security guards asked me who I'd pissed off. I didn't know his name, but liked him and had chatted with him about the Army. He'd done six years in the Royal Anglians and invalided out after losing a kidney in a motorbike accident.

Dave Little came in and was surprised to see me. He said my face was looking a lot better and said he thought I should take more time off to recover before coming to work.

“What's with the police and extra security?” he asked.

“Its for him,” said the regular security guard, “Whoever he upset is still after him, we reckon.”

Dave looked surprised at that, then his phone buzzed, and he excused himself as he hurried off to answer it privately.

I went to Alena's office and was invited in. Jim was on her couch hunched over his phone. Alena put her finger on her lips and gestured me to sit.

“He’s here... I’ll discuss it with him and get back to you.” said Jim into the phone, “Yes... yes I understand, don’t worry.” He ended the call and put the phone down.

“Things are happening Kit... Shelagh was attacked a few hours ago. Don’t worry, she is fine, but the officer protecting her is in hospital with a bullet in her shoulder. The Gallaghers have a long reach... Shelagh was in Christchurch, New Zealand. The good news is that they have the shooter, and Jimmy ... Shelagh’s husband has turned State Witness... he is furious that they targeted Shelagh. In the meantime, you are being given a personal protection team. They are professionals, the best in Britain. Their boss is on his way here now. We have spoken to Kevin and he suggested that you fly up to Ulva. It’s remote and a small community. He thinks you might like it up there. What do you think?”

“Sure, but what about using me as bait?”

“They are still trying to decide how to do it,” said Alena, “But hopefully, with Jimmy Sullivan now co-operating, that won’t be necessary, he is Liam Gallagher’s nephew.”

“Are you going to tell Sir Miles and that Inspector Grey that I’m going to Ulva?” I asked.

“No, but the protection team are paid by the Home Office, and they report to Sir Miles... I suspect that inspector Grey has been suspended, or will be very soon. What are you thinking?”

“If Ulva is remote and hard to get to, the Gallaghers might be tempted to get at me there, thinking any security in such

a remote place might be slack, thinking no-one would bother to go after me out there.”

“They’d be making a mistake, I know Paul Prestwick, his people do a lot of work for the Ministry of Defence guarding consultants and contractors in places like Libya, Afghanistan and Iraq,” said Alena.

“Aye, they are the ultimate professionals Kit, you can depend on them,” said Jim, “Look, I’ll discuss it with Sir Miles, but I’m hoping that it won’t come to that.”

“Ulva is a huge construction project isn’t it?” I asked, “And it seems to me there’s always at least one Irishman at every building site in the country. There must be a few at Ulva. I don’t think its a good idea to underestimate the Gallaghers... if they can get to Shelagh in Christchurch... Ireland is not that far from the Hebrides. I’m a target whether I like it or not.”

Jim nodded, “I suppose you are right. I’ll make some calls. Are you OK waiting here at the office till Paul arrives? He should be here before one?”

I nodded and Alena suggested I use Shelagh’s office. I still had some yoghurts and Maltesers and coffee was free in the canteen. I went to get a coffee and ended up chatting with Louise who was in the canteen. I returned two of her books. Dawn joined us, then Dave, and I ended up staying in the canteen till Alena brought Paul in.

He was probably in his fifties. He was not a tall man, probably five ten, but he had shoulders like a powerlifter, and his hands felt like they were hewn from wood. He

looked relaxed and comfortable in a baggy cable-knit jumper, jeans and the suede ankle boots we call veldskoene or vellies in Afrikaans.

Paul greeted everybody politely before asking me if he could have a word with me in private. He got himself a coffee and I filled my travel mug with water from the dispenser and we went to Shelagh's office. We sat in armchairs and he asked me what had happened and what I knew about the Gallaghers. He listened attentively and waited till I was finished before speaking.

“OK, so here's what I can tell you. The three bandits that snatched you were Ivan Connor, Mick Gallagher and Clive Grafton... they were all IRA... now they're enforcers for the Gallaghers. Clive Grafton, the one you blinded with hammerite, he's a killer and wanted for two murders in Ireland. According to Connor, he kicked the hell out of you while you were in the van, and Gallagher, the driver, sent Connor into the back to try and stop him. Gallagher and Connor aren't angels, but they are saints compared to Grafton. Liam Gallagher, his brother Connor and half-brother Justin are on the Interpol Red List. Liam served 15 years for murder and has not been seen in public since he was released in ninety eight. He was mainstream IRA but even they want him dead now. Connor and Justin have never been convicted of a crime, but they have dozens of outstanding arrest warrants and have been named as prime suspects in several murders, the most recent being the shooting dead of four Scottish men in Ibiza, all senior members of a Glaswegian organised crime gang that were encroaching on the Gallaghers' drug and human trafficking turf. Shelagh Sullivan, your landlady and Jimmy Sullivan's wife, was targeted by Kaitlin O'Reardon, the niece of Clive

Grafton . She missed and shot a New Zealand police woman in the shoulder. She has been arrested and her phone records show that she was informed of Shelagh's location by a member of the Essex Counter Terrorist Police. That officer has been arrested but isn't co-operating. Mick Gallagher received a call from the same officer three hours before you were attacked. Lastly, the same officer stood down the police protecting you at Colchester Hospital last night."

"Any questions?"

I shook my head and thanked him.

"For what it is worth... you've done a good job. You kicked a hornets' nest and exposed a ton of shit. The Gallaghers were making a lot of money from tapping into that line, and you helped to close that down. Instead of cutting their losses, they wanted to make an example of you and it has already cost them four of their trusted family enforcers and over twenty associates in UK and Europe. Jim Short says you want the Gallaghers to come for you in the Hebrides. Why?"

"It sounds like they want to make an example of me regardless of where I am. They won't be surprised if I try to find a safe place to hide, and from what you told me, they won't have much difficulty finding out where I am hiding. Hopefully it will be easier and safer to deal with them in the Hebrides."

"Safer for who?"

“Well there are fewer people there... so fewer innocent bystanders to get in the way.”

“It won’t be any safer for you... even the weather in the Hebrides can kill you, and it often feels like it wants to.”

I shrugged, “I’d really like to get those murdering bastards off my back,” I said, “I hate looking over my shoulder all the time.”

“I hear you,” said Paul, “Assuming you are safe with people like Liam Gallagher after you is a huge mistake. I like your reasoning and I think you are right... you will only be safe when the Gallaghers have been taken down, preferably killed. I’ll need a day or two to put people into place. In the meantime we need to get you kitted up and moving. Let’s go and fetch your stuff?” He got to his feet.

His vehicle looked like a high end Audi... I’m not much of an expert on cars, but this was no ordinary car. It was fully armoured, the glass was at least an inch thick and the doors closed with a sound like the breech of a massive artillery gun. Paul chatted comfortably as he drove me to Shelagh’s house. There was a police car parked outside. They flashed their lights when Paul approached.

I saw Mrs. Ash’s curtain twitch as we went into the house. Paul checked each room before allowing me to enter it. He asked me to point out anything unfamiliar, but there was nothing I could see that looked wrong. I asked to have a look in the garage to see if my bike and the trailer I had been working on were OK. Paul liked the look of the trailer and helped me to put the wheels on. He wanted to try it out, we had to lower the saddle of my bike, and he put a heavy

toolbox and a heavy sack of chain in the trailer. Paul asked me to stay in the house and away from windows while he cycled down the driveway and out onto the road. He was only away for a few minutes and grinned when I opened the garage door.

“This is a fine trailer Kit, can I buy one when this is all over? My kid brother likes cycling and he is the local handyman in a small town in Germany. He’d love it.”

I told him that this trailer had already been paid for, but that I’d happily make him one, it would only take me two days and I had all the materials to hand.

We locked up the house and set off. Paul told me that his people were moving in concert with his vehicle, checking the route ahead, as well as checking to see if we were being followed. He had an ear bud and occasionally spoke saying things like, OK, Seen and Go ahead.

He asked me to switch my phone off and put it in the glove compartment, then told me we were going to a safe house near Cambridge. I fell asleep.

The safe house was a mansion. Paul woke me up with a gentle shake on my shoulder. He was carrying my backpack in one hand as if it weighed nothing and shook his head when I reached for it.

“You’ve got cracked ribs... best not to carry any weight for a while. There’s an indoor pool here if you want some gentle exercise, but stay indoors till I tell you its safe to go outside please?”

I had a huge room with a four poster bed all to myself. I changed into my trunks and headed for the pool. I really enjoyed being able to swim. It hurt at first, and I stuck to crawl and breast stroke, but after ten or so lengths, I was feeling a lot better. The pool was only about four or five metres wide but was a full twenty five metres long.

Paul was on a lounge reading a book with a mug of Guinness on the table next to him when I got out of the pool. He looked different with reading glasses.

He took them off to look at me, “I saw the photos...you took one hell of a beating. You look a lot better now. What pain killers are you using?”

“Something called Arnica, mostly for my balls and my ribs. The doctor said the painkillers they were giving me were addictive...”

He nodded, “I’ve lost some good blokes to opiate addiction, but you seem to be coping well. Arnica is good...you can get Arnica with brufen that does help with pain, and its safe. I’ll arrange some for you to try.”

Paul asked me if I wanted a drink and showed me the bar. There was a barista there. He wasn’t sure how to work it, and let me have a go, then asked me to show him how to make cappuccino. I took my cappuccino up to my room, where I showered and changed. I went down with a book and asked Paul if I could get my phone and he told me it was being checked out for bugs and trackers. He walked down to the basement with me, where a weird looking black guy called Rory handed me my phone and told me it was clean apart from a tracker that he had installed. He told me

he had replaced the battery on my phone for a better one, and told me to keep my phone on me and charged. He gave me a power bank the same size as my phone.

Paul took me to a room where he found some body armour for me. He told me it would stop a nine millimetre round and a knife, and advised me to wear a t shirt under it. It was much lighter and much more comfortable than the heavy body armour with kevlar plates that I had in Zambia.

We went back to the bar and Paul made two cappuccinos. He put half a shot of rum in his.

“It’s going to take two more days to get my people into place,” he told me, “You should be fine walking around the grounds, but keep your phone on you and don’t get too close to the perimeter. If your phone starts vibrating, hit the ground and crawl into cover. Rory will answer the phone, use it like a two way radio - press the side button to talk. Have you used a two way radio? “

I nodded, “We call them walkie-talkies. Roger Out and that sort of thing,”

Paul nodded, “Hopefully you won’t need it. Stick this in your pocket. Its a wireless earbud. Press the red button and stick it in your ear to mute the phone speaker. Keep the phone on your left if its in your right ear and vice versa. The feedback is horrible.”

I didn’t know what feedback was and said so.

“Sorry, it a screeching sound you get from moving a microphone close to a speaker that sends the amplifier into

overdrive. About supper...are you OK with steak, mushrooms and mash potato with pepper sauce?"

I followed Paul to the kitchen and peeled potatoes while he chopped onions and prepared the mushrooms. He made everything look easy. The pepper sauce was made last, in the same skillet he had cooked the steaks in, he used cream and brandy. The food was great and Paul was easy company. We washed up and went back to the bar for Irish coffee. Paul asked me about life in Zambia and got me talking about the things I wanted to do with my life.

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I slept well that night. I had a long walk around the grounds when I woke, then went for a swim. Paul had suggested we have breakfast at nine. He dived into the pool when I was just about finished. He swam like an otter. He was still swimming when I'd showered and changed and returned with a book. I made two cappuccinos and took them to the pool.

He thanked me for the cappuccino and took it with him to get showered and changed.

Paul cooked breakfast with the same economy and ease as he did everything else. I made toast. Lots of it, and more cappuccino.

"How are ribs?" asked Paul, when he sat down to eat.
"There's a tube of Arnica with Brufen on your bedside table. Try it?"

“Thanks, I will. They hurt, but they told me that ribs take a long time to heal. I’m feeling a lot better today.”

“I saw you were swimming more easily,” said Paul, “It’s a good way to get back into shape after a setback. Are you OK with spending the day here? I’ve got to make some calls and get a few things organised, but I’ll be around. Gordy’s due back... he’ll be doing the cooking for us.

“Yeah, I’m good... I like it here. May I use the gym? I saw it when I went for a walk this morning.”

“Yes of course, but take it easy Kit, cracked ribs can do damage.”

“I’m only going to use the stationary bike,” I assured him, “Walking, cycling and a bit of gentle swimming. Is there a washing machine I can use to clean some clothes...”

“Yes of course... come I’ll show you where the laundry room is, its fully equipped, with some nice kit in there. I love the steam press. My wife keeps asking for one, but they’re bloody expensive.”

It was impressive. After washing up the breakfast things I took a book and my dirty clothes and got everything washed, dried and pressed. The steam press was great.

I had another long walk after that and met Rab, the groundsman, and his dog Rolf, a wolf hound cross mastiff, who let me scratch his ears. Rab, a quietly spoken Scot had the look of an old soldier, though I guess he was younger than Paul.

I was making more coffee at around ten when I met Gordy. He introduced himself as Gordon. Another Scott, though he didn't have as strong an accent as Rab. He'd lost both legs below the knee in Afghanistan and had prosthetics like Oscar Pistorius. He told me he could now run faster and jump higher than he could before he lost his legs.

I made him a cappuccino and he asked what I wanted for lunch and listed the choices. I had never eaten Salmon so asked for that and he grinned and said he'd hoped I would opt for that.

Rab and another person, Sandy, joined us for lunch. Paul took a tray down for Rory. Gordy muttered about Rory being daft for spending all his time in the basement, saying it was especially bad for him, being black skinned, as he needed more sunlight than white skinned people to keep his Vitamin D levels up. Rab said Rory had installed special lights to help him with depression and vitamin D deficiency. Sandy hardly spoke a word beyond polite greetings. She was younger than the others, slim and graceful, but very shy.

I really enjoyed the salmon, and there was bread and butter pudding afterwards. I offered to make cappuccino for everyone and was surprised when Sandy asked if she could help. She wanted to learn how to do it. She was absurdly pleased when she managed to make a perfect cappuccino.

After lunch Gordy refused help with the washing up, saying he had a perfectly good dishwasher. I went for a walk and Paul joined me and showed me the exercise route. There were stops with simple but effective fitness stations. The first was a thick rope hanging from a very high tree branch. Paul went up it as if he was weightless, just using his arms.

The next was parallel bars, about four metres long. That was followed by a leg press, simply but cleverly designed to use your body weight as the load. I managed it.

There were staggered stumps that tested your balance, climbing challenges and every sort of strength apparatus I could imagine, all simply and solidly made for outdoor use. I could use less than a third of them without my ribs protesting. Paul managed them all with practiced ease.

Paul attended to a call when we got back, and I made a cappuccino and started on a new book after messaging Ames to say I was recuperating in style at government expense.

That evening Paul spoke to me in the bar and said I would be flying to Ulva via Glasgow, and that I would have a protection officer with me. Hester was going to meet me at Glasgow and stay with me while we were on Ulva. He told me that she was top level and that I should do whatever she tells me. Paul would not be travelling with me, but said he had a five person team monitoring and being ready to respond if I was in any danger.

“I saw how you responded to Grafton attacking you Kit, you are fast and tough, and with training you would be formidable, but please don’t try to be a hero? Do exactly what Hester tells you to do, and if she isn’t around or able to tell you what to do, hit the ground, crawl to cover and use your phone. Stay safe and as much as possible, out of the way, so that you don’t get caught in the crossfire.”

He told me to be ready to go after supper, which was set for seven PM.

Gordy had done beef Wellington, which I'd eaten before, but his was much nicer. Rory came up to collect his dinner and wished me good luck before returning to his basement, or cave, as Gordy called it. Sandy wasn't there, but Gordy plated a meal for her and someone else called Jumper and put it in the warmer. The talk at the table was about a guy they knew who had just been killed in Ukraine. Rab had joined the Parachute regiment with Ross, and told us how Ross had helped him to get into the SAS. We all drank a toast to Ross.

I was packed and ready to go before supper, and made cappuccinos for Gordy and Paul before we set off. Paul drove and was very quiet. We drove into an RAF base and minutes later I was in a large helicopter wearing a helmet and feeling very cold. Paul had shaken my hand and wished me good luck before he handed me my back pack.

A man with Sergeant's stripes gave me a safety talk. It was difficult to hear above the noise of the helicopter winding up or whatever they call preparing for flight. He helped me to strap into a canvas seat and told me they would be taking off in about ten minutes. There were eight canvas seats, four on either side, and a huge mound of stuff between them that was being tied down with a cargo net with ratchet straps. My blue back pack was on the top. Three passengers in uniform strapped themselves in opposite me and just before we took off a portly man in a business suit came in and was given the same safety talk and strapped in on the seat one down from me by the man with the Sergeant's stripes. He looked around, nodded and smiled at

everyone, then fetched a pair of glasses from his pocket and put a leather satchel on his lap to use as a table for a book he removed from it. I wished I'd got a book from my back pack before it was secured. I was too cold and too uncomfortable to sleep. The uniformed trio had all stared at me and seemed to be discussing me. I closed my eyes and thought about how to make a cargo bike. I'd seen images of one on-line, it had a cargo space about the size of my trailer, between the handle bars and front wheel of the bicycle.

The helicopter cabin warmed up while we were flying. I could hear that someone, presumably the pilot, was making some sort of announcements but I think there was something wrong with my headset, as I couldn't make out what he was saying.

The man with the stripes touched me on the shoulder and offered me a can of coke and a plastic wrapped cheese sandwich. I shook my head and said no thanks and exchanged thumbs up with him, then closed my eyes and went back to my planning.

We landed just after eleven and there was a young woman in a police uniform waiting for me. She stuck out her hand and smiled, "Hi Kit, I'm Hester, your minder. Are you hungry?"

I shook my head and told her I'd had a huge meal before the flight, but that I could really use a toilet.

Hester had a slight accent and looked like she might be Greek, her hair was a sort of ash blond tied in a short pony at the back of her neck. She had olive green eyes and a

beautiful face. The top of her head reached to just below my shoulder.

“Are you really police?” I asked, as we walked towards the building.

“Special constable... It’s an offence to impersonate a police officer so we are all special constables, they usually just do community policing and have the same powers of arrest as a normal citizen. We are all TA’s as well, Territorial Army, that allows us to wear military uniforms when we need to. Has Paul told you the rules Kit?”

I nodded, “Do whatever you tell me to do. Don’t be a hero, drop down and crawl to cover if anything goes down, keep my phone on me and charged and use it like a radio if I need help.”

She nodded, “Good. You don’t go anywhere without me checking it first, including to the toilet. We sleep in the same room. You wear your body armour twenty four seven, even in bed. You can call whoever you want, whenever you want unless I say not to. Stay away from windows when you are indoors. We know that Justin Gallagher has a Barat sniper rifle - it has an effective range of over one kilometre and can take you out through a brick wall. You being so tall makes you easier to identify on a thermal scope.”

“Suddenly I don’t like this plan,” I said and tried to laugh.

Hester smiled, “Well, they want you dead anyway. At least this way you know what to expect and have a chance at calling them out.”

She told me to use the disabled toilet after checking it out first. Thankfully she didn't stay in there with me. We stayed on the base that night, sharing a large twin room. Hester said she was going to shower and suggested that I try on the thermals and cold weather gear that was stacked neatly onto my bed before packing them into a camouflaged pattern holdall. There were two sets of cold weather gear, three sets of thermal underwear and one very nice pair of goretex boots. Everything fit.

Hester was in bed and looked to be asleep when I emerged from the shower.

She was up and dressed before I woke in the morning. We ate in the RAF mess hall. She explained the RAF rank system to me, which I quickly forgot. The breakfast and coffee were really good. When I told her I was surprised she laughed and told me that the RAF was not like the Navy and Army, where food was often horrible. I asked her if she had served in the military and she nodded and said she was IDF. It took me a while to realise that meant Israeli Defence Force.

We took a military minibus to the Glasgow Heliport, Hester had a camouflage pattern hold-all just like mine, but it wasn't as full as mine, which had my blue back pack and stuff in it as well as the cold weather gear.

The helicopter to Ulva was much more comfortable and had twelve passengers and four empty seats. Most of the passengers were Polish construction workers. One was on crutches with a leg in a cast and his head wrapped in bandages. It was only an hour and a bit of flying time.

Sally, the leggy Welsh project manager, was waiting for us and introduced herself to Hester. She told me that Dawn Kemp had told her about the attack on me and hoped that I would enjoy recuperating on Ulva. She said Kevin had asked her to apologise for not coming himself but would join us for lunch.

She drove us to the castle, it was only a five minute ride, and showed us to our room. The castle looked like a real castle. Hester and I had adjoining rooms, each with our own shower, basin and toilet. We were high up with a view over the town of Ulva which was, according to Sally, nearing completion.

Sally gave us a tour and told us we were the only people allowed to use the top floor of the Castle as those accommodations were usually reserved for the owner's VIP guests. There was a fifteen meter indoor pool that we were allowed to use and a very modern gym and fitness area where a half dozen women were doing yoga or something like it. There was a small cafe next to the gym, which did snacks. Hester and I asked for coffee, Sally ordered tea and scones and told us a little about the Castle and town, which had all been built from scratch. The project had started just over thirty months previously, and had been scheduled to take three years, but was due to be completed in late November, almost four months early, despite a number of additions that had been added to the project. She said a huge party was planned for the Scottish Hogmanay celebration on New Year's Eve.

There was a small convenience store in the Castle but Sally said it was much cheaper to do shopping in the CoOperative

store in town and asked if we felt up to walking down to the town, as we had plenty of time before lunch.

Sally suggested that we carry our Goretex coats in case of a sudden squall. She said the weather could be unpredictable and the winds ferocious. She fetched hiking poles and her Goretex jacket from the Land rover before we set off.

The sky was overcast but from the Castle I could see what Sally told me was the Isle of Mull. It was hard to believe that the entire town of Ulva had not existed three years earlier. As we walked down towards it, Sally pointed out places of interest and the Island Craft and Culture Centre that she was managing the completion of. A small ferry was moving slowly towards the harbour mouth. I saw someone using one of my trailers just before Sally pointed it out to me. She said she had one, and found it really useful.

The town was quite busy. We had a nose around the CoOp shop. Lee, Kevin Coombes' wife, came out of a building to greet us. She gave me a hug and said she was so sorry that I had been hurt. She said she would be joining us for lunch at the Livingstone Inn.

People greeted Sally warmly and were politely curious about me and Hester. Sally told them that I had come to Ulva to recuperate after a failed abduction attempt by Irish gangsters. We walked to the harbour and then back up to the town and to the Livingstone Inn for lunch.

Kevin was there and greeted me warmly and shook hands with Hester. He asked Hester if the accommodations were alright and seemed pleased when she said they were perfect. There were eight of us having lunch together,

including three men from the construction company, Denby and Essam. I recognised Fred and another Yorkshireman, Bob. Douglas was a Hebridean. Kevin introduced us all and told them that I had exposed a hacking operation being carried out by an Irish organised crime gang and that they had tried to abduct me and had shot a New Zealand police officer who was providing security for Shelagh Sullivan, whose husband, Jimmy, had been involved in the hacking operation but who was now co-operating with the authorities. Kevin said that the police believed that the Gallaghers were looking for revenge after most of their enforcers, who were also relatives, had been arrested. He asked Hester if she could tell them any more.

Hester nodded and told them about the Gallaghers and about some of the killings attributed to them. She warned that they were extremely violent and resourceful men.

Fred looked at me and asked how I felt about it. I told them that I was scared, but grateful for the protection I was being given.

Doug told me not to worry, that the Ulva island and town community was tight knit, that everybody knew everybody and that nobody was going to harm me on Ulva.

The lunch was pretty good too. Bob, who was sat next to me, said he'd heard good things about me from Dawn Kemp and said he'd bought two of my trailers for his son and daughter who loved them.

After lunch Hester and I walked with Kevin to look at the new sewerage handling system that had been designed and built for Ulva. Kevin explained that the original system had

failed to cope with the cold weather, and the solution had been to build a much bigger system, and combine the town and castle effluent with effluent from the new dairy and pig farms starting up on Ulva. It seemed to be working and the operator said he believed that the sale of phosphates, nitrates, potassium and biogas would eventually offset the cost of pumping and treating the effluent.

We walked back up through the town. Kevin checked on some of the buildings that were being finished. All the major construction work had been completed and it was mostly final fix and snags being done. Denby and Essam had set up a small company to carry out maintenance and alterations and build farm buildings as the community developed, and one of the two Polish stone mason cooperatives had been engaged to rehabilitate the stone quarry site by turning it into an adventure activity centre. KeyStone and Denby and Essam were not involved with that. Kevin took us to the Denby and Essam canteen that catered for the contractors and introduced us to the manageress. She asked if we had any special food requirements, likes or dislikes. Hester said she ate everything and was hoping to taste some haggis. I said I liked most food, especially breakfast.

Hester and I made our own way back to the castle. I showered and fell asleep reading a book. Hester woke me at six and we walked to the canteen for supper. Everybody seemed to know us and welcomed us to Ulva. We sat with Sally and two women, with unpronounceable Scottish names. They were mother and daughter. The mother was a Hebridean, who barely spoke English. Her daughter had written and published a book on Hebridean crafts, based mostly on what she had learned from her mother, who had

featured in a documentary in the nineties, on Hebridean Culture. Shannon Mackay had asked them to set up the Crafts and Culture centre in Ulva. Sally was the project manager for the project and was clearly very enthusiastic about it, she had even learned Gaelic!

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It took me about a week to settle in and get used to the pace and routines of life at Ulva. I wanted to make myself useful by helping with the work being done there, but Hester reminded me that we were baiting the Gallaghers and it was not fair to expose other people to possible injury. We walked for at least four hours every day.

I managed to buy myself some hiking poles at a new outdoor shop in the town. At first they made the pain in my ribs worse, but the bruising faded quickly and I felt the muscles in my arms and shoulders improving. I did swim most days, but the fifteen metre pool was a bit too short.

Hester kept me updated on what she was hearing from Rory. The Gallaghers had been throwing money around on the dark web, offering rewards. They were offering half a million pounds to anybody who could “end the rat” Jimmy Sullivan. They were offering money for information on the whereabouts of several people, including me and Shelagh.

When another Scottish gangster was killed in Cancun, Hester told me that it was done by the Gallaghers... and that it had been a trap set by Paul’s people. Three days later she told me that Justin Gallagher had been located in Marseilles, but that he had vanished before the French

police could arrest him. Hester gave me a look before adding, “He was looking for a boat to get him to Stornaway... that’s in the Outer Hebrides.”

“So it’s happening... Do you think he will come for me himself, or send someone from Marseilles?”

Hester shrugged, “Marseilles is a good place to find hitmen, but Paul thinks the Gallaghers want to hurt you themselves. If they are sending someone else, it will be to snatch you. This is speculation... only time will tell. Are you OK?”

I shook my head, “Not really... but what else can we do? I can’t get my head around it all. They stole millions... why don’t they just cut their losses and move on?”

“Its no surprise to me... they need respect, fear actually, to survive. If they are perceived as weak, other wannabe gangsters are more likely to trespass on their turf.”

I had a lot of trouble sleeping that night. It was November, and the Island was being lashed by storms. Most of the Denby and Essam workers had left the Island and the Ulva Craft and Cultural Centre official opening had been postponed because the Flights and Ferries had been cancelled because of bad weather. There were only six of us getting meals at the canteen, not including the canteen staff.

Hester had set up a powerful telescope in her room. On a clear day I could see Iona. After breakfast I asked if I could take a look through the telescope. The sea was rough and nothing was moving that I could see.

“Lets hope the bastards sink,” I told her, “There must be hundreds of wrecked ships around these islands.”

We managed our walk despite the fierce wind and icy showers, and somehow that lifted our spirits. We were literally blown, laughing, through the canteen door when we got back down to Ulva for lunch.

The food was good and plentiful as usual, and everybody was laughing and talking about the preparations for Hogmanay when I noticed that Hester looked slightly pale and serious. She gave me a small nod and a look that wiped the smile off my face and had my heart thumping in my chest.

She didn't say anything till we reached the Castle. It was almost impossible to talk or hear anything outside.

“They've been seen... it's the Gallaghers, Connor and Justin with an older man who might be Liam, but Paul isn't sure. There are no recent photos of him. If they went to Stornaway, they left quickly, they were spotted on deck off the Island of Rum, that's halfway between us and Stornoway.”

“Shit... what now?”

“We carry on... everybody is in place and ready. You remember the rules?”

I nodded, “No heroics, do what you say, get down, crawl to cover and use my phone as a radio.” I took my phone out and checked the charge, then plugged it into the powerbank.

“You sleep in my room tonight, OK?”

I nodded.

“Kit, I’m just as scared as you, but this is good news. If all three of the Gallaghers are coming here, we could end this permanently. That’s a good thing.”

I grinned, “Well yes, but it could be the end of us too...”

“At least you’re smiling. We’ll be OK, Kit. Believe it.”

“I don’t want you.. or anybody else, getting hurt because of me.”

“This isn’t because of you Kit. People like the Gallaghers need to be faced and taken down. That’s why I do what I do.”

I went to the telescope and studied the seas. There were sea birds skimming the waves, which were breaking over the concrete walls of the Harbour.

“I can’t imagine anyone moving on that water,”

“Smugglers have been using rough weather to get past Customs and Security services for centuries. Marseilles has hundreds of skippers who can and will go anywhere in any weather if you pay them enough.”

Hester insisted that we carry on with our routines. The walk down to the canteen for supper was OK, I suppose the wild weather and having to concentrate on not slipping took my

mind off things. Hester got to eat Haggis that night... it was OK; tasted sort of like a pork sausage with parsnip to me. Hester looked pleased with it, but she was much quieter than usual.

The Haggis sat very heavily in my stomach as we walked back up to the castle. It felt like an eternity and every time the wind dropped, I wanted to lie down and hide. My back muscles felt like they were going to cramp by the time we reached the castle. I kept imagining a heavy bullet tearing through my back and then telling myself that they would not all come just to shoot me in the back.

I got a pot of coffee from the cafe to take up to our rooms. Hester sat quietly cleaning her hand gun, with her phone on the arm of the chair and her ear bud in. I could tell she was listening to someone. She looked calm but somehow tense, like a sprinter in the starting blocks. I watched her hands and they were steady. Mine were shaking. I had them tucked into the front pocket of my hoodie.

The moon came up just after ten. I looked through the telescope. The rain had stopped but the winds were as fierce as ever.

“Anything out there?” asked Hester.

“Nothing,” I said and was just about to step away when I saw it, “No wait... there’s a boat!” My heart started racing. Hester tugged on my sleeve, to get me to move away.

She looked through the telescope for what seemed like a long time, before she spoke.

“Yes, affirmative. I have eyes on. OK.”

I realised she wasn't talking to me.

“What's happening?” I asked and she held up a hand to quiet me.

I watched as a bead of sweat ran down from her hairline, past her ear and onto her neck. I saw from a pulsing vein in her neck, that her heart was beating strongly... not as fast as mine, but it was thumping.

I saw her getting really tense, and felt the fear coming off her. It seemed to last forever.

I really needed to pee, but couldn't move.

She breathed out and looked relieved, almost pleased.

“What happened?” I asked.

“Paul happened,” she said with a smile, moving away from the telescope. I almost took my eye out getting to it. It was set for Hester's height, not mine.

The boat... was still there, but was rocking about wildly. it took a while for me to realise it was not underway, and was being batted around by the wind and waves. I searched the seas and nearly missed it, a man in a kayak, it was the flash of a paddle blade that I saw, and then I saw the line... he was dragging something with a line. I could not see what, but for a second I saw the kayak as it rose high on a wave. The shoulders were Paul's. Then he was gone out of view

behind a headland. I looked for the boat again and saw a beacon, flashing red. The boat was half submerged.

Hester had vanished. I looked around for her and heard the toilet flush, then remembered that I needed to piss. I nearly wet myself unlocking the interconnecting door to my room.

When I returned to her room, Hester was smiling and had her hair down. She had changed into a tracksuit and looked ready for bed.

“It’s over Kit,” she told me. “You can get on with your life now.” She looked more relieved than I felt, and I felt enormously relieved.

“What happened?”

“I told you... Paul happened. The Gallaghers are dead... all three of them. Somebody will find their bodies tomorrow. The sea got them.”

“I saw him... not his face... his shoulders. How...”

“Paul was Special Boat Service... there’s no one like him Kit. You didn’t see him OK? Let the sea take the credit for this?”

“What’s the special boat service?”

Hester laughed, “Well, you’ve heard of the SAS, right? The Special Boat Service is the Royal Marines equivalent, much smaller, much better and much more secretive than the SAS.”

I remembered then, reading about the SBS in a book about the Falklands war. One of their units bumped into an SAS patrol... it went badly.

It took me a long while to get to sleep that night, but when I did sleep, I slept really well.

The weather turned while I was asleep. When Hester woke me, saying I was going to miss breakfast, the wind had died down and it was snowing gently. We slid and slipped our way down to breakfast in the dark.

“We don’t know anything yet Kit... remember that.”

“Is Paul OK?” I asked.

She nodded and smiled happily, then slipped and fell. She laughed when I offered to help her up. A short while later a snow ball hit me on the back of my head.

We pelted each other with snow balls, laughing like little children all the way to the canteen. My ribs ached, but it was just from laughing.

We did a much shorter walk in the morning. I wanted to walk along the shore but Hester decided we should go and look at the stone quarry. She wanted photos of the structures covered in snow.

Afterwards, we were drinking coffee in the Castle cafe when we heard that a fishing boat had sunk and three crew had washed up dead on the shore. Everybody knew that Hester was police, so she went to help the local constable, she shook her head when I asked if I should go.

A helicopter took the bodies away. Hester returned shortly after that and went up to her room to get changed. I followed her.

“It’s them. I recognised Connor and Justin...and the other man is the right age to be Liam, but it will take a while before they are officially identified. The helicopter crew saw a life raft with a body in it. They alerted the coastguard, it’s probably the skipper. If he’s still alive he might be able to tell them more.”

Douglas, the Hebridean who worked for Denby and Essam came to the Caste that evening, we were just about to go to the canteen for supper.

“Your troubles are over Laddie,” he told me quietly, “My son’s wife’s brother is a with the Glasgow Procurator Fiscal’s office. He just called to tell us that the three dead men we found this morning are the gangsters that were looking for you Kit. The Gallaghers... there’s a warrant for their arrest and rewards for information leading to their capture... but they’re beyond the Law now, and good riddance.”

He squeezed my shoulder, “Ye can get on with your life now son. We’ll miss seeing you and your bonnie minder, but we are all pleased for you.”

The news had spread, and by the time we reached the canteen it seemed that everybody knew that the Gallaghers were dead. The canteen manager said the skipper was alive and in hospital in Glasgow. They made a bit of a celebration of it in the canteen and it came up on the eight PM News. I

got to see the faces of Justin and Connor, or what they looked like when they were alive, and Liam's mugshot from when he was imprisoned in the seventies. They all looked tough. I was very glad never to have met them face to face.

Kevin called me from Colchester and congratulated me. He asked if I wanted to stay at Ulva for the Hogmanay Celebration, but I said I would rather get back to Colchester and be useful. He laughed and said he'd get me back in time for the company Christmas Party.

Hester told me that Paul had already arranged transport, and we flew out on a six passenger helicopter at nine the following morning. The snow was all gone, and it was raining quite heavily, but there was no wind to speak of. We were met at the Glasgow Heliport by an RAF driver and driven right up to a much larger helicopter that took off while we were being strapped in to the last two remaining seats.

Rab was waiting for us at the Cambridgeshire base. He drove us to the mansion and stopped outside the front door.

"Leave your kit in the car," he told me, "I'm taking you home after Paul's debriefed you."

Paul looked no different than when I'd last seen him. He shook my hand and asked how I was.

When I tried to thank him he told me it was not necessary.

"It's all part of the service Kit... Hester told me that you saw me. That wasn't supposed to happen. Can you keep that to yourself Kit? The Gallaghers drowned when they

abandoned ship after their engine failed. That scenario keeps everybody safe... “

“I get that. They drowned and I never saw you.”

“Good man Kit,” he smiled and turned to Hester, “I hope he behaved himself?”

Hester laughed, “Well, it was you that insisted we shared a bedroom. What sort of husband does that?” She looked at me and winked, “Paul and I have been hoping to start a family... if we have a boy in the next nine month’s well call it Kit!”

She laughed and nimbly dodged a kick that Paul aimed at her bum.

Rab asked me if I liked the Hebrides, and laughed when I said I wasn’t sure, but it wasn’t somewhere I would ever find boring. He drove me to Shelagh’s house without needing directions and told me to keep the kit I’d been given. He asked me if I was still keen on joining the army and grinned when I said I was thinking of finding out about the Royal Marines.

“Yeah definitely... I’d be a Royal Marine if I could start over again. I’ll hunt you down if you ever quote me, but the marines are the thinking man’s paratrooper. Good bunch.”

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The house was empty. I loaded my dirty clothes into the washing machine and cycled to Thatcher's. I got hugs from everybody, including Alan, who asked if I was hungry.

Leslie sat with me and asked how I was, and if I'd heard anything from Shelagh. I told her I was feeling fitter and better than ever but that I hadn't heard anything about Shelagh. Leslie took over from Ames when Alan brought me a plate of steak and chips.

Ames told me that I looked different. I said I felt different now that I didn't have a death sentence hanging over me. She'd heard on the news about the Gallaghers being drowned and asked if it was all over.

"That's what the police say," I told her. "Do you still go out with the Marks Tey cycle club on Sundays?"

Ames shook her head and looked uncomfortable, "I met a guy... here, actually, in the pub. His name is Rick and..."

I put down my knife and fork and looked at her... realising that I was being dumped.

"I didn't want to say anything while you were... you know... recovering and..."

"It's OK Ames," I heard myself saying... my voice sounded like it was coming from far away.

"And you're going to the Army anyway... so..."

“No... it’s really OK Ames,” I said, suddenly feeling a lot better about it, “I hope he’s a nice guy and that you are happy together.”

She nodded, “Thanks... Rick is really nice. Are you OK... I mean your ribs and stuff.”

“I’m all good... and I’ll miss you, but I’m glad we met.”

“Can I have a hug?” she asked. I got a peck on the side of my chin as well.

Leslie came to sit with me when Ames went back to the bar. She didn’t say anything, she just rested her hand on my forearm for a second. It was enough.

I wasn’t allow to pay for my food or drink. I asked Leslie if she wanted me to work that night and she looked at the bar and shook her head.

“Probably best that you don’t Kit, not for a while anyway. Ames and Aggie work well together and Jules is back till New Year, she can help if needed. She’d love to see you... can you come for lunch tomorrow? Upstairs with Jules and me?”

I cycled home and cleaned the dust off Angela’s trailer, then used it to get some shopping done. I messaged Jennifer and asked if she was still cycling with the Marks Tey cycle club and if so, where they were cycling the next day.

My phone rang seconds later, it was Jennifer.

“Hi Kit... yes... we’re going to the Pier at Harwich... can you make it tomorrow? How are you... I’ve been so worried since that story in the papers. Dawn told me you’d gone into police protection.”

“I’m fine... what time are you setting off... may I go with you? I’m taking a trailer for Angela...”

“Of course... I was planning to head out at seven... can you meet me at St Botolph’s? I should be there by five past.”

I got the frame of Paul’s trailer welded up before going to bed that night. It felt good to be making things again.

I got a huge hug and a kiss on the cheek the next morning, and had my hand shaken by everyone and a few more kisses when we joined up with the other riders. Angela was delighted with her trailer and insisted on towing it. Jennifer hung back while I attached the hitch to Angela’s bike and rode next to me as we followed Angela in a little group of our own.

I was the centre of attention when we got to the Pier at Harwich, and had to tell my story to everyone. Jennifer sat next to me and rode back to Colchester with me.

She asked about Ames, when I said I’d been invited to lunch by Leslie. I told her that she had a new boyfriend, and that I was having lunch with Jules and her mum.

After showering I went through the mail that had accumulated. There was one for me... my citizenship application had been approved!

There was another surprise waiting for me when I got to Thatchers and knocked on the door at the top of the stairs. It was opened by Jennifer, who gave me a hug and a kiss on the lips. It was just a quick kiss, but the look in her eyes got my heart hammering again. Jules appeared and gave me a hug and a kiss on the chin. Leslie called from the kitchen and told me to take my shoes off and make myself comfortable.

The lunch was good, but I was glad when it was all over. Jennifer left with me and suggested I come to her flat. It started to pour with rain while we were putting our bikes in her lock up. We got soaked running to her flat.

Jennifer wrapped her arms around me after closing the doors and kissed me. When we came up for air she looked at my face and laughed, "You look surprised Kit."

I shrugged, "I'm very happy but... I thought you and Alan..?"

"Alan? Oh no... I went to school with his sister ... and he's a bit too old for me anyway. We're friends. I didn't want to interfere with you and Ames... and then, when I realised that you might have been killed, and only weeks after Graham... I didn't want to waste any more time."

I didn't get home till after midnight, and really struggled to get up in morning.

Louise arrived at the office while I was walking up the steps. She told me I was looking a lot better and asked how I was feeling.

“Great,” I said and meant it.

I went through my emails and found one from Shelagh that had come in on Sunday. She said she was in Fiji and had given in her notice at TurnKey. She said she had no plans beyond doing some travelling and said I was welcome to continue using her car and living in her house until she decided whether to come back or not. She thanked me and said she was really sorry that I had been hurt.

David came and seemed very pleased to see me. I was called to Ms. Parson’s office and had to excuse myself. Dawn punched me on the arm and said hello when our paths crossed in the corridor. She had a powerful punch for such a small person.

Alena asked me how I was feeling. She told me that I was looking much better, then went on to say that I needed to go to London. She said that Jim would take me and that it was just procedure and that I had nothing to worry about. She made a call while I sat there and told me Jim was on his way.

He drove me in a Bentley, and chatted comfortably all the way. He said I looked a lot better and told me not to worry about the meeting.

“Just listen and answer if you want to. Sir Miles knows that they put you in harm’s way. He knows you aren’t allowed to talk about it, but he’s just covering his backside. You have nothing to be ashamed of ... he has, and I’ve told him that.”

It took two hours to get there and we had to wait another two hours to be seen. They’d taken our cell phones, but

there was a TV in the small lounge we waited in, and good coffee. Jim was happy watching sport. I tried to read a magazine and ended up thinking about Jennifer. We'd agreed to have supper at the Bottled Crab at seven PM.

Sir Miles was with two other men, Sir Miles thanked me for attending what he called the debriefing. He was polite but I found most of his questions stupid. I answered politely where I could, and did not say anything to rock the boat. I agreed that I was very lucky that the Gallaghers had drowned. He told me something that I had not known; that they had recovered the sniper rifle and photographs of me from the fishing vessel that had sunk. The owner/skipper of the vessel was still in hospital but claimed he did not know who his passengers really were, just that they wanted to get to Ulva unseen.

Jim was there the whole time, and his presence seemed to make the other men nervous, though he didn't say anything till he asked if they had finished with me, as he wanted to leave.

We stopped for lunch at a pub in Coggeshal on the way back. They did quite a nice curry.

I cycled home and realised that I'd forgotten to ask if I could take time off to go to the Passport office.

I was still feeling full when I met Jennifer at the Bottled Crab. She ate and I had coffee and spoonful of her blueberry cheese cake. We talked a lot and walked back to her flat with my bicycle between us, which was probably a good thing. I cycled home at midnight again and went in to work really early.

Kevin was there and greeted me like an old friend. We walked to the canteen and he made coffee and asked how I was feeling, adding that I was probably fed up with being asked.

I told him that I was feeling great, but that I had come in early to get permission to take the day off, as my citizenship application had been approved. He said he was also going to London and suggested I come with him to the station at seven. He was going to the ministry of defence to discuss a project in Catterick that Denby and Essam had been awarded. He asked how I was getting on with my plans to join up. He nodded and told me that he'd really enjoyed his dealings with the Royal Marines and wished me luck, adding that they also did trades, like the Royal Engineers and REME.

Kevin spent most of the train journey reviewing the documents he was taking to the meeting. I messaged Jennifer to say I might be late getting back - we had agreed to meet at Thatchers for supper at seven. I told her I was going to London to get my UK passport.

She messaged back straight away and told me that was great that I was getting a UK passport and suggested I go to the TA centre at Yeomanry House in London to ask about joining the Marines. She sent me their WhatsApp location pin and said to call her when I was on the way back from London.

I was hours dealing with the passport people and only just got to Yeomanry house before it closed. There was a sailor

and a marine, who both stood and welcomed me with a smile.

“Come to join the Navy mate?” asked the sailor.

I shook my head and pointed at the marine. The sailor put on an exaggerated sad face and the marine grinned, “Good man. Take a seat.”

Half an hour later I was on my way to Paddington Station with lots to read.

It took three hours to get back to Colchester. Jennifer was waiting for me at the station and we walked to Bottled Crab. She asked how I got on with the Marines.

“I need to go on line to apply, but I like what I’ve read so far, except ... well, Basic training is nine months!” I told her, “I’m not sure I can cope with spending that much time away from you. I was only away for a few weeks before some cheeky bugger stole my last girlfriend.”

Jennifer laughed, “I’ll come and visit you in Plymouth...no cheeky bugger is going to steal me away from you... I fancied you since the day I met you in the Community Kitchen - do you even remember that?”

“I do... I was totally tongue tied and smitten,” I said, “Will you really come and see me in Plymouth?”

“Of course... I’ll move there if I have to. I can pretty much find work where ever I like, and I like Plymouth. You are going to need somewhere to base yourself when you aren’t being a Royal Marine, and that somewhere, Kit, is with me.”