

# 7 Days In May

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Thanks to the staff of Carol's Café, Invergordon, in the Highlands of Scotland, whose steady stream of coffee, tea and breakfasts gave me the energy to finish this novel.

## Contents

Day 1

Day 2

Day3

Day4

Day 5

Day 6

Day 7

Epilogue

## Day 1

=10:29 hrs=

Frank Booker sighed as he read the report lying on his desk, his pudgy finger running down the pages picking out the relevant details. He fidgeted in his seat, not really believing his Director of Research would have had the audacity to turn in such a negative piece of work.

“God damned woman,” he muttered, flicking over another page, scanning it with his steel-blue eyes while wiping his forehead with a man-size tissue. Booker was running to fat and tended to sweat in the enclosed glass cage that was his office.

As he read, Booker tapped a pen on the desktop, his small, almost feminine mouth - framed by ruddy jowls - pursed in concentration. He cursed again, wondering how he had ever employed such an unsophisticated scientist in the first place. A doctor she might be but one with little imagination about positing a resolution. If Booker’s army career had taught him nothing else it had made him realise that fortitude made the man.

Booker’s favourite lament when drinking his evening port at the Duck and Drake was the way that the youth of today expected everything to be handed to them on a silver plate.

“Where is the effort, the drive,” he’d ask anyone willing to listen.

Booker slammed the report shut and removed his glasses, rubbing the bridge of his nose with a forefinger and thumb. Leaning back in his chair, he swung it around to face the huge picture window behind him, staring across the grounds of the facility he’d managed for the past six years.

The sun was high, glinting from the razor-wire atop a high electrified fence paralleling Military Road. The name always brought a smile to Booker’s lips, reminding him of better times. Military Road ran south-east along the Isle of Wight’s coast line, winding its way through scattered villages. It was a pleasant walk at this time of year but

one Booker hadn't been able to take for some months. The project was burying him under complexities that should have been resolved by his staff.

What the hell was he paying them for, he wondered.

Closing his eyes, he pictured his golden retirement fund disappearing because some stupid bitch couldn't do her job properly. Breathing deeply he watched two gulls skimming low over the sea, trying to calm himself.

The facility he administered, designated Area 7 by the authorities, but known by the staff as 'The Camp', had been set up in the late 1990s to research pharmaceutical methods of improving warfare. Booker was offered the post of Director General after he'd retired from the forces. Sir Craig Holland, an old army comrade, had put forward his name, smoothing the way by reaching out to the numerous government contacts he'd built up over the years. It was the loyalty shown to him by Sir Craig that had carried Booker through his initial doubts about the latest project that they were researching.

The Aggression Stimulation Project, or AspByte as it was quickly christened, had raised some serious doubts in Booker's mind, but Sir Craig had visited Area 7 personally, explaining how important the Government considered the project to be.

Sir Craig was Chairman of Biosphere Cojoin Ltd, a company supplying drugs to the armed forces. He had assured Booker that there was no conflict of interests in this latest undertaking and Booker had taken his word on the matter - after all the man was a retired General, a member of COBRA, and Military Advisor to the Prime Minister.

Sir Craig explained that the Aggression Stimulation Project was being set up by the army to explore the feasibility of producing a drug capable of raising aggression levels in their troops, going on to tell him that Human Rights issues were chipping away at their success rates in such places as Afghanistan - a theatre where the enemy had no such considerations to worry about. And Booker had to admit that after reading media reports of families lining up to sue the government for not supplying proper equipment to its soldiers, he could understand that point of view.

While Sir Craig continued his inspection of the facility, he expanded on the army's aim of forming a small, select fighting unit within the Gurkha Regiment. These soldiers, treated with the new drug, would form a compact fighting force that would terrorise any enemy into submission. Despite Sir Craig's gushing enthusiasm, Booker had a difficult time coming to terms with the doubts forming in his mind.

Bringing his thoughts to the matter at hand, Booker turned back to his desk, dropping the report into his top drawer. Walking to a filing cabinet across the office, he pulled a keyring from his pocket, sorting through it, trying a couple in the lock before finding the right one.

Returning to his desk he sat down, dropping the file he'd taken from the drawer in front of him with little enthusiasm. The AspByte file was thick and Booker spread it open on his desk, wiping his forehead as he searched for any clues as to what pressure he might bring to bear.

The file indicated that the early research had gone well, the subjects - initially rats but later cats - displaying an awesome aggression, attacking their handlers at every

opportunity - but the project had stalled. The problem facing the team now was finding a method of controlling the aggression. Something they hadn't yet accomplished.

Dr Sheena Mckenzie, Booker's flame-haired Director of Research had even tried advanced viral techniques but to no avail. Now she was convinced that it couldn't be done, recommending that he close the project down.

Booker didn't accept her analysis, feeling nothing but contempt for somebody who gave up so easily. If it couldn't be done one way, they would find an alternative. They had to, a lot of money, and his own future was tied up in this project. She just needed the right motivation and it was up to him to find it. He continued reading her file, pouring over every little detail.

Some time later Booker closed the file and picked up the phone, punching out a number, tapping the file with his fingertips while he waited for it to connect. The problem needed dealing with quickly, he couldn't afford these doubts about the success of AspByte getting farther up the line.

Booker's thoughts were interrupted and he scowled at the desktop. "Oh yes. Is that you Dr Vasant? Yes, good, listen. I've got this report in front of me from Dr Mckenzie recommending that the project be terminated. Can you explain what the hell's been going on over there for the past eighteen months? I was given to understand from your reports that it was on schedule."

Booker listened to the deep voice issuing from the handset, muttering a few, ah ha's and yes I see's while the Head of Research for the AspByte Project, Dr Mani Vasant, gave his excuses and recommendations.

Booker cut him short. "Well Dr Vasant, thank you very much. That's very interesting. I'll call you again later, after I've had a word with Dr Mckenzie."

Booker replaced the telephone in its cradle, a thoughtful expression on his face. He hadn't said goodbye to Vasant, but then he never did engage in social niceties with his staff, not seeing the need to.

Gazing at the ceiling, he considered what he'd just been told, then buzzed through to his secretary, ordering a cup of tea before sitting back in his chair to mull things over.

If Dr Vasant was right, then the project could be pushed ahead with just a few months delay. Nodding, he wiped the back of his neck. He could deal with that. Sir Craig knew, as well as anybody, that such research never went smoothly or quickly. Digging in his desk drawer Booker got out his dicta-phone. He'd better get an alternative report drafted for McKenzie to sign straight away, time was of the essence.

Feeling pleased with himself, Booker clicked the machine on. "Report to Sir Craig Holland," he began to dictate. "Use the crested paper and head it 'Eyes Only'.

The office door opened and a well dressed woman walked in, placing a china teacup and saucer on his desk. Turning to leave, the secretary's eyebrows rose when she heard a muttered, "Thank you Sheila."

My, the old man must be in a good mood today, she thought. Wonder whose head is on the chopping block this time.

Booker picked up the telephone again and punched out another number.

=14:15 hrs=

Sheena McKenzie gazed from her office window, blue eyes reflecting the bright sunlight. She hated the high chain-link fence surrounding her working world, The gate security and the identification cards they all had to wear made Area 7 seem more like a prison at times. It stifled her creativeness, chipped away at the confidence that had allowed her to realise her dream of becoming the Director of such a prestigious government facility in the first place.

That is if her latest report hadn't put paid to that particular little dream, she thought, staring through the window with a troubled frown creasing her forehead.

Sheena had grown up in a small village on the east coast of the Scottish Highlands, her early childhood spent roaming the fields surrounding her parent's smallholding. She would often come back from her wanderings clutching a glass jar containing some insect or small creature she'd found, and when she got home she would always run to her father to ask him what it might be.

He always gave her the same answer, "I don't know Sheena boy, but if you leave it in the shed, when I've finished work we'll find out together."

And they always had, delving into her father's many books - a large eclectic collection that he'd built up over the years.

Although he worked on a small-holding, hard physical work, her father always found time for Sheena, sometimes accompanying her on her searches for new creatures. He fancied himself as something of an amateur naturalist and his bubbling enthusiasm had rubbed off on her at an early age. She still remembered his crinkly, sunburnt face and the smell of stale smoke that always hung about him, with fond memories.

Although poor, Sheena's family had unlimited pride and enthusiasm in their daughter's abilities, supporting her throughout her studies at university; her mother even taking on an extra job to help supplement the meagre grant. Sheena had studied hard, gaining a doctorate in virology - a subject that had fascinated her since secondary school - only to join the ranks of the great unemployed who swelled the Job Centres after the bank meltdowns of 2010. Sheena spent the next two years helping out on the family small-holding, convinced that her education had been an utter waste of time.

It had been an accidental meeting with her old university supervisor during a family trip to Edinburgh that had led to her applying for the Directorship of Area 7 - a name that always brought dark thoughts of conspiracy theories to her mind. No-one had been more surprised than her when a letter dropped through the front door late one afternoon offering her the position, and would she start straight away. Her mother and father had been ecstatic, even taking her to the small local hotel where they had a celebration dinner, telling anyone who would listen how intelligent their daughter was.

Sheena was standing in front of her office window, hands on hips, studying her reflection, a soft smile spread on her face at the memories. At five-seven and nine stones, Sheena was what she liked to think of as curvaceous. Waves of red hair framed a pale, round face, highlighting wide blue eyes, a stub nose and full lips. She didn't consider

herself beautiful, but knew a lot of guys - especially Gary Knowles, the laboratory technician working in the animal house - found her bright hair and soft Scottish burr attractive. The thought brought a slight flush to her face and her smile grew wider. Gary had asked her out for a drink on more than one occasion and they'd had one date but so far nothing serious had come of it.

Jumping when the telephone cut across her thoughts, Sheena turned from the window and crossed to her desk. Her office was fairly large, with sparse furnishings; a modern glass desk on which sat a telephone and a large flat-screened monitor, a low coffee table set between two comfortable three-seater settees for visitors, and three grey coloured filing cabinets which sat against the door wall. No pictures, no certificates, nothing to give a hint of who used the office. Her desk was clear of paperwork. Sheena had always been a clear-desk person, hating the papers and personal stuff some people cluttered their workspace with.

Picking up the telephone, Sheena's forehead creased when she heard Booker's voice. She'd never got on with Frank Booker, disliking his attitude to the staff at Area 7, women in particular. She sometimes wondered why he'd employed her in the first place. Listening to him speaking she could almost smell the faint odour of sweat that always hung about him.

"Dr McKenzie, I want to see you in my office at three-thirty. We need to discuss your report."

Before she could reply with a, "Yes sir! Thank you sir!" or an, "Up yours sir!" Booker had rung off.

Sheena couldn't remember having met such an arrogant man before joining Area 7. Running her hands through her hair, she checked her watch. Two-fifteen. Settling down at her desk, she opened a drawer and pulled out a copy of her report. Knowing her superior as she did, it would pay dividends to memorise every comma and dot in it. He had a mind like a steel trap and he used it to great effect.

Seventy-five minutes later Sheena was standing outside Frank Booker's office, waiting for him to acknowledge her knock. Unlike herself, he always had his door firmly closed and appeared to take great delight in keeping his visitors waiting. Finally she heard a gruff voice from behind the thick wooden panel, and assuming that he'd invited her in, pushed it open.

"You wanted to see me," Sheena said.

"Ah yes, come in. Sit down."

Sheena crossed to a low seat in front of the desk and sat. Booker stared down at her with hooded eyes, bringing a picture of a large toad eyeing up some unfortunate insect to her mind. Pushing the image aside she waited, her face devoid of expression.

Holding up a folder Booker shook it, a tight smile on his face. "I've read your report and talked to Dr Vasant." Sheena started to reply but he cut across her. "I think you need to explore your options a little further Dr McKenzie. Both Dr Vasant and I agree that there are other options here that should be considered."

Sheena felt her temper rising, struggling to stop the red flush that she knew must be

growing on her face.

“Oh? Such as?” she managed in a neutral tone.

Booker lent forward, his voice patronising. “Well, Dr Vasant thinks that a change in the type of subject, something nearer to the physicality of humans for instance, is an avenue that should be explored, and is one that you have not looked at in any depth.”

He sat back, hands folded across his stomach, a self-satisfied expression spread across his face that implied he’d won some sort of unspoken argument.

For a few moments Sheena was at a loss but then lent forward, emphasising her words carefully.

“Dr Vasant is not the Director here Mr Booker. Neither is he a virologist.”

Booker held up a placatory hand and smiled across at her.

“I’m well aware of Dr Vasant’s position and qualifications Dr Mckenzie,” he said. “But he is in charge of research on this particular project.”

Sheena heard her voice slip into a deeper Scottish accent, something that only happened when she got defensive.

“He may well be Mr Booker, but the fact remains that I am the Director and in my opinion this project should be closed down. If you read Section 14 of my report you’ll see that these animals have shown an extremely dangerous amount of uncontrollable aggression. In fact it has grown exponentially since the third trial began in January. We’ve tried every approach to control the response, with no success. And we still haven’t overcome the problem regarding the subjects showing mental instability after four weeks of treatment.”

Sheena took a breath, trying to control the tremble that had entered her voice. This man always ended up infuriating her. He was so pig-headed. She laced her fingers, wishing that the Director General was a person that one could engage in debate, instead of somebody who refused to see reason.

“I know Mani . . . Dr Vasant,” Sheena corrected herself, remembering how much of a stickler for titles Booker was, “thinks that using our TRC inoculation on pigs might help us to overcome the difficulties we’re experiencing.” She waited a beat, watching Booker nod his head in agreement. “But I must strongly disa . . .”

“Have you tried it?” Booker interrupted, leaning forward.

“Of course not. I’ve explained in my report why it would make no difference. Besides which, porcine subjects displaying that amount of aggression would be impossible to handle.”

Booker looked down at the report, opening it with an impatient flick, turning pages quickly. With a grunt he stopped, running the nail of his forefinger down the page until he reached the section he was seeking. “It states here that, in your opinion,” he glanced up at her with a dismissive twitch of his lips, then continued, “changing the experimental subject to a pig will make no significant difference to the outcome of the results gained. Is that correct?”

Sheena nodded silently, not trusting herself to speak.

“The use of the word significant interests me Dr Mckenzie.”

Sheena faltered under his stare. "Well . . . it's . . ." Licking her lips, she tried again. "Look, we all know that one can't be one hundred percent certain about anything regarding experiments such as these. It's new territory, especially the use of a joint dual-yCRO DNA and testosterone approach. But this I am certain of . . ." Sheena placed both her hands on his desk and stood up, leaning forward so that she was standing over him. "What we're undertaking here is far too dangerous Mr Booker and now is the time to call a halt."

Sheena was angry, breathing hard, and suddenly realised that Booker was staring at her chest. The bastard was enjoying this, she realised.

Stepping back from his desk, she gathered herself and managed to smile back down at him. "Will there be anything else Mr Booker?"

"Yes Dr McKenzie, there will. You will restart the experiment using pigs as the main test subjects. I'll have the maintenance department make up some special restraints for handling the animals. If you wish you may put your reservations in writing to me and I'll send them on to the appropriate person. Dr Vasant is waiting for you in the lab to discuss the various options open to us in using this new approach, so I would appreciate it if you would see him immediately you leave here. In the meantime I'll write a holding report explaining your concerns and the actions we are taking." Booker nodded his dismissal, the corners of his lips turned upwards in a tight smile. "That will be all thank you doctor."

Sheena hurried from the Director General's office, denied even the satisfaction of banging the door behind her because it was fitted with a soft-closer. She rushed down the corridor to her own office, her heels sounding angry clacks on the tiled floor.

A short while later the loud crash of a slammed door echoed back down the corridor.

=17:04 hrs=

Gary Knowles laid out twelve Phenobarbital filled syringes, trying to ignore the heavy gloominess that had settled over the lab since Dr Vasant had instructed him to put down all the cats being sent over from the AspByte project. This was the part of the job that Gary really hated - still it had to be done and done humanely.

Gary searched through his clothes, locating his identity card in the back pocket of his jeans. It was bent, the plastic covering curled away from one corner. Like all things Gary owned, the identity card was well past its sell-by date. A girlfriend he'd once taken back to his flat had walked out in disgust at the state it was in; unwashed dishes in the sink, clothes piled everywhere, a big dirty ring around the bathtub. Gary couldn't understand why she'd been so fussy, he'd only cleaned the flat a couple of months earlier and the bed sheets the week before that.

Placing his identity card on the work bench, he rummaged around in a drawer, taking out a small tube of superglue. The tip of his tongue protruding from the corner of his mouth in concentration, Gary carefully glued the errant plastic back in place. Then moving across to a steel cabinet, he slid the card through a reader on the door, hearing the soft click of the lock disengaging.

Reaching into the cabinet, Gary lifted out a black plastic box, laying it on the



workbench, flicking up the two catches that secured the lid. Inside the box was an anaesthetising dart gun. Checking the weight chart stuck to the inside of the lid, he plucked out twelve coloured darts from the soft foam lining. Supplies were getting low, he needed to order some more. Scribbling himself a reminder on a yellow Stick-it note, he attached it to the side of his computer monitor, where it was instantly lost among the twenty or so others already there.

Placing the dart gun and darts beside the syringes, Gary added the log book that he was required to complete after he'd euthanised the animals. He checked everything once again and nodded.

Yes it was all ready. Now, he told himself, he could take a break before the animals arrived.

Picking up a pair of tongs, Gary removed a beaker of boiling water from a nearby Bunsen burner, pouring the contents into a mug containing the makings of a coffee. Then settling himself on his high stool he picked up The Sun newspaper and turned his attention to the sports page. But no sooner had he taken a sip of his coffee than the two rubber doors leading into the lab slammed open as a powerful looking black man pushed a large trolley through them. The doors swung back and forth behind him with a decreasing clack-clack until they came to a rest. Gary sighed, putting down his mug, folding his newspaper, knowing that this was the end of his short-lived coffee break.

The newcomer gave Gary a big smile, picked up the mug and took a gulp of coffee. "Thanks mate, that's just what I needed after fighting these little bastards." Digging out a thick leather glove from his lab coat, he tossed it to Gary, "Take a gander at that my friend and let your eyes widen in awe."

Holding up the glove, Gary saw that it had been ripped across the palm and was stained with blood.

"Little fucker got me through the top of the cage when I was loading them on the trolley, nearly took my bloody hand off."

Gary glanced at the untidy bandage wrapped around Rudy's hand, shaking his head. "Should take a bit more care with these animals Rudy. You had it looked at yet?"

"Yeah mate. Went to the First Aider. You know, that little blond what works in the canteen? Anyway she had a gander and reckoned I should see the doc, especially as I didn't know what the cats was being used for. Doc Vasant gave me some injection or other, just in case."

Gary walked over to the trolley and pulled free the thick sheeting covering the cages. The animals hissed at him, ears flatten back against their heads, yellow slit-eyes following his every movement.

As Gary walked around the trolley the cats stalked him, slinking low, claws extended, lips pulled back over sharp teeth, mirroring his movements.

Gary frowned at Rudy across the top of the cages, his voice indignant. "What the hell have they been doing over there? I know Doc Vasant said they'd need knocking out before de-caging but this is bloody ridiculous." Gary stepped back as a paw reached out of a cage, snagging his lab coat.

Rudy shrugged. "Don't know mate but whatever it is, remind me not to get caught in a cage with one of them horrors anytime too soon."

Finishing Gary's coffee in a noisy slurp, Rudy made for the doors, taking the mug with him.

"Oy!" Gary shouted, just managing to catch the mug as it came flying back through the air at him.

Chuckling to himself as Rudy's deep laughter faded away down the corridor, Gary shook his head. Putting the mug next to the other four dirty ones already on the worktop, he promised himself a break as soon as he'd taken care of the first few cats.

Pulling on a pair of thick gloves which had small metal inserts sewn into the palms and back and protective tubes in the fingers, Gary picked up the first cage, putting it on the worktop, careful to keep his body out of reach of the sharp claws dabbing the wire bars at him.

Fetching the dart-gun, he loaded it, inserting a small compressed air canister into the end of the butt. Then turning to the cage, he studied the cat inside. It stared back at him with such malice that he recoiled. Feeling a dampness break out on the palms of his hands, Gary shuddered at the thought of what might happen should the animals get loose.

Gary turned the cage around, trying to find the best position to shoot the cat, but it moved with the cage to stay facing him, glaring at him with intelligent eyes. If he hadn't known any better, Gary would have sworn that the animal knew what was about to happen to it. The cat mewled softly, then gave a long hiss.

Taking careful aim, Gary stayed facing the animal, holding the gun around the side of the cage so that he could shoot it in the meaty part of the hind leg. It stood quite still, fur raised along its spine, eyes fixed on him, as though it were trying to memorise every detail of his face. They stood that way for perhaps a minute, then the cat's eyes lost focus and it collapsed.

At once the lab was filled with a loud wailing as the other cats began attacking the sides of their cages. For one terrible moment Gary thought that they might bite their way free. Alarmed, he picked up another dart, quickly thrusting it into the gun but as suddenly as they had started the cats fell silent again.

Wiping the sweat from his forehead with the sleeve of his lab coat, Gary took a shuddering breath. He'd never experienced anything like this before and it deeply disturbed him. With trembling fingers he placed the dart gun on the worktop and cracked open the cage door.

Reaching inside he poked the prone cat. It stirred, causing a shot of adrenaline to flood through Gary's body. He gasped, wrenching his hand from the cage, his elbow striking the coffee mugs, dashing them to the floor with the crash of smashing china.

Swearing under his breath Gary slammed the cage door shut and went off in search of a dustpan and brush. Having cleaned up the mess, he reopened the cage and reached in, pulling the anaesthetised cat out onto the bench, praying that he hadn't left it too long.

Quickly shaving a patch of fur from the cat's foreleg he inserted the syringe into a vein, pushing the plunger home, watching the clear fluid disappear. Pulling the syringe

clear, he dropped it into a Sticks Box and sighed, glad that the first cat had been successfully euthanised.

As he turned back to the bench the cat's eyes flicked open and it began scrabbling at the worktop, trying to stand. Gary hurriedly backed off, eyes wide with surprise, heart thumping in his chest. Then the cat's head began to droop and it finally collapsed back onto its side, giving one last drawn-out mewl before laying still. Using a stethoscope Gary tentatively checked the cat's heart, relieved to find that it was dead. Taking a moment to let his own heart rate slow, Gary licked dry lips.

"One down, eleven to go," he muttered.

Working efficiently and quickly, Gary repeated the process on the remaining animals. They had quietened down now, as though accepting their fate, which Gary knew was ridiculous. No animals apart from humans had any sense of their own impending death.

Gary had reached the penultimate cage when he felt his mobile vibrating against his thigh. Pulling it from his jeans, he flipped it open, holding it to his ear.

"That damned man is going to drive me crazy!"

Gary checked the caller ID with a frown. He'd never heard Sheena swear before and wasn't sure that it was actually her calling.

"What's up Sheena? You okay?"

"Not really Gary. Right now I could spit feathers."

Gary glanced at his watch with the feeling that this was going to be a long, cathartic call. He needed to get this job finished, he was already way past the time when he should have left.

He should cut the call short of course, but if he listened sympathetically perhaps he could persuade Sheena to come out for a drink with him. Catching his mobile between cheek and shoulder, Gary made placatory noises as he continued working.

Sheena carried on a tirade about the things she would like to do to Frank Booker in one ear, while the cats wailed and hissed at him in the other, and he began to wonder what he'd done to deserve such venom being thrown at him from all directions at once.

"Shit!"

The phone slipped from his shoulder and Gary made a grab for it, dropping the cage he'd just picked up. The cage crashed to the floor on one corner, bursting the door open. The large male was out in a flash, jumping up onto the worktop, upending vials and glass containers as it ran from one end of the long bench to the other.

Gary's mobile dropped to the floor and he could hear Sheena's voice calling, asking him what was going on.

The cat turned, its attention on the tinny voice, almost as though it recognised who was speaking. Running back along the worktop it launched itself at the mobile, knocking over a Bunsen burner as it leaped to the floor.

The Bunsen burner landed on Gary's discarded newspaper which caught fire, igniting some spilt ethanol. The top of the workbench broke into a sheet of flames. Backing away, Gary looked around for the fire extinguisher. Hearing a low growl from behind, he glanced back at the cat, eyes widening in disbelief. The cat had somehow

managed to mangle its way through his mobile, which now lay in pieces at its feet.

As the flames shot higher, licking the ceiling tiles, the cat looked at him with a murderous expression. Gary ignored the animal, intent on finding the fire extinguisher. He finally spotted it hanging beside the steel cupboard and ran over, pulling it from the bracket, releasing the split-pin locking the handle closed. Before Gary could get back to the fire he felt a weight land on his shoulders and claws rake down the back of his head, ripping his scalp open. Crying out in pain, he dropped the extinguisher, and fell to his knees.

Rolling onto his back Gary managed to dislodge the cat and sit up, skating backwards on his buttocks, dimly aware that somewhere in the distance a fire alarm had begun ringing. The cat stalked around him and he turned with it, eyes tearing from the acrid smoke.

Searching desperately for the dart-gun, Gary spotted it on the worktop, surrounded by flames. He had to get to it now.

Scrambling to his feet, Gary launched himself towards the bench, grabbing for the gun.

Yes, yes, he had it.

Turning, coughing, nose filled with fumes, he brought the gun up, a triumphant glow spreading through him.

The cat landed on his face, hissing loudly, back feet scrabbling at his flesh, tearing away the skin, popping out one of his eyes. Dropping the gun, Gary grappled with the cat, twisting back and forth, trying to pull it from his face. His screams rose and fell in time with the wailing of the fire alarm, like the accompaniment of a drunken banshee.

Gary finally managed to tear the cat free and throw it across the lab, groping his way about, his remaining eye blinded by the thick smoke. The cat leapt at him again, knocking him backwards onto the bench where his lab coat soaked up the remains of the spilt ethanol.

Flailing about for a hold, Gary's sleeve burst into flames. Struggling upright, he beat at the flames but just spread them further until they enveloped him. Disorientated, he stumbled towards the lab door, his body now a flaming torch, his screams of agony unheard as the flames burnt away his ears.

Gary had never suffered such agony before. He could smell his own flesh burning, hear the fat in his skin spluttering, feel his delicate tongue blistering. Crashing into the lab doors, he fell backwards to the floor, his last thought, that this must be what hell was really like.

Rudy charged into the lab, ripping off his white coat, smothering the flames on Gary's still burning body, holding his breath at the stench of burning flesh, trying not to throw up at the sight of the blackened skin curling away from his friend's face.

As Rudy battled to put out the flames, the big cat slipped unnoticed between the closing doors, as silent as the man it had just killed.

=19:34 hrs=

“Yes Sir Craig, I appreciate that.”

Booker sat at his desk, twirling his glasses in one hand as he talked on the telephone, a habit he’d picked up years ago. He’d been discussing the fire at Area 7 with Sir Craig Holland for the past ten minutes.

Booker listened to the gruff voice issuing from the earpiece and nodded.

“Yes Sir Craig, the fire totally destroyed one of the smaller laboratories but fortunately our on-site fire-fighters managed to keep it contained to the one area. Regrettably, a young lab technician was killed. We think he accidentally started the fire somehow. Our people are carrying out an investigation as we speak. A member of staff has reported that he used to make coffee using the Bunsen burner.” Booker harrumphed before continuing. “Why these people can’t stick to the safety regulations is beyond me. Anyway, our HR department is drafting a press release and our legal people will contact the family of . . .” Booker checked the file, “Gary Knowles, as soon as possible. There will have to be an inquest of course, but there’s no doubt about the outcome. Accidental Death.”

Booker listened for some moments, then folded his glasses with one hand, slipping them into an inside pocket.

“Yes Sir Craig, that’s correct. We’ll start the next round of experiments using the new subjects as soon as I can get them shipped in. It will take about a week. Yes . . . yes. That’s the soonest . . . I appreciate you have a lot invested in this. So have I. Good, okay. Yes, I’ll keep you updated. Yes I’ll send her report as soon as she submits it. Goodbye . . . yes goodbye.”

Replacing the receiver, Booker swung his chair around to face the window, staring out into the night. He wiped his face, tossing the tissue into the waste-paper basket beside his desk, his breathing heavy. He owed Sir Craig his position here at Area 7, but that didn’t mean the man could insult him whenever he felt like it. He could be insufferable when things weren’t going the way he wanted.

Booker calmed down and stood up, walking to the window. The sky was clear, the stars bright. An evening when he should be taking his usual quiet stroll down to the local and a nice port, instead of having to explain himself to somebody who had no idea how difficult it was keeping so many egos working together towards one end.

He sighed, promising himself some time in London when he’d sorted this out and things were back to normal. He hadn’t been to the flat in ages. Booker’s eyes softened as he recalled his last visit - the subdued lighting, the meal, the shared bed. Feeling a little better he turned from the window, a smile puckering his red lips.

Locking his paperwork into a safe, Booker glanced out of the window again, an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach. Putting it down to the stress of the fire, he checked he hadn’t left anything lying about that the cleaners might read and headed for the door.

The acrid smell of burnt wood and plastics permeated the corridor, making Booker cough as he gingerly stepped over the fat hose still snaking its way passed his office door. Nodding at a couple of workmen clearing up after the fire, he headed towards the

damaged lab to check on progress.

When he got there he could see that the body of the lab technician and the remains of the cats had been removed. The large workbench running the length of the room had been destroyed, as was most of the suspended ceiling. A mangled pile of wire cages lay in a heap against the rear wall and a large black square had been burnt in the floor tiles. The heat generated by the fire must have been incredible.

Leaning over Booker picked up an object from the floor. It was the remains of an identity card, the edges burnt and curled. Turning it over, he saw the face of a young man staring back up at him.

Booker let the card drop back to the floor, wiping his fingers on his trousers as he turned towards the exit. At least the cats had been destroyed, one less thing to worry about.

Sliding his card through the reader, Booker waited for the lift, his mind already busy on the details of the reports he'd have to write tomorrow. The lift arrived with a muted ping and the door slid open. He stepped inside, hitting the button for the roof, leaning back against the cold steel.

As the lift rose up the shaft a sudden thought rose in Booker's mind and he felt all the stress returning. His daughter was expecting him to pick her up from her school on the mainland tomorrow and in all the excitement of the fire he'd forgotten to submit his flight plan and organise his engineer to give the helicopter a once over.

Pulling out his mobile, Booker hurriedly tapped in a number. His secretary should have arrived home by now and it was about time the woman did something to earn the outrageous salary he paid her. Having given his list of orders, Booker rang off, looking at his watch. If he was lucky he could get a quick drink in before dinner with his wife.

The lift stopped with a slight bounce and Booker stepped out into the still night air. Taking a deep breath, he looked up, marvelling at the sight of so many stars. He headed for the helipad and the R22 helicopter waiting there for him.

Settling himself in the cockpit, Booker did a quick start-up check, ran up the engine, took hold of the yoke and eased the machine into the air. He'd be glad to get home, he hated these late nights.

Orientating himself by the lights from a nearby farm-house, he headed towards his mansion, unaware that far below him the noise of his passing had startled a large cat.

=20:08 hrs=

When the helicopter rattled its way overhead, the cat sat back on its haunches, a wild look flashing in its eyes, a paw raised in the air as though it hoped to swipe the noisy machine from the sky. Once the helicopter disappeared into the distance and a silence had returned to the compound, the cat went back to its single-minded search, exploring the high fence that was blocking its escape.

When the cat had tried climbing the fence earlier, it had received an electric shock that threw it to the ground. It had lain on its stomach, licking its scorched paws, its delicate nose inhaling the pungent smell of burnt fur. It lay there for some time, staring at

the fence with intelligent yellow eyes, head moving back and forth as though trying to work out what had happened to it.

The cat jerked to its feet, hissing, its heart rate climbing as the ever-present rage grew in intensity. Its brain flooded with chemicals, building the rage until it was an overwhelming unstoppable force, driving it back to the fence and its single-minded search.

Having already received one powerful shock, the cat acted more cautiously, slowly inching its way along the base of the fence, whiskers twitching at the current flowing through the mesh. Ahead it could see bright lights and paused, looking back over its shoulder, seeking out the comforting darkness. It mewed softly, turning back the way it had come.

But the force that had driven its original escape gave the cat no peace, constantly surging from deep within its brain, blinding it to the dangers, evoking one overpowering thought that was repeated with each heartbeat.

Get out. Get out.

The cat turned back, continuing its hunt for a break in the fence.

A little while later it stopped, its head raised, ears swivelling towards the sound of an approaching car. The vehicle stopped at the main gate and a man in a dark uniform walked over, checking with the occupants before opening the big gate and waving them through. The cat watched the man return to the building, studying the gap between the gate and the post as it quickly diminished.

Even though it was tempted by the opening, the bright lights had frightened the animal and it turned away, still too uneasy to leave the shelter of darkness. Instead it bounded across the dark car-park towards the opposite fence, its sleek, muscular body driving it across the tarmac in long leaps, its noiseless footfalls quick and certain.

Reaching the fence the cat stood quietly, sensing the same electrical tension in the mesh that had hurt it before.

The cat felt no disappointment at this discovery, just a deep rage driving it ever onwards - an internal command that swamped its every thought, filled its brain so no other thought remained.

Get out. Get out.

## **Day 2**

=04:31 hrs=

The darkness was lifting when the big cat finally made its way into the village. It was hungry, but with a hunger that threatened no fulfilment.

Its coat was full of sticky seeds, knotted here and there where the fur clumped around them. It wanted to stop and clean itself, nibble and lick the clumps until they were smooth again, but something darker drove it onwards.

The cat slipped down the quiet lanes, searching for food. It had tried killing a mouse

earlier but the little creature had escaped, adding to its hunger and rage.

The animal had spent most of the night searching for a way out of the compound, finally discovering an old rabbit run under the fence. It was wary at first, never having been out in the open countryside before. Having been born and raised in a cage, it was now surrounded by strange scents and frightening sounds, but little by little, with the help of its deep seated rage, it overcame the fear.

The cat's nostrils flared when it caught a scent on the night air, recognising the odour from its time in the cage. Setting off at a fast lope, cutting through the back gardens of some nearby cottages, it jumped the low fences with ease, its hunger growing.

Finding the dish that had been left out for the hedgehogs, it quickly gulped down the moist contents, then crossing to a small garden pond, took a drink and spent some time flicking out the small goldfish onto the bank, eagerly adding them to its meal.

Hearing a low hiss the cat turned its head, back raised in an arch.

Three female cats stood side by side on a garden bench, watching with hooded eyes, heads bowed in submission. The big cat smelt the odour and knew one of them was ready to mate. It turned to face them and one by one they jumped to the ground, waiting for the big male to come to them.

The mating was quick and savage, the male's sharp teeth biting into the female's neck as it mounted, saliva mixing with blood. Afterwards the male bit the other two females on the neck as well, ensuring its teeth sank deeply.

Then the cat's split up, the females returning to their own haunts - the houses where the occupants rose to a new morning, a few wondering why their pet had not yet returned home.

The big cat set a steady pace, working its way across a field, something deep inside it, pumping out its message of rage.

As the first rays of daylight lightened the sky, the cat felt a calmness descend and for the first time since it could remember, it felt sated, able to concentrate on something other than the rage it had always known.

It found a sheltered bush, curling up under its branches, the tip of its tail covering its sensitive nose.

Dropping into a deep sleep, the cat dreamed of running free across the fields, but always close behind was the snapping jaw of the dark cage trying to recapture it.

=09:07 hrs=

Frank Booker closed the carved wooden doors of his mansion behind him and smiled in pleasure. One of his gardeners was busy raking the driveway smooth, while another clipped the low hedges bordering it. He had bought the place seven years ago when he'd gained his position as Director General of Area 7. He and his wife, Helen, had spent months looking over all the houses for sale on the Isle of Wight and in the end Booker had got so fed up that he'd threatened to leave the new job and go back to London if she didn't find somewhere quickly.

Two weeks later Helen had driven him to Bathingbourne. As they topped a low rise,



Booker saw a large house - more a mansion really - set in the most beautiful grounds. The smile on his wife's face grew wider as she guided the car up the driveway, stones crunching under its tyres. The sun flickering through the hedges across the windscreen made them screw up their eyes, so they missed the best views that first day.

Stepping from the car, Booker breathed in the scented air and joined in Helen's smile. He remained silent as he trailed his wife around the house but was suitably impressed. It was a magnificent place.

Booker had wanted it and had got it. Two months later he and his family moved in, and after much pleading, his daughter Carolyn, got her cat.

Helen, unable to conceive, had insisted that they adopt a daughter. That had been twelve years ago and now, after thirty years of a cold marriage, Booker and his wife had grown so distant that Carolyn was the only thing they had left in common.

Booker went his way, Helen went hers - she spending most of her time at committees, fêtes, and such like - Booker at his desk, except for the odd trip to London now and then to visit his lover.

Bracing his shoulders Booker smiled.

Not a bad life really, not bad at all.

Taking a deep breath Booker gazed at the sky. The sun was shining through scattered, broken clouds. He would have no trouble with his flight this morning. His secretary had submitted his flight plan to London City Airport, so he was ready to be on his way. With luck it should take him about forty minutes and after his meeting with Sir Craig Holland he'd stop off at the flat before picking up his daughter and her friend from their school. He should be back in time for his afternoon weekly meeting with Dr Vasant with time to spare.

The front door opened and Booker's wife stepped out under the portico.

"My, what a beautiful day," she said, bending over to fuss the cat that had twisted itself around her legs. "Go on, you bad boy. Go and do your business."

Finished with the cat, she straightened up, walking out into the sunshine beside Booker.

He turned and smiled at her. "You haven't called me a bad boy for years Helen. Are you feeling quite well?"

Helen Booker turned and watched the gardeners at work for a moment. "I meant the cat," she said after a pause, her voice neutral.

"I know," answered Booker with a wry smile.

Helen shot a look at him, distaste clear in her eyes. Unlike herself, who had kept her slim figure with constant exercise, he'd piled on the weight and she wondered for the thousandth time why she'd married him all those years ago.

She held out a white plastic box. "I made you some sandwiches for the flight," she said.

"Why thank you Helen. That's very kind of you."

"When will you be back?"

"Probably about five with a bit of luck. I've got a meeting at half past two with Vasant

at Area 7.”

Helen sighed loudly, turning back to the house. “Stupid name,” she muttered.

“I didn’t name it Helen. I just work there.”

The front door closed behind him and Booker walked down the long flight of stone stairs to the drive.

“Morning, Mr Booker,” the gardener tending the drive greeted him, nodding his head. “Nice ‘un.”

Booker nodded back before disappearing around the side of the house.

“Stuck up bastard,” the man muttered. “No wonder his old lady is always out on the razzle.”

Booker crunched his way across the yellow stones towards the helipad located behind the house. As he passed a green wheelie bin, he opened it and dumped the box of sandwiches inside. He’d get himself a couple of nice bacon rolls at the airport before he drove in for his meeting with Sir Craig - he hated the salad muck that Helen favoured.

Rounding the house Booker saw their cat loping down towards the stream running along the bottom of the garden. A cruel look entered his eyes as he hoped the damned thing drowned itself. It was always covering him with hairs and pulling the threads in his suits. Maybe he should take it to the project for Dr Vasant to work on.

With that cheery thought buoying him up, Booker struck out with a jaunty step.

Having been told that Booker was going to use his helicopter today, the flight-engineer had checked it earlier in the morning. Booker stopped for a moment, studying the machine. The sun glinted from the clear perspex canopy and its blue paintwork shone like a treat. He still couldn’t believe that he was the owner of such an aircraft. It had been a dream of his since childhood to own one and now his position as Director General of Area 7 had given him the means to indulge his fantasy.

As Booker settled himself into the helicopter’s padded seat, he pulled his iPhone from his suit pocket and hit one of the quick-dial buttons. After a moment a youthful voice answered. Booker’s heart did a flip in his chest and his forehead broke out in a light sheen.

“I’m coming into London for a meeting,” he said into the mobile. “Yes, yes, I’ll be finished my meeting by noon. I have an hour to spare, so I thought perhaps, lunch at the flat?”

Booker listened for a moment, his penis swelling in his trousers. They’d agreed to use the euphemism ‘lunch’ because it was so easy to hack a mobile. A man in Booker’s position needed to be very careful.

Blowing a kiss into the iPhone, Booker slid it back into his pocket and strapped himself in. Five minutes later he was hovering over his mansion, marvelling at the view spread out below - his well kept gardens surrounded by fields, and over to the south, the waves sweeping their way across the sea before crashing onto the shore.

=09:45 hrs=

Booker looked down at the airport, talking into his headset. Air Control directed him

to the end of the runway - a stand beside a large shed, where he settled his helicopter. Struggling his way out of the cabin, he thought yet again that he needed to lose some weight - at this rate he wouldn't pass his next medical. The last one had been a pretty close call and he was convinced that it had only been his invite for the doctor to attend lunch at the Savoy that had got him through it.

Booker poked his head around the door of the shed, his nose crinkling at the smell of oil and diesel fuel. Spotting a man in a pair of greasy overalls, he called out, "Is my car ready?"

"I don't know mate. You'll have to ask in the office. Know where it is?"

"Of course I know where it is!"

"Then why are you bothering me? Can't you see I'm busy?"

Booker held his temper, knowing from bitter experience that it was useless expecting any respect from such uncouth individuals. Striding over to the office, he pushed his way through the glass doors and stalked over to the young receptionist.

He gave her a frosty smile. "I ordered a car," he said.

"One moment please."

The girl checked something on her computer screen, took a key from a drawer under the desk, placed it in front of him and held out a ball-point pen. Pointing to a box on the blue form with a long lacquered nail, she smiled at him.

"Would you sign here please sir."

Ignoring the proffered ball-point, Booker pulled out his own Schaeffer fountain pen, signed the form with a flourish and pushed it back at her.

He was walking away from the desk when the girl called out to him, "Oh sir, don't you want us to check the vehicle with you? For scratches and such like?"

"Not necessary, young lady," Booker called back over his shoulder. "The car belongs to me and if anyone has scratched it then you can start looking for a new job."

The silver Peugeot Coupe was parked at the side of the building, its fat tyres still gleaming from the valeting it had received that morning. If there was one thing Booker hated, it was a dirty car.

Easing himself into the seat, he drove out of the airport, flashing his pass at the security guard before turning right on Hartmann Road, narrowly missing a cyclist who gave him a one-fingered salute. Booker pretended he hadn't noticed, his face flushing at the insult.

Should be in the army, that sort, he thought. That would teach the bastard some sort of respect. Probably an out of work scrounger on his way to collect his benefits. Booker felt his indignation rising and gripped the wheel tighter. They deserved putting in boot-camp, the lot of them.

Feeling somewhat better after his mental outburst, Booker negotiated his way over Connaught Bridge and on to the A112.

The rest of the journey was uneventful, if slow, and he grunted his satisfaction when he finally pulled into the underground car park of Biosphere Cojoin Ltd, the pharmaceutical company owned by Sir Craig Holland.

Finding an empty visitor's bay, Booker turned off the engine and sat thinking, the soft ticking of the cooling engine marking the passage of time. Finally he had worked out his strategy for the upcoming meeting and looked at his watch, seeing that he still had twenty minutes until his appointment. Good, he'd forgotten to pick up a sandwich at the airport, but had time to get one now.

=10:37 hrs=

Settling himself at the red-rimmed, white plastic table, Booker pursed his lips at the greasy surface. Wiping it with a tissue from the chrome dispenser, he looked around at the scruffily dressed patrons. He smiled to himself, already luxuriating under the admiring glances he imagined they were giving him when they thought he wasn't looking. Plucking an almost invisible speck of dust from his lapel, he dropped it to the floor with a twist of his thumb and forefinger, then picked up the steaming mug of tea he'd fetched from the counter.

While he waited for his bacon rolls, Booker studied the revised report Dr Mckenzie had written up yesterday. They had discussed it at length, trying to find ways of presenting the results in a better light, but no matter how hard they had tried, everything pointed to the same conclusion, the serum was a total failure. He'd just have to persuade Sir Craig that using pigs would bring better results. He knew the man wasn't going to like this, banking as he was, on Biosphere Cojoin Ltd being the lead supplier of the new drug to the forces.

Booker sat back with a grunt when his rolls arrived. Picking one up he took a big bite, chewing hungrily, his mind still pondering the best approach to take with Sir Craig.

There had to be an answer, he told himself half-heartedly.

Halfway through his second roll, Booker's iPhone rang and he answered it, a flutter settling in his stomach as he recognised the voice. Even though he was in a place where nobody would know him, Booker turned his body away from those around him, cupping his hands around the mobile so nobody could overhear what he was saying.

"Yes, I'm just having a quick roll," Booker said, chuckling at the reply he got. "No, shouldn't be too long. Just got a meeting with someone rather boring first."

Booker continued the conversation for a further five minutes then ended the call, careful to remove the number from his mobile before returning it to his pocket. He sat at the table, staring into space, his half-finished roll forgotten, his mind back at the flat and the joys waiting for him there.

Perhaps he should take a present with him, he hadn't done that for a few weeks. A watch perhaps, or a ring. Checking his watch he saw that he didn't have time and got up, brushing some loose crumbs from the front of his jacket.

The walk back to Biosphere Cojoin Ltd only took a few minutes and Booker soon found himself standing in a fast lift, the floor indicator marking his passage as he ascended the vast building.

The lift door opened and Booker stepped out into a large space fronted by windows overlooking the River Thames. Smiling at the receptionist, he introduced himself.

"Of course Mr Booker. If you'll just take a seat over there, Sir Craig will be with you directly."

Booker sat down, lost in dreams of one day having an office in a building such as this.

=11:59 hrs=

Frank Booker walked into Sir Craig Holland's office and sat in one of the guest armchairs, sinking into the plush leather.

"Tea, coffee?" Holland ask him, taking the chair opposite.

"Tea please Sir Craig."

"Lap sang? Assam? Indonesian? Or perhaps a green?"

"Assam please Sir Craig."

Holland looked over at his PA, who was still waiting politely just inside the door. "Two Assam please Gordon."

His PA gave a curt nod and left the room, closing the door softly behind him.

"Cigar?" Holland asked his guest, studying him carefully.

Sir Craig Holland had fought his way up the political ladder by being a good judge of character, and he judged the man sitting in front of him now to be weak and greedy.

Booker shook his head and lent over the arm of his chair, retrieving a file from the slim briefcase he'd set on the floor when he'd first sat down.

"My dear man," Holland said as Booker set the file on his knees. "Let's at least wait for our tea shall we? So tell me, how is that delightful daughter of yours getting on in that boarding school I recommended?"

"Oh she's doing fine. She seems to be enjoying it." Booker took a tissue from his pocket, wiping his forehead.

"How old is she now? Fourteen, fifteen?"

Booker moved in his seat, embarrassed at being asked such personal questions. Holland didn't miss the fidget.

"She's fourteen." Booker was saved any further discomfort by a quick double knock on the office door.

"Come," Holland called out.

His PA entered again with a large tray and proceeded to lay out the cups, saucers and teapot on the glass table between them. Adding a milk jug and a pot of sugar, he looked at Holland. "Will that be all sir or do you want me to pour?"

"No thank you Gordon. We'll let it draw awhile."

His PA walked across the deep piled carpet as though he was floating a few millimetres above it, bringing the tray to his side as he exited the office.

Holland smiled, his eyebrows arched. "Walks like a woman, don't you think Frank?"

Booker looked startled and pulled his attention back from the door, realising that he'd been staring at the man. "Can't say I noticed Sir Craig," he said, wiping his forehead again.

Holland lent over and poured them both a cup of tea, putting a splash of milk in the

cups first. Then the office echoed with the chinking of china as both men stirred their tea. Sitting back with the saucer balanced on the palm of one hand and the tea-cup held in the other, Holland took a sip and nodded.

"A good choice Frank." Clinking the cup back on the saucer, he sat and smiled at Booker. "So, what brings you to my office? It must be urgent to get you scurrying all the way over here at such an early hour."

Booker put his cup and saucer on the table and sat back in the comfy chair. Holland noticed a grease stain on the man's waistcoat. It looked to be new.

"Well Sir Craig," Booker began, tapping the file on his knees nervously. "For obvious reasons I didn't want to chance discussing this over the telephone."

Holland smiled again and took another sip of his tea, nodding for Booker to continue.

"Well it seems . . . that is, Dr Mckenzie and Dr Vasant, seem to think that what we are trying to do with AspByte is impossible. The serum causes brain damage to the subjects within four weeks. Every test so far confirms this."

Holland didn't show any emotion, hiding his contempt for the man sitting opposite him. It interested him that Booker used the acronym instead of the full title of the project, something he would normally avoid. He must be nervous.

When he'd put Booker in charge of Area 7, he'd expected better from him. For the past two years he'd sunk millions of pounds into the project, risking everything; his reputation and yes, even his freedom if things went wrong at this stage. He'd side-stepped the regulatory bodies to develop this drug, knowing that they would have vetoed its use. Maybe the UK was too left-wing to use such a serum, but he knew other countries that would welcome it with open arms. He smiled to himself at the thought.

"And what do you think Frank?" he asked.

Booker flipped open the file, searching through the pages until he found what he was looking for, holding it so that Holland could see, pointing at a graph. Holland raised an eyebrow.

"Well you see. Look at the graph, the model is telling us that it can't be done."

Booker sounded pathetic and Holland thought back to why he'd worked so hard to place him at Area 7 seven years ago. The man's only saving grace was that he had a secret and men with secrets were easily manipulated. Tenting his fingers, Holland tapped them on his chin, his eyes hardening.

"You told me you were making good progress, Frank."

"And we are. We were. It's just . . ."

Holland lent forward, slapping the palm of his hand on the arm of his chair, watching Booker jump in his seat. The file fell to the floor, papers spreading out across the carpet.

"I don't want to hear negatives Frank. Do you understand that?" Holland's heart thumped as contempt surged through him. Standing up, he lent over Booker. "I've invested good money in you Frank, and I want results, or else."

"But . . . but . . ."

Holland calmed himself with a few deep breaths and sat down again, trying to look earnest. "Frank, let me lay it out for you. This deal, the Aggression Drug Project, is worth

a lot of money to me. I've kept it from the mainstream research establishments and the M.H.P.R.A. for reasons which I don't intend discussing with you. What I am saying is that this drug will be developed. I don't give a damn if the soldiers receiving it are idiots in four weeks or not. In four weeks a war can be won. Do I make myself clear?"

Booker found himself trembling at Sir Craig's obvious anger. He nodded, still finding it hard to believe that Sir Craig had confessed to bypassing the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency. It was unheard of.

"You want me to press ahead with development, even though the drug will adversely affect those using it?" Booker checked in a tight voice.

"Isn't that what I've just told you Frank?"

Holland watched as Booker shook his head and stood up, a determined look on his face. He knew exactly what Booker was about to say. Now the bloody man had decided to take a moral stance. Typical.

"No Sir Craig. No, I can't do that."

"Sit down Frank." When Booker didn't move Holland raised his voice. "SIT DOWN!"

Booker sat and Holland smiled at him, reaching under his chair, pulling out a large brown envelope. Leaning over, he dropped it in Booker's lap.

"Here. A present for you," he said.

Booker looked at the envelope with a puzzled expression.

"Take a good look Frank. It's photographs of you and your lover. My man took them last month. Really Frank, I didn't know you could be quite so athletic."

Booker felt the blood draining from his face and sank down in his chair like a beaten child. His ears popped when he moistened his dry lips. The whole room seemed disconnected for a moment and he realised that he was hyperventilating.

"Come on Frank, have a look. After all I paid good money for them." Holland snatched the envelope from Booker's hand, tearing it open and tossing the contents in his face.

Booker felt the pictures hit him and flutter to the floor. There were at least twenty of them, full colour, A4 size, showing him making love to a young black man. Another pale, white teenager sat on the edge of the bed watching them.

"Get out Frank," Holland ordered, disgust thickening his voice. "Go back to your wife and daughter, and see what they think when they receive these." He waited a beat before continuing. "Or go back to Area 7 and do your job. It's your choice."

Holland waited until the defeated man had left his office, then picked up the phone.

When it was answered he said, "It's going ahead. Get the plant ready."

Well satisfied with how the meeting had gone, Sir Craig Holland walked out of his office. His PA was busy typing something on his computer.

"Ah there you are, Gordon. I'm going out for a while. You'll find some photographs scattered about the office. Lock them in the safe for me. There's a good man."

=13:12 hrs=

On the lawns outside Givendale House in St Mary's School, Dorset, two girls lay on

their stomachs talking. Dawn was excited because Carolyn's father was picking them up by helicopter for a holiday on the Isle of Wight. Her friend had complained that it wouldn't be a holiday for her, just going back home for the half-term school break, and as welcome as that was, well . . .

Dawn rolled over on her back and laughed. "Really Carolyn, you can be such an arse at times."

Dawn closed her eyes, feeling the sun caressing her round face. Brushing her long, light brown hair behind her ears, she thought how nice it would be to live in a house like Carolyn's. She'd give anything to live on the Isle of Wight in a big mansion instead of the small, two-up, two-down that she and her father lived in.

Somehow Christchurch on the south coast of England wasn't as appealing as living on an island. Some people didn't know how lucky they were, which was exactly what she kept telling her friend.

Dawn rolled over on her side and looked at Carolyn. She was rubbing Vaseline over her lips with the tip of a finger.

"Too many kisses at the dance last night?" Dawn asked.

"I wished," Carolyn replied with a giggle.

The end of term dance had been a bit of a flop this year. Or maybe, Dawn considered, it was because at fourteen they had grown a bit too sophisticated for the boys from the local school.

"So tell me about your dad," Dawn said. "If he flies his own helicopter, he must be important."

Carolyn gave Dawn a serious look, mimicking Mrs Fingal, their small, rotund geography teacher, "I'll have you know young lady, that my father is the Director General of Area 7."

Both girls fell about laughing and Dawn slapped Carolyn on her arm.

"Be serious for a minute will you. What's he really like?"

Carolyn considered the question for a moment, biting her lips. "He's a bit overweight, a bit old and a bit grumpy," she finally said with a smile.

Dawn slapped Carolyn again. "Be serious."

"Will you cut it out. If you do that again, I'll tell him to lock you up with the monkeys in Area 7."

Dawn giggled. "It's not really called Area 7, is it?"

Carolyn nodded. "Unbelievable isn't it? All very hush, hush. You'd think they had the Terminator hidden away in there or something."

"So what do they do?"

Carolyn shrugged. "Some sort of experiments I think. I don't really know. Anyway, enough about my father, how about yours? What's he like?"

Dawn frowned. "My dad? Oh he's okay I suppose. You know, he's a dad."

"Your mother died, right?"

Dawn nodded, a frown settling on her face.

"What happened? You've never told me."



Dawn looked off into the distance, her blue eyes half-closed. "We were on an island, I don't remember where. Anyway dad was out on the reef doing some research . . ."

"He's a marine biologist?" Carolyn sounded impressed.

Dawn nodded.

"Cool. So what happened."

"Well, mum was busy getting stuff ready, she used to help dad a lot, she was some sort of scientist too I think. I'm not sure really, I was only six at the time and dad won't talk about it. I'd gone down to the shore and was playing around in the sand. Anyway this boy floated passed on one of those blow-up bed things. He splashed me and I splashed him back, you know, just messing about. In the end we started playing together, jumping off the bed into the sea, that sort of kid's stuff."

"Anyway, we didn't notice how far out we'd floated and when we did the boy went mental, screaming and crying for his mum. He was really, really frightened. I don't think he was a very good swimmer. Next thing I know, mum's alongside us, trying to hush him down. She'd swum out from the shore and it was a really long way. She began pushing us back, which was hard because the tide was against her. She kept coughing up sea water and I started to get panicky too. We'd almost reached the beach when it happened . . ." Dawn stopped, tears filling her eyes.

Carolyn reached out, rubbing her arm. "Sorry, I didn't realise."

Dawn smiled through her tears, touching the back of her friend's hand with cold fingertips. "No, it's okay. It's good to talk about it. I never have." Composing herself, she sat up and cradled her legs, her chin resting on her knees. "So, without knowing it, mum had pushed us through a shoal of box jellyfish. She'd been stung so many times that her body had started to blacken where their venom had begun destroying her skin, but she kept right on swimming . . . right . . . on . . ."

Dawn burst into tears and Carolyn pulled her into a cuddle, rubbing her back, not knowing how to comfort her, guilty that she'd asked about Dawn's mother in the first place.

Dawn rubbed her nose with the back of her hand, continuing her account between sobs. "She saved us Carolyn . . . she gave her life . . . for . . . I'm alive because she died."

The girls sat together, Carolyn's arm draped over Dawn's shoulders as the distraught girl cried herself out, until she finally shuddered and looked around at Carolyn, her eyes rid-rimmed, her cheeks wet with tears.

She kissed her friend on the cheek and took a deep breath. "Thank you Carolyn. Thank you so much."

Not knowing how to reply, Carolyn sat silently while Dawn wiped away the last of her tears.

"Wow," Dawn said, "That was kinda awesome." Then a short time later, "You know, I've never been in the sea from that day to this. I hate it."

Both girls stood, walking towards their school-house. They had some packing to do. The headmistress had given them the day off to get ready because the official holiday didn't start until tomorrow. As they walked down the long corridors to their dormitory they could hear the muted murmurs of lessons behind closed doors.

Dawn pushed Carolyn and ran off shouting, "If I get there first, I'm going to wear your Paul Smith jeans."

Carolyn squealed and ran after Dawn, her feet thudding along the corridor.

"Girls! Girls! No running in the house please," a voice shouted after them.

They both ignored it, bursting into their dormitory in a fit of giggles.

=13:32 hrs=

The schoolgirls pointed at the sky, their excited voices calling back and forth, "Look, look, there it is."

Dawn and Carolyn stood off to one side of the crowd gathered along the edge of the hockey field, hands shading their eyes as they searched for the helicopter.

Dawn saw a tiny black dot heading towards them. It got bigger and bigger until she could make out the rhythmic whop-whop-whop of its blades.

Growing in size, the helicopter zoomed over the buildings of the school, bringing an excited cheer from the girls. As it began to descend the teachers lined up in front of the pupils, making sure that no over-excited girl ran out on to the field.

After landing, the helicopter door swung open and a man clambered out. He seemed to have some difficulty doing so and Dawn could see that he was quite plump. Was this Carolyn's dad? In her mind's eye she had built up a picture of someone resembling Chris Evans.

The pilot walked over to the teachers and they gathered in a small huddle for a moment before calling Dawn and Carolyn over.

"Come on girls, don't keep Mr Booker waiting now. I'm sure he's got a lot of important things to take care of."

Grabbing their backpacks, the two girls ran to the helicopter and climbed in, Carolyn hanging out again to wave at her friends who waved back, the younger ones jumping up and down in their excitement. Carolyn laughed, stowing their backpacks behind the seats before sitting down and showing Dawn how to strap herself in.

Tossing a quick, "Hello Carolyn, sorry I'm a bit late," at his daughter, Booker grunted his way behind the controls and took the helicopter into the air, hovering over the field so that the people gathered below had a good view.

Dawn looked down at the school where she'd spent so many years. She hadn't realised quite how big and spread out it was.

"Look," Carolyn said, pointing through the Perspex canopy over her shoulder, "There's the gym and over there, the science lab."

The helicopter continued to rise, until it was among the scattered clouds where it levelled off. Dawn could hear Frank Booker talking to someone on his headset.

"He's asking the way, he always gets lost," Carolyn shouted over the noise of the engine.

"I seriously hope you're joking," Dawn shouted back, seeing the twinkle in her friend's eyes.

"Might be," Carolyn quipped.

Dawn watched the landscape slip below them - cars like toys, people like tiny ants scurrying along a grey ribbon. Dawn looked round when Carolyn poked her in the ribs. Her friend was holding out a pair of headphones that had a microphone attached. Dawn pulled them over her ears.

"Is that better?" Carolyn asked, pointing to the earphones then her father to show that he would be able to hear what they said.

"Much," Dawn said, nodding at Carolyn to let her know that she understood. "So, this guy you were making out with at the dance last night," she continued. Dawn heard a splutter in the headphones as Mr Booker half-turned, his face red. Feeling Carolyn's slap, she relented. "It's okay Mr Booker, I'm only kidding. Honest."

"Yeah - the great joker," Carolyn cut in, pushing her face into Dawn's, her eyes wide, warning her to shut up.

"Oops," Dawn mouthed at her friend, leaning back into her comfortable seat, a big smile plastered across her face.

Carolyn flashed her eyebrows in exasperation and looked out of the window.

"You don't have a lot of luggage Dawn," Booker said over the headset.

"No Mr Booker, Carolyn said that I could borrow some of her stuff while I'm there. I hope that's alright?"

"Course it is," Carolyn cut in. "I've got loads of clothes, haven't I father?"

Booker just gave a low grunt that could have meant anything, concentrating on his flying. In truth he could have done without having to fly the girls to the house right now. The meeting with Vincent had not gone well, the young man taking it hard when Booker told him he would have to leave. It had taken a lot of money to lever him out of the flat and it had been a tight rush trying to get the locks changed before he had to fly to the school to pick them up.

"How long will it take to get there Mr Booker?" Dawn asked.

"About twenty minutes I should think. I'm having to take a big loop out over the sea for some reason. If these air-controllers had to fly themselves home every day they'd make the flight-paths shorter."

Settling back to enjoy the rest of the flight, Dawn's thoughts turned to her mother. She'd been shaken by the deep feelings of guilt that had surfaced after talking to Carolyn about the accident.

Was that why her father would never talk about it, she wondered. Did he blame himself for her death too? Whatever his reason, it was a conundrum she didn't want to tackle right now.

Pushing it from her mind, Dawn lent forward to speak to Frank Booker, even though she knew wearing the headset meant she didn't have to. Habits were hard to break, she realised.

"Mr Booker?"

"Yes Dawn," came the reply.

"What is it that you do exactly. At Area 7, I mean?"

Booker was silent for a moment, then tapped a dial on the console with his finger.

“Well,” he said eventually, “Most of it is confidential I’m afraid, but basically we carry out experiments for drug companies and various government departments.”

“You don’t experiment on animals, do you?” The repugnance in Dawn’s voice was unmistakable and she heard Booker’s soft sigh.

Booker had been down this road before. Many times. When would people realise that without animal experimentation, no matter how distasteful it was, there would be little advancement in the drug industry?

Correcting the flight path, Booker considered his reply. “Well Dawn,” he said, “I know most people think that we maltreat animals at places like Area 7 but I can assure you we do not. Our animals are looked after better than some people’s pets are. I’ll tell you what, I have a meeting to attend to there before I fly you to the house, so why don’t you two take a look at the animal house while you wait for me. I’ll get Dr Mckenzie to show you around and you can judge for yourselves, okay?”

Carolyn lent forward. “Wow, that’s a first. I’ve never seen so much as his office.”

“Carolyn!” Bookers tone conveyed far more than the single word he’d uttered.

“Sorry father,” she said, sitting back in her seat, a chastened look on her face.

Dawn was seeing a side to Carolyn that surprised her. Her friend had always seemed so carefree and outspoken, but in front of her father she appeared . . . subdued was the only word that came to mind.

The cabin was filled with a sharp buzzing and Dawn jumped. Carolyn laughed, putting a reassuring hand on her arm. “It’s okay. It’s only the satellite phone. We’re not crashing yet.”

Dawn breathed a sigh of relief, then her eyes lit up. “You’ve got a satellite phone on the helicopter?”

Carolyn nodded. “Sure and one at home too. Father has them as a backup in case the network on the island ever goes down.”

Booker completed his call, which the girls couldn’t hear as it wasn’t being relayed over his headset.

“Er, do you think your dad might let me ring home on it?” Dawn asked Carolyn.

“I can hear you Dawn,” Booker said. “And yes, you can. Carolyn will show you how.”

Dawn took the phone as Booker handed it back to her and saw that it was like a standard mobile, if a little thicker.

“Just dial like you do on your mobile, then press the green call button,” Carolyn told her. “Neat, isn’t it.”

Dawn punched in her dad’s mobile number.

“Hello?”

“Dad, guess what.”

“What?”

“I’m calling you on Mr Booker’s satellite phone. How cool’s that.”

“Does he know? Those things cost a lot of money to use.”

“Daaad, of course he knows.” Leaning towards the window so she wouldn’t be overheard, Dawn whispered, “Anyway, he can afford it, he’s loaded.”

Why was her dad always such a boor. Carolyn's dad could fly a helicopter, why wasn't her dad more like that? Sometimes she wished she'd been adopted when her mum had died.

"Sorry honey but I've got to go. I'm in the middle of doing a seaworthiness check on the new submersible. You remember the second-hand one I was looking at? Well I managed to get a good deal on it and it came . . ."

Just like everything else, Dawn thought. Second-hand. Make do and mend.

"I'll catch you later honey. Bye now."

Dawn handed the phone back to Carolyn, turning to stare out of the window, feeling more depressed than she had for some time.

=13:40 hrs=

Alex Winters was tired when he got the phone call, He'd been up and working hard since five-thirty on his new submersible. Being second-hand, it had needed a bit of work and a lot of safety checks before he could take it out on a trial run. He'd taken a chance sinking so much cash into the craft but was confident that it would pay dividends. What it did mean was that he wouldn't be able to put his usual payments towards Dawn's education funds for at least the next six months.

Like a small child at Christmas, Alex had woken at an unearthly hour, and after a hasty breakfast, hurried down to the small dock that he rented just off Mudeford Bay in Christchurch.

He'd been lying flat on his back under the control console, feet propped up on the captain's chair, soldering iron in hand, trying to read the complex wiring diagrams spread across his stomach when his mobile rang. Aware from the ring tone that it was Dawn, he sighed. Knowing the rebellious side to his daughter's character, and how easily she got into trouble, Alex thought he'd better take the call because the last thing he needed right now was an angry Frank Booker.

Pushing aside the diagrams, he wriggled his way out from under the console.

"Hello?" Alex answered the phone in a preoccupied tone.

"Dad, guess what."

"What?"

"I'm calling you on Mr Booker's satellite phone. How cool's that."

"Does he know? Those things cost a lot of money to use." Alex knew the liberties Dawn often took without considering the consequences.

"Daaad, of course he knows." In a whisper, "Anyway, he can afford it, he's loaded."

Alex looked at his watch, realising how time was slipping away. If he didn't get the wiring sorted out this afternoon, it would mean another lost day, and he needed to get out earning before his bank manager started lecturing him again.

"Sorry honey but I've got to go. I'm in the middle of doing a seaworthiness check on the new submersible. You remember the second-hand one I was looking at? Well I managed to get a good deal on it and it came . . ."

The phone went dead and Alex guessed that Dawn had cut the call short. He'd been

more and more worried about the way she'd been behaving lately. She seemed to have few friends or interests, and when she was home from school spent most of her time in her room listening to music. He'd have preferred it if she was seeing too many boys, at least he would be able to cope with that. He just couldn't figure out why they were drifting so far apart.

Another four hours slipped by before Alex was satisfied that the craft was seaworthy and ready for a trial run tomorrow. He'd found a small crack in one seal and would need to monitor it but apart from that everything seemed to be alright.

Locking the shed, he headed home in his old Fiat, trying to ignore the squeal of a dry bearing somewhere deep inside the engine. As he drove, Alex thought about the new contract that he was in the middle of negotiating with Bell's Marine Research. True he'd have to spend a lot of time abroad, but if he pulled it off he'd have work for the next four years and he'd be able to buy Dawn some of the things she kept asking for, and maybe have a little spare cash to do up the house as well.

Pulling up to the kerbside outside his home in Robin's Way, Alex waved a hello at old Mr Waverly, out tending his roses as usual, even though it was getting too dark to see.

"Evening Alex," the old man croaked in his breathless voice, the result of years of smoking.

"Hi John," Alex called back. "How're the roses?"

"Could do with a good dollop of horse-shit but where you going to get any of that these days?"

It was an exchange that had been repeated since Alex had first moved into the cul-de-sac with Dawn, and one Alex guessed would continue until old John ended up buried under his beloved plants.

Grabbing a frozen dinner from the freezer, Alex tore off the cover and stuck the plastic tray in the microwave without even checking to see what it was. It didn't make much difference. All convenience dinners tasted the same to him.

When the microwave pinged, he pulled the packet out, gave the soggy contents a quick stir and carried the hot container into the lounge. Balancing it on a cushion, so as not to burn his legs, Alex sat down on the edge of the couch and began eating.

Taking a forkful, a sudden thought came to him and he gave a sad smile, recalling how Karen would give him hell if she caught him using one of her precious cushions as a lap-tray. An unexpected tightness seized his throat and he threw the meal onto the coffee table, sighing loudly. It had been eight years since Karen had died and still he expected her to walk through the front door at any moment, just like she used to - hair flying in all directions, a big smile plastered across her face, calling out that she was home and had he got dinner ready yet.

Alex felt tears stinging his eyes and the old familiar anger rising. Why had she been taken from them? Why had she died, instead of that snotty nosed kid who'd caused all the trouble in the first place? He still didn't understand how life could be so cruel.

If God was in heaven, then he didn't care much about the Winter's family. That's for bloody sure, he thought.

Choking back his tears, Alex picked up his meal again. It was almost cold, but with angry swipes of his fork, he finished it anyway. Tossing the empty container back onto the table, he sat back and let the cushion fall to the floor, wondering when the emptiness inside him would finally go away.

Reaching down for the cushion, Alex spotted the corner of a photo album sticking out from under the couch. Dawn must have been looking at it the last time she'd been home and had pushed it under there.

Alex hadn't seen the album in years, not since Karen had died. He hadn't been able to bare the thought of looking at her face. He'd stashed the album at the back of the airing cupboard and wondered how Dawn had found it. Reaching out a trembling hand, Alex pulled it out and rested it on his lap, running the tips of his fingers over the white leather cover, the indentations awakening old memories.

He remembered now how he and Karen had argued over it, Karen wanting a white cover, he a brown one. Alex smiled as the memories flooded back, his heart warming. They'd not been married long, full of enthusiasm, wanting to take pictures of every part of their lives so they could relive the memories later on in old age.

Alex half-lifted the cover, then let it slip closed again, not sure that he could cope with Karen's face looking up at him. An unexpected tear hitting the album cover jolted him from his dark thoughts and he quickly flipped it open before he changed his mind again.

For the next hour Alex worked his way through the album and his life with Karen; starting their own marine company, their holidays together, Dawn's birth, his mother's death - all the facets that made up their lives together spread out on his lap.

Now he was nearing the end of the album, the period leading up to Karen's death. They'd been researching a reef at Tubbataha, off the Isle of Palawan for a documentary film-maker. It was a unique example of an atoll reef, with a very high density of marine species - the North Islet serving as a unique nesting site for birds and marine turtles. It was a brilliant example of a pristine coral reef with extensive lagoons and two coral islands. Just the sort of place the documentary makers were looking for.

Turning the pages slowly, Alex let the memories ease back into his mind, unaware that his lips had formed a sad smile. Dawn had got bored so Karen had taken her back to the beach, telling him that she'd meet him there later.

Alex had been showing the underwater crew the stunning hundred metre vertical coral wall when another diver appeared at his side with a small board, tapping him on the shoulder. The stark message read: "You're needed up top now. Your wife has been taken to hospital."

As he waited in the corridor outside the casualty department where the doctors were working on Karen, Alex managed to get the details, piece by piece, from Dawn. She was crying quietly, cuddled into his side. He hushed her, reassuring her that it wasn't her fault, that it had been an accident.

The doctors fought for two hours but in the end Karen had died, her skin a mass of red welts and blackened patches from the box jellyfish stings. The toxins had proven too devastating for her immune system to cope with.

The funeral was just a blur in Alex's mind, a period that he always considered his darkest hour. Closing the album, he found himself smiling, feeling at peace with himself, something he never expected to experience again. He sat with the album on his lap, his fingers unconsciously tracing the patterns in the leather, remembering back to their first date.

Looking at his watch Alex saw that it was too late to call Dawn, she'd be in bed by now. He'd ring her in the morning and apologise. Getting up he headed for bed, the album still clutched in his hand.

Alex knew that he had many bridges to rebuild with his daughter but before that, he needed to get some sleep - and find some work.

=13:55 hrs=

Booker flew in over the coastline, heading for Area 7. The large compound stood out against the surrounding countryside as a grey splash of concrete. A big white circle, with a smaller cross in the middle, painted on one end of the long roof marked the landing area.

A guard strode out of the building, looking up at the helicopter as it flew overhead, giving a wave when he recognised the identity tag on its tail. If he hadn't recognised it, security would have had people waiting on the helipad when it landed.

For the past ten minutes Booker had been worrying about how to handle Sir Craig and his threats. If his affair with Vincent became public knowledge then his wife would leave him, he had no doubt about that. It would mean the end of his marriage, his career, everything that he'd been working towards all his life. Deep inside, a part of him was determined not to let Sir Craig get away with blackmailing him this way.

Booker was in no doubt that Sir Craig was right when he said that other countries would be queuing up for such a drug, but now that he knew the full details and illegality involved, he wanted no part of it. He had to find a way out of the mess he was in.

Shaking such thoughts aside, he concentrated on landing the helicopter, trying to ignore the girl's constant chattering in his headphones.

Booker had always chosen the easy options throughout his life, never taking chances, always playing it safe, keeping an eye out for the main chance. It had served him well so far but somewhere, deep inside his psyche, he'd always wanted to be different - the hero prep-school boy who earned respect by beating his enemies with his fists instead of cowering behind the bigger boy he'd paid to protect him.

Well here was a chance to be honourable for once, he told himself. To hold true to those childhood dreams. He could do this. He didn't have to let himself be blackmailed into doing such a criminal act.

Booker decided that his first step should be an approach to Dr McKenzie. If he confided in her about the things he'd been told by Sir Craig then she might be persuaded to help him. If the research showed that the new drug didn't strengthen aggression for instance, but subdued it after the initial spurt, that would make it useless.

If he handled this right and destroyed all the paperwork, no one would know what



they had achieved here. Dr McKenzie had used methodologies that only she was capable of reproducing without the original research notes. If she could be persuaded to destroy them and keep quiet, he could put an end to this. The more Booker thought about it, the more sense it made. There was a way to recover from his predicament and save his marriage, he just had to fool Sir Craig into believing that the research had produced negative results.

Feeling better, Booker landed the helicopter, shut down the engine and looked back at his passengers, forcing a light tone into his voice. "Okay girls, leave your stuff here for later. This way to the grand tour."

Dawn and Carolyn followed Booker out of the helicopter and across the roof - Carolyn wondering what had got into her father.

This way to the grand tour? She hoped he wasn't getting ill or maybe suffering from stress.

"This is such a big place," Dawn said looking along the length of the building.

When the lift arrived they stepped inside and a short time later exited into a long, well lit corridor. Booker led the girls to an office, entering without knocking. They followed him inside. A red-haired woman sat behind an enormous glass-topped desk, tapping on a keyboard. She stood up as they entered, her plucked eyebrows raised in a greeting.

"This is my daughter and her friend Dawn," Booker said, sweeping his pudgy hand in front of the girls. "I know it's a liberty Sheena but I was hoping you might be kind enough to show them around the animal house while I have a meeting with Mani. I should be about twenty minutes at the most."

Sheena had to replay Booker's words in her mind to make sure that she'd heard correctly. Had he really called her Sheena, and Dr Vasant, Mani? This was something new, Frank Booker asking for her help and using first names to boot. Pushing the mystery aside for a moment she turned her attention to the girls, her eyes sparkling as she greeted them.

"Carolyn, it's a pleasure to meet you at last," she said, holding out her hand. "I've heard so much about you." Turning to the other girl, who was looking a little out of her depth, Sheena smiled. "And it's nice to meet a friend of Carolyn's too. Are you here for the school holidays?"

Dawn nodded at the woman whose cool hand clasped hers. There was something about her that made Dawn feel welcome and safe. Usually it took a long time for her to relax in front of another woman but she'd taken an instant liking to this slim, pretty doctor.

"Thank you Dr McKenzie," Dawn said in a shy voice.

"Oh please, call me Sheena."

Dawn released Sheena's hand and nodded, her face lighting up.

Sheena turned to Booker. "Did your meeting in London go as you expected Mr Booker?"

"No," Booker responded. "And I need to discuss that with you, along with some other things before I go. Will you be free later? And from now on it's Frank, not Mr Booker."

Booker felt like a great weight was lifting from his back. He didn't care what people

thought about him any longer, he was going to be his own man. This time he was going to do the right thing and put an end to this project. He should never have agreed to oversee it in the first place.

Sheena could do nothing but nod at him, her mind in a frantic whirl.

What an earth had happened to Booker in London, she wondered. What ever it was must have been serious to affect him this way.

Booker left and Sheena turned to her charges. "Well girls," she said in a cheerful voice. "Who wants to have a look around? We had a fire in the basement yesterday but fortunately the animal house wasn't affected."

Dawn and Carolyn followed Sheena along a corridor and around several turns until they came to another lift which took them down to one of the basement levels. The smell of smoke still hung in the air and as they made their way to the animal house Sheena explained about the fire that had started in one of the laboratories, leaving out the fact that a young technician had lost his life in it.

The overhead lights were bright, illuminating the corridors so that no corners were left in darkness. Sheena noticed the girls screwing up their eyes.

"You'll get used to the brightness in a little while," she told them. "We have to be sure that this place is kept really clean. No dust, no cobwebs, no little furry balls of belly fluff blowing around, like under your beds."

Both girls giggled and relaxed, realising that Sheena was just like them and not the stiff-backed, matronly scientist they had expected.

Dawn went back to her main concern. "When you experiment on the animals, do you hurt them Dr Mckenzie?"

Sheena suddenly stopped, a serious expression on her face, head cocked to one side, hands on hips, tapping her foot impatiently. Both girls held their breaths, wondering if Dawn had gone too far and upset her.

"I thought we'd agreed that it was going to be Sheena and not Dr McKenzie," Sheena admonished them, before a big smile lit up her face and she took off down the corridor again, the girls trotting to keep up with her long strides.

"And to answer your question Dawn, yes a few animals do feel some pain but we do our best to minimise that. It's not something I'm proud of, or enjoy doing, but in a few cases, a very few cases, it's necessary. Okay then, this way to the monkey section. You'll enjoy this."

Sheena led the girls through into the monkey house and introduced them to the laboratory technician.

"Simon, would you show the girls the animals and explain how you look after them for me please? I've got to get back to my office and get ready for a meeting with Mr Booker. When you're finished here will you take them up to the canteen and feed them with ice-cream for me. Okay girls? See you later then."

"Okay Sheena," they said in unison, turning to the young laboratory technician, pushing each other with their shoulders as he looked at them.

Dawn giggled, her face reddening when Simon smiled at her. He had a nice smile

she noticed, even teeth, unlike her own which were overshot and bristling with braces. His hair was gelled and his designer stubble made him look as if he'd just stepped out of a magazine.

"So what do you do here then?" Carolyn asked, a bit put out at the attention Dawn was getting. "Do you clear up the monkey shit and stuff like that?"

"Carolyn!" Dawn couldn't believe what her friend had just said.

Instead of being upset, Simon just chuckled. "Mostly. Want to come and help me?"

Laughing, they turned and walked farther into the monkey house.

=16:11 hrs=

The visit to Area 7 had been exciting but Dawn was disappointed that she hadn't seen Doctor McKenzie again before they had left. They had taken off from the roof of the facility and headed inland, Frank Booker quiet as he flew the helicopter.

When the mansion came into view, Dawn put her hand on the curving Perspex canopy, as though she could reach right through and touch the building. She'd never seen such a beautiful house before. Did Carolyn really live there or was this just a big hotel that they were passing over? But no, Mr Booker was hovering the helicopter above the grounds, so this must be it.

Dawn spotted two short wings leading off the main house, each ending in a tall, round, spire-topped turret. The left hand turret had an elongated flag flying from it but she couldn't make out the design because it was flapping in the down-draught. The house reminded her of some fairytale castle. Oh how she wished she could change places with Carolyn and live in a place like this. Why was her life so dull, so boring?

The helicopter settled on a helipad behind the main house, to one side of a large ornate garden. Retrieving their backpacks, Dawn and Carolyn followed Booker through a maze of rhododendrons that bordered the helipad. Passing a large pond, they crunched their way along a wide shingle path around the side of the house. Dawn lost count of the number of windows they passed.

"How many rooms have you got here?" she asked.

"Forty odd, I think," Booker called back over his shoulder. "Nineteen bedrooms."

"We don't use most of the first floor rooms, or some of ground floor ones come to that," Carolyn said. "We've got a billiards room, a gymnasium and an indoor swimming pool. Oh and an entertainment theatre. The staff have their own wing at the other end of the house."

Dawn was finding it hard to absorb all the facts being thrown at her. "Slow down Carolyn. Geesh!"

Carolyn tucked her arm through Dawn's, laughing lightly. "You're going to really enjoy yourself, I promise. Come on, I'll show you where your bedroom is. We can dump your things there and go look around the gardens before it gets too dark."

Walking up the white stone stairs towards the tall, double front doors, Dawn was struck by how well kept everything was. They'd need quite a few staff to look after somewhere this big, she realised. As they reached the columned portico, the front door

opened and a tall, slim woman walked out to greet them.

"You must be Dawn?" she said, holding out her hand. "I'm so glad to meet you at last. I'm Carolyn's mother."

Dawn shook hands and said hello.

Helen Booker turned back to the open door. "This way please."

Dawn looked at Carolyn, who pulled a face at her and winked. Linking arms with Dawn again, Carolyn pulled her through the front door. "This way please," she mimicked her mother.

"Carolyn!" Helen Booker rebuked her daughter.

Dawn looked around at the enormous entrance hall, her eyes wide. It was like something from a film set. Two wide, dark wood staircases swept up to the first floor landing. Modern, gilt framed paintings - mainly landscapes - were hung at regular intervals up the panelled staircase walls. A central chandelier, suspended from the high ceiling, reflected light from the tall windows, its myriad glass pendants bathing everything in bright points of sparkling light. The whole place smelt of beeswax.

Noticing Dawn looking at the paintings, Helen Booker smiled. "One of my little hobbies," she said. "I just love the landscape around here."

Following Helen Booker through a doorway to one side of the staircase, Dawn found herself in a large sitting room. Unlike the hall, its walls and ceiling were painted a light blue, giving the room an airy feel, even in the fading afternoon light. White ornate plasterwork cornices complemented the large central ceiling rose, from which hung a brass five armed light fitting. A shoulder high carved marble fire surround dominated one wall. Opposite this sat two five-seater couches and a couple of leather armchairs.

Large windows overlooked the grounds and Dawn was drawn to one. The vista took her breath away. Rolling green grass swept down to a formal garden, where the beds, surrounded by miniature hedges, were a blaze of colour. Looking to the right, Dawn could see the fields beyond, fading into a misty, distant haze.

"Beautiful view at this time of year, I always think," Helen Booker said from behind her.

Dawn just nodded, wondering how long it would take to walk around the gardens. There were so many paths, so many things to see. She was in her own fairyland and she wanted nothing more than to explore every bit.

Helen Booker pointed. "Over to the left, beyond that big oak tree and further into the wood, is a folly. I'm sure Carolyn will take you to see it while you're here. It was built by the previous owner, Clarence Downey. It's called the Pumpkin for reasons that will become apparent once you see it." Helen Booker turned to Carolyn. "Why don't you show Dawn her room darling?"

Carolyn took them to her own bedroom first, where Dawn stood in the centre of the thick piled carpet, turning slowly, eyes taking in every detail. The view from the windows was to the rear of the house and Dawn could see that the property ended in a large wood.

Carolyn flopped on her four-poster bed and sighed. "I prefer being at school," she complained. "At least there you have people to talk to, things to do beside watching your

mother paint. Boring!”

Dawn wandered over to an enormous doll's house and opened the front. It was an imitation of the mansion.

“Wow!” she said kneeling down and poking about in the various rooms, each complete with its own miniature furniture and fittings.

Closing the doll's house again, Dawn looked around, spotting a carved wooden rocking horse.

“Who wants people to talk to when you've got all this stuff Carolyn?” she said, sitting astride it. “Look, you've even got a computer and flat screen TV, and PVR and everything. You're parents must really love you to buy you all this stuff. My dad never buys me anything.”

Carolyn gave a bitter, hollow laugh, arranging herself on her stomach, facing Dawn, feet raised and crossed at the ankles, chin cradled in her palms. “They only do it because they feel guilty.” The bitterness in her voice surprised Dawn.

Dawn got off the rocking-horse and sat beside Carolyn on the bed.

“Guilty? Why?” she asked.

Carolyn rolled over onto her back, her eyes fixed on the ceiling.

“They're not really my mother and father, they're really my aunt and uncle. My parents died in a car crash when I was three. At first they let me go into care, didn't want me. Anyway, after I'd been in that horrible place for three years, they suddenly decided to adopt me for some reason. They buy me anything I want now, but I can't wait until I'm old enough to move away from here, I hate it. My mother and father were rich and had plenty of money but it's tied up in a trust until I'm twenty-one. Come that day and I'm off out of here.” Carolyn sat up and jumped off the bed. “Come on, I'll show you around.”

They spent the next two hours prowling around the grounds and outhouses. Dawn was delighted to see that Carolyn even had her own pony. Carolyn showed her how to ride the quad bike, which made it far easier for them to see everything. The folly made Dawn laugh when they reached it, because it did indeed look like a giant pumpkin, balanced on top of a long, thin stick. The windows built to look like eyes and a mouth. Dawn thought it was grotesque and couldn't imagine why anyone would want to build such a monstrosity.

They said their good-nights in the long, first floor corridor, whispering and laughing like a couple of naughty children from a Lewis Carol novel. Dawn went into her bedroom and closed the curtains. Rummaging in her backpack, she pulled out her battered iPod and slotted it into the holder on the Zeppelin shaped docking station that was part of the room's audio set-up. Adjusting the volume, she showered in the en-suite and pulled on a pair of jogging bottoms and tee-shirt that she used for pyjamas, then sat on the bed and updated her diary while listening to Lady GaGa.

Finished, Dawn slid the diary into her backpack and crawled into bed, pulling the top sheet up to her chin, pushing the duvet down to her feet because she hated being hot when she was sleeping. Flicking off the bedside light, Dawn closed her eyes and thought about her dad.

Carolyn's account of her upbringing had upset Dawn and she'd wondered, just for a moment, if it had been true, or if Carolyn was just looking for sympathy. It didn't matter though because she'd swap places with Carolyn tomorrow. She'd prefer to live here than where she did, any day.

Settling back on the pillows she let her mind wander. Dr McKenzie's face floated into her thoughts and Dawn wondered what sort of mum she'd make. She took a bet with herself that it would be a good one.

Still too excited to sleep, Dawn tossed and turned, then sat up and clicked on the bedside light. Picking up the remote control from the bedside cabinet, she fiddled with the controls until she found the right button. The wide-screen TV rose from the interior of the Ottoman at the foot of the bed with a soft swish. Now that was really neat.

It had been a long, tiring day; the helicopter trips, Area 7, the tour of the gardens, and if Dawn was being honest with herself she'd have admitted that it had all been a little overwhelming. As the TV flickered unobserved, Dawn's eyes did the same and before very long she fell into a deep sleep.

A little later the bedroom door, slightly ajar, moved further open and a slim shape entered the room. The cat jumped up onto the bed, curled its body into a circle and settled down, its soft purring fading away as it joined the girl in a her sleep.

=17:01 hrs=

Sheena sat at her desk, a frown creasing her usually smooth forehead. Frank - she was still finding it unsettling to use his first name after all the years she'd called him Mr Booker - had met with her before he'd taken the girls off to his house in Bathingbourne, a meeting that had turned her world upside down.

Before the knock on her door, which was another out of character action from Booker, Sheena had been thinking about Gary. It was the first time that his death had really had time to impact on her and she felt sad that she hadn't got to know him better. She would miss his quirky smile and open nature a lot. She wondered if Frank Booker would know when his funeral was going to be.

As the knock cut across her thoughts, Sheena told Booker to enter and he came into her office with a smile on his face, waiting by the door until she had invited him to sit opposite her on one of the couches. He didn't beat about the bush but dove straight in, telling her about his meeting with Holland.

Never for a moment had Sheena thought that the research they were undertaking at Area 7 might be illegal. It had shaken her to the core and she grasped at once the fact, that even though she could prove that she hadn't been aware of the illegalities, it wouldn't save her career if the truth ever got out. She'd played the leading role in the research and development of the drug, and had done so without the proper permits. She knew that she should have checked their status before starting the research, instead of taking everything on trust.

Frank Booker had told her about his tawdry affair in London and how he was being blackmailed by Holland into going on to the next stage of production, and even though

Holland knew what the results on the soldiers taking it would be, the man was determined to push forward with the project.

Sheena had been impressed that Booker had the courage to come to her with such personal and damaging information and realised that he either trusted her a great deal, or was in fact very desperate. She could so easily use the confession against him.

Trust from Frank Booker was not in Sheena's lexicon and it was proving hard for her to readjust to the fast-moving events of the past few days.

Together they explored every option open to them and a plan had slowly emerged. They would ignore Booker's idea of trying to fool Holland into thinking that the serum didn't work and instead face him head-on. Sheena pointed out that he had as much to lose as any of them, reasoning that he'd rather agree to the project closing down than risk his reputation should the results become public.

Frank gave Sheena the combination to Dr Vasant's safe and filing cabinets. She would destroy all their research notes, then euthanise the animals that had been part of the experiments and cremate them. Frank would inform Dr Vasant that AspByte had been closed down and move him on to other research, explaining that Sheena had also been moved to a new research project.

Before leaving with the girls, Booker would telephone Holland and do his best to get him talking about the effects the serum would have on anyone taking it, and the illegal nature of the project. He'd also try and get Holland to mention the blackmail again. The conversation would be taped and hopefully the blackmailer would become the blackmailed. Sheena was convinced that under this pressure Sir Craig Holland would have no option but to back down.

At the end of their meeting they both agreed that in the unlikely event that Holland didn't accept the situation, they would give the tape to the police and take their chances.

Sheena pushed back her chair and stood up, her face drawn. She had a lot to take care of before she left for home tonight.

=18:45 hrs=

On the top of a bluff, a short way from the government facility known as Area 7, a cat stood in the moonlight, its head turning slowly. Suddenly it stiffened, growling low in its throat, sensitive nose telling it that a female had passed this way. A female ready to mate.

An owl headed out on its nightly hunt for food, flying low across the field where the big cat stood. The cat hissed, raising its paw, rage flooding its mind. The owl flew on, unaware of its narrow escape with death; a few metres lower and its chicks would have died from hunger in a cold nest.

The cat waited, watching the owl disappear into the darkness, then turned its attention back to the trail it was following, slinking along close to the ground, its large head steady, every nerve taught. It was close, the scent was strong here.

"Clancy! Clancy!" A young girl's voice rose and fell on the breeze that blew in from the sea. "Come here boy."

Sandra walked to the wooden fence bordering her garden, holding on, standing on

tip-toe as she peered over the top. Her dad had bought her the puppy for Christmas and she'd promise him that she'd look after it. Now, six months later, it looked as though it might have run away.

The cat stopped as the shouts drifted across the field to it, yellow eyes searching through the darkness.

Sandra kicked the fence in temper. She knew she'd be grounded for months on end if the stupid puppy had run away. Knowing that she shouldn't, yet feeling a tingle of suppressed excitement that she was about to, Sandra opened the garden gate and walked out onto the road, looking up and down the tarmac.

Not a sign of the stupid thing!

Crossing over to the wire fence surrounding Mr Shinlock's field, she tried calling again, "Clancy, come here boy!"

The cat turned, moving towards the field and the shouts, the rage in its mind deepening, fed by memories of cages and pain.

"Clancy!"

On the far side of the field Sandra heard a short bark, followed by a series of high-pitched yelps.

Sandra was nine years old and slim for her age, which helped as she lay on her back and wriggled her way under the fence, holding the sharp barbs away from her body with both hands.

Being nearer to the yelps than the girl's shouts, the cat turned its attention to the puppy, stealthily padding towards it.

The puppy's whimpers quickly turned to silence.

Sandra stood up, brushing soil from her back as best she could. Turning her head she listened to the night sounds, unsettled now that she was away from the road. The field was so big and dark, the cool earth filling her nostrils with its earthiness. It was only her certainty that she wouldn't be allowed to play out with her friends if she lost her puppy that spurred her on.

Turning, Sandra looked over her shoulder towards her house. The TV was flickering behind the half-drawn curtains. Dad would be watching the News and mum would be busy getting tea in the kitchen. It wouldn't take long, she'd be back before they even missed her.

Sandra began running across the field, the darkness engulfing her. Reaching the middle, she stopped, confused. Which direction had the barks come from? Turning slowly she called out her puppy's name again.

"Clancy, where are you boy? Clancy?"

The cat bared its teeth, the sharp points of its canines glinting in the dim light. It moved nearer to the fence.

The clouds broke, moonlight flooding the field. Sandra set off again, her small feet making little noise in the soft grass.

Where are you, you stupid pup, she wondered.

On the far side of the field the cat watched her, its eyes two white spots of reflected



moonlight. Opening its mouth wide it hissed, raising its back into an arch, extending its claws.

The puppy had trapped itself down a rabbit hole, Sandra was sure of it. Her dad had warned her about the dangers of small puppies chasing rabbits and she'd promised to never let him out alone.

Were rabbits out of bed at this time of night, Sandra wondered. Had Clancy chased one into the field and got stuck down a hole?

Sandra stopped running, out of breath, the questions buzzing in her mind. Head held high, chest rising and falling, she called again, "Clancy?"

The night was quiet, just the hiss of traffic passing along Military Road far below her. Then she spotted the fence bordering the far side of the field and broke into a run again.

As she neared the fence the cat lowered itself to the ground, tail whipping back and forth, ears flat, eyes wide, rage boiling in its brain.

Sandra stopped again. Had she seen something? A movement just beyond the wire fence in the undergrowth? Was that a pair of eyes in the shadows?

"That you Clancy?"

Sandra heard a low growl. Was that Clancy? Where was he? Squinting up her eyes, she stared into the darkness on the far side of the fence, trying to make out what was there.

Running to the nearest post, Sandra used it to climb over the fence, every nerve tense, ignoring the tear that the barbed wire opened in her jeans and the soft skin of her leg. On the other side of the fence she crouched down, suddenly filled with the desire to climb back over again.

Then she spotted her puppy lying on its side, head thrown back, a large black patch on its chest. Taking a tentative step forward, Sandra bit her lower lip.

"Clancy?" she whispered, kneeling beside the small body, touching the blackness with trembling fingers. It was warm and wet.

Sandra jerked her hand away, realising that it was blood. Her puppy's throat had a big hole in it. She gagged, scrubbing her hand on the grass, trying to rub the blood away. She felt giddy, hardly able to breathe.

Crooning like a hurt animal, tears in her eyes, Sandra picked up her mangled pet and pushed it between the wires of the fence, dropping its body on the far side. Clambering over after it, she picked her puppy up, struggling with the dead weight. If she got it home and into the garden, her dad would never know it had been out here at all and she'd be okay.

A cloud drifted across the moon, blanketing the field in darkness.

The cat stood up, moving to the fence.

Sandra took a deep breath, gathering her courage as best she could and began walking across the field, her eyes set on the dim glow from her house. She'd only taken a few steps when she heard a soft twang and knew that something had come through the fence behind her.

Trying to push aside the fear threatening to close her throat and cut off her breathing,

Sandra turned her head centimetre by jerking centimetre until she was looking back over her shoulder.

Behind her stood an enormous cat, its teeth bared. It seemed as big as a pony, its canines the size of the sabre-toothed tiger's she'd once seen at a museum on a school trip.

Sandra turned to face it, then took a step backwards. "Bad cat! Go away!" she chastised the animal, her voice the image of her mother when she scolded Clancy for pooping on the carpet.

Instead of running away the cat lowered its head and slunk nearer.

Sandra was terrified, her mouth so dry that she couldn't scream, her knees almost buckling when the cat's eyes fixed on hers. She had an almost overwhelming desire to pee.

Driving herself to move, she threw the puppy at the cat, then turned and fled, screaming for her dad at the top of her voice. Distracted by the puppy landing in front of it the cat took a moment to react, but then a fresh surge of rage flooded its brain and it bounded across the field after the fleeing figure.

Sandra's fear lent her speed, the adrenaline pumping through her small body moving her legs like she'd never run before. She could see her house now, the wires of the fence black lines across the light escaping through the gap in the curtains. Grabbing the top wire, she pulled herself over, ignoring the sharp barbs digging into her palms.

"Dad! Dad!" she called tumbling onto the hard surface of the road.

Looking back Sandra could see the cat close behind. She scrambled forwards on all fours, the rough surface of the road tearing through her jeans, jabbing painful bits of stone into her skin.

The cat leapt at the fence, mouth wide, knowing its prey was escaping.

Sandra stood up, slipped on a patch of oil, lost her footing, her leg slipping under the bottom wire of the fence, her jeans snagging on the barbs.

Screaming at the top of her voice, Sandra pulled at her jeans, glancing back at the house, hoping that her dad would hear her.

"No," she wailed, tears streaming down her face, her bloody hands tugging at the stubborn material in desperation. "No! No! No!"

The cat cleared the fence, landing on the road, turning back towards her, hissing like a snake.

Sandra gave one last frantic tug and managed to free herself, but before she could move the cat was on her, thumping into her chest, knocking her backwards against the barbed wire. Needle sharp teeth tore at her throat and barbs bit into her back, the incredible pain taking away what little fight she had left.

As the small girl gave up her unequal struggle, she heard the sound of her dad's voice calling, "Sandra, Sandra, where are you?"

Running feet on the road, the bright lights of a car's headlights. The cat left its kill, disappearing into the darkness of the field.

A black stain spread its slow way across Sandra's chest, frothing her life away. Her

head fell sideways, neck torn open in a bloody grin.

They found her a few moments later - her mother, her father, and the passing motorist whose headlights had picked out her body draped across the wires.

### **Day 3**

=02:38 hrs=

Having backed up Frank Booker's incriminating telephone conversation with Holland onto her laptop, Sheena sat at her desk thinking. She felt uneasy about trusting Frank Booker with her future. What guarantee did she have that he wouldn't somehow put the blame for all this on her? For the past seven years he'd been a chauvinist, could he really have changed so much, so quickly? Rubbing tired eyes, she sighed.

Pulling her laptop nearer, Sheena created a secure partition on the hard drive onto which she transferred all the AspByte files and records from Area 7's computer network. She might have no option but to go along with Frank Booker's plan, but she didn't have to do it without some sort of alternative backup. Next she searched the internet until she found the programme she was looking for. Downloading it, she let it install on her laptop, working her way through the usual screen prompts and disclaimers.

Satisfied that she had done all that she could to protect the information, Sheena left her office, hurrying down the corridor to the lift, which she took to the lower-basement. Entering the hot atmosphere of the server room, she crossed to the nearest terminal, where she sat down and pulled out the paper-clip tray above the nested drawers to the right of her knees. Feeling under the edge, a smile broke across her face when her slim fingers detected the paper taped there. Tearing it off she smoothed it on the desk, then tapped that weeks Administration Password into the server's keyboard.

Reaching behind her head, Sheena tied her hair back into a ponytail. She was tired and wanted to go home but there was a lot of work to get through before the Tech guys got in tomorrow morning. Pushing such thoughts from her mind, she pulled a thumb-drive from her pocket and slipped it into the nearest USB port. Booker had guaranteed that the programme on it would destroy all the files on the mainframe server. When the programme had finally run its course, Sheena repeated the operation on both Dr Mani Vasant and Frank Booker's Personal Accounts.

Knowing the programme would take a long time wiping the files, Sheena went through to the animal house and began euthanising the research subjects. Luckily they hadn't started any research work with the pigs yet.

Two hours later she was back at the server, nodding in satisfaction. If Booker was to be believed, now only somebody with access to the latest forensic recovery software and a lot of time stood any chance of recovering the files.

The back-up copies of Area 7's projects were kept at Frank Bookers mansion and he would wipe those when he arrived home. It would create some chaos when the facility

opened in the morning but they would talk their way around that as best they could. The important thing was to cover their tracks and get rid of any incriminating information.

They hoped that they could persuade the staff that somebody had hacked the system and intended telling them that, when they arrived in the morning.

=03:35 hrs=

Sheena arrived back at her office, hair in disarray and clothes dirty from handling the animals. She had burnt three large bin-bags of papers and files, along with all the carcasses in the large basement incinerator. The pungent smell of burnt paper and fur still clung to her skin and she longed for a hot shower.

Sheena tidied herself up as best she could in her en-suite toilet and she made herself a cup of coffee, sitting at her desk with a soft groan. She drank slowly, her eyes tired and gritty. Putting the empty mug on her desk, she picked up the telephone. She couldn't remember the last time she'd felt so exhausted.

As Sheena expected, the call went straight through to voice-mail. Cutting the connection she redialled, repeating the process twice more before a sleepy voice answered.

"This better be good."

"Dimitrios, listen it's Sheena. I'm really sorry to be ringing you so late but I need some advice."

"Early," the voice mumbled.

"What?"

"Early Sheena. It's half-past four in the morning for God's sake!"

"Yes Dimitrios, I know and I'm really, really sorry."

"Hang on a sec."

Sheena heard the sound of a match striking and then a soft cough as her friend filled his lungs with smoke.”

“I thought you’d given those up Dimitrios.”

“Yeah well, enough of my troubles. What’s up with you that you’re dragging me out of bed at this unearthly hour?”

Dimitrios Hampus was a young up-and-coming biochemist who had made a lot of contacts among scientific circles, including one or two in the M.H.P.R.A.. Sheena had run across him when he’d contacted her about some tricky virus he’d discovered in a fungus some years ago. It had led to a new research opportunity that had given Dimitrios a high standing among his peers. Now it was his turn to help her.

“Listen, have you heard of any research being carried out for the armed forces on aggression?”

Dimitrios whistled and chuckled quietly. “What the hell have you got yourself involved in now Red?” he asked.

Her nickname went back to a drunken night a few weeks after their first date, when they had watched *Gone With the Wind* and fumbled around on the couch. The dates had led nowhere but the nickname had stuck.

Sheena chuckled. “The same old Dimitrios I see. I’ve been doing a little digging around for a book I’m writing and I’ve come across one or two rumours about some research being undertaken by the army on induced aggression. I just wondered if you had heard anything about it.”

There was a long silence on the line as though Dimitrios was considering his answer, but he just said, “No Red. Nothing at all.” Another pause. “And you just happened to call me at four-thirty to ask me that? All I’ll say is be careful girl, that type of research is usually backed by hard-ball players who don’t like publicity.”

Sheena’s voice took on a defensive tone. “Look, I’m sorry I bothered you Dimitrios. It’s just that my publisher wants to put the book to bed tomorrow.”

“Okay then,” he said. “And you owe me a free signed copy when it comes out.”

“You’ll have it,” Sheena said. “Bye Dimitrios.”

Putting down the telephone, Sheena rubbed her temples. She hoped that her call wouldn’t get Dimitrios thinking too hard. He had a quick mind and it had been chancy calling him, but if anyone outside of Area 7 were to have any hint of whispers regarding what was happening at the AspByte project, it would be him.

Sheena was satisfied that she’d done all that she could to cover their tracks and pulled herself out of her chair. It was time to go home. Shrugging on her coat, she switched off the office lights and closed the door behind her.

Calling a tired, “Goodnight,” to the cleaning crew working their way through the empty offices, Sheena made her way out to the car park. She couldn’t wait to tuck herself up under her duvet and get a good night’s sleep.

In his comfortable Chelsea flat, Dimitrios Hampus frowned, picking up his mobile. Having worked for Biosphere Cojoin Ltd for the past two years, he felt his boss, Sir Craig Holland, would be interested in the telephone call that he’d just had.

=05:33 hrs=

Edna Riley moaned as she turned in her bed, trying to get comfortable. Her stiff old joints were giving her more trouble than usual. She'd have to ask Shirley to get that nice young doctor to call around with some stronger pain-killers tomorrow.

Edna, eighty-nine, had been bed-ridden for the past five years and spent most of her time listening to Radio 4. Her thin white hair hardly covered her scalp anymore and the veins on the back of her hands, plainly visible through her translucent skin, were like blue faded branches that had been painted on. Arthritis had made Edna's joints so stiff and painful that she could barely move, so she relied on the wardens of the sheltered housing complex to help her shower twice a week, cook her meals, and do a little cleaning now and then.

Edna was picking at the bedsheets with knobby fingers, wondering what time it was. Something had woken her. She knew it must be early because the darkness still held the daylight at bay and a full moon flooded through her window, reflecting from the TV screen at the end of her bed.

What had woken her, she wondered.

Edna frowned in concentration. The TV was off - it was seldom on - yet she'd seen a movement in its screen.

There it was again. What was it? Something . . .

Edna's breath caught in her throat when she realised the movement wasn't in the TV at all but was a reflection. Something was moving outside her bedroom window. Concentrating harder on the screen, she made out the shape of a large cat, stretching itself up against the window, trying to reach the half-open top casement.

Edna's old heart fluttered in her chest. It was her Candy come back to her after all these years. They'd told her that he was dead, but she'd never really believed them. He wouldn't do that to her, not her Candy. Edna suspected that they had taken him away to some cat's home because she wasn't able to look after him anymore. Like her, he'd grown old and had found it difficult to jump up on her bed. He'd never get in the window, poor thing. Edna fussed at the sheets, praying to the Lord that her beloved cat wouldn't go away before Shirley came in the morning and let him in.

Please God, please!

The cat patted at the glass with its paw and Edna saw that he couldn't quite reach the top window, and that even if he did, he wouldn't be able to squeeze himself through the small opening, he was far too big. Her Candy patted at the casement again, giving a low yowl, so full of meaning that it melted her old heart.

As Edna listened to her cherished pet trying to reach her, tears flooded down her face. Why was life so hard, so cruel? Then, painfully, a centimetre at a time, she began rolling over on her side, a determined look in her faded blue eyes.

"I'll be there in a minute my darling, just wait. Just wait now."

The cat watched the old woman through the window while she struggled in her bed, its tail whipping back and forth, sitting patiently on the sill as though it understood every

word.

Edna reached out a trembling hand, her crumbling old joints making her cry out in agony at every movement.

Just a little further, please, just a little further. Don't go away again Candy. Please, just . . . a . . . little . . . bit further.

Then Edna had it and relief flooded through her trembling body. She'd done it, as she knew she would. They might have marked her down as a feeble old trout but she knew better.

Holding her heavy walking stick in one withered hand, she raised it above her head, cradling her elbow with her other hand to lend support, the stringy, worn out muscles hanging from her arms like curtains. It was so painful that she almost gave up, but the thought that her wonderful Candy had come back to find her after all these lonely years drove her on.

The rubber feral of the walking stick slid its slow, tremulous way up the glass of the window until it reached the top casement. Edna held her breath, knowing this was her one and only chance.

"Please God . . ." she whispered.

With the last of her strength Edna pushed the window further open and collapsed back on to her pillows, the walking stick falling to one side, knocking over the bedside table-lamp. She smiled, she'd done it. She'd opened the window.

As Edna felt her cat's weight drop down onto her bed, the sun rose above the horizon, flooding the room with a red wash, like blood on an empty white canvas.

=08:30 hrs=

Dawn opened her eyes and yawned loudly. It took her a few moments to remember where she was and that the comfy king-sized bed she was lying in was real and not part of some dream. The room was suddenly flooded with bright sunshine and she screwed up her eyes.

"Good morning Dawn," a crisp voice greeted her. "Breakfast will be ready in half-an-hour, just enough time for a shower."

Dawn watched Helen Booker tie the curtains back, then disappear from the bedroom. She groaned. This was worse than being at school. What time was it any way?

Looking at her mobile, Dawn saw that it was eight-thirty. Raising her eyebrows in surprise she smiled happily. Not so bad after all then. She had slept like the proverbial log and obviously Helen Booker didn't expect them to be early risers. She was going to enjoy her stay here.

Returning from a hot shower in the en-suite, Dawn found Carolyn sitting on her bed. "Hi Dawn, I've bought you some clothes. I know you didn't bring many of your own."

Dawn and Carolyn were the same size and often swapped clothes at school. She looked at the stuff spread over the bed; jeans, tops, tee-shirts, all with the latest labels. She picked out a nice pair of jeans and a bright tee-shirt, dropping her towel on the bed as she stepped into her underwear.

Carolyn helped Dawn make the bed and then they ran down the stairs into the enormous country-style kitchen. Sitting beside Carolyn at the big wooden table, Dawn's eyes widened as she looked around the room, her stomach rumbling at the wonderful smells hanging in the air. The Booker's must have spent a fortune on the kitchen fittings she realised, taking in the double gas oven and hob. Everything was finished in stainless steel, just like the equipment on the chef programmes she sometimes watched on TV.

Helen Booker was cooking their breakfast on a smaller hob at a central unit and smiled at them when they entered, asking Dawn whether she wanted one egg or two.

"Two please, Mrs Booker."

"Helen," Helen Booker said.

"Okay then," Dawn responded, biting into some toast that Carolyn handed to her.

Helen Booker served the girls their breakfast and left them to it.

"This is great," Dawn said, mopping up the egg yolk with a piece of toast. "Breakfast in our house is usually cornflakes."

"Oh, did you want some?" Carolyn asked.

Dawn giggled, shaking her head. "So what are we going to do today?"

"Dad said we could go shooting. If you want to?"

Dawn spluttered on her diet coke. "Shooting? With guns?"

"Yeah with guns."

"Wow. That'd be great. What sort of guns? AK47's?" Dawn made a sweep of the kitchen with an imaginary machine gun. "Bang, bang . . . bang bang. Bang bang bang."

"Grow up Dawn," Carolyn laughed. "It's clay pigeon shooting. With a shotgun. You sound like one of those kids from the council estate near our school."

"Oh horror of horrors," Dawn teased Carolyn, "that you should be forced to have contact with low-lives such as them."

Dawn got up and put the dishes in the sink, then began running hot water over them. "Where's the washing-up liquid then?"

"Oh please!" Carolyn said, leaning over Dawn's shoulder and turning off the tap. "We've got a dishwasher and a cleaning woman. We don't do dishes."

"Lazy bitch!" Dawn responded.

Dawn slipped away as Carolyn launched a slap at her and they ran from the kitchen into the hall. Helen Booker was coming down the stairs, raising her eyebrows when she saw them.

"So what are you girls planning on doing today?" she asked.

"Carolyn said we could go shooting," Dawn replied.

Helen Booker looked at her daughter.

"Dad said it would be okay, if Terry supervised us."

"Carolyn, I don't like you getting so familiar with the staff. His name is Terrance, please remember that."

"Yes mother. Will it be okay?"

"Well, I suppose so. If your father said that it would be alright that is."

Carolyn hugged her mother, winking over her shoulder at Dawn. "Thank you mother."



Where is father anyway?"

"He went to work early. I'm surprised the racket of that horrible contraption didn't wake you two up." Helen Booker straightened the collar on Carolyn's red blouse and brushed some invisible fluff away. "Be careful and don't keep Terrance from his work for too long."

They watched Helen Booker disappear into the back of the house and smiled at each other. "Terrance?" Dawn smiled.

"Yeah I know," Carolyn laughed. "Come on, let's go and find Terry."

Linking arms they headed for the door.

=08:30 hrs=

Shirley Dibs hurried along the path, aware that she was late. Being late annoyed her. She hated her routines being upset this way.

At fifty-nine, Shirley Dibs had grown to appreciate a regimented life and being late wasn't part of that schema. Rounding the corner of the house, she quickened her pace, high heels tapping on the paving stones.

Shirley Dibs may have been long on years, but she was far from short on energy, and as she hurried along she went over all the things she needed to do that day. The first task was to get Edna's breakfast, then give her a quick wash before hurrying off to her next client. Shaking her head she chastised herself. A late start like this could mess up her whole day.

Shirley Dibs had worked in the caring business since leaving school, dedicating her life to the comfort of others. In that time she'd seen plenty of changes, many of which she'd welcomed, but being made to call her old dears, clients, always grated. It sounded so unemotional, so detached, nothing at all like the feelings she experienced on her day to day rounds of the Sheltered Accommodation complex.

Opening Edna's front door with her master-key, Shirley Dibs entered the small house, wrinkling her nose at the slight smell that often permeated her older client's homes. Edna's house had been rearranged so that the bedroom was now in what had once been the lounge. Kicking off her high heels, she slipped on a pair of flat shoes that she always carried in her handbag.

Shirley Dibs wouldn't be seen out and about in anything but high heels, even though they added an extra two inches to her six-four stature, but they were too uncomfortable for housework.

"Morning, Edna," she called in an unexpectedly deep voice - the years of smoking having taken their toll. Slipping an inhaler from her cardigan, she took a couple of puffs. "Edna," she called again. "Are you awake?"

Walking into the kitchen, she held the kettle under the tap, coughing gently while it filled with water. It was past time for her first cigarette but that would have to wait. She'd have it on the way over to Mr Dunn's, her next client. He smoked like a trooper, even though he was in the last stages of cancer.

"Edna?" Passing the radio on the kitchen counter, she flicked it on, frowning as she

listened to the news and waited for the kettle to boil. So much trouble in the world these days, so much horror. Never mind, she'd get Edna a nice cup of tea and help her wash and comb her hair. The poor old thing was waking up later and later these days. Perhaps she should suggest cutting back on the sleeping pills. The kettle boiled and clicked off.

Padding down the corridor, Edna's tea in hand, Shirley Dibs pushed open the bedroom door, her attention still on the latest news from Libya. She stopped on the threshold, stock still for a moment, a puzzled frown on her face, not really registering the scene in front of her.

Something is very wrong, she told herself.

Then her eyes and mouth widened, her pupils narrowing as her skin turned cold and clammy. Edna had turned red. In fact the whole bed had turned red. And a big red splotch ran down the wall behind the bed-head onto the floor.

Then the smell hit her - a smell of faeces and blood, something she remembered from her days as a nurse.

The cup and saucer finally slipped from her trembling fingers, crashing to the floor, tea splashing her leg. The hot liquid against her skin hardly registered as her eyes stayed locked on the scene.

She stepped closer to the bed, hand covering her mouth, stifling a not yet formed scream. She stared at the body, then at the redness on the white wall, understanding flooding her mind.

Shirley Dibs later recounted the one enduring memory that would forever haunt her to a newspaper reporter; Edna's feeble body, ripped to shreds, pieces of her intestines hanging from a gaping wound, laying like a disembowelled child on the blood soaked bed.

But worse than that, and something she never did disclose to anyone, was the old lady's untouched face bearing the beautiful smile of someone who'd seen an angel.

=08:30 hrs=

Alex yawned, climbed out of bed and stretched, rubbing his back, which still ached from being curled up under the Dawn's console. Walking to the bathroom he stepped into the bath, pulling the shower curtain closed behind him, wishing he had enough spare cash to have a separate shower put in, rather than the over-bath one he had to make do with.

Ten minutes later he finished his shower and pulled on a pair of old jeans and a black tee-shirt which had, 'I Love Cockles', emblazoned across the front. It had been a present from Karen years ago, and tattered as it was, he still wore it when he could.

Opening a packet of breakfast cereal from the cupboard above the sink, he stood with his back against the worktop eating straight from the box, his mind occupied with the intricacies of the wiring he'd replaced yesterday. He'd check it out today, then carry out a trial run. If that went okay, then he'd try a longer run tomorrow and after that a full sea trial.

Alex was an old hand at submersible maintenance, often asked to undertake sea-worthiness tests on equipment owned by other companies. In fact this was his only income at present, which was why he'd been so glad to get the Dawn at such a bargain

price. Now all he needed was some work.

Checking the time, Alex shoved the packet back in the cupboard, wondering if it was too early to ring his contact in the oil business. The man had given him some work a couple of months ago. Perhaps he might have some more.

No, that would have to wait, he told himself. He had to catch up on the dreaded paperwork first.

Walking down the path from his house, Alex raised a hand at the, "Good morning," he received from Mr Waverly, out early tending his roses.

Smiling, Alex thought that maybe he should offer to put some outside lighting in the old man's garden so that he could spend even more time digging. Chuckling to himself, he creaked open the door of his battered old car.

After he'd turned it over a couple of times the Fiat spluttered into life and he set off towards Mudeford and the bay where his business was located. It was a sunny morning, a gentle breeze blowing in off the sea.

Alex inhaled the sea air as he got out of the car, savouring the ozone. He didn't bother locking the battered vehicle, figuring that if anyone was desperate enough to steal it, they were more than welcome.

Unlocking his workshop, Alex slid the big doors aside and walked into the cool, shaded interior. He'd been lucky finding the premises at such a reasonable rate. Property was expensive in Christchurch. Walking through to the offices at the back, he checked his answer-phone. It had one message from an old friend who wanted to meet up for a drink.

Settling down at his untidy desk, Alex spent the next couple of hours catching up on paperwork and telephoning around his contacts, letting them know he had his own submersible and was looking for contracts. A couple of people said they'd get back to him but none gave him a firm promise. Maybe his luck would change when Dawn got home from her holiday on the Isle of Wight. Things always seemed brighter when she was around.

At lunchtime Alex pulled a pizza from the freezer in the workshop and stuck it in the microwave, making himself a cup of tea while it warmed up. As he ate the tasteless meal, he poured over the wiring diagrams for the Dawn, brushing away the crumbs that fell from his fingers.

By the time he'd finished lunch he was happy that the rewiring he'd undertaken was good, and folded up the cheese-spotted drawings. Squinting through the thin film of dirt covering his office window he saw that a strong wind had blown up, buffeting the tall bushes outside.

Switching on his computer, Alex checked the Met Office weather site and then looked outside again. The sea was choppy but not so bad that he wouldn't be able to launch his submersible. If he got a move on that is.

Opening a steel cupboard at the rear of the workshop, he rummaged around inside until he found the can of white spray paint he was looking for. Then using a small craft knife, he cut out a template from a piece of thick card, using it to test spray a name on a small piece of plywood. Standing back he studied his work.

Yeah, not bad. Not bad at all, he thought.

Digging out a can of black acrylic paint, he repeated the process on both sides of the submersible, then stood back, inspecting it from every angle. The italicised letters seemed to flow along the sides of the craft. It looked really good. Walking back into his office, he opened a drawer and pulled out a miniature bottle of Champaign that he'd been saving for the occasion.

After easing the submersible down the concrete ramp into the sea and releasing it from its cradle, Alex waded into the water and opened the bottle, pouring Champaign over the front of his new acquisition.

"I name you Dawn," he said proudly. "God bless you and all who sail in you. Especially me."

Chuckling to himself, he manoeuvred the craft against the large tyres hanging down from the quayside, tying it off to a bollard with a painter. Then walking back to the workshop, he hauled the empty cradle back up the ramp with an electric winch. Finished, Alex stood silently for a moment, wishing with all his heart that Karen had been at his side for the launch.

The submersible - an Explorer 1000 - had a working depth of 305 metres and could take two passengers, four in an emergency. The large, bulbous bow port gave a wide angled view but was only useful in clear water. The sea off the coast of Christchurch could be murky and Alex would need to use the on-board radar he'd installed to supplement the sonar set-up.

Latching down the top hatch he settled in the captain's seat and ran up the various systems, using the check list he'd drawn up the previous night. As he worked his way through the list, various instruments and dials came to life, until the interior of the submersible began to resemble the cockpit of a jumbo jet.

Lastly he checked the batteries, which he'd left charging over-night. Fully charged they would power the Dawn along at a cruising speed of four knots. Satisfied that everything was as it should be, Alex donned the marine VHF radio headset and contacted the Harbour Master, advising her where he was going and how long he expected to be.

Casting off by way of a specialised retractable painter that he'd designed himself, Alex engaged the main motors and took the submersible out to sea. For safety reasons he should have had another person in the sub with him but he was far too impatient to wait until he could arrange that. Once clear of shallow water he kicked in the main ballast thrusters and took the Dawn down until she was running a few metres above the sea bed, the steady ping of the sonar sounding the way in his headset.

It was some three hours later that he returned to the quayside and tied up his craft, his face lit up with a big smile. The tests had all gone well, only needing a few tweaks here and there. The pressure had held up but the faulty seal definitely needed replacing. If he ordered it now he could pick it up and fit it tomorrow. All-in-all he was happy with how the sea trials had gone. Tomorrow he'd take the submersible out farther and make the last few checks.

It took an hour to haul the submersible from the water back into the shed, and it was

getting late by the time he'd finished. Alex felt ravenous.

Setting the burglar alarm, he locked the door and headed off to the pub, leaving his car where it was. Alex knew that the Christchurch police loved nothing more than lurking in the hedgerows, waiting to catch the unwary motorist, and he was determined that nothing would spoil his mood tonight.

"Alex," the barmaid greeted him as he settled himself on the high barstool, "What can I get you?"

"A lager-top please."

Alex watched Carol pull his pint. She was the archetypical barmaid - blond, big busted and flirtatious - but Alex knew that was just a façade for the punters. Underneath lay a rather shy but gracious woman, who held a Ph.D. in Politics and was someone who, given the chance, could hold a listener enthralled for hours with her wide-read knowledge and interests.

Alex sat by himself drinking his beer while Carol chatted to a couple of guys at the other end of the bar. After a while she drifted over and poured herself a small port. Sipping it, she smiled at him.

"So how's it going? I haven't seen that old man of yours for some time," Alex said by way of an opening.

Carol sighed, leaning back against the shelf behind her. "His month on the rigs," she said, a wistful look in her eyes.

"Miss him?"

"You'll never know how much."

Alex thought about his daughter, away at boarding school for most of the year, and even during her holiday still not here at his side. He nodded slowly. "Wouldn't bet on that girl," he said slowly.

Carol flushed slightly, looking embarrassed. "Oh I'm sorry Alex . . ."

He smiled at her. "It's okay, been a long time now."

"Yeah but you still miss her a lot, don't you?" When Alex didn't reply Carol sighed quietly, searching his eyes, tipping her head as she did when about to ask an awkward question. "I know it's none of my business Alex, but isn't it time you moved on? I mean, for Dawn's sake?"

Finishing her port, she washed the glass, shaking it before placing it on the rack under the bar. She lent closer, looking up the counter to make sure they couldn't be overheard. "If you ever need to talk Alex, I just want you to know, I'm here, okay?"

"You're right Carol," Alex said, "It isn't any of your business. I'll have another lager-top please."

As Carol moved away to serve another customer Alex settled in for a long session, wondering why it was that other people always thought they knew how to run your life for you. He knew she meant no harm, but all the same.

When Alex finally got home he felt woozy and had a headache. Ignoring the blinking light on his answer machine, he made his weary way up to bed.

Whoever it was, they could wait until morning he told himself.

=11:05 hrs=

As soon as they were out of sight of the house, Carolyn pulled Dawn behind an outhouse, checking that they hadn't been seen.

"Look," she said, "There's something I have to do. We'll take the quad bike and meet Terry down in the woods. Then I'll leave you there and cut over to the road. I'll only be gone a couple of hours."

"Hang on a minute. Where are you going? Why can't I come too? I don't even know this Terry guy."

Carolyn hesitated, then cursed under her breath. "Okay, but if I tell you, you can't go repeating it."

"Repeating what?"

"I've got a sort of boyfriend in the village and he wants to meet me this afternoon. If mum finds out about him she'll kill me."

"Oh I see," Dawn said, disappointment flooding her face.

"Well you do see that I can't really take you with me, don't you Dawn?"

"Yeah, I suppose so. Go on then, you go and see your . . ." she made quotation marks with her fingers, "sort of boyfriend."

"Terry's okay. You'll enjoy shooting. You'll see. I'll meet you after I've seen Ryan and we can ride back together. Hey, I'll ask Ryan if he's got a friend if you want."

"You know what you can do with that suggestion, don't you?"

Dawn's crush on Carolyn had begun shortly after they'd teamed up two years ago at school. It was nothing serious but she found the thought of watching her friend kissing a boy somewhat distasteful.

"Please Dawn. You don't mind, do you?"

Dawn sighed, giving in, unable to say no to her friend as she looked at her large brown eyes. Jumping on the quad bike, Carolyn drove them through a gate in the back fence and out onto a track. Dawn bounced around on the back seat, hanging on as the bike careered along an old logging path, finally cutting through some trees and into a large clearing. The sun was shining through the canopy, dappling the grass.

"There's Terry," Carolyn said over her shoulder.

Dawn saw a slim man bent over a contraption in the middle of the clearing. He straightened up as they dismounted, shading his eyes against the sun. He looked to be in his mid thirties.

Carolyn took Dawn's hand, pulling her over to the machine. "Dawn, this is Terry. He's the Estate Manager. Terry this is my friend Dawn."

"Hi." Terry nodded.

Carolyn gave him a big smile. "Terry," she began, "I've got to go to the village on an errand. Do you mind showing Dawn how to shoot clays?"

"Nah okay," he replied.

Carolyn pulled Dawn to one side, whispering in her ear. "You behave yourself while I'm gone. I don't want to hear about any shotgun weddings when I get back."

Before Dawn could answer, Carolyn had called a light-hearted cheerio and disappeared among the trees. Terry looked after her, shaking his head before turning to Dawn.

"She off to see that boyfriend of hers then?"

"You know about that?"

"The whole bloody village knows about it," he said with a laugh.

Dawn held her hand over her mouth and giggled. "She thinks it's a big secret."

"No secrets on this island," Terry said. "Everyone knows if you so much as scratch your arse. Oops, sorry. I meant your bum."

Dawn shook out her hair and smiled. "That's okay. I'm not a little girl you know."

Terry's expression said he didn't quite agree.

Dawn watched as he busied himself adjusting something on the machine. He worked with total concentration, the tip of his tongue protruding between his teeth, like some schoolboy taking apart his first toy. As he turned back to her, she noticed that he had a slight cast in one eye. It gave the appearance that he was looking over her shoulder. She found it a little disconcerting.

"What's that?" she asked.

Turning back to the machine, he patted it. "This is known as a trap," he said. He picked up an object that looked like a heavy Frisbee, handing it to her. "And that's a clay."

Dawn turned it over in her hands, feeling its rough texture before handing it back. Terry placed it on the trap, adding some more on top. Picking up a cable with a pear-shaped button on the end, he held it out to her. "Here, take this," he said, walking back to the trap and picking up a thicker cable which he plugged into a waterproof socket on a nearby tree. "It's electric. The boss had a cable run out here from the house. More money than bloody sense if you ask me."

Terry stood behind Dawn. "Okay, push the button," he instructed.

Dawn did as he told her and a clay shot high into the air, skimming over the tops of the trees. She pressed the button again and another clay followed the first, slightly higher this time.

"Okay, the first thing is safety. You do exactly as I tell you, stand where I tell you, move when I tell you. Understand?" Dawn nodded and he continued, "Too many people get hurt because they don't listen. So this is important Dawn. I'll stand behind you with the release button so you can't shoot me. Have you ever used a shotgun before?"

"No Terry." Dawn felt her excitement rising. She was going to fire a gun, an actual gun.

"Okay some rules to remember then. Don't carry the gun over your shoulder, like in the films. Carry it with the safety on, and your fingers away from the trigger. Don't hand it over or put it down if it's loaded. Okay, lecture over. Let's get on with the shoot. Give me a minute to set up the trap properly."

Dawn watched as Terry pulled the contraption to the edge of the clearing and adjusted its height. When he was satisfied, he picked up a long bag and unzipped it. Inside was a shotgun, which he carefully slid out. Walking over to Dawn, he showed it to

her.

"This is an Escort Fieldhunter 12-gauge pump-action shotgun. It carries five shots. Most clay shooters prefer an over-under set up but the boss likes his pump-action. Watched too many Pulp Fiction films if you ask me. I'm not even sure if this is legal over here on the island."

Dawn watched in wide-eyed concentration as Terry loaded the gun, studying everything he did. This was beyond belief, her heart was hammering in her chest.

"Okay young lady. Take the gun, keep your finger off the trigger and the weapon pointed at the sky."

Standing behind Dawn, Terry instructed her on the use of the safety catch, then told her to hold the gun butt into her shoulder - firm and hard. Reaching around, he tried to pull the gun away, satisfied that she had it tightly into her shoulder he carried on.

"Good, now stay that way for a minute." Terry was back behind her in a moment, pulling a pair of ear-defenders over her head. He moved quietly, almost seeming to float through the air without disturbing things around him.

Pulling one ear-defender aside, Terry said, "Okay, try a shot into the air first, to get the feel of the gun. When you're happy with the feel of it, rack another cartridge into the breech. After that I'll tap your shoulder and release a clay, okay? Oh, and squeeze the trigger. Don't pull it."

Dawn wet her lips and looked out over the treetops. Terry had said to squeeze the trigger and that's just what she did. The gun kicked back into her shoulder and she gasped.

Terry told Dawn to eject the remaining cartridges onto the ground and she did so, wondering what she'd done wrong to bring the lesson to such an abrupt end.

"What's the matter?" she asked, relinquishing the gun to Terry.

"Absolutely nothing Dawn," he said with a smile. "You're a natural. You even kept your eyes open when you fired. Not many people can do that when a gun discharges. Did you know that?"

"What then?" Dawn's voice echoed her disappointment.

Terry walked off behind the trees but was back a few moments later with a coat. "Okay, this'll be a bit big for you Dawn but the shoulder is padded for shooting. It should stop you bruising."

Dawn shrugged into the coat and followed Terry's directions as he told her how to reload the gun.

Dawn spent the next two hours firing away at the clays that Terry sent soaring into the sky above the trees. Now and again he instructed her on one or two finer points of shooting, but in the main let her get on with it.

Those two hours flew by like two minutes and before she knew it Terry was tapping her on the shoulder, shouting, "Last one Dawn."

She hit the last clay with no trouble, shattering it into tiny pieces that pit-pattered to the ground. Dawn had hit far more clays than she'd missed and was smiling widely as she took the ear defenders off.



Unloading the gun, she handed it back to Terry and saw Carolyn standing a little way back from them, a wide smile plastered across her face.

"My, you'd better not let dad know how good you are, he'll be green with envy," she said.

Terry chuckled, zipping the gun back into its bag. "She's good all right. Best first-time shooter I've ever seen."

"Praise indeed, coming from Terry," Carolyn whispered in Dawn's ear. "Come on, let's go have a ride on Satin before we go in."

They walked over to the quad bike. Dawn sat at the handlebars, pushing the starter. "Thanks Terry," she called above the throbbing engine. "Hope I can try it again soon. I really enjoyed myself."

"Oh thanks Terry, I really enjoyed myself," Carolyn giggled from behind her, poking Dawn in the ribs.

Dawn shook Carolyn's hand off with an irritable shrug and opened the accelerator wide, almost throwing her off the back of the bike.

"Hey!" Carolyn cried, grabbing Dawn around the waist.

=11:07 hrs=

Captain Robert McKee shut down the engines, stretching his neck as he eased himself out of the high-backed chair. The ferry's passengers were already disembarking, making their way to the ferry terminal. He sighed, looking at his watch while the two large stern-mounted propellers ran down to a stop in their fixed nozzles.

McKee had been sailing the hovercraft back and forth between the terminals at Ryde and Portsmouth for the past six years - a ten minute journey each way in good weather. He wondered just how much longer he could stick it. The salary was good, and he needed a good salary to live his lifestyle, but he often dreamt of going back to the Highlands of Scotland and his old job as a maritime pilot in the Moray Firth.

Ducking his six-six frame through the metal cabin hatch, McKee dogged it closed and headed down the short flight of stairs to the deck. His blond hair caught the wind, blowing it over his face. Tossing his head back, he leaped down to the concrete ramp and headed for the terminal.

Logging out on the shift-list and calling a jaunty goodbye to the Terminal Manager, he made his way over to the taxi-rank. McKee's next shift was in three hours and he intended using that time to watch one of his favourite movies. The Commador Cinema in George Street was screening a series of old classics and today's film was Jaws - in McKee's view, one of the best suspense films ever made.

The taxi dropped him outside the cinema and he slipped inside the dark theatre just as the adverts were coming to an end.

Great, he thought, couldn't have timed it better.

As he settled into a seat and watched the opening scenes, McKee relived his fantasy of being the Chief of Police in Amity, instead of the Captain of a hovercraft on the Isle of Wight. Leaning back in his seat he felt all the old regrets beginning to sweep over

him.

He could have made so much more of his life if he hadn't been a drinker. All he had now was a broken marriage, kids he never saw, and a long, lonely retirement staring him in the face. Bitterness washed through him as he watched the men on the big screen tackle their problems with so much more panache than he'd ever shown in his own lifetime.

McKee was engrossed in his favourite scene - where the three characters were showing one another their battle scars - when the man sitting a couple of seats along swore and jumped to his feet, bent over double, struggling with a bundle in his lap. It was hard to see in the dark but McKee thought that the black bundle looked for all the world like a cat.

Surely the idiot hadn't brought his pet along to the cinema with him!

The man cried out and McKee jumped as his face was unexpectedly drenched in a warm liquid. Another scream reverberated through the theatre, the high-pitched cry of a woman this time. The overhead lights snapped on and brightness flooded the cinema, illuminating the cavernous space in a stark dazzling glow. McKee squinted his eyes at the sudden glare, looking down at a shocking red splash that covered the front of his white corded jumper.

Two seats along, the man whose blood still dripped from McKee's face collapsed across the row in front of him, hands fluttering at his neck, trying to staunch the blood gushing from a torn artery.

McKee struggled to make sense of what was happening, the film's dialogue, mixed in with people's screams, disorientating him for a moment.

A cat appeared from under the seats in front of him, its growl audible above the growing shouts. When it launched itself upwards, McKee caught it mid-air, twisting sideways and tossing it away from his body.

The cat landed on the chest of a young woman sitting in the next row of seats, its claws raking her face from eye to chin. Her partner grabbed the cat by the scruff, lifting it high above his head, slamming it down on the back of a seat. McKee heard the crunching of broken bones but the cat continued writhing in the man's grip.

Reacting from shock and fear, McKee pulled off a heavy shoe and brought it down on the cat's head, over and over, while the man held the struggling animal tightly, grunting from the effort. Breathing hard the two men looked at the bloody mess at their feet, turning away from each other, shame overtaking the adrenaline high still pumping through their bodies.

Neither said anything.

From all over the cinema, shouts and screams told the tale of other people being attacked by cats. McKee estimated that there had to be at least forty or fifty of them. He'd never seen so many cats together in one place before, always thinking of them as lone creatures, not animals that came together in a pack this way.

Pulling on his shoe, McKee made his way up the central aisle of the cinema. From behind him came the sound of pounding feet and he was roughly shoved aside by a girl of

about twelve. Two cats clung to her, one with its claws buried in her eye sockets. She ran headlong up the aisle and into the wall next to the exit door.

McKee heard the sickening crunch of her head connecting with the wall and shuddered.

The girl fell backwards. One of the cats, badly hurt by the impact, scrabbled about, its claws hooking into the carpet as it tried to pull itself from under her body. It couldn't make it to its feet, squirming around on its stomach instead, back legs dragging behind.

The contents of McKee's stomach rose in his throat when the cat bit into the side of the girl's neck, twisting its head from side to side, tearing at her skin.

Running up, he stamped on the animal's head - stamping, stamping, his stomach roiling, shouting at the top of his voice, losing all self-control.

Still gripped in the height of a terror-induced rage, McKee grabbed up the lifeless body and slammed it hard against the wall, over and over, until he was splattered with gore and blood. Then leaning against the wall he let his hot, sour vomit splash over his shoes, his body heaving. Gasping he straightened up.

McKee looked down when he felt an excruciating pain in his calf. A ginger cat was attacking his leg. It was just a kitten, but its tiny teeth and claws penetrated the fabric of his trousers, tearing his skin. Leaning against the wall, McKee stomped on it, then hooked his shoe under its stomach, kicking out as hard as he could.

The kitten screeched, flying through the air, crashing into the overhead Exit sign, which exploded in a shower of glass and plastic, bright sparks sizzling across the animal's fur. The kitten burst into flames, dropping to the floor.

McKee kicked the smouldering animal under the seats, then turned to the exit door, rattling it.

It was locked.

Shouting his frustration. McKee punched down on the metal bar with the heels of his hands, kicking the door in rage.

It didn't move.

Standing back he kicked it again, as hard as he could, but just bruised his foot.

Smelling smoke McKee turned. The row of seats nearest him was on fire, flames flickering along the backs, heavy smoke curling into the air.

McKee ran between the seats towards the large exit doors at the other side of the theatre. People were flooding from the main seating areas, blocking the doorway with their fighting, writhing bodies. Every second that passed saw more and more people pushing and shoving towards the door, trying to escape the fire that was now raging out of control along one side of the cinema.

McKee flattened himself against the wall, sliding along it, shouldering his way nearer and nearer to the exit. Finally, with one last shove, he eased himself around the door frame, feeling a rib crack as the packed bodies crushed him into the woodwork.

An hour later McKee had been treated by a paramedic outside the theatre, along with some other walking wounded. His cuts had been dressed and he'd been given a tetanus injection. The paramedic told him his rib would heal in time with no treatment, but

that he should make an appointment for an x-ray, just in case.

As the last ambulance roared off and the police moved in, notebooks open, wanting statements about what had happened inside the cinema, McKee melted back into the crowd.

He didn't want to be interviewed right now. His head was pounding and the acrid smell of sick hung about him like a thick smog. Hailing a cab McKee made his way back to the ferry terminal, where he showered and cleaned himself up. Scrounging a coat and some work jeans, he got dressed, feeling a little better.

Entering the canteen, McKee sat away from the other staff, listening to the news on the radio, drinking coffee. It wasn't long before he was spotted and surrounded by people curious to know what had happened. He told his unbelievable tale over and over, as more and more people joined the crowd.

All sorts of rumours and opinions were doing the rounds at the terminal, but nobody knew why the cats had attacked people the way they had. To the staff's disappointment McKee had no more answers than they did and after a while he was left alone to finish his coffee.

Ringling the Terminal Manager on his mobile, McKee told him that he wasn't feeling so good and wouldn't be taking his shift. The manager told him that would be okay and that he could get a lift back to Portsmouth on the next ferry. Standing up, McKee made to go, but a man sitting on the next table called over to him.

"You okay Bob? You don't look so hot," he said.

McKee scratched at his ankle. "Are you piloting the Isle of Wight back across to the mainland Ron?" he asked.

Ron Noble nodded, picking up his captain's hat. "Come on, you may as well sit in the cabin with me. You look done in."

The two men headed for the door, McKee wiping away the sweat that had broken out on his forehead.

Walking down the concrete ramp towards the hovercraft, McKee stopped, taking a deep breath. "Jesus," he muttered, "I feel like I got a sudden dose of the flu."

"Probably shock," Noble answered.

Setting off again they made their way up to the deck and into the small cramped cabin looking out over the bow of the craft. McKee sat down in one of the chairs, leaning his head back against the restraint, air whistling in and out of his mouth.

Noble glanced across at him, a worried look on his face. "You okay mate?"

"I feel like shit," was the mumbled answer.

Noble settled down in the captain's chair, scratching at his ankle as he started the engines. Pulling up his trouser leg he saw a few angry looking red bumps dotting his white skin. He scratched them again, then got back to work.

The rumble and vibrations of the big motors made speaking impossible, so they both fell silent as the big hovercraft turned to face the sea. Throttling up the engines, Noble headed the hovercraft out amongst the waves, flicking on the big windscreen wipers.

Five minutes later he lent forward, brushing the windscreen with the cuff of his jacket,

but even though he'd cleared it, he still couldn't see through the mist. It was almost as if his eyes wouldn't focus properly.

He was well out to sea now, hanging onto the controls with sweaty hands. Beside him McKee fell off his chair, hitting the floor with a sickening thud.

Noble knew something was wrong with McKee, but what? Leaning over he held his palm on McKee's forehead. It was hot, very hot, and the man had begun to shake. All captain's on the ferry line attended yearly first-aid classes and Noble knew the beginnings of a seizure when he saw one.

Ignoring McKee for the moment, Noble concentrated on keeping the hovercraft headed on the right course, now and then coughing deeply, forced to wipe the heavy sweat from his forehead with the sleeve of his uniform.

McKee needed help fast and Noble knew that turning back with the sea running the way it was, would take longer than if he kept going to Portsmouth. He'd contact the terminal by radio and tell them to have an ambulance standing ready.

Pushing both throttles wide, Noble felt the two big engines thrust him into the high-backed chair. Just five more minutes and they'd be at the terminal.

He needed to do something, he remembered. What was it? Something about the radio.

Noble fought to control his movements. He seemed to be stuck in thick mud. His head was about to explode and he felt as though he'd been dropped into an ice bath, even though he was sweating.

The big craft surged forward over the sea, topping the high waves, thudding down into the troughs. The passengers glanced uneasily at one another, a couple turning green before vomiting over the cabin floor.

The cabin attendant headed for the intercom, pushing the button frantically. What the hell was the captain playing at?

In the bow cabin Noble was hanging from his seat belt, eyes rolling in his head, sweat dripping down his face. Just a few minutes more, he kept telling himself in a dull mantra, just a few minutes more, and everything would be okay.

Staring through the windscreen Noble thought he could see something ahead. Was that the harbour wall?

The craft continued heading up the Solent in a spray of white spume, weaving from side to side.

Noble shook his head, trying to clear his vision, squinting through the windscreen.

There, there it was. The terminal. Over to starboard.

Turning the hovercraft towards the concrete ramp, Noble reached out with a shaky hand, ready to shut down the engines.

His hand never reached the controls.

An eye-witness later told the local reporter how the hovercraft had headed up the loading ramp at full throttle, careering its way through a low fence onto Clarence Pier, where it smashed into The Golden Horseshoe Amusement Arcade, taking out a length of its side wall.

On the first floor, Pirate Pete's Play Area was full of children and parents, enjoying a sunny day at the seaside. As the wall collapsed below them, a family sitting by a large sheet glass window were thrown sideways, their table tipping over, slamming the mother against the glass. It cracked from top to bottom, a large piece slicing down on her arm, chopping it off at the elbow. The woman leapt to her feet, warm blood from her severed arm spurting into the faces of her family.

The collapsing building groaned, falling in on itself, burying people under tonnes of debris. Later on TV, someone dramatically described the sound as, 'Akin to the groan of the Devil inviting sinners to a hellish party'.

The collision threw Noble's body forward and he hung onto the hovercraft's steering wheel as he fell, pulling it towards port and the entrance to the pier's refurbished Skyways Roller Coaster. Crashing through the entrance façade, the hovercraft roared into the roller coaster grounds, scattering people in all directions.

The hovercraft smashed into the supporting girders of the roller coaster and the creaking, tearing groans of a main stanchion collapsing was followed by a tremendous bang as a large section of the ride toppled to one side, raining metal and wood onto the people below. A long length of track crashed down onto the hovercraft, crushing the passengers still trying to escape.

The shrieks of pleasure coming from the cars hurtling down from the highest point of the ride, quickly turned to screams of terror as it shot from the rails, slamming into the top deck of a double-decker bus. The vehicle lurched out of control, crumpling itself into the side of a building, the driver decapitated by a piece of façade that smashed its way through his cab.

The unfortunate man's head was later discovered by police under a nearby parked car, his driver's cap still firmly planted in place.

=12:15=

Mai Cox pulled her rapid response vehicle into the lay-by and switched off the engine. She was tired, this had been her forth call-out today and by far the worst.

Letting her head fall back against the car's cushioned headrest, Mai Cox closed her eyes, trying to erase the memories that kept flooding into her mind; the crushed bodies by the exit door of the cinema, the chewed and mangled flesh of the patrons who'd been attacked by the cats, the small girl they'd found with her eyes torn out - at least they'd been able to save her.

The cinema had smelt like a charnel house when they'd finally been given the go ahead to enter it. The blood stains - just dark splotches on the red carpet and seat coverings - testament to the attacks that had taken place.

Mai Cox still couldn't believe what had happened. It made no sense to her, or any of the other EMS personnel that had responded - that cats could have caused so many casualties.

Reaching over she grabbed a bottle of water from the back seat and took a deep swallow. The liquid was warm and didn't quench her thirst. Wiping her forehead with the

back of her hand, she sighed heavily. She was feeling dizzy, hot, and the damned bites on her ankle were itching like hell again.

A lot of the rescue teams had complained about being bitten by something when they were working in the cinema. It had been so bad that the Area Controller had told the cinema manager to get the place fumigated before it opened to the public again.

Twisting sideways, Mai Cox put her foot on the passenger seat and pulled up the leg of her green coveralls, dabbing at the bites with a wet tissue.

There, that was better.

Clipping her seat belt in place, she pulled the car back out into the stream of traffic and made her way back to the Ambulance Station in Ryde.

Ten minutes later Mai Cox blinked the sweat from her eyes and turned on the windscreen wipers, but they made little difference to the mist that seemed to be swirling around outside the car. She gasped as the sound of an angry horn blasted its way into her senses, pulling the car back onto her own side of the road, biting her bottom lip as the lorry coming towards her ripped off her side-mirror.

Leaning forward, Mai Cox tried desperately to see through the windscreen but her eyes seemed not to be working properly. She strained harder and at last they focussed, allowing her a brief glimpse of something grey and solid.

Her car hit the thick reinforced concrete bridge buttress at seventy kilometres an hour, exploding into a fireball that left little but twisted metal and scorched bones.

=13:03 hrs=

Dawn grinned as she slid off the pony, walking around bow-legged. "Hey look, I'm John what's his name. You know, that tall cowboy in all the old films?"

"Wayne. John Wayne."

"Yeah, him. Don't know how they used to ride horses all day like that. Must have killed them."

"It's easier with a saddle," Carolyn said. "I'll just go round the field a couple more times, then we'll go and get something to eat, okay?"

Carolyn took Dawn's place on the pony and cantered off bare-back. Dawn rubbed her aching thighs, watching her friend jump the pony over some low fences on the far side of the field. Carolyn had just turned the pony around to ride back, when it unexpectedly reared up into the air, throwing Carolyn to the ground.

Carolyn screamed as she fell and Dawn ran across the field towards her, heart thumping. The pony reared again, whinnying in terror, tossing its head from side to side. Dawn saw a large cat clinging to its rump, its claws ripping through the pony's skin as it struggled to cling on.

Skirting the lashing hooves, Dawn knelt beside Carolyn. "Are you alright?"

Carolyn nodded, a dazed look in her eyes, rubbing her shoulder. "What happened?"

The pony galloped across the paddock, trying to shake the big cat from its back. Nose flaring, it reached the fence, eyes wide in terror, kicking out with its hind legs, almost bucking the cat loose.

Dawn pulled Carolyn to her feet. "I don't know," she said in a shaky voice. "There's a cat on the pony's back. I think it's attacking it for some reason."

Carolyn shook her head in denial. "Don't be so stupid Dawn! Cat's don't attack ponies."

"Well look for yourself then." Dawn turned her friend around, hearing her gasp in surprise.

The pony was heading towards them, hooves thundering across the ground.

"Quick," Carolyn gasped, "Let's get out of here before we get trampled."

The girls turned and ran across the field towards the gate leading to the stables. Dawn was a good runner but could hear the pony closing behind them, hoof-beats getting louder and louder. Risking a quick glance over her shoulder, she saw that the pony was almost on them, thick bubbly foam frothing from its nostrils, eyes the size of saucers.

Carolyn careened into Dawn, knocking them both to the ground. The pony ran between them, one hoof kicking Dawn's arm as it passed. Rolling over she scrambled to her feet, breathing hard, watching the pony head straight for the paddock gate, the big cat still clinging to its back.

The gate was far too high for the small pony to jump and its forelegs clipped the top rail, twisting its body sideways, throwing it to the ground with a sickening thud. Dawn heard the crack of breaking bones. A sound that made her stomach heave.

Carolyn was on her feet and running towards her pony before Dawn could react. "Satin! Oh no, Satin!" she screamed as she ran.

Clutching her hurt arm, Dawn shouted at her, "No Carolyn stop." Look over there. Stop!"

Carolyn glanced in the direction Dawn was pointing and saw some cats slinking along the fence towards her struggling pony. She stood undecided; one part of her wanting to help Satin, the other too frightened to move. There could be no mistaking the cats intentions.

"Quick Carolyn, the quad," Dawn shouted, running across the field.

Carolyn broke from her indecision and followed Dawn, scrambling over the fence after her.

The cats were gathered around the pony now. It lay on its side, whickering pathetically as they tore at it. A big lone tom-cat stood to one side, watching the girls, growling low in its throat, warning them to keep away from their kill.

Dawn and Carolyn backed away, too frightened to turn their backs on a scene that looked like something from a horror film. One of the cats had worked its way into the pony's stomach and was busy pulling out long pieces of its innards, growling as it tore at its prize. Another was crunching its way through an eyeball.

The pony raised its head and looked at them, its remaining eye filled with pain and terror. Dawn turned away, bile rising in her throat, searching for the quad bike.

Where the hell was it?

She turned back as Carolyn shouted a warning and saw the big cat slinking its way towards them, head low to the ground, yellow eyes blazing. It was then that she spotted



the bike half hidden behind a nearby bush.

"Come on, quick," she said, pulling Carolyn's arm.

Jumping on the quad bike, Dawn turned the key and thumbed the starter, opening the throttle wide. The engine turned over and over without catching. She had flooded the carburettor and was almost crying with frustration.

"Quick, start the damn thing!" Carolyn gasped, jumping on the seat behind her.

Dawn pushed the starter again, pushing it so hard that it cut into her thumb. The engine turned over . . . and over . . . and over.

"Please God, start it!" Carolyn screamed in Dawn's ear.

Suddenly the engine caught and Dawn shouted a triumphant, "Yes!"

The engine slowed, coughed twice, backfired, then died again.

"No, no, no," Carolyn whimpered as the big cat pick up speed, heading straight towards them at a fast run.

Taking a deep breath, Dawn steadied her thrumming nerves, reaching out for the starter again. When she pushed it this time, she pulled in the clutch and left the accelerator alone. The bike fired up.

Dawn slipped it into gear, twisting the throttle wide, fighting the bike as it bucked up onto its rear wheels. Instinctively braking she slammed the front wheels back to the ground, almost catapulting them over the handle bars.

The cat launched itself at them, claws extended, lips curled back, its deep-throated snarl raising the hairs on the back of Dawn's arms. Carolyn screamed, burying her head in Dawn's back, clinging on so tightly that Dawn could hardly breathe.

The bike's wheels dug into the ground, showering soil up behind them as it took off, but not before the big animal landed on the handlebars, fighting to keep a foothold. Dawn clung on tight to the bucking bike, trying to keep it under control as it bounced across the rough pasture.

The cat slipped, almost falling off, managing to scabble its way down to the front carrier. Dawn slewed the bike from side to side, trying to dislodge it. The cat flattened itself on the pannier, clinging on, a manic look in its eyes. Dawn watched the big animal's back feet scrabbling for support, knowing it was gathering itself for a leap.

As the foul stench of the cat's breath wafted into her face, a calm part of Dawn's mind marvelled at the hatred in the big cat's eyes. It was acting as though it had a personal score to settle with her.

The bike roared across the field, slewing onto the wide central path, spewing stones in all directions. Dawn struggled with the powerful machine, just managing to keep it under control, knowing she only had seconds before the big cat sprang at her.

They were face to face, just her and the cat, the rest of the world had faded away. Dawn's breath caught in her throat at the look of utter rage flooding from the animal's eyes. It tensed, raising its body and Dawn knew she was about to die.

A glint of reflected light caught her eye and without thinking she threw the machine into a tight right-hand turn.

Carolyn screamed as she was tossed from the back of the bike, tumbling over and

over along the path, gravel tearing through her clothes and into her skin.

The bike hit the raised lip of the pond, flying into the air, its engine screaming. Dawn was flipped clear, landing in the water with a breath-taking splash. A second later the bike crashed through the ornamental wooden bridge then cartwheeled into the pond, spraying water and goldfish in all directions.

Then there was a sudden, drawn-out, silence.

The cold water galvanised Dawn from her shock and she swam to the surface, spluttering foul-tasting water from her mouth. Carolyn reached down, pulling her from the pond. Dawn coughed, on hands and knees, her body covered in mud, long strands of pondweed clinging to her like thin fingers trying to pull her back into the murky water.

Struggling to her feet, Dawn's eyes widened when she spotted the bloody gashes on Carolyn's arms and face, pieces of gravel still deeply embedded in her torn skin. Carolyn seemed unaware of her injuries, hyperventilating and whimpering like a small child.

"Where is it?" Dawn whispered, almost too afraid to ask, her voice trembling with emotion.

Carolyn didn't answer, her eyes glazed with shock. "I want mum," she said. "Please . . . I want mum."

Together they struggled their way back to the house, Dawn casting fearful glances over her shoulder all the way, terrified that the big cat would reappear at any moment.

=13:35 hrs=

"Mu-um! Muuum!" Carolyn slammed the front door, immediately turning to look out of the slim side window, searching for signs of the cat, shouting at the top of her voice.

Dawn stood in the middle of the large hall, head bowed, tears stinging her eyes, water gathering in a puddle at her feet. She shook uncontrollably as the effects of the adrenaline rush hit her.

"Oh my goodness. What an earth's happened?" Helen Booker stood at the foot of the stairs, hand to her mouth as she took in the bedraggled pair standing in the hall.

Carolyn ran to her mother, hugging her tightly, bursting into sobs. "Oh mum, it was horrible . . . they . . . they killed Satin."

Helen held Carolyn back from her by the shoulders, studying her injuries with a frown. "Who killed Satin? What's happened Carolyn?" She looked over at Dawn for confirmation. "Why are you wet Dawn, and what's the matter with your arm?"

Dawn looked down, noticing for the first time the red patch on her sleeve. "I drove the bike into the pond," she managed through chattering teeth.

"You had an accident on the quad bike?"

"No mum, she did it on purpose."

"What?"

"I had to Mrs Booker. To get rid of it."

"What on earth are you two talking about? Why would you want to get rid of the quad bike?"

"Mum, listen. Dawn drove the quad into the pond to get rid of the cat. She saved our

lives.”

“Come with me and let me look at those injuries,” Helen Booker said, pushing the girls ahead of her into the kitchen.

Sitting next to Dawn at the kitchen table, Helen Booker pulled up her sleeve. Dawn winced as she touched the laceration. Then turning to Carolyn, she examined her daughter’s deep grazes, tutting at the gravel still embedded in her skin. “Stay here,” she said.

She was soon back with a green first-aid box, a bowl of salted water and a large piece of lint. After cleaning and bandaging Dawn’s cut arm she turned her attention to Carolyn, gently washing the torn skin on her face and arms.

“I’m going to have to take you to the hospital. I can’t get all this gravel out.”

Carolyn shot out of her chair, crashing it to the floor, backing away towards the kitchen wall, her eyes wide with fear. “No mum, we can’t! We can’t go out there. It’ll get us. It’s out there, waiting for us. It’s out there! Please don’t make me go.”

Carolyn slid down the wall, sitting hunched into herself in a heap, tears streaming down her face. Helen Booker rushed across the kitchen, and kneeling down, gathered her daughter in her arms.

“Hush Carolyn, it’s alright. I won’t make you go anywhere you don’t want to go. I’ll ring the doctor to come over here. Would that be better?”

Carolyn calmed down and stood up, clinging to her mother, her sobs subsiding.

Helen looked over her daughter’s shoulder at Dawn. “Why don’t you tell me what happened?” she said quietly.

Dawn lent forward on the kitchen table, taking a deep breath. “She’s telling the truth Mrs Booker. A big cat attacked Satin while Carolyn was riding her. We got away on the quad bike but the cat jumped on us while we were escaping. I had to drive the bike into the pond to get rid of it. Satin’s dead, out by the field gate in the paddock.” Dawn’s words tumbled from her mouth in a rush and she stopped, taking another shuddering breath. “It was horrible. All the blood . . . “

Helen Booker listened, rubbing her daughter’s back, trying to understand why the girls were telling her such an unbelievable tale. It was obvious that Dawn had driven the bike into the pond by accident and that this was an attempt at covering it up. She thought for a moment, then sat Carolyn down at the table and walked across to the telephone.

“Yes, could I speak to Doctor Contin please? Thank you.” Helen arranged for the doctor to visit Carolyn later in the afternoon when he was on his rounds, then redialled another number. “Ah, is that you Terrance? Good. Listen, will you send someone out to the paddock and check on Satin for me? Oh, good. All right then. Oh and see if the quad bike is in the pond for me would you? Yes, that’s what I said. In the pond. Thank you Terrance.”

Helen Booker hung up the phone and walked to the sink. “He’s going to check on her himself.” Pouring water into the kettle, she switched it on and sat at the table. “In the meantime we’ll have a nice cup of tea and all calm down a bit shall we?”

A dark shape slipped around the kitchen door, silent feet padding across the hard

tilled floor towards them. Carolyn screamed, scrambling onto the table, knocking the condiments to the floor. The ceramic containers smashed, showering salt and pepper everywhere. The cat hissed, running from the kitchen, its fur fluffed up in alarm.

Helen Booker slapped her daughter and Carolyn stopped screaming, staring at her mother with a look of total surprise. Dawn guessed that she'd never been slapped before.

"Stop this behaviour at once Carolyn! It was just Pickles."

Dawn leaped to her feet. "You slapped her!"

"That's as maybe Dawn, but Carolyn was hysterical, screaming at her cat for goodness sake. What else was I supposed to do?"

"You're just like my dad," Dawn shouted, the terror of the attacks finally catching up with her, making her lose control. "Why don't parents ever listen? I know you think we're lying, but we're not."

Dawn stormed out of the kitchen, hurrying up to her bedroom, where she stripped off and took a shower. The hot water washed away the grime covering her body but not the terror that kept pushing itself into her mind. Covering her ears, Dawn sobbed under the jets of water, trying to block out the dying screams of the helpless pony as the cats ripped it to pieces.

After her shower, she felt a little better. Pulling her mobile from her pocket she punched the speed dial and held the phone to her ear, listening to it ring. Finally it redirected to voice-mail. Taking a deep breath, Dawn began a rambling account of what had happened. She knew she wasn't making much sense but couldn't stop, the words flowing from her in a torrent.

Why was dad never there when she needed him?

Finishing her call, Dawn sat on the edge of the bed, mobile clamped in her hand trying to make sense of what had occurred in the paddock. Had it really happened or was it just some kind of shared hysteria? Dawn heard the phone ringing in the room below and hurried from the bedroom. Maybe it was her dad calling her back on the land-line.

When Dawn reached the kitchen, Helen Booker was standing beside the central island, phone clamped against her ear, face drained of colour, repeating over and over, "Oh my God." Finally she replaced the phone in the cradle and walked to the table, her whole body trembling. Grasping the back of the chair, she lowered herself into it and sat for a moment, a shocked expression on her face.

"Well," she began in a distracted voice, staring at a spot high on the wall, "That was Terrance. He found Satin. She's dead. Just as you said." Turning to face her daughter, she continued in a more controlled voice, "I'm sorry Carolyn. So sorry I hit you darling, but . . . " Helen Booker stopped, shaking her head before continuing, "Anyway, Terrance thinks the pony was attacked by a wild cat. Perhaps an escaped animal from the zoo or something. He's calling the police now, and he's arranged to get the quad bike from the pond."

Carolyn levered herself to her feet and walked around the table to her mother, sitting in her lap. They cuddled, both crying quietly. Dawn watched them, wishing that her dad was here to give her a cuddle too, but that was something he rarely did.

The kitchen door flew open and Terrance rushed in. Carolyn jumped, giving a muted scream, cuddling herself even further into her mother's body. Dawn half-stood, then realising who it was, sat down again, trying to calm the thudding in her chest.

"Hush now, it's alright. It's only Terrance," Helen Booker said, stroking Carolyn's hair.

Dawn glanced over at Terry. He had a deeply worried expression on his face.

"The police are all too busy with some terrorist thing or other right now. They said they can't get here until this evening or tomorrow morning, but they'll want to talk to you both when they do," he told them. "Don't go outside yet. Keep all the doors and windows closed, just in case. I'm sure whatever it was that attacked you is long gone by now, but you can't be too careful. I'm getting a couple of the groundskeepers together and we'll go out and see what we can find. I've called Mr Booker and let him know what's happening. He's coming over and bringing Doctor McKenzie with him."

=16:10 hrs=

While Sheena worked on Carolyn's pony, news of the cinema attack on the other side of the island came over the radio.

Sheena was undertaking a preliminary autopsy on the pony and the remains of a cat shot by the Estate Manager. She'd been at it for a couple of hours but was no nearer to finding a connection to their work at Area 7 than when she'd started. She wasn't happy and now here was Booker informing her that cats had attacked other people as well, for goodness sake!

Sheena insisted that everyone stay well back while she carried out the rushed autopsy on the animal which lay spread on a wooden pallet on the forks of a tractor. She was really concerned that their experiments at Area 7 had some connection with these incidents. It was too much of a coincidence that the pony and the people at the cinema had been attacked by a clowder of savage cats. Sheena didn't buy into coincidences and knew there had to be a connection somewhere, a connection that could lead to a long prison sentence!

"What is that," Booker pointed, watching as Sheena cut away some damaged tissue from the cat's liver before placing it in a sterile container. He'd donned a spare paper contamination suit from Sheena's car and was looking over her shoulder.

"Just a minute," she replied, parting the fur on the animal's side and picking off a dead flea with a pair of tweezers. Transferring the insect to its own container, she sighed. "We need to find out how this thing is spreading. I'll have to get back to the lab and do some tests."

"You think this might be caused by our work at Area 7?" Booker asked, voice rising, concern creasing his shiny forehead.

"Well don't you?" The underlying anger in Sheena's voice was unmistakable. "It must be. I just need to work out what the vector is."

Booker shook his head as he straightened up. "I think you're reaching Sheena. I think you're feeling guilty. The only positive in all this is that we've already stopped work on the project."

Sheena drove off with her samples and Booker walked back to the house, uncertainties flooding his mind. Should he contact Sir Craig and let him know what was happening, that the project might have somehow caused all these deaths?

Booker finally made up his mind and called Holland, realising that it was better to cover his back. Holland's response was fast and loud.

"Destroy everything Booker," he shouted down the phone at him. The files, the animals, the computer records. Everything. Do you understand me?"

"But the work . . ." Booker hadn't finished before Holland cut across him.

"Fuck your work," he snarled. "Get this through your thick head, you moron. If these deaths are the result of your work at Area 7, we'll all be spending our retirement in prison. Is that what you want? Understand me Booker, the experiments you're undertaking were carried out illegally, so I suggest you do as you're told and quickly, before this gets any further out of hand."

"As you wish," Booker responded.

"And you keep a backup of the mainframe at home, don't you?"

"I do," agreed Booker.

"Send those over to me by private courier."

After the phone call Booker sat at his desk smiling. Hearing Sir Craig in a panic had been heart-warming. He had put off telling him that they'd already destroyed the evidence because he'd hoped there might be a way he could use the threat of exposure to get the incriminating photos back. Maybe he could do that later.

=17:02 hrs=

Sir Craig Holland slammed the phone down and took a deep breath. After the damned idiot had tried to blackmail him, he was back on the phone as soon as things went wrong, whining like the weak fool that he was. Holland sat back in his chair, thinking hard. He knew how dangerous the situation was and how much worse it could get. The facility would have to be cleaned up. He needed to inform the man pay-rolling the project, a conversation he wasn't looking forward to.

Holland sighed and picked up the phone, tapping out a number. "John," he said when it was answered, "We have a situation here that needs taking care of, fast." Booker explained the circumstances in short, clipped sentences, then listened to the deep voice on the other end of the line. "Yes, yes John. I do," Booker nodded. "Yes, I can see that. . . . No I can handle the PM if you can back me up. . . . Uh ha. . . . Can you set it up for me? Good man."

Holland rang off and smiled, feeling more relaxed, unconscious of the sweaty sheen on his forehead. They'd get the back-up research files from Booker, wait a couple of months, then set up the project in a different location, preferably another country. There was too much already invested in the project to let it go now. A thought struck him and he made a couple of notes on a desk-pad. The young virologist, Shirley something . . . no, Sheena . . . Dr Sheena McKenzie. If he could recruit her for the new set-up it would save them having to start over from scratch.

Pushing a button on the intercom, Holland called in his PA. "Ah, there you are Gordon." Tearing a page from his pad, Holland handed it across. "Check her out please. I want as much dirt as you can get." He paused, raising his eyebrows. "You understand me?"

The PA nodded silently and left the room.

Sitting down at his desk, Gordon rang a private detective he knew. The man wasn't above breaking the law if the price was right. Giving the detective Sheena McKenzie's details, he negotiated the price and sat back thinking. Something big was developing. Perhaps he could get some leverage from it. It was about time he had a pay rise.

Holland was busy telephoning somebody who could only be reached via a number known to a select few. He tapped his fingers on the desk top impatiently, working out his best approach.

"This is the PM's secretary. How may I help you?" a quiet voice said.

"Will you tell the PM that I think we need to convene a COBRA meeting, please Glenda."

Holland, settling down for a long and protracted call, was forced to use all his wiles and persuasive ways as he explained the reasons for his request.

"Yes." Yes it is rather urgent. Yes terrorists, that's what I said. Yes Glenda, firm intelligence, as I said."

Fifteen minutes later Holland placed the receiver back in its cradle, a smile on his lips.

It's amazing the effect the word terrorist can have on politicians, he thought, picking up his teacup.

=17:34 hrs=

Doctor Contin stood by his Boxter, running his hand over the red paintwork. He'd had it two weeks and still felt a thrill every time he took it out for a spin. Slipping into the driving seat, he undid the retaining clips and pushed the button that folded the collapsible roof back into the rear compartment. It was a nice evening and he intended taking advantage of it.

Pulling his car out of the Medical Centre's car-park, he drove off towards Military Road and Booker's mansion, wondering what his young daughter had managed to do to herself this time. The message passed to him by his receptionist had been a bit thin on details.

The throaty roar of the engine rose and fell as he changed down on a tight bend, throttling the car around the curve, feeling the centrifugal force as a firm push against his side.

Booker's house was about ten kilometres along Military Road, under six minutes at his present speed. Drifting his car around another corner, Contin's face twisted in surprise when he saw the line of cat's spread across the road in front of him.

It made little difference that he'd heard about the cat's cinema attack because his instincts took over and he yanked the steering wheel hard to one side, hoping the cats

would scatter before he hit one. The Boxter's fat tyres held the road as though they were glued to it and the car jinked around the cats, missing them completely.

The nearside wheels dropped into the shallow ditch beside the road and Contin's smile of triumph quickly turned to one of fear when the steering wheel wrenched to one side, breaking his thumb.

Gritting his teeth, Contin pulled the wheel in the opposite direction, managing to get the car back onto the road, where it slewed from side to side, the tyres smoking as he stamped on the brakes.

After the car came to a shuddering stop, Contin let out a long, ragged breath, resting his forehead on the steering wheel.

Jesus fucking Christ! he thought. That was close.

Sitting upright, Contin smiled, still feeling his heart whacking away in his chest.

Nothing like a good scare to make one feel really alive!

Reaching out a still trembling hand, Contin put his finger on the starter button - just as the first cat landed on his shoulder.

=23:30 hrs=

"Gentlemen, gentlemen please." The Prime Minister's voice cut across the low hum in the Cabinet Office briefing room.

Away from the glare of the cameras, the Prime Minister looked older than his thirty-nine years, his chin covered with a black stubble, a weary look in his brown eyes as they traversed the men seated around the table. He was short and stocky but possessed an aura that filled any room he entered.

Sitting down, he pushed his teacup aside and opened a folder bordered in red. It was headed, 'For Eyes Only', in bold letters. Looking up the Prime Minister tapped the table with a fingertip, calling the COBRA meeting to order.

"Firstly, let me apologise for bringing you all here at such an unearthly hour but when I explain the circumstances I think you'll agree with me that it was the correct action to take. Let me do the introductions, although I expect most of you already know one another. On my left is Sir Craig Holland, our Military Advisor. Next to him is Admiral Purser, then General Locke. To my right Sir Geoffrey Coombs, Defence Support Group and on his right, Stanford Manners from the Cabinet Office. Lastly Sir Kenneth Santork, Commander, Metropolitan Police. This meeting is being taped gentlemen and I'd appreciate it if you took no notes. At this early stage, the Government cannot afford any leaks on this matter. So, let's get down to business."

For the next twenty minutes the men around the table listened in anxious fascination to the details of the report presented to them. When the Prime Minister had finished, he sat back and took off his glasses, slipping them into an inside pocket. He'd just given them a brief outline of the incidents on the Isle of Wight and in Portsmouth.

"Well gentlemen," he said looking around the table with shrewd eyes. "That's the situation and it's up to us to take the appropriate action. Suggestions?"

Holland lent forward. "Do we have any corroboration that this is in fact a terrorist



attack and not something else?”

The Prime Minister nodded, patting another folder beside the first. “Yes Sir Craig. I received this report from the CIA just an hour ago. Apparently they’ve been following a group of terrorists they believe to be funded by Al Qaeda. Supposedly this group has developed a rather nasty form of biological weapon - about the size of a large briefcase - that can be set off with a small explosive, spreading an aerosol capable of carrying particles of liquid or solids over a wide area. The effects are death within one-half to two hours.”

The room broke into a chatter of voices and the Prime Minister smacked his palm on the table to get their attention. “Late last night I ordered two Agency Gold Centres to be set up. One in Fratton by the A2047 outside Portsmouth, the other aboard the HMS Monmouth, at present located south of the Isle of Wight. The following command structure has already been suggested by Stanford.” The Prime Minister glanced over at the man from the Cabinet Office, who gave a slight twitch of his lips in recognition. “Sir Craig, as our Military Advisor, I’d like you to take over the post of Overall Gold Commander. Admiral Purser and General Locke, I want you to be Agency Gold Commanders. Kenneth will you liaise with the Chiefs of Police in both areas please and oversee the setting up of Silver and Bronze agencies.” Looking around the table the Prime Minister raised a thick eyebrow. “Objections? Questions?” When nobody took the bait, he continued in a subdued voice, “And lastly gentlemen, please keep the chain of command moving. I want no bottlenecks or cock-ups like there was during 7/7 regarding communications.”

After passing copies of the CIA report around the table, he made copious notes on a lined pad while he waited for them to read it. The instructions about note taking obviously didn’t apply to him. Afterwards he gathered up the reports, flicking through each to check that no pages had been removed, scoring their names from a list as he did so.

“Was that really necessary?” Kenneth Santork barked, his voice leaving no doubt about the insult he felt he’d just received.

The Prime Minister glanced over at him and gave a quick smile. “Yes Kenneth. After the leaks we’ve had lately, I feel it is. If you have trouble with that, there’s the door.” The people around the table looked at one another, some raising eyebrows, others shifting on their chairs, all of them surprised at the steel in the Prime Minister’s voice. “Sir Craig,” he addressed Holland. “Suggestions please.”

Holland twisted his features and sat back, clasping his hands over his stomach. “Well, if the CIA report is to be believed?” He waited a beat until the Prime Minister nodded his head, “Then we have no option but to isolate both areas and prevent any further spread of . . . what is it? A virus or . . .”

“But that would involve thousands of people,” Kenneth Santork interrupted.

“Just over three hundred thousand,” agreed the Prime Minister. “Luckily one area’s an island and the other covers just ten square miles. Difficult Ken, but not impossible.”

“And how do you propose we keep people from leaving or visiting the Isle of Wight?” Admiral Purser asked. “We can stop the ferries and planes but the island’s full of yachts

and small boats.”

“Set up patrols,” Holland said. “Shouldn’t be too hard if you enlist the help of the coastguards.”

They sat awhile, each thinking about the problems facing them. Holland leant forward, breaking the gloomy atmosphere that had settled on the room. “We need to keep a tight control on information, that’s vital. The news media and internet especially. I suggest you talk to the editors of the various newsgroups Prime Minister. For the present we should stop the Internet and all land and mobile phone services in those areas.”

“But that’ll just cause panic and dissent,” protested General Locke.

“It’ll also keep things under our control,” Holland retorted. “If the Prime Minister makes regular radio and TV appearances explaining the situation as a suspected terrorist attack, backed up by public service announcements, the public will accept it and go about their business. They always do.”

The Prime Minister was staring at the table, his eyes glazed as though his thoughts were elsewhere. Then he looked up and nodded. “Yes Sir Craig, you make a good point. The last thing we need is the media stomping their big feet all over this. Let’s keep it quiet for the present. We can’t afford to cause panic and have people running all over the place spreading whatever this thing is even further. Any more suggestions?”

General Locke’s deep voice rumbled across the table. “It’s going to take a day or two to organise medical teams to back up the local services. We should send in some small teams immediately. Perhaps army medics in full contamination suits, until we understand what we’re facing here.”

For the next two hours the group threw ideas and suggestions back and forth. They broke up at 9 am and went their separate ways to set things in motion.

On his way back to his office Holland dropped into a nearby coffee shop and ordered a cappuccino. Spooning the froth from the top, he took out his mobile and put through a call.

“John? Yes it went like a dream. Thanks for getting that report through to the PM so quickly. Will there be any comebacks? That’s brilliant. I just wish we had as much clout with our secret services over here.”

Picking up the cardboard cup Holland left the coffee shop, an extra spring in his step.

## **Day 4**

=03:48 hrs=

Sheena was flagging. She’d been staring at the electron microscope screen for what seemed like hours, studying the virus she’d found in the samples taken from the cat and pony.

Taking a break, she made herself a cup of coffee and sat at the desk in front of the big screen, staring at the virus again. It looked like a little ball of cabbage heads. Shaking

her head at how pretty some of the deadliest viruses in the world could look, Sheena sighed.

There was no doubt in her mind that the cats that had attacked the pony were infected with the new strain of DNA she and Mani had developed. She'd need to check a few things with him when he started work in the morning but the evidence was overwhelming. Somehow the virus had got out into the general cat population.

The pony had expired from traumatic pneumothorax caused by penetrating trauma from a broken rib, but there was also some evidence that the injuries inflicted by the cats may have taken place close to, or at, the time of death. Sheena couldn't be sure. However there was no evidence of any changes to the pony's DNA as far as she could tell.

Sheena had listened to the news reports about the cinema incident and the deaths suffered by some of the rescue services after the event, knowing that there had to be some connection. But what?

She had established that the cat vector was via mating and blood infection through contaminated bites, but what was the vector killing people who hadn't been attacked or been bitten by cats? The rescue service personnel for instance, who'd had no contact with the cats, yet had still died?

Sheena rubbed her temples, trying to ignore the headache that was lurking in the background.

Think Sheena . . . think.

How could the virus spread without contact? And how had it altered to a virus that killed, rather than just engendering feelings of intense rage in the subject?

Sheena was about to give up for the night and go home when she caught sight of the sterile tube lying next to the keyboard. Picking it up, she stood with it in her hand, wondering if somehow that might help her find an answer.

No it was too simple, too much of a coincidence.

Sheena looked at the ceiling thinking back to a documentary she'd seen as a teenager. It had been about a zoonotic disease that had swept Europe in the 14th Century, leaving millions dead; bubonic plague - the Black Death.

Quickly preparing a specimen, she set it in the carrier and closed the spectrum chamber. The X-ray images appeared on the big computer screen and she lent forward excitedly, tapping on the keyboard to print out a hard copy of the image. There it was, her dual-yCRO-DNA sequence, smack bang where it should be. Altering the image Sheena held her breath, checking sequences in another computer database before nodding to herself. Yes there it was, but with a subtle change - tiny but significant.

Forgetting her tiredness, Sheena's fingers rattled over different keyboards as she dug into the hundreds of worldwide databases she had access to. Time slipped by and before she knew it a hand was shaking her shoulder. She looked up into the big brown eyes of Dr Mani Vasant, shaking her head.

"Sheena," he said in his soft tones, "Have you been here all night?"

Sheena nodded, yawning as she shook herself awake. She pointed at the screen.

"I've found it Mani. God, what have we done?"

Vasant pulled a seat over and plonked his large bottom on it, lines creasing his forehead as he stared at the image. "What do you mean?"

"The vector Mani. It's fleas. From the cats."

"Whoa, what do you mean fleas? Fleas have nothing to do with our work here."

"Look Mani," Sheena pushed across her notes, pointing out the relevant details as she spoke. "The dual-yCRO-DNA sequence passes into the fleas when they bite the cat. But here's the difference," her slim finger tapped the page. "The sequence changes in the flea. See, right there."

Vasant nodded, his face serious. "And the result?"

"Death," Sheena said. "Within a couple of hours, probably sooner for those who's immune system is in any way compromised. The Black Death all over again and we put it out there."

"Ctenocephalides felis," Vasant muttered rubbing the back of his neck. "The common cat flea."

"The one saving grace is that - for some reason I don't yet fully understand - the flea dies if its temperature falls below thirty-six degrees Celsius."

"How do you know this?"

"I went out searching for a cat."

"You did what?" Vasant's voice echoed around the laboratory, causing Sheena to jump.

Holding up a placating hand she smiled. "I took an anaesthetising gun with me and wore a full decontamination suit. I'm not a complete idiot you know." Vasant looked at her as though he might disagree. "As soon as the host expires the fleas lose their source of heat and die too. To get infected you usually have to have had physical contact with the host. But . . ."

"But if the flea manages to find a new host before the critical temperature is reached, then it spreads the virus." Vasant agreed, nodding slowly. "I see."

"Yes Mani, but at least that means that the spread of the virus will be restricted."

"We have to get this out to the authorities as soon as possible."

They both turned as the door opened and Frank Booker strode into the laboratory.

=06:32 hrs=

Two cats slid through the garden fence, both bearing the marks of matted fur where the big male had bitten their necks during mating.

They stopped as a dog barked from next door's garden. A deep voice shouted and the dog disappeared back indoors. The cats continued across the grass towards the back of the house.

Up in his bedroom, Ryan was unable to get back to sleep. Getting up, he decided to update his Facebook page, hoping that Carolyn would take their budding relationship more seriously if he altered his Profile to, 'In a relationship'. Frustrated he gave up, realising that he couldn't get on-line for some reason. She had agreed to meet him again

this afternoon and he wanted her to see the message first. Closing the laptop, he thundered his way downstairs to the hall, telling himself that he'd try again later.

"Hi Chuckles," he called in passing to the cat whose head was poking through the cat flap in the back door. "Want some breakfast?"

Without waiting for an answer, Ryan walked down the hall and into the kitchen, where he opened a tin of cat food, setting it on the floor beside a water bowl. Then he sat at the kitchen table and poured himself a bowl of flakes from a packet, his pet already forgotten.

Chuckles pushed its way through the cat-flap into the back hall, the other cat following it, looking about uneasily. Chuckles was familiar with the house and headed up the stairs, gliding up the carpeted treads like a silent spectre. The other cat, uneasy in the strange surroundings, hesitated. Chuckles reached the top landing and looked back down, giving a soft hiss. The second cat hissed back, then quickly joined it.

Four doors led off the landing at the top of the stairs, one of which was slightly ajar. Chuckles stood listening for a moment, then pushed its way into the room. As the other cat followed, it picked up the faint scent of warm milk, its interest quickening. Slinking across the room, Chuckles stood beside a white and pink cot, its tail whipping back and forth. The second cat followed, yellow eyes fixed on the creature gurgling happily behind the wooden slats.

Leaping from the floor Chuckles landed on the narrow rail along the side of the cot, leaning over to study the baby.

Spotting the cat, a big smile spread across the baby's face and it reached out its pudgy fists, fingers opening and closing as it tried to touch it.

Chuckles hissed softly, the synapses in its brains firing electrical impulses faster and faster until the rage had raised a fur ridge along its spine. The second cat jumped up onto the windowsill, watching Chuckles, its black pupils wide, hissing as the rage mounted in its own brain.

Keeping its rear end on the top rail, Chuckles slid its front paws down the side slats of the cot, balancing precariously until its front paws were on the mattress and it could drop down without frightening the occupant.

The happy baby kicked its feet in the air, slapping the mattress with both hands, tongue slipping in and out of its mouth, eyes wide with pleasure.

The cat slid along the side of the cot until it was standing at the baby's head, then lent over and looked directly into its eyes, teeth bared, hissing softly.

The baby's face suddenly screwed up, turning red as it began to wail.

The cat on the windowsill made ready to pounce, growling low in its throat as Chuckles lay across the baby's face, cutting short its cries.

=06:35 hrs=

Alex groaned loudly, rubbing his temples, his stomach rumbling as he sat on the edge of the bed. He was paying the price for too many beers and that last couple of double whiskeys. Stumbling to the shower, he stood head bowed and eyes closed, hot

water cascading down his back, doing his best to recall the events leading up to his arrival home. The details were fuzzy and mostly missing. Easing his head back he let the water hit his face, rolling his head from side to side. He'd drunk a litre of water before going to bed, otherwise his hangover would be a lot worse.

Ten minutes later Alex was sitting at the kitchen table trying to eat a piece of dry toast. He persevered and his protesting stomach began to settle down. Rubbing his eyes with his thumbs he pushed away the plate and stood up. He'd downed two painkillers earlier and was feeling a lot better. Standing with one hand on the back of the chair he considered whether he was fit enough to drive to London and pick up the seal he needed for his submersible.

Deciding that he wasn't, Alex drunk a large glass of water and went back to bed.

=06:38 hrs=

"You're up early," Ryan's mother said, walking into the kitchen.

"Suppose," Ryan replied, still preoccupied with his plans.

"Surprised you aren't up in your bedroom playing with your computer."

"Can't get on-line mum."

Putting some bread in the toaster, Ryan's mother pushed the lever down. It didn't catch and she tried again. It caught this time.

"Want some breakfast Ryan?" she asked.

Ryan shook his head, finishing the Iron Bru he was drinking.

"So what are you going to do today?"

Ryan looked at his mother and shrugged.

Having already been through the teenage years with Ryan's older brother, she ignored her son's sullen mood and pottered about the kitchen, humming to herself as she prepared her breakfast.

"You seeing Carolyn today?" she asked. "You could always bring her over for tea you know."

"She's got her friend from school staying with her," Ryan answered.

"Well, you bring them both over for tea then."

"Mum, we don't do tea these days. Get with it."

The exasperation in Ryan's tone brought a smile to his mother's lips.

They both looked at the ceiling as a baby's cry sounded from upstairs.

"Your sister's awake." Why don't you go fetch her while I put the kettle on and make her a feed."

Ryan got up, pushing his chair back across the floor tiles with a sigh. But instead of going straight to his sister's bedroom, he decided to try getting online again first. Ten minutes later he shut his laptop in frustration, muttering to himself at how useless the internet connection was in the area and went to see to his sister.

Pushing open the door of his baby sister's room, he walked in. Small red footprints led across the grey carpet to the partly open window. Wondering what they were, Ryan stared at them as he crossed to the cot, only raising his head when he had reached it.

His first impression was one of redness, a wash of paint accidentally spilt in the cot. Then, as his brain began unravelling the messages from his eyes, Ryan felt his stomach knot into a hard lump. His mouth dropped open, the room growing larger, then smaller, then larger again.

Like some Damien Hurst nightmare sculpture, his baby sister's small body lay gutted in the cot, steam still rising from her entrails on the cool morning breeze that was blowing through the open window.

Ryan's mouth moved but no sounds came out, only the soft clicking of his tongue against the roof of his mouth. He grabbed the side of the cot, steadying himself, forcing himself to breathe.

Reaching out trembling hands Ryan scooped his sister into his arms, her blood soaking into the front of his white tee-shirt. The red tears running down her tiny cheeks matching the bigger ones running down his. He turned and walked from the room like a zombie, his breath coming in short gasps, his eyes glazed with incomprehension.

Kettle in hand, Ryan's mother looked up from the table as he entered the room. Her world exploded into a rush of breathless dizziness as she saw her son, arms outstretched, blood still dripping from his hands, holding her last born out to her.

The kettle slipped from her lifeless fingers, hitting the edge of the table, the boiling contents spraying upwards over her chest and face. But she didn't feel a thing, already halfway to the floor in a dead faint.

=07:20 hrs=

Dawn was woken by the dull whop, whop, whop of helicopter blades coming from the back of the house. Getting up she looked out of the bedroom window and saw Frank Booker loading suitcases into his aircraft.

Rubbing sleep from her eyes she checked the digital clock on the night-stand. God it was seven-twenty in the morning! Shaking her head she turned from the window and climbed back into bed and burrowed back down underneath the thick duvet. Shutting her eyes she let the darkness begin to take her, but then her eyes shot open again.

Throwing the duvet aside Dawn ran to the window and looked out again. Yes she'd been right. Sitting in the cabin of the helicopter were Carolyn and her mother. What was going on? Throwing on her jeans and a tee-shirt she headed down the stairs at a run, swinging around the wooden newel at the bottom so fast that she almost knocked Booker off his feet.

Recovering, Booker picked up the briefcase Dawn had knocked from his hand. "Ah. You're awake then," he greeted her.

"What's happening? Where's Carolyn going?" Dawn's voice carried the beginnings of panic. She didn't like admitting it, but yesterday's events had really frightened her.

"Carolyn is just coming for the ride to keep me company while I take Helen somewhere Dawn. We thought it was a bit early to wake you. Why don't you go back to bed? It's really early, you must still be tired."

Booker didn't wait for her answer before rushing off to his office at the rear of the

house.

As she started back up the staircase to the bedroom Dawn frowned. Something about Frank Booker's tone was off. Changing direction, she pounded down the stairs again and ran around the side of the house. As she reached the back lawn, Booker came through a set of French doors, stuffing copious papers into his briefcase, hurrying along the gravel path towards the helipad.

"Mr Booker, Mr Booker," she called after him.

Booker ignored Dawn, pretending he hadn't heard, but she knew he had because he'd given a sudden guilty start at the sound of her voice. Dawn rushed after him, managing to grab the helicopter door before it closed. She lent into the cockpit looking at Carolyn. Her friend was crying, tears rolling down her face. Carolyn tried to undo her seatbelt but her mother restrained her.

Tears filled Helen Booker's eyes too as she turned them on Dawn. She mouthed, "I'm really, really sorry," the noise of the rotors whipping away her words.

Booker turned in the pilot's seat, kicking Dawn clear with his foot, pulling the door closed with a slam. She was lucky not to lose a finger. Carolyn thumped her fist on the window, shouting out Dawn's name as the engine speeded up.

Dawn watched in confusion as the helicopter climbed fast, beating her body with its backwash. She stood on the concrete circle, rubbing her arm where Frank Booker had kicked her, sobbing quietly until the aircraft was just a small black dot in the sky.

Then the black dot finally disappeared into the haze and Dawn was left alone. She made her slow way back inside the house through the French doors, her eyes widening in surprised at the mess everywhere. The desk drawers were upside down on the carpet, papers and folders littered the floor, and in one corner a large safe stood open, its interior disarray evidence of the hurried removal of its contents.

Dawn made her way up to the bedroom again, wondering what to do. Picking up her night-clothes from the floor where she'd dropped them, she noticed the envelope resting against the mirror of the dressing table. She'd missed it when she'd first got up.

Dropping the clothes, she rushed across the room, slipping a finger under the flap, tearing it open along the top. Inside was a single sheet of paper.

Unfolding the note, Dawn recognised Carolyn's spidery scrawl and sat on the edge of the bed to read it. As she read her face got paler and paler. Ryan had phoned her earlier, Carolyn had written. His sister had been killed by cats, just like the pony had.

Carolyn had woken her mother and father with the news, and her father had insisted that they must leave the island at once, telling her that Dawn couldn't come because there wasn't enough room for her and all their luggage.

They had left her behind for luggage!

The writing blurred as tears formed in Dawn's eyes, her anger mounting. She scanned the letter again, tracing the dark splotches on the paper - obviously tears - with the tip of a finger.

Dawn felt overwhelmed, empty and cold. The letter fluttered to the floor from her numb fingers. How could they do this to her - leave her behind this way?



Burying her face in the pillows Dawn tried not to cry. She'd never felt so abandoned, so alone. Not since her mother had died.

=07:46 hrs=

Dawn sat on her bed wondering what to do. She'd tried calling her dad on the Booker's satellite phone but couldn't reach him. Thinking that he might be somewhere with no signal, she rang his office, getting the answer-phone. Dawn was still shocked at the way Frank Booker had treated her, trying to get her mind around the fact that he'd kicked her off the helicopter in such a horrible way.

Because it was so early in the morning Dawn went back to bed, turning things over in her mind before finally dropping into a fitful doze.

She woke later, feeling a little better. Getting up she looked out across the fields behind the house. It was a cloudless sky, a buzzard circling on a thermal above the helipad. She watched it for a while, marvelling at the way it just hung in the air, wing-tips opening and closing as it steadied itself. Unbidden thoughts of Frank Booker's helicopter flooded her mind and she turned from the window, her peaceful feelings shattered. Maybe a shower would help.

In the shower Dawn reconsidered her feelings about Carolyn's father. She had thought of him as someone she'd have liked as a dad. A successful man who could give her a nice home and lots of stuff. Dawn loved stuff, all sorts of stuff - clothes, shoes, make-up, CDs.

Growing up after her mum's death had been hard, always short of money. She was even ashamed to use her mobile phone because it was so old. On top of that, her dad had been too busy working to spend much time with her, or do the things other dads did with their children. Drying herself with a soft bath-sheet, Dawn wondered why Mr Booker had behaved the way he had.

What had she done to deserve such treatment, she wondered. Perhaps it was because he'd found out about Carolyn's boyfriend and she hadn't told him.

Used to taking care of herself in her dad's absences, Dawn raided the kitchen cupboards and cooked herself a breakfast of scrambled egg, grilled bacon and tomatoes, plus two slices of toast. She was eating her breakfast when she felt something brush up against her leg. She froze, toast halfway to her mouth, heart beating wildly. Looking down she saw that it was only Carolyn's cat, Pickles, looking for something to eat.

After feeding the cat Dawn washed-up and tidied the kitchen, then went back upstairs. The cat followed her, almost tripping her up on the staircase. She picked it up, rubbing her cheek over the soft fur, trying to push memories of what had happened in the paddock from her mind.

For the next hour they sat together on the bed, Dawn thinking - Pickles purring. Finally Dawn glanced over at the bedside clock. Almost nine-thirty. Making up her mind that she had to do something other than just sit around, she ran down to the study and made her way over to the satellite phone.

There were four buttons - Sec, The Lab, Dr Mani, Dr Mckenzie. Which one should

she try?

Dawn figured that Sec stood for Secretary and she didn't feel up to talking to someone like that just now. She pushed line four, listening to the distant rings. There was no answer. Dawn tried the Lab extension instead.

"Vasant," a pleasant voice answered in a slight Indian accent.

"Oh hello," Dawn began, voice hesitant. "Er . . . I was trying to get Dr . . . um . . . Sheena?"

"Oh you mean Dr Sheena Mackenzie."

"Yes. Is she there please?"

"Not at the moment. Is there anything I can help you with?"

"My name's Dawn. Dawn Winters."

"Ah yes. You were at the laboratory the other day."

"Yes, yes, that's right." Dawn hesitated, wondering what to say. In the end it all came out in a rushed muddle. "Mr Booker took off in his helicopter and wouldn't take me. I mean they all did, even Carolyn. He kicked me."

"He did what!"

"Well, he sort of kicked me . . . on my arm. He said I couldn't go with them because there wasn't room because of the cases and things."

"Are you alone in the house right now?"

"Yes."

"Doesn't Mr Booker have any staff? I thought he had staff there."

"Yes I suppose so but I can't find anyone. I think they must all be out working or something." Dawn's voice trembled and she felt herself beginning to cry. "And . . . I'm scared and can't reach my dad on the phone. I don't know what to do."

"Okay." Stay where you are Dawn and I'll drive over. We can look around together and see where everyone is. Is that alright?"

"Uh huh."

"I'll be about half-an-hour."

Dawn replaced the receiver and burst into tears. She hadn't realised how frightened being alone was making her. Looking down, she saw a familiar face staring back up at her and choked out a half laugh. Drying her eyes she bent down and picked up Pickles. Laughing self-consciously she put the cat on the desk and tried telephoning her dad again.

This time when she called home she got the answering machine. Well at least she could leave him a message. "Dad, it's half-nine and Dr Vasant is coming over to collect me from the house and take me to Area 7 to see Sheena. I'll ring you when I get there. Mr Booker flew off and left me here on my own. Dad I'm really scared." Dawn hesitated before ending the call, putting the phone back to her ear. "I love you dad, please ring me back, I'm really missing you."

=10:15 hrs=

Dawn heard the sound of a car on the driveway and looked out of the window, watching as Dr Vasant struggled his rotund body from the driver's seat. He glanced

around, spotting her at the window, waving for her to come out. Dawn shook her head, indicating that he should come into the house instead. A few minutes later she heard the front door open and close. Vasant appeared at the lounge door, his smile bright against his dark skin.

“Hello Dawn, shall we go and see if we can find somebody then?”

Dawn was still busy lacing and unlacing her fingers, staring out of the window.

“Dawn?”

Dawn turned to Vasant, trying to keep the tremble from her voice. “I’d rather not go out there Dr Vasant. The cats killed Carolyn’s pony. They might get us too.”

Vasant nodded his understanding, knowing how the attack must have upset the two young girls.

“Well how about if I drive the car nearer to the front door, and then you can run down the steps and jump in? Then we can drive around the grounds in safety and see who we can find. There’s bound to be someone about somewhere. How about that?”

Dawn scanned the garden from the window, trying to ignore Dr Vasant’s patronising tone.

“Okay then,” she finally agreed.

Staying glued to the window Dawn watched as Dr Vasant manoeuvred his car as close to the steps as he could get. He tooted the horn.

Opening the front door, Dawn stuck her head out, checking that the coast was clear. Taking the steps three at a time, she threw herself into the car and slammed the door, leaning back with a deep, shuddering breath.

Vasant drove the car around the back of the house and out towards the wood. The track was rough, bouncing them about in their seats.

“Doesn’t Mr Booker have an Estate Manager?” he asked.

“Yeah, Terry.”

“Any ideas where he might be?”

“I think he was supposed to be setting up a shoot for some visitors that are coming tomorrow, but that was before . . .”

Vasant waited a beat, glancing at her. “Where would he do that?”

Dawn pointed along the track. “There’s a turning farther along. On the left.”

Vasant concentrated on his driving. Dawn tried phoning her dad again but had no luck. She stared out of the car window, worrying her bottom lip with her teeth.

Nearer to the wood the track got rougher and Vasant was forced to drop his speed to a crawl. His car wasn’t an off-road model and the sump kept banging against the ridge down the centre of the track.

“Much farther?” he asked.

Dawn pointed. “Look, through the trees. That’s his Jeep.”

Vasant pulled his car alongside the big vehicle and opened his door. “Stay here Dawn, I won’t be a minute.”

Dawn grabbed his arm. “Please don’t leave me alone.”

Walking around the car, Vasant opened the passenger door and waited while Dawn

climbed out. She looked around, eyes darting from tree to tree like a nervous rabbit caught in bright headlights.

Voices were coming from deeper in the wood. Taking Dawn's hand, Vasant led the way along the footpath, holding branches aside so they didn't whip back in her face. Entering a clearing they saw two men struggling a large machine onto a trolley. Hearing their approach one of them turned, his face lighting up in recognition.

"Dawn," Terry said, "What brings you here?"

Dawn explained what had happened earlier that morning, stumbling over her words.

Terry waited patiently for her to finish then looked at Vasant. "This true, about the cats?"

Vasant nodded, his gaze fixed on the ground. "Dr Mackenzie carried out an autopsy on one yesterday."

"And they killed a baby this morning. Christ!" Terry turned to the man with him. "Leave that Pat. If that bastard couldn't be bothered warning us before bugging off, I've no intention of dragging his bloody trap back into storage. Go down to the village and see if you can find out what the hell's going on. Take the Jeep, I'll get a lift back with the doctor here."

Terry headed over to the Jeep, pulling a shotgun case and a box of shells from the boot. "Here," he said, tossing the items to Dawn, "Shove them in the back of the car with you."

Bundling into Vasant's Peugeot they set off back towards the house. Reaching the turn-off onto the main forest track, Vasant swung the car right and put his foot down, but they hadn't travelled more than a couple of hundred metres when a deer bounded from the trees, running right in front of them.

Vasant swore, wrenching the steering wheel hard to the left. The nearside wing clipped the animal and it went down in a jumble of thrashing legs. Vasant lost control of the car, the front wheels bouncing over a large tree root, slamming down on the sump with a loud bang. Putting the car into reverse, Vasant floored the accelerator but the tyres just span on the root, wafting the smell of burning rubber into the car.

Terry lent over and gripped his wrist. "Take it easy doc, you'll burst a tyre that way. Bloody front wheel drives are all the same. Tell you what, you weigh more than me. Go and stand on the front bumper and I'll try to get us off, okay?"

"Oh Terry, please help the deer. Look it's hurt," Dawn said in a small voice.

The animal lay on its side, one leg twitching, eyes wide in fright. It had obviously been seriously injured.

Terry and Vasant got out of the car and knelt beside the deer. "Don't say anything to Dawn," Terry said, "but something spooked this animal. We'd best keep a sharp eye out. Stand so she can't see what I'm doing."

Pulling a knife from his pocket, Terry opened the blade. Vasant's eyes grew wide and he lent forward, grabbing Terry's wrist. "Hang on. What are you doing? We have to get a vet."

Terry shook his arm free and slid his knife into the deer's neck, cutting the main

artery. As the blood gushed across Terry's hand, the deer's eyes glazed over and it stopped breathing. Terry wiped his hand on the grass and stood up, pocketing his knife.

"Go stand on the bumper," he said. "And keep an eye open. I don't like the way that animal was spooked."

Vasant stood on the bumper, laying himself across the bonnet, adding his considerable weight to the car. Terry jumped back in the driving seat, easing the car forward as far as he could.

Then, with a, "Hang on doc," he stamped his foot on the throttle, holding it there.

The car slammed backwards, its front wheels billowing smoke as the tyres attempted to get a purchase on the root. Then the car slowly began to rise, its wheels spinning madly, until suddenly they got a proper grip and the car lurched off the root, throwing Vasant onto his back.

Terry fought for control, the steering wheel bucking in his grip. He finally managed to wrestle the car back onto the track, grunting in satisfaction.

Terry jumped when Dawn screamed and grabbed his shoulder, pointing out the side window. Vasant was halfway to his feet, a large cat gripped in his hands. Several others were warily circling him.

"Give me the shotgun, quick," Terry shouted, winding down his window.

Dawn ripped the gun from its bag and slamming in five cartridges, passed it across to Terry.

He took aim, shouting, "Throw the bloody thing on the floor and get out-of-the-way, doc."

Vasant tossed the cat from him as hard as he could. It landed amongst the leaves on the forest floor, ears flat against its head, back legs bunching, preparing to attack again.

Vasant smelt the pungent scent of his own fear as the cat streaked towards him.

Then the stillness of the wood was shattered by a shotgun blast that caught the cat mid-leap. It fell at Vasant's feet in a bloody heap and he stared down at it with wide, frightened eyes.

Immediately the other cats disappeared, melting into the heavy undergrowth. Terry opened the car door and got out, gun at the ready.

"Quick doc, get in the car," he shouted.

Vasant stood silently, eyes locked on the dead cat.

"Doc, come on."

Vasant looked up, shaking his head, his skin pale. "Too late," he said quietly. "I've been bitten by the fleas."

The man looked as if he was about to collapse and Terry took a step towards him.

"No!" Vasant shouted. "Stay away from me. If you don't, you'll die. I have about an hour, maybe two if I'm lucky. Call Dr Mackenzie. She was working on a vaccine, maybe she's finished it by now. I'll wait for her in that funny looking place we passed, the one that looks like a pumpkin."

Terry wavered between concern for Vasant, and Dawn's safety. Common sense won out and he climbed back in the car, a determined look in his eyes.

"What's happening Terry?"

"Dr Vasant is going to wait in the folly while we get Dr Mackenzie over."

"Why? Is he hurt? Was he bitten by the cats?"

"No Dawn," he said, "He was bitten by fleas."

Dawn didn't seem to hear the answer, she was staring out of the window at the deer instead.

"You killed it." Her tone was accusatory.

"Dawn, for Christ's sake it was dying anyway. I just put it out of its misery!"

Dawn burst into tears and began sobbing. Terry pulled her into his shoulder. She resisted for a moment then relaxed.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to snap at you like that. I guess we're all a little tense," he said.

Dawn pulled back from him, wiping her cheeks with her palms, turning away to hide her embarrassment and uneasiness. Terry started the car, pushing thoughts of his own daughter from his mind. She was in New Zealand now, living her own life with her mother, and best kept in the box labelled, 'Past Mistakes'.

They both stayed lost in their thoughts until Terry pulled the car up to the front door of the mansion. Getting out they ran up the steps and into the house, slamming the door

tightly shut behind them.

"I'll go and ring Dr Mackenzie on the sat-phone. Do us a favour and make a cup of tea will you Dawn. Strong, no sugar."

Dawn wandered into the kitchen, filling the kettle and plugging it in. She felt drained - like she had after taking her last maths exam. Her brain seemed to have stopped working, she couldn't think straight.

Sitting at the table she lay with her head on her arms and closed her eyes.

Why was she feeling so tired?

=11:59 hrs=

Sir Craig Holland flicked on his intercom. "Yes?"

"There's a Mr Gonzalez to see you sir."

"Thank you. Show him in."

The intercom flicked off, quickly followed by a soft-knuckled knock on Holland's office door. A man entered, taking in his surroundings with one quick sweep of his dark grey eyes. The athletic build, cropped hair, sallow skin and cold stare, told Holland that this was a man you'd regret upsetting.

Gonzalez sat in the proffered chair to one side of the large desk, studying the man sitting behind it. As he waited for him to speak, Gonzalez recalled the details in Holland's file that he'd studied on the long flight over from America.

Sir Craig Holland, retired General, Military Advisor, and member of the COBRA group - appropriate because the man's beady green eyes reminded him of a snake's. Wavy black hair, worn in a style reminiscent of a pennant blowing in the wind. Eyebrows almost meeting over a prominent nose, down which the man studied those around him with undisguised contempt - obviously an arrogant character. Pin-striped suit, worn with a white shirt and red tie, the uniform of someone used to giving orders.

Gonzalez had met many such men in his line of work and had little respect for any of them.

They studied each other a while longer, then Holland broke the silence. "How was your flight Mr Gonzalez."

"Good."

"You do understand the reason for your visit here?"

"I've been fully briefed."

Holland slid three files across the desk. "These are the details of Frank Booker, Dr Sheena Mckenzie and Dr Mani Vasant. They'll need persuading to forget about the project. My assistant is gathering information of a more delicate nature on them for you. Booker has a murky background, which will be useful. I'm not sure about the other two yet."

Gonzalez pushed the folders back across the desk with a stubby finger. "I won't need these. As I said, I've been fully briefed."

Holland felt his mouth turn dry. The steady piercing stare of his guest was making him nervous, an uncomfortable feeling for someone so used to giving orders. Gonzalez's

eyes flicked away, then back again, a tight smile forming on his lips.

"All I want from you is the pass code for Area 7 and a list of staff members on duty tomorrow," he said.

Holland felt his face flush at the man's rudeness. Gonzalez's short, clipped sentences were beginning to sound like orders. Licking his lips with the tip of his tongue Holland pushed aside his rising anger, along with his intention of offering his visitor a cup of tea. The man was obviously below his own class status and the sooner he got him out of the office the better.

The intercom buzzed and Holland held down a button, his voice laced with annoyance. "What?"

"The Agency Gold Commander on HMS Monmouth has a situation that needs your input sir," his PA advised him.

Picking up the phone, Holland looked across at Gonzalez. "Excuse me a moment."

He expected Gonzalez to leave the office but the infuriating man just sat there, watching him.

"Yes Admiral?" Holland said into the telephone.

Before he realised what Gonzalez was up to, the man had lent across the desk and punched a button on the phone, transferring the call to the loudspeaker setting.

The Admiral was shouting to make his voice heard over the noises in the background. "We have a civilian helicopter leaving the Isle of Wight. It refuses to acknowledge our radio calls. It seems to be heading for France. The identity number is registered to a Frank Booker. We can force it to land when it reaches France if you want us too?"

Gonzalez stood up and lent over the desk, whispering in Holland's ear, "Tell him you'll ring him back."

Holland looked up at Gonzalez, his stomach doing a quick flip. The grey eyes staring back at him held the promise of much pain should he not comply.

"Give me a second Admiral. I'll get right back to you." Replacing the handset, Holland rounded on Gonzalez. "Who the hell do you think you're talking too?" he blustered.

Gonzalez straightened up, smiling fully for the first time. It wasn't pleasant, the muscles of his face jerking up in stages, as though he was having a problem trying to remember how to use them.

Thin hard fingers found Holland's throat, squeezing the arteries each side of his neck. He held on to the edge of his desk, head buzzing, easing himself upright in the chair as Gonzalez exerted more pressure.

"Listen you motherfucker," the hard voice rasped in Holland's ear, "You do as I say, when I say. Our friend back home won't be too happy if you cause me any grief. Are we understanding each other here?"

Holland swallowed his fear and anger, feeling his face flush. He'd never been talked to in such a way in his whole life and didn't know how to respond. But as soon as Gonzalez left his office he intended putting a call through to America to get him taken off



the job. This was insufferable!

Gonzalez released Holland's neck and sat back down in his chair, staring at the ceiling. He seemed to be counting the cracks in the plasterwork, giving Holland time to get his composure back under control. Then his eyes snapped back to Holland's. "Okay, this is what we do."

For the next few minutes Gonzalez set out his orders, and though Holland protested, eyes widening as he listened to what Gonzalez was saying, he had to admit that it was a shrewd plan.

Picking up the telephone, Holland rang the Gold Commander back. "Ah yes Admiral Purser, I have intelligence that the helicopter has terrorists aboard. They intend releasing the virus they have already used on the Isle of Wight over Paris next. Shoot them down at once. No forewarnings Admiral, don't give them time to release the virus. Even if they drop it over the ocean it could still drift back to the main land. That mustn't be allowed to happen."

After a short pause, Admiral Purser's voice came back on the loudspeaker. "Will you repeat that order please."

"Shoot them down Admiral. Destroy that helicopter!"

"Very well sir. Understood." The connection clicked off, leaving a soft buzzing on the line.

Opening a drawer, Holland pulled out a laminated card with Gonzalez's photo imprinted on it. "This is a Gold Pass, it will enable you to go wherever you wish and enlist the aid of any of our armed forces should you need them. Also the police." Dropping another laminated card on top of the first, he pushed them towards Gonzalez. "The other card will get you into Area 7." Pressing a button on his intercom, he said, "Gordon, would you please supply Mr Gonzalez with the staff rota for Area 7 on his way out."

Standing up Holland lent across his wide desk, holding out his hand, dismissing his visitor.

Shunning the handshake, Gonzalez stood up and glided across the deep-pile carpet on the balls of his feet. As the office door closed behind him Holland let out a small sigh, wondering if he'd made the right decision in enlisting help from his partner across the pond. Maybe he should have handled this himself.

=19:33 hrs=

"Dawn . . . Dawn!"

Dawn opened her eyes, blinking in the dim light shining through the kitchen window. Dr McKenzie was sitting at the table opposite her.

"Huh?"

"Hey sleepyhead, wake up and give me your arm."

Dawn sat up, easing the ache in her neck where she'd been lying with her head on the table. "What happened? I was making tea for Terry." She looked around, rubbing her eyes with her knuckles.

"It's getting on for half-seven. You've been asleep for hours. Terry said you'd had a

shock so we thought it best to let you get some rest after all you've been through."

"The deer." Dawn looked at Sheena and shuddered. "Terry killed it."

"Yes he told me about that. Here, roll up your sleeve so I can give you this vaccine. It'll stop you catching the virus." Sheena pulled a scarifier from her shoulder bag.

"Dr Vasant was talking about fleas." Dawn caught Sheena's wrist in a tight grip, her eyes widening as the memory came back. "What happened to him? He said he was bitten by fleas. Is he alright?"

Sheena eased her arm free and rolled up Dawn's sleeve. "This won't hurt. You've been vaccinated before haven't you?"

Sheena kept up a steady stream of small talk while she applied the vaccine to Dawn's upper-arm, scratching the skin with the scarifier.

Dawn winced, rubbing her arm. "You didn't tell me what happened to Dr Vasant," she said, pulling down her sleeve.

"Want something to eat? I've heated up some pizza and I can make you some big fat chips to go with it if you'd like."

Dawn smiled, the tension flowing from her. Sheena sure knew how to make her feel better.

After eating their meal, Terry and Sheena checked the house, making sure that all the doors and windows were closed. Then they all settled down in the lounge. The TV stations were full of government statements about an ongoing terrorist attack on the island and none of them knew what to make of it all, so after some debate they decided to watch a DVD.

As the closing titles of the film were scrolling up the screen, the lounge door pushed aside and a dark shape slinked into the room. Dawn turned, stretching out her hand from where she was sitting on the floor, her face lighting up in pleasure. Pickles ran across the floor towards her, tail erect.

The room was filled with the explosion of a shotgun and Dawn screamed, her ears ringing as a bright flash washed out her vision. The cat, caught squarely in the blast, slammed against the wall, leaving a long smear of blood on the wallpaper as it slid to the floor.

Dawn felt as though the breath had been knocked from her body. She jumped to her feet, horror distorting her face. Turning to face Terry, now lowering his gun, she tried to speak but the words wouldn't come, her mouth just opening and closing soundlessly.

"Catch her, she's going to fall." Terry's shout was far too late. Dawn was down before Sheena had even turned.

Terry walked over to the cat, pushing at it with the toe of his shoe. "How the hell did that get in here? I thought we'd checked all the windows and doors."

Sheena was holding out her arm, her fingers splayed as she shouted at Terry, "Get away from that. The fleas."

Dawn moaned, sitting up. "It's Pickles, Carolyn's cat. You killed it, just like the deer! Why? Why do you keep doing things like that?"

Sheena almost collapsed with the tension and Terry's face fell as he hurried over,

extending his hand to help Dawn up but she turned away from him.

Sheena knelt beside her, rubbing her back, tilting Dawn's head to look in her eyes. "It'll be okay, hush now."

"Dawn I'm so, so sorry. I thought . . ." Terry looked at Sheena, shaking his head. Then turning away, he hurried from the room, calling back over his shoulder, "I'll get a pillowcase and tidy up."

Sheena helped Dawn to her feet and cuddled her. "He thought the cat was attacking you. He wouldn't have shot it if he'd known it was Carolyn's pet."

Dawn stepped back, looking up into Sheena's face. "It was Pickles," she said with a shiver, then burying her face in Sheena's shoulder, added in a muffled voice, "I want my dad."

"Look why don't we get you up to bed. We're all tired and upset."

When Dawn nodded, Sheena led her from the room by the hand.

Having settled Dawn, Sheena came back down to the lounge and looked around. The cat's body had gone, although the blood stains were still bright under the lights.

"She okay?" Terry asked as he came into the room.

Sheena nodded, a frown creasing deep furrows in her forehead. "What was all that about terrorists on the news?"

Terry sat down in an armchair, worrying the inside of his cheek with his tongue before answering. "I reckon it's a cover-up for this cat thing," he said, staring her straight in the eyes.

Sheena stiffened, then collapsed in on herself, her face turning pale. "What have I done? All these deaths. And poor Mani too. It's all my fault."

"That's as maybe, but at least you've developed a vaccine that'll stop it spreading any further. We've got to get it to the right people as soon as we can."

Sheena stood up, suddenly animated again. "Yes, you're right. I've got to take it to the police so they can get it into the right hands."

Terry caught Sheena's arm as she headed for the door. "Wait, where are you going?"

"To the police station. I just said."

"Have you taken a look out of the window lately?"

Sheena hurried across the room and stared out into the night. Dark shapes were moving against a darker background, slipping in and out between the plants and bushes. Catching her breath she turned to Terry.

"Cats," he said. "Hundreds of the bloody things. Every cat on the damned island seems to be hanging around out there tonight. We'll have to wait until daylight. We can't chance leaving in the dark, even though we've been vaccinated. That many cats would tear us to bits in seconds, and I've no intention of letting you go out there alone."

Sheena's new-found energy dissipated like a deflating balloon. Head low she made her way across the lounge. "I'll go see how Dawn is."

Terry turned back to the window, blinking as a flash of lightning lit the sky, "Okay," he mumbled.

## Day 5

=05:30 hrs=

The sound of an approaching helicopter competed with the rumblings of the low hanging clouds as the summer storm grew in intensity, lashing the landscape with rain.

"Over there," Gonzalez told the pilot, pointing to a big cross painted on the building's roof .

As the helicopter touched down, Gonzalez got out, shouting at the pilot above the din of the rotating blades, "Stay with the chopper and keep your eyes open. Report anything suspicious on the RT."

Gonzalez beckoned and another man jumped out, turning up his collar against the rain. They were both dressed in combat fatigues and wore holstered side arms. In addition Gonzalez's companion carried a stubby automatic machine gun.

They hadn't taken more than a dozen steps when a voice cut through the rain. "Okay you, hold it right there. This is a restricted area."

A security guard appeared out of the gloom, rain running down the peak of his cap onto the thin plastic mac covering his uniform. Gonzalez knew from his briefing notes that there were two security guards on duty, and from the prominent nose and slight limp, this had to be Lynas. The other guard would be on duty at the main gate.

"Lynas, right?" Gonzalez said holding out his pass.

As the guard lent over to inspect it, Gonzalez punched him in the throat with curled knuckles. The guard opened his mouth, gulping, grabbing at his throat, trying to pull air through his crushed larynx.

"Get him out of sight, then deal with the man on the gate. Meet me in the main lab. Go."

Gonzalez headed for the roof staircase without a backward glance, knowing his orders would be carried out ruthlessly and efficiently.

The door squealed on its hinges, echoing down the brightly lit concrete staircase. From the architectural drawings he'd studied, Gonzalez knew the stairs led down to a main corridor running the length of the building. The offices were situated towards the front, with laboratories at the rear. The basements held the animal housing and smaller labs.

Walking the length of the corridor Gonzalez entered the reception area. Even this early in the day a young man was sitting at the reception desk, reading a novel that was half-hidden under the counter.

Gliding across the carpeted floor Gonzalez came up behind him, gripping the receptionist's shoulder so tightly that his fingers disappeared into the man's muscles. Crying out in pain he clutched at Gonzalez's hand, turning his head. The sight of the large black muzzle made him gasp. It seemed to expand in size with every passing second.

"You will make a general announcement over the tannoy," a hard voice whispered into his ear. "Nod if you understand." The receptionist nodded, licking dry lips, body trembling with an adrenaline rush.

Gonzalez could feel the man's sudden fear - a musty smell that flared his nostrils. "Tell the staff that there's been a security breach and they must assemble in the canteen immediately."

Pressing a button on the intercom the receptionist tried, but his dry, frog-like croaks were unintelligible.

"Take a drink and try again," Gonzalez ordered.

Picking up a bottle of water, the receptionist took a long gulp, and after the warning 'ding-dong' signal, made the announcement in assured, clipped tones - the last words he ever uttered.

Five minutes later Gonzalez and his companion were standing in front of the canteen counter, surveying the seven people sitting around a table. Even though the rota had shown Doctors Vasant and Mackenzie only worked on the day shift, Gonzalez had hoped that at least one of them might have been here. It would have saved him the trouble of having to track them down to their homes.

Moving forward a few paces, Gonzalez addressed them in a hard, flat voice, "Ladies and gentlemen, my name is Danny Santius. As you are probably aware from the recent news reports, the Isle of Wight is under threat from terrorists. You may have noticed that certain computers at this facility have been interfered with during the night." One or two heads nodded. "We believe that the terrorists have stolen some of the hard drives and other sensitive information from the facility. While we investigate this, you will all go down to the small office behind the animal house and wait there please."

A tall thin man got to his feet. "But this is ridiculous. Who are you? There aren't any terrorists here. I can assure you that I'd have seen them if there were."

"Sergeant Bream," Gonzalez said turning to his companion. "Take this man out to reception. Show him why we think this is the work of terrorists, then bring him back here."

The two men returned a few minutes later, the tall man's face a deathly white. He sat down without saying a word, his hands trembling. Gonzalez nodded at his companion who gathered the staff together, herding them towards the lift.

"Any more trouble?" Gonzalez asked when he returned.

"I locked them in an office but it won't hold them for very long if they make a concerted effort to get out."

Gonzalez thought for a moment, then nodded. "Okay, I'm going to be at least a couple of hours. Go and keep an eye on them. How about the main gate?"

"Locked up tight. The guard's body is out of sight."

"Shouldn't be anyone trying to get in for another . . ." Gonzalez checked his watch, "three hours. The day-time staff start at nine. Okay, let's get this done."

=06:32 hrs=

Ollie Harris was running as fast as he could, his breath coming in ragged gasps as

he pounded along the uneven track. He glanced over his shoulder again. The cat's were nearer, much nearer.

Pumping his legs faster he lengthened his stride, his grey beard flapping over his shoulder. Not far now, he'd nearly reached the corner of the field, just a few more metres.

Ollie Harris's day had started out just like any other. The storm had woken him early. He'd splashed water on his face, combed some tangles out of his long dirty beard, had a cup of tea in his only mug, and left the caravan to look for some casual work.

It was raining. In fact it was pelting down, but that hadn't worried Ollie Harris one bit, he was used to being out in all kinds of weather. Shrugging his torn coat higher around his neck, he started walking up the track beside Mrs Kavanaugh's field. He'd go and offer to cut her some firewood for her winter stock; she was always such a soft touch when he showed up looking hungry and bedraggled.

As he shuffled along, head bowed against the rain, hands deep in his pockets, grey beard covering the front of his coat like a dirty scarf, his battered cloth cap pulled low over his face, Ollie Harris looked to be anywhere between twenty and fifty. Skinny, stooped - and with what the majority of people thought of as a drinker's nose, but was in fact rosacea - he was everybody's picture of the archetypical village tramp.

Nobody knew Ollie Harris's actual age, but his family had moved to the Isle of Wight in the late '90's, his mother dying of cancer shortly afterwards. Then, at the age of sixteen, his drunken father had given him one too many beatings and he'd retaliated in a blind rage.

The sight of his father's body lying at his feet, face a bloody pulp, had frightened young Ollie Harris so much that he'd run off, spending the next eighteen months living rough in the woods until he'd been picked up for vagrancy.

It was quickly apparent to the police that there was something far wrong with young Ollie Harris, and they were proven right when he was diagnosed with severe bipolar disorder. After a short course of carbamazepine, the hospital discharged him clutching a prescription for benzodiazepine and an appointment to see the psychiatric nurse in six months.

He'd gone back to living rough in the forest until old Mrs Kavanaugh, perhaps seeing something in the unkempt, rambling vagrant that nobody else did, took pity on him and let him stay in a broken down old caravan that she kept at the bottom of her field.

Ollie Harris stopped under the spread branches of an oak tree and stared at Mrs Kavanaugh's stone cottage.

Something is wrong, he thought.

Ollie Harris knew that Mrs Kavanaugh was house-proud, and grateful that at her age she was still able to take care of herself and not have to rely on others.

So why was her washing hanging out in the rain, he wondered. And why was her front door standing open?

As Ollie Harris got nearer to the cottage, he spotted the abandoned washing basket dropped on one side of the path. Picking it up, he walked to the front door and called out. There was no answer. He pushed the door fully open and called again.

“Mrs K, you home?”

Ollie Harris felt uncomfortable about walking into Mrs Kavanaugh’s house uninvited, arguing with himself that it wasn’t right.

But suppose she was in trouble.

“Are you in trouble Mrs K?” Do you need any help?”

Ollie Harris stood on the doorstep, rain dripping from his raincoat onto the quarry tiles in the hallway.

Best if I try again, then go, he told himself.

“Mrs K, I’m going now.”

Stepping back, he started pulling the front door closed, then stopped, head tilted, wondering if he’d heard a voice.

Maybe it was just in my head.

Pushing the door open again, he stepped into the hall.

“Mrs K?” You there?”

Taking off his raincoat, Ollie Harris shook the water off, closed the door, then hung his coat neatly on a row of big brass hooks farther along the hall.

“Mrs K?”

Hearing a noise from the direction of the kitchen, he nodded to himself.

She must be in the back, making herself a cup of tea. She loved a nice cup of tea. Probably couldn’t hear him what with the noise of the storm and all. Better just go back and make sure she’s alright.

Ollie Harris’s ceaseless internal conversations continued as he walked down the hall.

Entering the kitchen, he smiled. There she was, sitting in her rocker by the window, her two cats in her lap, both stretched up, nuzzling her neck.

So pretty, he thought.

Pulling out a chair, Ollie Harris turned it to face Mrs Kavanaugh and sat down.

“Well Mrs K,” he began, pausing when he noticed that her eyes were closed. “You asleep?”

One of the cats turned its head at the sound of his voice. Its white muzzle stained red, bits of something hanging from its mouth. It hissed at him.

Ollie Harris grasped at once what had happened. He’d heard the rumours - nasty rumours about cats attacking people. He stood up, casually, in no hurry.

“You’ve done for her, good and proper,” he said in a quiet voice. “As proper as you like.”

The other cat turned its head to stare at him and Ollie Harris saw that Mrs Kavanaugh’s throat had been torn out, the blood running down the front of her white blouse - a brick-red bib glistening under the fluorescent lighting.

As he looked at her throat, the blood shimmered and moved, seemingly alive, bringing memories of other times; of fists and mashed noses, of bruises to be hidden from friends, of impotent rages that had left him feeling less than human - but much worse, of times when pleading for mercy had been answered with triumphant laughs and more punches. Mrs Kavanaugh had shown him a different life, a life of sharing and giving and

he felt a sudden deep sadness that it had come to an end.

Leaning down, Ollie Harris grabbed one of the cats by its scruff, holding it out from his body. The frantic animal twisted around, trying to escape, its sharp claws darting out at him. All its efforts did the cat little good because Ollie Harris was used to handling wild animals. He'd trapped all sorts in the woods, even the odd cat or two in his time.

Walking across to the sink, he plunged the cat straight into the waste disposal unit, ignoring its dying screams. Finished, he turned his attention to the other cat. It looked back at him, hissing loudly, jumping to the floor, its rear end down as it backed away. Something about the man had cut through the cat's rage, bringing about a return of its instinctual fears and the drive for survival.

It recognised uncontrolled rage when it saw it!

Ollie Harris fetched a tea-towel from a hook by the sink, twirling it around his hands until he'd made a twisted rope. Crouching by Mrs Kavanaugh, he gently wrapped it around her neck, binding the wound. Finished he opened the kitchen window, staring at the remaining cat. It ran across the kitchen and leapt up onto the sill, giving a final defiant hiss before disappearing into the rain.

Ollie Harris made a fresh pot of tea, pouring one into Mrs Kavanaugh's favourite teacup, along with a dash of milk, just the way she liked it. He put the cup on the small side table next to her rocker and patted her cold hand before walking back down the hall and out of the front door.

No one will ever know why he did what he did, because nobody ever saw Ollie Harris again.

=07:30 hrs=

Entering the lounge Alex was greeted by the winking light of the answer-phone. Ignoring it, he settled himself in the leather couch, trying to concentrate on the newspaper. The headlines screamed out at him: TERRORIST ATTACK ON THE ISLE OF WIGHT. Details were scarce and as he ran his eyes down the article, he lent forward in concentration. According to what he read, both land and mobile phones were down, as was the Internet. Throwing the paper on the floor, Alex punched the replay button on the answer-phone and his daughter's frightened voice issued from the tinny speaker.

Alex had trouble understanding what Dawn was saying so he played it back twice, trying to make sense of the message - something about a cat attacking a pony. All he knew was that his daughter sounded frightened and upset.

Picking up the phone he dialled her mobile, tapping his finger on the handset as he waited for a connection. After four rings a recorded voice informed him that the service he was trying to contact had been suspended and to try again later. The same message greeted him when he used Booker's number.

Alex stood up, thinking hard. Turning on the TV, he paced back and forth in front of the set as the rolling news reported the events leading up to the terrorist attack. Reading between the lines Alex knew that there was little more information than he had already gleaned from the newspaper. The TV outlined the exclusion zones on a graphic, telling



people living in the areas to keep their doors and windows closed and only go out if it was really necessary. All sorts of experts were being paraded in front of the cameras but they added little to the basics of the information already released by the Government. The Prime Minister was due to give an announcement later in the day, in the meantime all ferry traffic to and from the Isle of Wight had been suspended and a no-fly zone had been introduced.

Alex turned off the TV and picked up the newspaper again, scanning the other pages for more information. Nothing. Worry lines etched his forehead. He needed to know what was happening to Dawn, she'd sounded terrified. But he had no way of contacting her, until an idea suddenly came out of the blue and he slapped his fist into his open palm. Of course he had a way, the drink had fuddled his brain.

=07:32 hrs=

Gonzalez had searched the facility from office to office, checking every computer, destroying the hard drives that hadn't already been taken. It was obvious from the start that somebody else had already had the same idea, but that wasn't his worry right now.

As Gonzalez was about to leave Booker's office a green glint caught his attention and he turned back, studying the satellite phone. Picking up the handset, he was stunned to discover that it was still working. The idiots were supposed to have shut down all communications on the island! Punching out a number he reported the situation to his boss in America and was told that it would be taken care of and to wait by the sat-phone for the information he'd just requested.

Ten minutes later Gonzalez answered the phone, listening intently as the last two conversations made on it were relayed to him. Both Doctor McKenzie and Doctor Vasant had used it.

Replacing the receiver with a smile, Gonzalez nodded his head in satisfaction. Things were going to plan.

Forty-five minutes after it had landed on the roof of Area 7, the helicopter took off into the storm, its three grim-faced occupants lit by a sudden flash of lightning. Rising vertically, the machine hovered, the pilot battling to keep the aircraft steady in the gusting wind.

Gonzalez stared down at the complex far below, pulling a remote-control from his pack, a lopsided smile appearing on his face. This was the part he'd been looking forward to.

"Goodbye guys. Round one to the terrorists," he said, pressing the red button.

The aircraft was suddenly buffeted by a huge explosion ripping through the main facility as the long building was torn apart, its roof collapsing in a wave from one end to the other, burying the staff still locked in the basement office under tonnes of rubble. Such collateral damage was an everyday occurrence to Gonzalez and meant little to him.

The helicopter hovered a while longer, like an overgrown insect inspecting its kill. After the dust had settled a little, the side door of the aircraft opened and a gloved hand released the remote.

Gonzalez watched it spiral down into the destruction below, satisfied that this part of the operation had been well planned and executed.

He knew that after the fire had died down and the rescue services inspected the site, enough of the device would be found to enable MI6 investigators to link the explosion to Al Qaeda. Satisfied, Gonzalez nodded to his pilot and settled back in his seat.

As the wind buffeted the aircraft and the rain lashed it with a growing intensity, Gonzalez stared out at the dark clouds, fingers restlessly caressing the firearm strapped to his side, vivid images playing across the lids of his closed eyes as he relived his tours in Afghanistan.

His grin broadened into a full-blown smile.

=07:35 hrs=

Dawn heard the satellite phone ringing and jumped out of bed, hurrying downstairs, pulling the duvet around her as she rushed into the study.

"Hey Dawn, guess what? Your dad's on the sat-phone. He said you've left him messages all over the place." Terry said when he saw her, holding out the phone.

Dawn took the handset with trembling fingers. "Oh dad! Thank goodness. It's been horrible."

Dawn listened patiently while her dad explained that he'd just heard about the terrorist attacks on the island and that he was coming to get her and that she had to stay right where she was until he arrived.

Twisting and untwisting the telephone cord around her fingers Dawn sat smiling, not really hearing what he said, just taking comfort from the sound of his voice. It was enough to hear that he was coming to get her.

"Dawn? Dawn honey, are you okay?"

"Yes dad. I just feel a bit hot that's all. It must be the vaccination Sheena gave me earlier."

"Yes that Terry guy told me the doctor had given you something. Listen I have to go. You do what Terry and Dr Mackenzie tell you to and stay out of trouble. I'll be there before you know it. Okay?"

"Yes dad." Realising that the call was about to end set Dawn's heart racing.

She didn't want him to go. For the short time they'd been talking, all the bad things had faded away. Now they were threatening to overwhelm her again.

"Dad, I love you," she said, trying to keep the tremor out of her voice.

"Love you too honey. Bye."

Dawn was left holding the phone, listening to the crackle of an empty line. Screwing up her eyes against the tears that threatened to flow, she told herself that she'd cried enough and it was time to show them all that she could cope. Placing the handset back on the cradle Dawn stood up, shucking the duvet around her shoulders and taking a deep breath. Turning she saw Sheena watching her from the door.

"Everything alright?"

"Yes. Dad's coming to get me. He said he should be here sometime today with a bit

of luck, and that I've got to stay here until he comes for me. I think I'll go back to bed."

Sheena walked back through to the lounge, and with a big sigh sat on the couch. "She's convinced her dad's coming to get her later today, Terry. I don't know how much more of this she can take."

"I don't think there's much chance of that happening. They've got this place tied up tighter than a drum. Nobody's going to get on or off the island until this mess is sorted out, that's for sure."

=07:40 hrs=

Racing from the house Alex jumped in his car, the worn tyres leaving another few miles of rubber on the tarmac as he floored the accelerator. Mr Waverly shook his head at his next door neighbour's antics, then went back to tending his roses, unaware of the events unfolding across the Solent.

After a frantic drive into the village, Alex slammed the car door and ran up to the house, tapping his foot whilst holding his finger on the bell-push. Two minutes later a window on the first floor banged up and a man stuck his head out, eyes squinting in the early morning sunshine.

"Fuck sake!" he shouted down at Alex.

"Sorry Harry," Alex called back. "It's an emergency."

The window shut and a few minutes later, Harry was standing at the open front door, his hairy stomach hanging over the elasticated waist-band of his light blue underpants.

"What!" he greeted Alex with a growl.

"I'm really sorry Harry but I need to borrow your boat for a couple of hours. Dawn's stuck on the Isle of Wight and . . ."

"Isle of Wight? What the hell are you ranting on about?"

Alex realised that Harry might not have heard the news yet. "Look," he started again, "I haven't had time to repair the split in my inflatable. I really need to borrow yours for a couple of hours."

"Hang on."

The door slammed in Alex's face and he heard the thump of bare feet on the inside staircase as his friend, weighing in at almost twenty stones, headed back to his bedroom.

"Here." A set of keys landed next to Alex's feet with a rattle. "Put 'em back through the letterbox when you're done. And don't be all day, I want to go out myself this afternoon." Harry withdrew his head, slamming the bedroom window shut again.

Picking up the keys, Alex unlocked Harry's garage and hauled out his inflatable boat. Latching the trailer to the back of his car, he disengaged the jockey-wheel and plugged in the electrics. The Fiat's engine rattled into life, puffing out a cloud of grey smoke as Alex gunned the accelerator. Driving off down the road towards his workshop, the worry lines on Alex's forehead grew even deeper.

Twenty minutes later he had the inflatable unloaded and in the sea, the petrol tank of the 6 hp engine topped up, and his wetsuit and life-jacket stowed aboard.

After struggling into his wetsuit, Alex shrugged on the life-jacket and started the

outboard motor. It kicked into action like a dream and he pushed the throttle forward, following the buoys along the coastline before heading out towards the open sea.

Away from the shoreline Alex cranked the throttle wide, exhilarating in the spray and constant buffeting of the aluminium decking on the waves. Black clouds had gathered in the sky and rain had begun to fall, so he hunched down in the boat and headed for the Isle of Wight, his mind wandering, the rhythmic slapping of the boat on the water having an almost hypnotic effect on him.

He'd found it hard coping with Dawn since her mother's death, the 'what if' guilt building a wall between them. He'd even considered hiring an au-pair at one point, but had sent Dawn to a boarding school instead, raising his guilt levels even further.

Alex had become so involved in his thoughts that he failed to hear the aircraft swooping in low above him and it was only the shadow cutting across the ocean that alerted him to it. Glancing skywards he saw a big helicopter keeping pace with the boat. The pilot's face stared down at him out of the cockpit's side window. Another crew member stood just inside the side door opening, cradling what looked like an automatic weapon.

With a squawk and howl of feedback, a loud-hailer sounded, "Attention the boat below. You are in a restricted area. Turn your craft back towards the mainland at once."

Alex swore loudly, jabbing his finger towards the coastline - now approaching at a rapid rate - trying to make it clear that he was going to land on the Isle of Wight whether or not it was a restricted area. After all what could they do, shoot him? Hunkering down in the seat Alex weaved the inflatable from side to side, leaving the crew no chance of landing a man in the boat with him.

But the crew of the helicopter had no intention of undertaking such a dangerous manoeuvre. Instead the gunner opened up with his weapon, spraying the sea in front of the inflatable with bullets.

For a moment Alex was stunned, his mind refusing to believe what was happening. No British Forces would dare shoot at an innocent civilian this way. Then another round of bullets traced their way over the waves towards him, pushing such thoughts from his mind.

Alex stared at the shoreline ahead. He was only five minutes away, if he kept going they wouldn't be able to stop him landing. His initial surprise had given way to a deep seated determination to beat whoever was trying to stop him. Standing up, he gripped the throttle, ramming it to the stop, urging the last bit of speed from the roaring engine.

The gunner swung his weapon to the stern of the inflatable, the stream of bullets cutting right across the engine. The resultant explosion slammed Alex into the steering wheel, smashing his head against the central nut. Disorientated, he fell to one side, pulling the boat into a sharp port turn. The craft's momentum threw him straight over the side into the sea. The last Alex saw of Harry's inflatable was the thick black clouds of smoke billowing from the rubber side-floats as it settled in the sea. Bits of engine splashed down all around him and he covered his head with his hands.

Floating in the cold water, Alex was glad he'd worn his wet suit, at least it would

keep him warm and dry while he waited for the crew of the helicopter to pick him up.

But instead of rescuing him, the helicopter circled overhead once, then unexpectedly disappeared out to sea, leaving him alone with the waves and the fast sinking inflatable.

After checking that his life-jacket's emergency light and radio signal were working correctly, Alex washed the blood from his face, trying not to panic. The feel of cold water against his forearm brought the realisation that a piece of shrapnel from the engine had torn the fabric of his wetsuit.

Pulling the emergency-whistle lanyard free Alex wound it around his left arm just above the tear. Twisting the free end under the white cord, he turned his attention to where he might be. Too low in the water to make out the horizon or the shore, he floated in a circle. All he could see was the sky.

The blow to his head had brought on a feeling of drowsiness, making him lose all sense of direction. A feeling of panic began to grip him.

No he must keep calm. For Dawn's sake. He couldn't lose it now. He was wearing a wetsuit and a life-jacket, so he wouldn't drown. It was a long swim but he could make it.

He wasn't far from land but which direction?

=09:11 hrs=

Terry turned from the window, frowning at Sheena.

"They still there?" she asked.

"I doubt it in this rain. It's pouring down out there."

"I've got to get the vaccine to the police this morning. It can't wait any longer Terry."

He nodded, turning back to the window, his voice muffled as he pressed closer to the glass. "We should have called them last night when the sat-phone was still working."

"Morning," Sheena said as Dawn entered the lounge, eyes still sleepy and hair mussed up.

"Morning," Dawn replied. "There's some toast in the kitchen if anyone wants some." She took a bite of the piece in her hand, trailing crumbs down her tee-shirt.

Terry turned and wrinkled his nose. "Burnt from the smell of it!"

Dawn smiled, playing along with his attempted levity.

"We were talking about going to the police station," Sheena told her.

Dawn's smile was replaced with a frown. "But I've got to stay here. Dad said so."

Sheena walked over, putting a comforting arm around Dawn's shoulders. "I know honey but he'll understand when he knows how important this is."

Dawn shrugged Sheena's arm away. "I don't care how important it is," she snapped.

"Tell you what Sheena. Why don't I take it to the police station while you wait here with Dawn?"

Dawn picked up the look between the two adults. "He is coming for me. He told me he was."

Sheena forced a smile. "He might have a problem with that Dawn. The island's been cut-off from the mainland. Nobody's allowed on or off. It was on the news again this morning."

"He'll find a way. I know he will." The conviction in Dawn's voice surprised even her.

Sheena glanced at Terry and a concerned look passed between them. Turning back, she took hold of Dawn's hand.

"Honey . . ."

Dawn pulled her hand away. "Don't treat me like a little girl. And stop calling me honey. My name's Dawn."

"Look Dawn . . ." Sheena tried again.

"Maybe Dawn's right," Terry cut in. "Tell me what I need to know and I'll take the vaccine. It doesn't need the both of us to do it."

Shrugging, Sheena found a writing pad and scribbled some notes on it. Tearing the page off she handed it to Terry, along with a small vial. "This is the formula and a sample. They'll be able to manufacture the vaccine from that."

"My shotgun's down behind the couch in the lounge," Terry told Dawn. "I'm expecting you to look after it for me."

With that parting remark Terry was gone and they watched him through the lounge window as he ran to Sheena's car, slamming the door closed just in time to stop a cat slipping in behind him. It was impossible to see where the animal had come from in the gloom.

As Terry started the car two more dropped from an overhanging branch onto its roof and he took off with a jerk, throwing them clear.

The cats sat on the driveway in the heavy rain, tails flicking back and forth like windscreen wipers, watching the car disappear into the gloom. After a short pause, three others appeared and they all turned to stare at the house, ignoring the pelting rain and the flashing lightning. It reminded Dawn of a scene from some Gothic horror story.

=09:20 hrs=

Gonzalez ordered the pilot to take him lower over the car that had just turned right out of Booker's driveway onto Military Road.

The driver was male. Checking his file Gonzalez saw that the vehicle was registered to Dr Mackenzie. So who was driving it, Vasant? No, Vasant was Pakistani, this man was white.

"Get in front of him," Gonzalez ordered. He needed to question this guy and find out where the doctors were.

The pilot eased the helicopter lower, trying to bring the car to a halt, but the buffeting wind and pounding rain was making the manoeuvre difficult. When the tip of the landing skid clipped the car's roof the pilot swore, pulling the helicopter skywards again.

In the car Terry's heart flipped as something slammed against the vehicle's roof, making it swerve violently from side to side. His first thought was that a tree must have blown over in the storm and struck the car. The tyres squealed as he fought to regain control, the rear end fish-tailing on the rain-slicked road.

When he finally managed to bring the car straight again - heart hammering in his chest - he was facing the way he'd come, rocking from side to side as a violent wind

buffeted the car about. It took him a few seconds to realise that the booming noise overhead was a helicopter's rotor blades and not the storm.

Throwing open the door, Terry leant out, looking upwards, one hand shielding the rain from his eyes. A man was leaning from the helicopter, pointing at him. Terry's subconscious recognised the threat before he'd even realised that he'd slammed the door shut again.

The man wasn't pointing, he had a gun!

The flash of gun-fire lit up the car's windscreen as it shattered, showering Terry with tiny glass crystals. Gasping, blood oozing down his cheek, he stamped his foot on the accelerator, leaning forward into the steering wheel as he urged the car to greater speed.

Someone was trying to kill him!

The car suddenly accelerated and Gonzalez fired another couple of rounds, but they went wide as the helicopter turned to follow the escaping vehicle.

"Get nearer, I need a clean shot," he shouted.

The helicopter rapidly gained on the car and Gonzalez lent from the cockpit, taking careful aim. He didn't want to kill the driver - not yet, he needed some answers first. As he fired, the car slewed into the mansion driveway, nearly demolishing one of the high gateposts with a side-swipe and his shot missed again.

When the car broadsided the thick stone wall Terry was thrown against the door post, cracking his cheek bone. The seatbelt bracket slice into his scalp and he gasped in pain, shaking his head, trying to focus as the car slid sideways on the gravel.

Grabbing the handbrake, he fought to bring the car back under control, heading off across the grass towards the trees on the far side of the driveway.

Gonzalez took another shot but an unexpected flash of lightning dazzled him, throwing his aim off again. The bullet struck a rock, ricocheting harmlessly into the distance. Before he could fire again the car swerved off the driveway, cutting across the grass into a stand of nearby trees.

Gonzalez shouted at the pilot to get the chopper on the ground and as soon as the machine had touched down he was out, pounding across the grass towards the trees. Hitting a patch of wet mud he slid to an awkward stop, looking around.

It was gloomy beneath the canopy, the wet undergrowth making it difficult to see. Gonzalez stood stock still, then turned his head slowly, eyes half-closed.

It wasn't long before he spotted a dark outline off to one side. Holding his gun in a two-handed grip, he crept through the trees, making no sound. This was something he'd spent years training at, something that came as second nature.

When he reached the car he found the driver's door open. Rounding the back of the car, Gonzalez crouched, keeping his centre of gravity low. Then creeping along the side of the vehicle in the wet mud, he rose quickly, aiming his gun at the driver's seat, ready to fire.

The car was empty, just a slick of blood on the door post, fast disappearing as the rain washed it off.

Gonzalez flicked his eyes from tree to tree, searching out his quarry. Hearing a soft

thud from behind, he span around, firing instinctively as the dark shape launched itself at him.

=09:25 hrs=

Terry shook his head slowly, eyes unfocussed, ears ringing. Exploring the back of his scalp, his hand came away with a wet palm.

He had to get away, someone was trying to kill him!

The noise of the helicopter moving overhead drove Terry from his lethargy and he turned the starter with fumbling fingers. The engine turned over but didn't catch.

Cursing, Terry eased himself from the car, popping the bonnet to look at the engine. It took him a few minutes to locate the problem - the main distributor lead had been nicked by a bullet. Fortunately the damage was near the end which meant the lead was long enough to cut and reuse.

In a panic Terry tried to tear the broken bit free with his bare hands but the rubber covering was too strong. The helicopter flew over the stand of trees again with a clatter of whirling blades. It was much lower now, obviously on its way in to land.

He had to move - fast.

Taking a few deep breaths, he staggered off through the trees, not yet recovered enough to run. He needed somewhere to hide from whoever was in the helicopter, somewhere that he could rest and get his thoughts straight. His head was woozy and all he wanted to do was lie down and go to sleep.

Something glinted through the trees, something big and orange. For a moment Terry thought it might be the helicopter but then realised it wasn't. It was the folly. He could rest there and get his strength back.

Pulling open the door Terry made his way up the steep spiral staircase, one hand sliding around the circular wall to steady himself. It took forever to reach the big ball shaped room at the top, and when he did, he stopped on the threshold, eyes wide, breathing hard.

Dr Vasant sat slumped on the big couch, head bobbing as he tried to raise it. Terry took a few steps towards him but Vasant held up a trembling hand.

"No," he managed in a weak voice. "Go . . . you must go."

Terry bent over, hands on knees, trying to recover his breath, a warning hammering through his brain.

The fleas. He had to get away from the fleas before they bit him!

Turning, Terry stepped towards the door, then backed away, face twisted in fear as the big cat appeared in the opening. It hissed softly, watching his every move.

Shoulder against the curved wall, Terry backed away, eyes locked on the cat. The animal didn't move, just watched his retreat around the room, seeming to know that there was no escape. Terry's fingers touched something and he took a quick look.

As soon as he took his eyes from the cat it crouched and ran at him. The cupboard handle was in his hand and Terry pulled the door open, falling into the dark space, slamming the door behind him, his head banging off an overhead shelf, adding to the



headache that was already half-blinding him.

The cat yowled and began scratching at the door. Inside the cupboard Terry lent his back against the wall, clamped his arms over his head and slid downwards until he was sitting on the floor. His head felt as though it was about to explode and right now he really didn't care if the cat managed to break its way into the cupboard or not.

The cat kept up its attack on the thin door, its sharp claws wearing a deepening gouge in the soft wood.

=09:30 hrs=

The cat dropped to the ground, its head a mess of torn flesh. A twisted smile appeared on Gonzalez's face. His reflexes were still first class. He'd taken the shot without a thought, his muscle memory taking over his actions.

Pulling a small can from his back pack, Gonzalez tucked his trousers into his socks and sprayed his legs up to his waist. He'd been told that the can's contents were guaranteed to kill any insect within ten seconds and hoped that was true, because he knew that if any fleas got near his skin, he may as well stick his head up his ass and kiss the world goodbye.

Walking around the car, Gonzalez glanced into the open engine compartment, seeing that the distributor lead had been damaged, which was why his target was on foot.

Good, that would make it all the easier for him to track his quarry down.

Searching the immediate area, Gonzalez spotted some footprints in the grass and followed them. He needed to find the man who'd been driving the car before he got to any authorities. If he managed that, then his job would be made even harder than it already was.

The footprints led out into a large clearing and he stopped at the edge, surveying the area for any signs of danger. He couldn't see or hear any movements, so ran across the open space to a strange looking structure built in the middle.

A central concrete column supported a weird looking orange ball. It reminded Gonzalez of some kind of fruit but he couldn't think what. Moving around to the far side of the column he found a wooden door swinging back and forth in the breeze.

Cocking his head, Gonzalez listened at the bottom of the spiral staircase for any sounds from the building above him. Hearing nothing, he pulled out his automatic pistol and headed up the concrete staircase, taking the steps two at a time on the balls of his feet, moving smoothly, making no sound at all, even his shallow breathing regulated and controlled.

Gonzalez spotted the end of the staircase and moved up the last few steps at a crouch, stopping to listen, gun at the ready. Rising on his toes, he let his eyes rise above floor level.

The building was one large room with three windows set out in a strange pattern on the far side from him. A small door was set in the wall to his left. Apart from a dead body, a large couch and a small glass topped coffee table, the room was empty.

Gonzalez took the last few steps and stood at the door opening. He stood quite still,

taking in his surroundings, eyes flitting from place to place, studying each item in turn, ignoring the dead body he could see lying off to one side.

When he was satisfied that there was no danger, he took a step into the room and stopped, holstering his gun.

The cat dropped down on him from a shelf over the doorway, claws spread, lips curled back over sharp teeth.

=09:35 hrs=

"There's another one," Sheena said, looking through the window to see if she could spot who was shooting. Since Terry had left there had been sporadic gunfire from the front of the house and now the wood.

"It must be Terry. He's come back for some reason. He's shooting at the cats with . . ." Dawn's voice faltered when she realised that Terry's shotgun was still in the lounge behind the couch where he'd left it.

Sheena's forehead was creased with worry. They sounded more like pistol shots to her. What was happening out there? Maybe the police had come at last, she wondered hopefully.

Turning from the window, Sheena grabbed Dawn's hand, pulling her towards the kitchen.

"Where are we going?" Dawn asked, resisting. "Dad told me to stay here."

"I don't like this Dawn." Something doesn't feel right. We've got to go. Right now."

Dawn pulled her hand free, shaking her head. "NO! I'm staying here like dad told me to. He'll be here to collect me soon. You'll see. He will."

Sheena swung Dawn around to face her, taking both the girl's hands in hers. "Dawn listen to me, please. Something bad is happening out there. All that shooting and the helicopter flying over and back again. We have to leave. Tell you what. You leave a note for your dad telling him where we've gone so he can find us when he gets here, okay?" Dawn looked uncertain for a moment so Sheena shook the girl's hands, raising her eyebrows. "Come on, you know it makes sense."

Dawn looked at the floor, then back up at Sheena, her eyes searching the young doctor's face, as though looking for some hidden truth.

Finally Dawn nodded and Sheena gave her a soft smile.

=09:40 hrs=

Terry sat with his forehead against the door wondering how long it would take for the cat to lose interest and go away. He was sweating, feeling sick, wondering how much damage banging his head in the car had done him.

The scratching on the door stopped and Terry jerked his head up, putting his ear against the wood, trying to hear what was happening in the room.

Had the cat given up and gone away? Was it safe to come out now?

Sliding his back up the wall, Terry stood on shaky legs and listened as hard as he could, holding his breath so as not to distract himself. He heard a soft scrabbling noise

from across the room, then silence, disturbed a few moments later by the sound of a soft footfall.

The boom of a gunshot through the door had Terry's heart thumping in his chest and he wondered for a moment whether he'd been shot, but realised it was just the sudden rush of adrenaline.

Easing the door open a crack, he screwed his eyes up against the sudden light and peeked out, wrinkling his nose at the acrid smell of burnt gunpowder. A man stood across the room with his back to him, re-holstering a pistol. Vasant was lying on the floor at his feet.

Terry felt an overwhelming surge of anger building inside him, ousting his pounding headache and overcoming his lethargy. Every sense was suddenly at full capacity; his eyes picking out every detail of the dark room, his nose telling him that the man was a smoker, his tongue tasting the chemicals of the discharged gunpowder.

He'd shot Vasant! Vasant was already half-dead and the bastard had shot him!

Terry slammed open the door and was across the room in four quick strides, but the man was already half-turned towards him, crouched in a fighter's stance.

Hooking his arm around the man's neck, Terry caught him in an arm lock, but the man span on his toes, flicking Terry over his shoulder.

Terry slammed into the couch, tipping it onto its back, bouncing off and landing against the wall with a thud. Struggling to his feet he saw the gunman was smiling at him from across the room, arms folded as though he didn't have a care in the world.

"So my friend, we meet at last. You gave me a long chase." The man's voice was flat, unemotional, devoid of feeling.

Terry pointed at Vasant. "You killed him, you bastard."

Shaking his head the man nodded towards the small body lying against the wall. "I shot the cat," he replied. "Doctor Vasant was already dead when I arrived."

"Who are you?" Terry asked.

"I'm the man asking the questions," was the quiet reply. "Where's Doctor McKenzie?"

"I've no idea."

"That's a shame because that means you're of no further use to me." The man uncrossed his arms. "You sure you don't know?" His hand moved closer to the holster.

Terry suddenly pointed over the man's shoulder, shouting, "Cats," at the top of his voice.

As the gunman turned, Terry ran at him, hurling himself into his side, slamming him against the wall. Not stopping, Terry ran for the stairs, taking them three at a time.

Reaching the bottom door, Terry barrelled his way across the clearing and had almost reached the cover of the trees when he felt something smash into his left arm. Thrown forwards onto his side, his arm struck the ground, exploding into pain. A fraction of a second later he heard the gunshot that had taken him down.

Luckily it seemed to be only a flesh wound and he could still move. Adrenaline pumping through his body, he took off through the trees like a frightened rabbit, trying to

keep to what cover there was.

After taking the shot, Gonzalez swore loudly, rubbing the side of his head where it had slammed off the wall. If he hadn't been so dazed, he'd have killed the bastard no trouble. Now he'd have to track him down again.

When Gonzalez had been slammed against the wall, he'd fallen backwards, his left hand smashing through the coffee table, tearing a large gash in his arm. In the excitement of trying to kill the man he'd hardly noticed how bad it was, but looking at it now, he could see a large flap of skin hanging from his forearm. It needed immediate attention.

Gonzalez sat down, digging a first-aid kit out of his slim backpack. Half an hour later he looked at his handiwork and grunted. The stitches weren't the best he'd ever done but would suffice. He'd have another nice scar with which to regale his drinking pals when he got home.

Treating the wound with antiseptic powder, he covered it with a field dressing and sat back. Tossing a couple of painkillers in his mouth, he took a drink from the water bottle, closing his eyes against the sudden dizziness that descended on him.

=09:45 hrs=

Now well into the wood at the back of the mansion, Terry stopped for a breather, his lungs were burning and he had a stitch in his side. He lent over and was sick, the contents of his stomach burning his throat on the way out. Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand he looked around.

Squatting down to be sick had probably saved Terry's life. A man was working his way through the undergrowth towards him but hadn't spotted him yet. Studying the man, Terry saw that he was dressed in the same camouflaged outfit as the gunman back at the folly and carried a similar pistol in his hand.

Had the man heard him being sick? Yes he probably had, which was why he had his gun ready.

Terry eased himself behind a tree, looking about for a weapon. The only thing he could find was a rounded stone about the size of a tennis ball. Hefting it in his hand, his face lit up in a smile. He wasn't the captain of the village cricket team for nothing!

Taking a deep breath, Terry steadied his nerves. He'd only get one chance at this. If he missed he'd probably end up dead but if he did nothing he'd end up dead anyhow. Not much of a choice either way.

Taking another peek, Terry saw that the man had moved closer and was looking about slowly, obviously unsure of where he was hiding. He waited until the man was looking away from him, then stepped out from behind the tree, throwing the stone straight and true.

As the missile left Terry's hand the man spotted him, raising his gun. It went off with a sharp retort that made every bird in the wood take to the air in a mad flapping of wings.

=09:47 hrs=

Terry heard the bullet bury itself in the tree beside his head with a dull thunk. Tiny splinters of wood peppered his cheek like stinging bees.

The man who'd shot at him was lying on the ground in a heap, a large bruise already forming on his forehead where the stone had struck. Terry ran over, picking up the pistol. He checked the man's pulse, which was beating with a steady rhythm. Manoeuvring him into a sitting position, legs spread each side of a tree, Terry used the man's shoelaces to tie his wrists together around the trunk. Satisfied that he would cause him no more problems, Terry headed for the house.

Running down the rough track towards the back of the mansion, Terry spotted a helicopter sitting on the helipad, rotor blades turning slowly, as though ready for a quick take-off. It crossed his mind that Booker had come back but then he saw the pilot through the side window and it wasn't him. Also this helicopter was bigger than Booker's, more sinister looking.

It flashed through his mind that the terrorists he'd just been fighting might have Dawn and Sheena on board.

Weaving his way through the trees Terry hid behind a large rhododendron bush, studying the helicopter, not sure what to do. The terrorists - for that's what they seemed to be to him - had tried to kill him. Would this one do the same?

It didn't matter, he'd have to get on board and see if Dawn and Sheena were there. If they weren't, then he'd need to neutralise the pilot before going to the house.

Holding the pistol in a double-handed grip, Terry aimed at a spot just below the rotor blades, hoping to disable the helicopter, but before he could fire the bushes behind him rustled.

Terry spun around, finger already squeezing the trigger. Instead of the terrorist he was expecting to see, a cat faced him, eyes glinting in the fading evening light. It was thrown backwards by the bullet, dead before it hit the ground.

The echo of the shot rolled across the grounds and Terry heard the helicopter rotors begin to spin faster. The pilot had obviously heard the shot and was taking off. Breaking into a fast run, he sprinted across the clearing, just managing to catch the edge of the open side door before the helicopter rose out of reach.

Dangling from the side of the machine by one hand, Terry was buffeted by the down-draft, his heart pounding. His fear, and the sudden rush of adrenaline, gave him the strength to swing his body enough to grab onto the sill with his other hand. Then using every last bit of his strength, he slowly brought up one leg, hooking his heel inside the doorway.

Pulling himself up, Terry rolled into the cabin and lay on his back, panting with the exertion, his whole body trembling.

Struggling to his feet, he was thrown sideways when the helicopter lurched, its engine screaming as the pilot piled on the power. Then he was thrown in the opposite direction as the machine dropped again, then recovered.

What the bloody hell was the pilot playing at!

Terry finally managed to reach the cockpit. He waited for a second, then pulled out

the pistol, taking careful aim. The gunshot made his ears ring in the enclosed space.

Blood splattered across the wind-shield and instrument panels.

=09:51 hrs=

Sheena opened the front door a crack and peered out, checking to see if the coast was clear. Dawn had told her that the quad bike had been pulled out of the pond and was now in the garage. She didn't want to think about what would happen if it didn't start when she tried it. The bike was their only hope of outrunning the cats.

"Do you hear that Dawn? It sounds like a helicopter at the back of the house. He's back, Booker's back. Come on, quick!"

Slamming the front door they raced to Booker's study and across to the French doors. A large helicopter had just landed on the helipad, its rotors slowing to an idle.

But it wasn't Booker's.

Dawn suddenly grabbed Sheena's arm, horror twisting her face. "Look, a cat!"

They watched helplessly as the large animal slinked around the tail of the helicopter, belly low to the grass, eyes locked on the open side door. Sheena pulled the French doors open and stepped out, ready to shout a warning to the pilot but stopped in surprise as a shot rang out.

As the sound of the shot died away, the helicopter began to take off.

"Look out," Dawn warned, pulling Sheena back into the room.

A man had broken from the cover of some nearby bushes and was running for the helicopter. Leaping into the air, he hooked his fingers over the door threshold and they watched, hearts in mouths, as he fought to twist his body into the cabin. Just before he disappeared, Dawn caught a glimpse of his face and gasped.

It couldn't be!

"That was Terry," she whispered through dry lips, her heart still thumping at how close he'd come to falling from the rising helicopter.

A few minutes later the aircraft began to spiral downwards in a series of disjointed movements, as though the pilot had lost control.

Heading away from the house, it dropped quickly until it was skimming above the trees, then seemed to recover. It turned slowly, the pilot in plain view behind the large Perspex windscreen.

Dawn and Sheena gasped as the windscreen spattered red and the helicopter suddenly plunged to the ground.

=09:51 hrs=

Terry pulled the dead cat from the pilots shoulder, tossing it back into the helicopter. The pilot was screaming, blood streaming from his empty eye sockets, shaking his head back and forth so violently that Terry was splattered with warm blood.

Terry saw the ground rushing up at him through the blood splattered windscreen but had no time to react. The helicopter struck the top of a tree, twisting sideways, burying its rotor into the thick foliage. One of the blades snapped off, whirling across the helipad and

burying itself in a tall chimney stack. The stack exploded in a shower of bricks, and masonry cascaded down the steeply sloping roof.

Hitting the ground with an ear-numbing crash the helicopter threw large clods of earth into the air. Both men were tossed about, the pilot slamming through the windscreen, his body a bloody mess.

The impact buckled the fuselage, crushing the cockpit to half its normal size. Terry was slammed forward against the back of the pilot's seat, which protected him from the worst effects of the crash. Bent double in the confined space, he searched for a way out as the debris from the stack reached the edge of the roof and shot off, hammering down on the wreckage with a noise like rumbling thunder.

A broken piece of roof slate cut through the fuel line, spraying kerosene mix over the hot engine, and despite its high flash point, the fuel burst into flames, back-flashing to the fuel tanks.

The explosion crisped Terry's flesh and he was thrown clear of the wreckage, stumbling his way through an orange hell, wondering why his eyes felt so hot.

=09:57 hrs=

Dawn watched the helicopter hit the ground with wide-eyed horror, ducking as it exploded in a shower of flying metal. If the French doors hadn't been open she'd have been ripped to pieces by flying glass. Instead she was thrown backwards across the room by a powerful blast of hot air. She lay stunned on the floor, wondering what had hit her.

Sheena, standing to one side of the door opening, had missed the full effect of the blast. She looked around at the wrecked room, shaken by the sudden explosion that had almost deafened her. Running across the room she pulled Dawn to her feet, brushing dirt from her face, checking she had no cuts.

"Are you alright. Can you hear me?"

Dawn nodded, still dazed, then looked towards the door and screamed.

Walking through the flames of the wrecked aircraft was a burning man. The blackened figure staggered forward on unsteady legs. A shoe had been blown off, along with some toes. A few burnt rags still clung to his body, smouldering with thin wisps of grey smoke. The exposed skin was burnt into black-edged wrinkles, embedded with a raw redness. As the smell of burning flesh hit her, Dawn felt her stomach heave.

"Oh God, Terry," she muttered, tears filling her eyes, her heart beating wildly, her mind struggling to make sense of what she was seeing.

Sheena was the first to recover, pulling a curtain from the window and running outside, smothering the flames with the improvised fire-blanket. Terry fell to the ground.

Spreading the curtain beside him, Sheena shouted at Dawn to come and help. When Dawn didn't appear, Sheena shouted again. She turned her head a third time, her patience wearing thin, and saw Dawn appear at the door, a shotgun in her hands.

Sheena saw the look of hatred in Dawn's eyes and was gripped by a sudden fear.

Dawn was pointing the shotgun straight at her!

"Get down!" Dawn screamed.

Sheena took a dive to the ground.

The gun's recoil thumped the butt into Dawn's shoulder but she hardly felt a thing, pumping a new cartridge into the chamber, training the sights on another cat and firing again.

Just like shooting clay pigeons!

Dawn fired the gun twice more, each shot hitting its target square on.

Sheena lay next to Terry, her hands over her ears until the firing stopped, then looked up at Dawn with a new respect in her eyes.

Dawn fed some more cartridges into the gun and lent it against the wall. She held her hands out in front of her. They were trembling so badly she couldn't hold them still.

"Dawn, we have to get him inside. Quick, help me. Take hold of his clothing, don't touch his skin. Roll him onto his side while I bunch the curtain along his back. Then when I tell you, roll him back onto it."

Together they managed to get Terry onto the curtain. Dawn could feel the heat radiating from his body and the smell of burning fat that even now seemed to be bubbling gently beneath his skin.

Sheena thought it best not to try lifting Terry, so they dragged him into the study on the curtain. Shutting the French doors, Sheena knelt by him, her hand hovering over his face, not knowing what to do.

"Terry, can you hear me? It's Sheena McKenzie."

Dawn sobbed from the other side of the room, then slowly walked over and dropped to her knees.

"Is he dead?" she asked through her tears.

Sheena shook her head. "I don't think so but he's badly burnt. We need to get him to a hospital as soon as we can."

"How?" Dawn asked in a flat voice. "He took the car. We can't even lift him onto the quad."

Sheena stood up and pulled Dawn to her feet, leading her out of the room and into the kitchen. "He's going to die and very soon Dawn. There's nothing we can do except try to make him more comfortable."

"And how do we do that?"

Dawn's cheeks were wet with tears and Sheena could see that she was at her wits end.

"I'll cover the worst of his burns with cling-film, that's about all I can do for him. I haven't got any pain killers except some paracetamol, which won't do the slightest good. You stay here while I do what I can."

"No." Dawn dried her eyes with the back of her hand and took a deep breath. "I want to help. He was my friend."

Sheena looked at the pale girl for a moment, weighing her options. In the end she nodded her head slowly. "Okay then."

Searching the kitchen drawers they found two rolls of cling-film and returned to the study. The stench of burnt flesh was overpowering and Dawn wished that they could open



the windows, but the threat of a cat attacking them was too real.

Fifteen minutes later they had covered as many of the burns on Terry's body as they could. While they treated him, Terry moaned quietly a few times but had not opened his eyes.

Sheena went to get herself a drink and Dawn sat on a cushion by Terry's head, arms wrapped around her knees, wondering where her dad was.

He'd promised. He'd promised her that he would come.

=12:32 hrs=

Gonzalez moaned and opened his eyes.

He sat still for a moment, his brain taking in the oddly shaped room. Then it came flooding back.

His fight with the man he'd been chasing!

Looking down at his arm he eased the dressing off, examining the cut he didn't remember stitching. It was a rough job but would suffice. Dumping another dose of antiseptic powder on his arm, he redressed it and took a couple of strong painkillers. Massaging his temples he sighed, then checked his watch.

Shit, he'd been out for hours!

Gonzalez licked dry lips, trying to push his burgeoning headache aside so he could think straight. He felt weak and no surprise, but he'd suffered worse and had still come through. This was no different.

Taking his time Gonzalez made his way down the steep staircase and out into the clearing. He checked his surroundings, flicking his eyes from point to point, swearing to himself that any God damned cat that came near him would breathe its last.

Pulling out his two-way radio he tried contacting his associate, then the chopper pilot, but both radios were off-air. Checking with his base he was told that they couldn't raise them either and that was when he realised he might be in trouble.

Before he could give any orders he was given a message from his paymaster in America telling him to get over to Area 7 and make sure that the remote was found and to keep an eye on the police activity. It was essential that the attack was put down to Al-Qaeda. Even though he thought it best to search the mansion for the man who had attacked him before he left, the American was paying for his services so Gonzalez did as he was told, ordering a car to pick him up on Military Road.

The storm had stopped and the sky was splashed with the red promise of sunshine, but there was still a slight chill in the air. Taking a few deep breaths Gonzalez orientated himself and set out towards the gates at a slow pace. He'd conserve his strength while he could. He'd need it later when he ran into that guy again.

A smile formed on his lips when he thought about what he'd do to him when they did meet again.

=14:45 hrs=

"How did it go sir?"

Holland ignored his PA, slamming the office door closed. Then, slumping behind his desk, he took a deep breath, trying to calm the palpitations that threatened to overtake him.

The meeting had not gone well, the Prime Minister accusing him of withholding information. It had been touch and go for a while but he'd finally managed to convince the Old Man that terrorists had been responsible for releasing the virus into the general cat population, and that the rumours circulating through the news media that it was the result of some balls up at a government experimental facility were just that - unfounded rumours.

Admiral Purser reported that the navy had shot down a suspect helicopter thought to contain a group of terrorists, which supported Holland's argument, but unfortunately the aircraft had sunk with no survivors, so it couldn't be verified.

They discussed a report from the rescue services that a detonation device had been found at Area 7 and that it may have links to Al-Qaeda. The remains were being studied by experts, who were expected to report first thing in the morning. A news release had been prepared regarding the bodies found in the ruins of Area 7 and the Prime Minister would release it straight after the meeting.

The Prime Minister instructed General Locke to send in the army to wipe out the cat population on the Isle of Wight before the situation got any worse, and they discussed how best to handle the resultant news coverage that was bound to follow. Booker tried to delay the operation to give Gonzalez more time to track down Doctor McKenzie but the Prime Minister vetoed his suggestion.

Holland realised that with the facility gone and Vasant dead, Doctor McKenzie was the last link in the chain and if she wasn't neutralised right now, the whole lot could come crashing down around his ears.

When Holland left the COBRA meeting, the Prime Minister's private secretary was waiting for him, and as the others made their way towards the street and the waiting press conference, Holland was taken to one side and left in no doubt that the Prime Minister wanted a full report from him by that evening on what had been going on at Area 7, especially as far as experiments on cats were concerned.

Holland closed his eyes, wondering just how much longer he could keep all the balls juggling in the air at the same time. Picking up the phone he sat quietly for a moment, then tapped out the number he'd been putting off ringing since his arrival back from Downing Street.

=18:38 hrs=

Alex opened his eyes with a start. He'd fallen asleep and was cold. His muscles were shivering violently, trying to build up warmth. He was beginning to hallucinate, hear voices.

The voice spoke again, "Hey mister, this way. Over here."

Alex closed his eyes, giving himself back to the calmness that waited just out of reach. An unexpected slap on the side of his face brought his attention back.

"Grab it man. Grab the rope."

Shaking himself awake, Alex grasped the rope in hands that hardly worked. Winding the rough cord around his wrist, he held on tightly as he was dragged towards the launch. As he bumped against the side a sailor lent over, grabbed the back of his life jacket and hauled him aboard. Rolling over onto his back, Alex squinted his eyes against the light. A broad figure moved across the light and he was hauled into a sitting position. Something warm was thrust into his hand - a plastic mug of coffee.

"Here, drink this. Be careful, it's hot."

Sitting up Alex took a sip, feeling the hot liquid reviving his flagging spirits.

"I must have passed out. Thanks for picking me up."

"Best take it slow mate, there's a tot of rum in there."

Alex noticed the name HMS Virtue picked out in gold lettering on the sailor's cap. Struggling to his feet he hung on to the side of the cabin, watching as the sailor's body constantly adjusted to the movements of the launch; evidence of his years spent in the navy.

"Why are we heading back out to sea? I need to get ashore," Alex asked.

Until he felt the restraining hand on his arm and saw the helmsman glance back over his shoulder at them, Alex hadn't realised he'd been shouting. Trying to calm down, he licked his salt encrusted lips and took a deep breath.

"Take it easy, you've been in the sea for hours from what I hear. You're lucky someone saw you from the cliffs and reported it. Much longer and you'd have been dead I reckon. Come on, sit down, you're still in shock." The sailor guided him to the stern of the launch.

Alex sat down on the bench seat, glancing back every few seconds at the fast receding coastline. "But you don't understand . . ."

"It's you that don't understand mate. The Isle of Wight's off-limits, see. No movement on or off 'til further notice." The sailor's expression softened slightly. "What's your name?"

"Alex Winters."

"Well Alex, you got two choices. We can take you back to the mainland and drop you off, or back to the Virtue. Best take a tip from me mate, the captain ain't looking for no new passengers right now, if you get my drift."

Alex tried to stand but was roughly shoved back down on the seat.

"Don't be an idiot. You got any ID on you?"

Alex dug into the waterproof pocket of his life-jacket and pulled out a plastic covered ID card that he carried in case of emergencies at sea. It seemed to satisfy the sailor, who sat down next to him.

"Okay then, so where do we take you?"

Alex gave the Isle of Wight another long look and sat back. "Home I suppose."

The sailor slapped Alex's knee, chuckling softly. "Okay, home it is then. Just point the way."

The sun was low in the sky, casting a red wash over the sea. The steersman had switched on the riding lights, which now threw out soft red and green glows. The launch slapped the waves and the tang of ozone bit the air.

“Christchurch harbour,” he said watching the lights on the Isle of Wight fade away in the gloom.

The powerful engines began thrusting the launch through the waves and Alex heard the steersman’s voice relaying their heading via the radio. Sitting so he faced the strong breeze blowing across the bow, his thoughts turned elsewhere and elsewhere.

As his dead wife had been fond of saying when they faced an apparently impossible dilemma, “Alex, there’s more than one way of skinning a cat.

## **Day 6**

=04:05 hrs=

Alex checked the instruments and adjusted his heading. Ten minutes more and he should be off-shore somewhere alongside Military Road. Then it would probably take him a further ten minutes or so to find a secure place to hide his submersible and swim ashore.

I’ll be there in half an hour baby. Just hang on, he promised his daughter.

The journey across the Sound and around to the southern side of the Isle of Wight had gone without a hitch, the Dawn running silently on her batteries. The work he’d done on the rewiring had paid dividends, the new sonar set-up guiding him safely to his destination, and even the seal he’d replaced was holding up.

When Alex finally surfaced it was to a dull rainy day, the small craft tossing about on the surging waves. Even though it was early morning, the low clouds and lashing rain made it so dark that he was concerned about taking the submersible any nearer to the shore for fear of damaging it. He sat thinking for a moment, bracing himself against the swells, wondering how to get ashore.

Then a yellow blinking light caught his attention. It was a large warning buoy about fifty metres to leeward. The coastline here was obviously dangerous with underwater rocks. He’d have to be very careful.

Keeping a sharp eye on the sonar Alex manoeuvred the bobbing craft as near as he could to the buoy. He needed to be quick once he opened the hatch as the heavy seas might flood the small submersible.

Alex punched a few buttons and slipped a hand into the control glove that operated the Dawn’s claw-like appendage attached to one side of the viewing bubble. It took him five attempts before he finally got a grip on one of the buoy’s big anchor points, by which time he was dripping with perspiration.

Locking off the claw Alex donned his wetsuit, took a pair of flippers from a locker, stuffed a pair of deck shoes into his pocket and squeezed himself through the tight opening of the hatch.

As he struggled his way out on to the top of the Dawn, he was met with pounding waves and stinging rain, almost losing his grip as he fought to dog the hatch closed.

Dropping backwards off the submersible, Alex fell into the sea, turning to orientate himself. He saw it coming too late, just managing to raise a protective shoulder as the Dawn twisted on its claw, crashing into him.

Coughing seawater Alex fought down the panic.

I'm okay! I can do this!

His shoulder felt numb and he was having difficulty moving his right arm, but he kicked out with his flippers, keeping his head above the waves, slowly fighting his way towards shore, wishing he'd used his air-tank, instead of just a face mask.

The morning light was dim, rain shrouding any lights that might have been showing from the houses dotted along the shore. Alex could just make out the dark outline of a hill in the distance and set out towards it at a slow crawl. He was strong but had never attempted a long swim in such dangerous conditions before.

Alex had only swum a short distance when he realised that he might have made a terrible mistake. The clouds had lowered, cutting what little light there was even farther. Behind him just black waves, in front an impenetrable wall of rain.

All sense of direction had suddenly deserted him.

=05:01 hrs=

The wind clipped the tops of the waves into long white frothy streamers that lashed Alex's face. He was tiring quickly but could see the rocky outline of the shore not far away. Thin fingers of sand stretched out into the sea, like a cupped hand ready to support him.

His knees hit the seabed and he stood, bracing himself against the incoming waves breaking against his back, feeling the exhilaration flood through his body.

He'd made it. He was ashore. As though in celebration of his success the rain eased and a weak sun showed through the clouds.

Spitting salty sea water Alex staggered up the thin sandy spit and flopped down behind a large rock, digging a hole in which he buried his wetsuit and flippers. Then donning the deck shoes he'd bought with him, he made his way across the dunes to Military Road.

The swim had been the hardest physical undertaking that Alex had ever experienced and he felt exhausted. He needed a rest.

Crossing Military Road he found a thick bush and burrowed his way into the middle. The ground was dry and he lay down, hands behind his head, thinking of his daughter and how good it was going to be when he held her in his arms again.

Alex suddenly realised that, since Karen's death, he'd been distant with Dawn, afraid to get too close in case she was taken from him, as his wife had been. The situation had grown without him really realising it, sort of crept up on him unawares; an emptiness that had its origins in the terrible numbness of Karen's funeral, a rejection that forced him to lock away his feelings. Perhaps it was time to open that particular door again and examine what lay hidden behind it.

Being physically separated from Dawn this way had shaken Alex from his self-cantered behaviour, made him realise that he had to change, make up for the loneliness

he'd caused his daughter. Rejection could be a terrible thing to bear. Alex knew this first hand, from the way he had felt after Karen had left him to raise their daughter on his own.

And maybe he should start dating again, perhaps find a mother for Dawn. That thought brought a tight smile to Alex's lips and he wondered if he'd even know how to go about dating after all these years.

Alex felt his eyes grow heavy and closed them, telling himself that he'd just have a short rest, then get back to finding Dawn. The swim had really taken it out of him. His muscles ached as if he'd run a marathon. His last thought before slipping into a deep sleep was whether or not he should use the internet to meet someone, or try speed-dating.

As Alex slept, a dark shadow made its way through the damp grass and across Military Road, its sensitive nose close to the ground, following the scent trail. It moved nearer to where Alex was sleeping, its curiosity aroused. Something was hiding here. Excitement rose in the animal and it pushed its head further under the bush, moving stealthily so as not to frighten whatever was there.

=05:43 hrs=

Dawn and Sheena had sat at Terry's side all through the long night waiting for him to die but he'd hung on, moaning softly now and then, eyes moving beneath blackened lids as though he was dreaming.

Sheena had finished a quarter bottle of whisky and Dawn was swimming in coke. Neither of them had eaten. Apart from a helicopter flying low overhead about half an hour before - which had revived their hopes for a short period - there had been no sounds from outside.

The room was dark, except for the red glow of the morning sun reflecting from the high clouds. Outside the chorus of birds had died down and a thick silence lay over the room - just the odd creak of expanding wood as the structure of the house warmed up.

Dawn was sitting in a half-daze, thinking about her dad when someone spoke. "Huh? What did you say?"

Sheena sat upright, hands on her knees, staring at Terry open mouthed.

"I . . . tried . . ." The skin around Terry's mouth split as he spoke.

"He's trying to say something," Sheena said jumping out of her chair.

Kneeling beside Terry, Sheena lent close to his ear, ignoring the smell. "Can you hear me Terry?"

The voice was almost inaudible, disjointed, as though each word was uttered with great pain. "The pilot . . . tried to save him . . . but the cat . . . too late." After a long pause, during which they thought he'd passed out again, he continued, "The car is in the wood . . . wood . . ."

Sheena felt tears stinging her eyes and wanted nothing more than to hold the dying man in her arms to ease his pain, but knew that was impossible. "Hush now Terry. Do you want a drink of water?"

"The car . . . take a knife . . . cut the lead . . . the lead to . . ." Terry gave a shudder

and his head rolled to one side.

Dawn could see the rawness of his tongue protruding from his mouth and swallowed hard. "Is he dead?" she asked.

Sheena shook her head and sat back on her heels. "No, he's passed out again. I wish there was something we could do."

"What do you think he meant about the car?"

"I don't know."

Dawn thought for a moment. "He said the car was in the wood. Do you think we could get it and take him to a hospital?"

Without realising it Dawn was already replacing 'Terry' with 'him' in her mind, making it easier to deal with the situation.

Sheena stood up, easing the muscles in her back. She looked weary and pale, not the vibrant woman Dawn had first met such a short time ago.

"Perhaps . . ."

Sheena's words were cut short by the noise of the French doors crashing open. A man in camouflaged fatigues stood in the doorway, his swarthy face glinting with a light sheen of sweat, his hard eyes locked on Terry, along with the gun he carried.

"Thank goodness," Sheena said. "We need to get him to a hospital. Will you help us? Do you have transport? Where you in that helicopter?"

Dawn shifted uneasily, her eyes darting from the intruder to Sheena and back again. She felt anxious and took a few steps nearer Sheena. The man looked at her. His eyes were cold and uncompromising.

"You're Doctor McKenzie," he said.

Sheena nodded. "Yes but Terry needs help. It's urgent."

"He's beyond help."

The cold, clipped words made Dawn feel as if her heart had been dipped in icy water. She moaned softly.

"Sit over there," the man told Sheena, pointing at the couch with his gun.

"Now wait a . . ."

Sheena's protest was interrupted when the man kicked the French doors shut behind him and walked further into the room.

"Where's your laptop. The one you took from Area 7?" he asked.

"Look, I don't know who you think you are but . . ."

The slap was hard, almost taking Sheena off her feet. Dawn screamed, jumping up.

"Sit down! Unless you want some of the same," he ordered, his finger stabbing at the couch in anger.

Dawn sat, her eyes wide, hands trembling as she watched Sheena wipe the blood from her lips.

"Fetch that chair over here."

Sheena did as the man ordered and he pushed her into the seat, securing her hands behind her back with plastic ties.

"Now you."

Dawn pulled over an antique dining chair and the man cuffed her wrists to the arms. He sat on the couch opposite them and took out his gun again.

"So," he said, "just like in all those films you no doubt watch, we can do this the easy way or the hard way. For both your sakes I'd suggest you do it the easy way and answer my questions honestly."

Dawn stared at him with hate-filled eyes, wishing she had the shotgun in her hands. Where was it? Where had she left it?

"Let's start with the crispy guy on the floor shall we. Who is he?"

Sheena struggled with her bonds. "You heartless bastard!" she shouted.

"Who is he, or do you want me to wake him up and find out myself?"

"His name is Terry. He's Mr Booker's Estate Manager."

"How did he end up like this?"

"When the helicopter crashed and exploded."

"He was on board the helicopter?" Gonzalez asked, his voice rising in doubt.

Sheena nodded.

"Well I guess that's two things I owe him for then."

"What?"

"Never mind. Tell me where the laptop is."

"What laptop?" Sheena was worried. If the laptop got into the wrong hands her work could be easily replicated.

The man lent forwards on the couch, forearms resting on his knees, gun held steady in a two handed grip. Slowly raising the gun, he pointed it at Terry's head.

"Can you live with another man's death on your conscience doctor? I know it might be a mercy to put him out of his misery, but still."

"You wouldn't dare." Sheena's voice shook with indignation.

"You sure you want to test that theory doctor?"

"Upstairs. It's in the bedroom upstairs," Sheena capitulated in a beaten voice. "The third one along. Under the bed."

The man stood up, holstering his gun, a sneer on his lips. "Don't even think about trying to escape," he said. "Otherwise Crispy there won't need a doctor, he'll need an undertaker."

Dawn looked at Sheena, seeing the shock in her eyes. She felt totally numb, like when she'd first heard that her mum was dead.

"What'll he do when he gets the laptop?" she whispered in a subdued voice after the man had left the room.

"Hopefully he'll go," Sheena replied, not really believing what she was saying, just trying to reassure Dawn.

Footsteps sounded and the man came back into the study, a laptop clutched in his hand. Sitting at the desk, he opened the lid and pressed the on-off button, tapping his fingers as he waited for it to boot up.

As the screen finally lit up he chuckled quietly to himself, then turned to Sheena. "Well doctor," he said, "are you going to tell me the password or do I have to guess it?"



Sheena sat staring at him for a moment, her heart pounding.

Should she take the chance or not? she searched for the right answer, mind in a turmoil. Which password should she give him? The one that would give him access to her research, or the one that would completely wipe the disc?

The first would mean that others would continue her work - with all the terrors that inferred, the second would probably result in their deaths.

"A, C, r, o, n, 25, A, D, G," Sheena responded to the man's raised eyebrows, carefully calling out each character.

The man rattled the keyboard then looked across at her, checking the password with her one last time. Sheena nodded and he hit the Enter key.

=06:41 hrs=

The room had grown unnaturally quiet. Sheena watched the man studying the laptop. The hard disc light was flickering but nothing seemed to be happening. He turned to look at her, his eyes flashing in the dim light. She shivered, looking at the floor.

"It can take quite a while to load up," she said looking up at him through her eyelashes. "The files are big."

As Gonzalez sat watching the screen, waiting for the computer to finish booting up, he smiled to himself. He'd been right to come back to the mansion instead of staying at Area 7 and directing operations there. After he'd finished here, he would go back and take over where he'd left off.

Sheena watched him, praying that the programme had loaded and was running in the background.

"What's your name?" she asked, trying to divert his attention from the laptop.

"Gonzalez," he answered, eyes still fixed on the screen.

He suddenly straightened in his chair, leaning forward, swearing under his breath. Raising his fist he brought it down on the keyboard with a crash. Half a dozen keys shot from the laptop, rattling off the desk and flying in all directions.

Gonzalez slowly turned his look on Sheena, shaking his head from side to side.

"That was a big mistake doctor," he said.

Turning back to the laptop, He picked it up and slammed it down on the desk. Pieces of plastic flew off. Tearing the back from what was left of the chassis, Gonzalez pulled out the hard drive.

"There are people who can retrieve information from this doctor," he said holding it up for her to see. "All you've done is make things more awkward for me." Standing up he walked over to Sheena. "Where's the rest of the paperwork you took from Area 7 when you left?"

Sheena cringed back in her seat, feeling the anger radiating from the man standing over her. She looked away, closing her eyes. "Do what you will to me," she whispered. "There's no paperwork. The laptop was all I took."

Without warning Gonzalez drew his gun and shot Terry in the head.

"Oh but it's not you that I'm going to hurt doctor. At least not straight away." A smile

spread over his face and he turned the gun on Dawn. "After I've killed this one, then I'll get to work on you. You'll be surprised at how long I can keep you alive, wishing you were dead. Where are the papers? I won't ask again."

Dawn was in shock, her fingers tingling, her eyes wide, her ears picking up every little sound, even her nose telling her that the cut flowers in the vase on the far side of the room were lilacs. The whole world was brighter, more alive. She was trembling uncontrollably.

Sheena's mouth hung open, her mind fighting to hold onto the contents of her stomach. She looked at the face that had once smiled at her - now a blackened mess oozing brain tissue onto the floor. She worked her mouth, trying to speak, desperately shaking her head as though it might turn back time and release her from the nightmare.

Gonzalez put the barrel of his gun under her chin, raising her head so he could look into her eyes.

"Well doctor, what's it to be? Another death, or the paperwork?"

Sheena gasped a series of breaths, trying not to lose control of her stomach. "Please . . ." she managed through a tongue-filled mouth. "Please you have to believe me, there are no papers. The laptop was all."

Gonzalez turned, holding his gun against Dawn's temple. "Last chance doctor."

"NO!" Sheena's scream was full of anguished terror. She was straining at the ties binding her wrists, cutting them deep into her skin, pulling the chair over the carpet in a series of disjointed jerks. Her voice bounced from the study walls as she shouted at Gonzalez, her whole body thrashing in panic.

"PLEASE NO!"

=06:42 hrs=

Alex woke with a start. He was disorientated, not knowing where he was or what had woken him. Then something licked his cheek again and he turned to see a large dog looking down at him, its big tongue lolling from its mouth.

Alex frowned, wondering where it had come from. A voice called in the distance and the dog's ears pricked up. It looked back out of the bush, then at Alex again, head tipped to one side, panting.

"Bugger off," Alex whispered, pushing at the dog's head.

The voice called again and the dog barked, making Alex jump.

"Go away before he comes and finds me. Go home!"

The dog backed half-way out of the bush, then hesitated. This time, when the voice called the dog disappeared in a flurry of falling leaves. Alex breathed a silent sigh of relief, his heart still hammering in his chest.

Crawling out of the bush Alex stood up, the sharp tang of seaweed and the sound of waves reminding him of where he was and what he had to do. The sky was light, promising a sunny day. Checking his watch he saw it was coming up for a quarter to seven.

Christ, he'd been asleep for an hour and a half!

Blue flashing lights suddenly appeared in the distance, accompanied by the he-haw of sirens. Alex hid behind the bush as a red fire-tender flashed past, the Doppler effect adding to its appearance of speed. It was followed by two other rescue vehicles and a police car.

As the dust settled, Alex pulled out a map and studied it. Booker's house was about four miles in the opposite direction to that taken by the fire engines. It would take him at least an hour, probably more the way his legs were aching.

He set out along the road thankful that the rain had stopped. The low clouds were beginning to break and the humidity was rising. Alex frowned, hoping it wasn't going to be too hot once the sun burnt the low lying mist away. He had a long hike in front of him and too much heat would slow him down.

As Alex strode along the side of the road, his tired legs consuming the distance at a steady pace, a lone animal followed him at a distance, eyes fixed unwaveringly on his back.

=07:30 hrs=

Alex checked the map one last time, then folded it, slipping it into an inside pocket. Not long now, about another half hour's hard walk. Since the rescue services had roared passed there had been little traffic on the road - just a couple of cars and a lorry.

Realising that he stood out like a marshmallow man at a weight-watches convention Alex had dropped into the roadside ditch when they approached. He didn't want to chance getting picked up by the police after all the effort he'd put into getting here.

Sitting down for a rest, he pulled out an energy bar and chewed on it, wondering why there were so many half eaten rabbits and other small dead animals lying about.

As he chewed the bar Alex thought about Dawn. She was so young and vulnerable and inexperienced. He wondered how she was coping, hoping that the doctor was looking after her properly. Finished with the meagre meal, he took a drink from the bottle of water he was carrying and strode off down the road again.

As Alex's shadow lengthened behind him, another darker shadow stopped beside the wrapper he'd just dropped, licking the remnants of chocolate before silently following after him.

Twenty minutes later Alex saw a high stone wall that obviously surrounded a house of some kind. He came to a large ornate gateway, the nearest post of which displayed a fancy iron plaque declaring that this was the Booker Mansion.

While Alex was examining the high gates, the cat that had followed him scaled the stone wall farther back along the road, working its way along the top. It had been persistent, stalking its prey patiently, knowing its time would come, not now but soon.

The cat was young, not much more than a kitten. It knew instinctively that the prey was too big for it to tackle on its own. It sensed others of its kind nearby, others that would help. Inching its way along the top of the wall the cat stopped just above the man's head, fighting the deep rage that urged it to attack the prey right now.

Alex rattled the gates. They were firmly locked. Reaching out, he put a finger on the

entry unit's call button but hesitated. Lowering his hand, he curled his fingers in a fit of indecision. He didn't know who might be at the mansion. Maybe the doctor had taken Dawn back to Area 7 so that she could keep an eye on her. If his little escapade with the navy had been on the news he might be recognised and stopped before he could get to Dawn.

Making up his mind to take a look first, Alex scaled the gates and sat astride the high stone wall, catching his breath before climbing down the other side. A noise made him turn. A young cat lay crouched farther along the wall, watching him with wary eyes.

Alex's face lit up in a smile. He was a cat man, always had been, preferring their independence to a dog's need for a pack leader.

"Well hi puss. What are you doing there?"

The cat lowered its head, its whole body flattening, its fur standing erect, lips curling back over sharp teeth.

"Whoa puss! Now that's not nice is it." Alex held out his hand, rubbing his thumb over his fingertips, making clicking sounds with his tongue. "Come on, let's be friends shall we?"

When Alex reached out the cat lifted a paw, extending its claws, hissing and growling in the back of its throat.

"Fair enough," Alex muttered to himself, turning away and dropping to the ground, rolling over as he landed to lessen the impact.

Can't win 'em all, he thought, leaning one-handed against the wall while he brushed the leaves off his clothes.

The cat ran along the wall, looking over the edge, its yellow slitted eyes widening. Its prey was getting away. Its heart-rate climbed, speeding the virus through its veins, flooding its brain with an almost palpable rage.

Gripping the top of the wall with its claws, the cat bared its teeth and launched itself into the air.

=08:01 hrs=

Alex heard a noise and looked up. The cat had jumped from the wall onto the low hanging branch of a tree. It seemed to be following him. Smiling to himself, Alex turned his attention back to the mansion that he could just make out through the trees.

Halfway along the drive Alex caught the flicker of something to his left and looked over. The cat was pacing him. He stopped. The cat stopped. He began walking again and the cat did the same. Then, from a nearby bush another animal appeared, joining it. This cat was bigger. It looked like a male.

Alex shrugged and continued up the drive, his deck shoes crunching on the stones. Glancing over at the cats again, he frowned. There were four now. Just how many cats did Booker have?

The animals kept pace with him, watching his every move. Warning tingles ran up Alex's spine. Something wasn't right here. Cats didn't behave this way.

Stepping off the drive he cut across the lawn to his right, putting some distance

between himself and the cats. As he neared a large flower bed three more of the animals emerged from amongst some tall fancy grasses, flanking his other side.

“What the . . .”

Alex stopped, looking around. He could see at least five other cats in the distance. If he didn't move right now they'd have him surrounded.

Although he knew that cat's didn't attack people, Alex's rising uneasiness turned to fear, overtaking logic. He broke into a run, heading towards a garden shed behind a low hedge.

Glancing over his shoulder Alex could see that the cat's were running after him and he piled on some more speed, gulping lungfuls of air as he neared the hedge. Another quick look told him that it was going to be a close thing. The cats were just a few metres behind him now but he would make it.

Vaulting over the low hedge, Alex threw himself through the open shed door and slammed it shut behind him, leaning his forehead against the rough woodwork, heaving and coughing as he tried to recover his breath.

“God-damn!” he whispered, raising his head from the door. “God-damn!”

It was then he heard the low growl from behind him.

=08:05 hrs=

Gonzalez studied Sheena's face, his finger whitening as he put pressure on the gun's trigger.

“Please, you have to believe me,” Sheena pleaded. “Why would I lie to you when I told you were the laptop was?”

Dawn could feel the muzzle of the gun pressed against her temple. It filled her world. She was unable to think, unable to speak, hardly able to breathe. Her whole being was waiting for the explosion that would end her life.

“Please . . .” Sheena tried again, closing her eyes when she saw Gonzalez's finger tightening on the trigger.

Instead of shooting Dawn, Gonzalez released the trigger and lowered his gun. “Okay doctor,” he said.

Holstering his weapon, he began a thorough search of Booker's study, pulling books from the shelves and emptying drawers onto the floor, adding to the mess that Booker had made when he'd left. Finding nothing, he turned his attention to the rest of the house.

As Gonzalez ransacked the mansion, Sheena and Dawn sat tied to their chairs, Dawn sobbing quietly. Sheena's heart went out to her, realising the poor girl must be terrified.

“Are you okay Dawn?” she asked.

Dawn raised her head, sniffing back the tears. “Bastard!” she said. “I thought he was going to shoot me.”

Sheena was taken aback, realising that the tears of fright were really tears of anger. She had misjudged Dawn, again.

“Can you get free?” Dawn asked pulling at her own restraints with no luck.

"No. My hands are numb, I can't feel them."

Dawn looked over at Sheena and gave her a small quirky grin. "Thanks for saving me," she said.

"I'm not sure that we're saved yet," Sheena said.

Dawn turned her gaze to the body lying on the floor, her face drawn. She had laughed and joked with this man such a short time ago, and now he was dead.

"I didn't know him that well but he seemed a nice man," Sheena said.

Dawn nodded. "He was," she replied, giving a quiet sigh and taking a deep, shuddering breath.

"Someone will be here soon," Sheena said with as much conviction as she could muster.

Dawn looked her straight in the eye and Sheena glanced away. "That's what my dad told me," she answered quietly.

"It's not his fault Dawn, the island's been shut down."

"I know."

"He'd be here if he could."

"I know."

"Do you and your dad live alone?"

Dawn nodded, a sad smile on her face. "My mum died when I was young."

"It must have been hard for you. For the both of you."

Dawn's eyes clouded over, as though she was deep in thought. "Yes I suppose it was. For him as well."

"He loves you."

Dawn shook her head and her eyes hardened. "You don't know that. Stop patronising me."

Sheena nodded. "Yes you're right. I'm sorry Dawn."

"I know he loves me," Dawn whispered, her conviction growing inside her.

Yes, he does love me!

The realisation was like a light suddenly flooding a dark room.

He does love me and I love him right back.

=08:08 hrs=

Alex froze, the patch of skin between his shoulder blades tingling as though touched by an icy finger. He turned, his back thudding against the door.

In the dim light coming through the cobweb covered window, Alex saw that he was faced by the biggest cat he'd ever seen. For a moment he thought it was a leopard or some other kind of wild animal that had escaped from a zoo.

The cat's large ears were erect, long tufts of hair lining the insides. Its eyes were mere slits, lending them a fierce quality. It appeared to be looking down its nose at him, lips pulled back, showing large canine teeth. Long whiskers quivered each side of its brown tipped nose.

Unlike most cats Alex had seen it had unusual markings, the spots and stripes

reminding him of a Scottish wild cat. Whatever it was, Alex knew that it was about to attack him.

The cat studied him, tail moving slowly from side to side. It turned, walking around the shed. Alex turned with it, aware that he had nowhere to run. At least inside the shed he only had one animal to contend with. Outside, who knew how many.

Alex edged backwards, spotting an old gardener's jacket hanging on a hook. He reached out slowly, making no sudden movements. The cat watched him wrap it around his arm, hissing like a snake.

For some reason Alex didn't understand, he found it almost impossible to tear his gaze from the big animal's eyes, and they continued moving around the shed, circling each other, eyes locked.

The cat struck out but Alex managed to kick it away, his deck shoe doing little damage. Alex crouched slowly, his hand searching for the garden rake he'd spotted laying on the floor, but as his hand found the cold steel handle, the cat attacked him again.

Alex flung his arm in front of his face and the cat crashed against it, pushing him backwards.

Alex staggered, falling over, landing on the rake's upturned spines.

His screams confused the cat for a moment, giving him time to stagger to his feet again.

Outside the shed the other cats began yowling and attacking the shed door, thumping against the flimsy wood time and again. Alex could see that the home-made hook wouldn't keep them out for much longer.

The big cat was stalking him again, edging him nearer the door, almost as though the animal was somehow communicating with those outside, herding him towards them.

There was another flurry of thumps against the door and it gave a little more, daylight showing down the frame. As he was forced closer, first one paw then another pushed its way between the edge of the door and the post.

Paws dabbed about, thick claws tearing pieces from the jamb as they strained against the failing hook.

Alex kept his attention on the big cat, trying to reach the door before it gave way. He reached out towards the rake again, but the cat lunged at his hand, ripping four deep lines across his knuckles.

Alex kicked out at the animal . . .

. . . just as the shed door burst open.

=08:15 hrs=

Gonzalez paced the study floor, his patience wearing thin. Holding the two-way radio to his lips he tried raising his companion. "Gater Two, Gater Two, come in."

Gonzalez has spent two hours tearing the mansion apart and had nothing to show for it, which pointed to the doctor having told him the truth.

"Where's the door to the garage?" he asked Sheena.

"Through the kitchen, the door beside the tall fridge," Dawn answered, "but there's

no car there. Terry . . ." She stopped, a lump rising in her throat. "Terry lent it to one of the staff."

Gonzalez threw her a suspicious look and headed out the door. As Dawn had told him, there were no cars in the garage, but he did find a half-filled plastic container of petrol and a quad bike. The bike looked as if it had been dragged through a mud bath - thick dirt encrusting every surface - but when he tried it, the engine purred into life.

Taking the container back through to the house, Gonzalez ran up the stairs and poured petrol over the beds. After the fumes had dispersed a little he set light to a ball of paper which he threw on the bed. It exploded in a sheet of flames. When he was sure that the fire was well under-way, he moved onto the next bedroom. He soon had three good fires going and opened every door on the first floor to spread the flames.

Going back to the study again Gonzalez stood in front of the two women. They looked back up at him with fear-filled eyes. The smell of smoke was strong in the house now.

"Gotta go doctor," he said picking his backpack off the floor. "Good luck." Just before he closed the door quietly behind him, Gonzalez threw a lighted paper ball against the curtains.

Returning to the garage Gonzalez opened the big doors and rode out on the quad bike, eyes constantly on the move as he searched the grounds for any danger.

=08:22 hrs=

Alex brought the garden rake down in a vicious swing, pinning the cat to the floor like a museum exhibit. His triumph was short lived though because the shed door had already burst open, the space quickly filling with cats, all staring at him with rage filled eyes.

In the distance a noise grew from a faint buzz to a loud constant roar. Somebody was tearing the guts out of a small motorbike, and as it roared passed the shed, the cats turned as one, attracted by the moving prey. A moment later they were chasing after the disappearing quad bike.

Alex walked out of the shed. The cats that had attacked him were trying to head off the bike when two of them suddenly cartwheeled head over heels. The rider re-holstered his gun, slewing the bike onto the driveway, kicking up stones as he headed towards the main gates. The remaining cats sped after him, doing their best to keep up.

Alex ran from the shed across the grounds, his heart beating hard as he pounded his way up the long flight of stone stairs leading up to the front doors. Slamming his way through them he crashed them closed and broke into a fit of coughing as thick smoke swirled around his head.

The house was on fire!

"Dawn, you here?" he shouted, collapsing into fits of coughing again.

Keeping low, Alex made his way into the big hall, opening the first door he came to. The lounge was empty but clear of smoke, so he went in and took a few deep breaths. Recovered somewhat, he went out into the hall again, standing under the large staircase,



calling Dawn's name.

Hearing a faint shout from behind a closed door, Alex headed for it. When he looked into the room he saw Dawn and another woman sitting in the middle of a large study, surrounded by a ring of fire.

Without thinking Alex threw an arm across his face and ran through the flames, ignoring the heat that singed his hair. They were tied to the chairs and Alex knew that he didn't have time to free them. Picking Dawn up bodily, he swung her and the chair up onto his shoulder, then ran across the room, shouldering his way through the French doors. Glass showered over them, some small splinters nicking the skin on his cheek.

Putting Dawn down Alex ran back into the room and grabbed the back of the other chair, dragging it backwards on its legs. Struggling the chair and woman out onto the patio Alex set her upright and collapsed into a fit of coughing.

"Where's the kitchen?" he finally managed to ask.

Dawn cleared her throat. "At the front of the house dad, to the left as you come through the front door."

Taking off around the side of the house Alex entered by the front door and headed for the kitchen. A few minutes later he was at the back of the house again, a sharp knife in his hand.

"Are you alright? Are you alright?" he kept asking Dawn over and over, cutting the plastic cuffs from her wrists.

Dawn shot out of her chair and into his arms, hugging him so tightly that he could scarcely breathe.

"Oh dad, I told them you'd come for me. I told them but they didn't believe me."

Disentangling himself from Dawn's embrace, Alex turned his attention to the woman. The plastic handcuffs had cut themselves into her skin and were slick with blood. He slipped the knife between her wrists and tried to cut one. She cried out and he stopped.

"No it's okay, go ahead," the woman told him.

Alex was aware that Dawn had run into the study again but was too busy cutting the woman free to stop her. Just as he'd freed the woman and helped her to her feet, a loud blast sounded and he ducked.

Dawn was standing behind him, a large shotgun in her hands, smoke rising lazily from its barrel. A cat lay a few metres away. Others were circling them warily.

"Did you do that?" Alex asked, eyes wide in shock.

"Dad we have to go. There's a car in the woods over there, come on we can't stay here."

They took a few steps and then Dawn stopped, pointing back to the chairs. "The knife dad. We need the knife, quick."

Alex ran back, grabbed the knife and rejoined them. They ran along the track towards the woods, aware that the cats were following them at a distance.

Rounding some bushes Dawn shot two more cats crouched together in the centre of the track. She'd hardly broken stride before she was off again, leading the way into the wood.

"There, there," she shouted, pointing towards a silver outline further in the trees.

"Dawn wait!"

Hearing Sheena's shout Dawn skidded to a halt, turning quickly, gun at the ready, primed to kill any cat that threatened them.

Her dad was lying on the floor. Sheena was kneeling at his side shaking him. She looked back up at Dawn.

"DAD!" Dawn screamed, running back.

=08:42 hrs=

The cats circled, moving from tree to tree, excitement growing when they saw that one of the prey was down. Mostly they kept their distance, knowing the danger, but the rage drove one closer.

It darted forward, then stopped, body half-turned, ready to flee. The prey didn't respond, so it moved nearer.

The sun disappeared behind a cloud, casting the wood in shadows. In the gloom the other cats crept forward, following the first, using the trees as cover, whiskers quivering as they scented the fear.

Hissing low in its throat the lead cat slunk to the next tree, slithering around it, body close to the ground, yellow slit eyes fixed on the man lying on the ground.

It moved the last few metres until it was within striking distance, bunching its muscles, readying itself. Then, with a short run, it leapt, front feet spread, claws out, ready to strike at the man's eyes.

The cat exploded in a spray of blood and fur, slamming back against the tree. The blast was quickly followed by the snick-shuck of a shotgun reloading, then silence.

The sun broke from the clouds again, glinting from the tufts of hair on the large tom-cat's ears. It sat high in a tree watching the attack. As the wood fell silent, it leapt down from branch to branch, joining the others that were now gathered at the base, twisting its lithe body in and out of the clowder crowded around it, purring loudly with pleasure.

Then the feeling of contentment died, pushed aside by rage as the cat remembered the cage, the fire, and the exhilaration of the attack. Pushing its way free, the big male studied the prey, searching for weaknesses. It had learnt to be patient and use the rage to its own advantage.

=08:45 hrs=

Dawn shucked the pump-grip on the shotgun, squinting through the trees. She couldn't see any more cats but knew they were out there somewhere - waiting.

"Is there anything you can do Sheena?" she asked. "What about the vaccine you gave me?"

"It's back in the house in my purse."

"Sheena think, there must be something."

Sheena rubbed her face with both hands, her brain refusing to function.

"Sheena . . ." Dawn insisted.

"Wait, I had another batch back at Area 7 in my office."

"Do we have time, you said the virus acts quickly." Dawn paced up and down, shotgun held tightly as though she wanted to take on the world.

Sheena shook her head, feeling a deep depression slip over her. "I don't know Dawn. It depends on the individual." She sat back on her heels looking defeated.

"Help me," Dawn said slinging the shotgun over her shoulder and grabbing one of her dad's arms. "Come on, don't just sit there!"

Sheena looked up at Dawn, seeing something in the girl's eyes that snapped her out of inaction. Together they pulled Dawn's dad to his feet and set off, each with an arm draped over their shoulder, supporting his back.

"I don't even know your father's name," Sheena said as they stumbled along.

"It's Alex."

"How did he get here?"

"If I know dad, he came in his mini-sub."

Sheena looked over at Dawn with a quizzical expression. "Your father owns a submarine?"

"No, a small submersible. He bought it second hand the other day. I haven't seen it yet."

They stopped talking, concentrating on dragging the half-conscious man towards the car, casting worried looks over their shoulders all the while.

Settling Alex on the back seat, they moved around to the front of the car. Dawn stared at the engine, one hand resting on the raised bonnet, bottom lip clenched between her teeth. Sheena stood by her side, her attention back the way they'd come, thinking that she might have seen a movement in the trees.

"He said . . ." Dawn stopped, thinking. "Terry said something about a wire." Leaning over the engine Dawn picked up the disconnected high tension lead. "Do you think this is what he meant?" When there was no reply Dawn glanced up from under the bonnet at Sheena.

Sheena was staring at something in the woods. "I think you'd better hurry," she whispered.

Dawn saw the nick in the wire and pulled out the kitchen knife, slicing the thick cable just above the damage. "Here, take this," she said, holding the knife out to Sheena.

Dawn held the end of the wire in her hand, wondering where it fitted.

Where the hell did it go? Wait, what are these other black cables?

Dawn followed the cables with a finger and there, on top of a plastic cap, she saw a deep socket. Pushing the end of the cable into it as hard as she could, she prayed it would work, because if it didn't, they weren't going anywhere soon.

Dawn closed the bonnet with a thump and turned to Sheena, who was still staring off into the trees.

"Sheena?" Dawn said quietly, placing a hand on her shoulder.

Sheena was trembling, like a frightened dog about to be beaten.

"Hey?" Dawn turned Sheena around, gasping when she saw the knife clasped in her

hand. It was dripping with blood. A dead cat lay at her feet.

"Come on, get in the car, quick."

Dawn pushed Sheena, who broke out of her shock and dropped the knife as though it were red-hot. Slamming the passenger door, Dawn belted herself in and looked across at Sheena, who took a deep breath and smiled back.

"Sorry," Sheena said with a shiver, "I've never killed anything that way before."

=09:17 hrs=

The car engine cooled, ticking unnoticed as they sat looking out of the windscreen, neither wanting to believe what they saw. Area 7 was a burning ruin, smoke still rising in thick columns as the fire-fighters did their best to damp it down.

Dawn turned to Sheena, the horror plain on her face, tears threatening to fill her eyes. "We have to try to find the vaccine," she said. "Tell them to find it."

Sheena opened the car door, "Wait here and I'll go and see what I can do."

Easing her aching body out of the car, Sheena walked across to the police tapes fluttering in the breeze, lifting one up.

"Sorry madam," a voice said, "But the public have to stay on that side of the tape."

"I'm . . ." Sheena suddenly moved her body sideways, hiding herself from the tall man who appeared to be directing operations. "What's he doing here?" she said in a harsh whisper.

The policeman turned, looking at the man for a moment. "Him? Oh I think he's from MI5 or MI6 or something. Anyway one of those gung ho, we know best, departments. Bloody people come up here . . ."

But the policeman was talking to himself because the woman had disappeared. He shrugged, pulling out a packet of mints.

Strange bloody carry on, he thought chewing slowly. Terrorists they were saying.

Sheena slammed the car door, reversing out onto the road, bucking the car off the bumpy grass verge. Ramming the car into gear, she floored the accelerator, constantly checking in the rear-view mirror as they sped away.

Dawn pulled on her arm. "Stop! We have to go back! What are you doing?"

Sheena shrugged off Dawn's hand, glancing in the mirror again, her foot to the floor. The steering wheel began vibrating and Sheena's knuckles whitened. Glancing at the speedometer she saw they were doing eighty-five.

"Sheena, you're frightening me," Dawn said in a small voice, her eyes on Sheena's pale face.

"He was there," Sheena managed through clenched teeth. "He was there and I think he saw me."

The terror in Sheena's voice set Dawn's heart racing.

"Who saw you?"

"Him. The man in the house. Gonzalez!"

"What?"

"He was in the grounds. Seemed to be in charge. The policeman said he was

anyway.”

The car tyres squealed when Sheena took a corner far too fast. Dawn put her hand on the dashboard to steady herself. The car fishtailed and Sheena took her foot off the accelerator, correcting the steering, regaining control.

“What are we going to do about dad?”

“I’ve got an idea, but we need to get some stuff and hide out. If that man finds us we’re all dead.”

The certainty in Sheena’s voice frightened Dawn and she looked back over the seat. Her dad was lying on his side breathing heavily through his open mouth. His face was drenched with sweat.

“But the police . . .” Dawn protested.

“Gonzalez appeared to be in charge of the police,” Sheena cut across her. “Do you really want to take that chance?”

Sheena concentrated on her driving, pushing the car and her luck to the limit.

Fifteen minutes later Sheena drove the car into the car-park of the local shopping mall, telling Dawn to stay in the car and watch her dad. Ten minutes later she was back, a large shopping bag clutched in her arms.

Throwing the bag into the boot, Sheena jumped in the car and started it. “Okay let’s find somewhere safe to stop and treat your dad.”

A couple of miles from the car park, Sheena turned the car off the main road on to a dirt track. She had to slow right down as the deep ruts threatened to damage the suspension.

“Not far now, should be here somewhere,” Sheena muttered to herself, winding down her window to get a better view. “Yes, there it is.”

Stopping the car in front of an old ramshackle wooden building, Sheena killed the engine and climbed out, stretching her neck. Retrieving the shopping bag from the car, she led the way into the shack. Inside the single large room was a battered old table, a couple of rickety chairs, and over in one corner, a grubby looking mattress.

Taking her purchases from the bag, Sheena arranged them on the table. Dawn walked over and stood opposite her, watching as Sheena laid things out; a couple of bottles of spring water, eight bags of frozen peas, four energy bars, a camping lantern and a small white plastic bag branded with the name of the local chemist.

“Frozen peas?” Dawn asked, one eyebrow rising.

“I’ll explain later,” Sheena replied, pulling the lamp from its box.

Screwing the two parts together with a twist, she lit the gas and the dim room took on a more cheerful air.

“Come on, let’s get your dad.”

They struggled Alex into the shack, half-carrying, half-dragging him. When they finally had him lying on the mattress, they were both so breathless they couldn’t talk, collapsing in the chairs. Dawn took a drink from one of the bottles, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand.

“Is he going to be okay?” she asked, looking across at her dad.

Sheena sat for a moment, wondering what to say. Dawn's father was dying but she didn't have the strength to tell the girl that. Instead she got up and emptied the chemist's bag out, picking up a thermometer.

Dawn watched Sheena take her dad's temperature, seeing the frown on her face as she read it.

"It's high," Sheena told her. "Bring over the peas will you?"

Dawn knelt by her dad's side while Sheena packed the frozen peas around his neck, placing his wrists on top.

"We need to get his temperature down," Sheena said, standing up, managing a slight smile. "But right now, I have to take some of your blood Dawn."

Dawn hated injections and she felt the usual spidery tingle down the back of her neck at the thought of needles.

Sheena picked up a syringe and rubber tourniquet. "Sit down and put your arm on the table for me please."

Dawn did as Sheena asked, turning her head to look away when she felt the tourniquet, followed by the cold swap rubbed over her vein.

"What do you want my blood for any way?" Dawn asked, taking a quick peek and quickly turning away again.

The needle was the size of a pencil!

"It's the only thing that might work," Sheena answered slipping the needle into Dawn's vein. She pulled the plunger back slowly, feeling the resistance as the barrel filled with blood. "I'm hoping that because you've had the vaccine already, your blood will help your father recover."

Dawn felt light-headed when Sheena released the tourniquet. She held the antiseptic swab in place while the blood from the small wound coagulated, trying to be nonchalant.

"What's wrong with yours then? You've had the vaccine too," she said.

Sheena smiled to herself, wondering at the two Dawn's she'd seen. The one so child-like, the other so adult.

"Well, I'm hoping that because you're related, your blood will have a more positive effect."

They crossed to the mattress and Dawn held her dad's arm while Sheena attached the syringe of blood to a long thin tube and taped it to the wall above his head, slipping the thin needle into his vein. Next she splashed cold water on Alex's face, slapping it lightly.

"Alex? Alex can you hear me?" Alex groaned, licking his lips. "Come on Alex, I need you to wake up now." Sheena persisted, shaking his shoulder.

Alex's half-opened eyes were bloodshot and tinged with yellow. They dragged him upright, leaning him back against the wall, feeding him tablets one at a time with small sips of water.

"These should help with his fever," Sheena explained as the last one disappeared. "Right, let's get him comfortable. Then all we can do is wait."

Sitting at the table they ate some energy bars, both lost in their own thoughts.

Sheena suddenly got up and went outside. She was back a few minutes later with an armful of magazines.

"Here," she said, dropping them on the table. "I just remembered I had them in the boot of the car. I was going to take them to the second-hand book shop. Might as well have something to do while we wait."

A few hours later Dawn sighed loudly and closed the magazine. She was fed up reading about the lives of people who had more money than sense.

"How did you know about this place?" she asked.

Sheena looked up at her, a sad expression on her face. "Oh someone I know once brought me here," she said in a quiet voice, tears glistening in her eyes.

Dawn could see how upset she'd made Sheena feel and mentally kicked herself. "I'm just going outside for some fresh air," she said standing up.

Sheena put a hand on her arm as she passed her. "Be careful Dawn, its dark and there might be some cat's around."

"Don't worry, I'll sit in the car. The gun's in there. I'll be okay. Just need some alone time."

After Dawn had gone, Sheena was left with her thoughts. It hadn't occurred to her until now, but with all that had happened over the past few days, she hadn't taken any time out to mourn Gary.

Poor Gary. What a terrible way to die. They had been at the start of a friendship that might have blossomed into something more, but now he was gone. Sheena felt so weary. Laying her head on her arms, she let the tears come, sobbing quietly as the moon rose on a cloudless black, star-studded sky.

Dawn sat in the car, the shotgun across her knees, hoping that some cats would turn up. It would feel good to point the gun and pull the trigger and watch the beasts that had killed her dad splatter into a red mist.

Dawn realised that her dad was going to die. Sheena hadn't been able to match her blood type with her dad's, and the probability that they would be the same was slim. He was going to die, with or without her blood, and there was nothing either of them could do about it.

Lowering her head, Dawn sobbed quietly, her tears falling onto her knees. Then shaking her head, she looked through the windscreen at the dark shapes of the night shimmering through her tears, knowing that she hadn't meant it. She loved cats. What she hated were the scientists who made such things possible. But then again, she didn't hate Sheena, did she.

Dawn dropped her forehead onto the dashboard, her confused thoughts making her head hurt. Shutting her eyes, she told herself that she'd just take a moment, then go back inside and check on how her dad was doing.

On the far side of the shack a cat sat licking its paws, cleaning the fur along the sides of its neck and head. The clowder had fed, leaving little of the deer for other animals to pick over. The chase had been long and the killing exciting, but not as exciting as the

kill that waited for them in the shack.

=17:21 hrs=

Sir Craig Holland sat in his chair, feet on a pouffe, newspaper between his hands. His wife was sitting in a matching chair opposite him, reading a novel. She glanced up, wondering if her husband was really reading the newspaper or was just using it as a shield. He'd been so preoccupied over the past few days, not his usual self at all.

They seldom talked these days, their lives separate on so many levels. She wasn't sad - she'd expected as much when she'd married him - just a little disappointed that life had crept up on her so fast that she'd had so little time or energy to enjoy it. Their children had grown up and left, seldom visiting these days, and she didn't get to see her grandchildren, unless she took the trouble to visit them.

The paper rustled as Holland turned a page.

"Grouchie needs a walk," she said quietly.

The paper rustled again and another page turned.

"I said . . ."

"I heard what you said," Holland answered lowering his paper to look at her over the top of his glasses.

Folding the newspaper with meticulous precision, as he did everything else in his life, Holland took off his glasses and pushed them into the leather case he kept on the small table by his chair.

"I might pop into the pub on the way back," he said, levering himself out of the deep chair.

"Yes why don't you do that dear."

Holland gave his wife a perfunctory kiss on the cheek and went looking for the dog. He shouted out the back door and the ugly bulldog came up to him, slobbering as usual. Its legs were so short they allowed it to do little more than waddle. Clipping the lead onto its collar, he closed the door and headed for the rear garden gate.

Holland fancied a walk through Wooten Woods, he liked the solitude and he could let Grouchie off his lead without the headache of meeting other people. Grouchie lived up to its name, baring its teeth at any dog who so much as looked at him.

Stupid name for a stupid dog, he thought, closing the gate with a soft click, checking again that it was closed before moving off.

The wood was up a high rise and by the time Holland had reached it, he was puffing and panting. He'd have to make an appointment to see his doctor again and get his lungs checked. Letting Grouchie off the lead, he sighed, watching it waddle its way into the trees, sniffing and slobbering over everything.

Holland thought about the conversation he'd had with the American yesterday. It had been hard but he'd said what needed saying. The man had to be shown who was in charge back here, and that America didn't run the whole world. The project had to be closed down right now. He'd already called a meeting of the COBRA group for tomorrow and would let the Prime Minister know what had been going on. It would probably mean



the end of his career but at his age that didn't overly worry him. It would be kept from the public of course, these things always were. He would retire somewhere abroad, probably without his wife.

As Holland walked further into the wood a dark shape followed, keeping well back in the trees, watching as he turned off the main pathway towards a clearing he'd discovered, calling the dog to follow him. It was a nice place to sit in the late afternoon sun and have a quiet snooze.

Holland stopped, looking back over his shoulder. The stupid dog was standing in the middle of the path, head up, sniffing the breeze, facing back the way they'd come. He called, and after a brief pause, it turned and followed him, casting backward glances now and then.

Holland found the clearing and walked over to his favourite spot, sitting down on the soft grass with his back against a fallen tree trunk. Taking the newspaper from his pocket he spread it open and began reading.

Nothing to beat a lazy Saturday afternoon in the sun, catching up on the news.

Grouchie flopped down beside Holland but soon had its head up again, ears pointed forward. Giving a gruff bark, it stood up, panting.

"Will you shut up and give a man a bit of peace and quiet!" Holland shook his paper as though that would make the dog obey.

It didn't. Grouchie had spotted something amongst the trees and his curiosity had been aroused. He waddled off to investigate. Holland gave the dog a quick glance, then went back to his paper.

The man following Holland saw the old bulldog coming towards him and smiled, pulling an air-gun from his pocket. Taking careful aim, waiting until the dog was just a few paces away, he tightened his finger on the trigger.

"Night, night, Grouchie. Sweet dreams," the man muttered, pulling the trigger.

The dart hit the dog in the neck and it yelped - an unusually high pitched yelp for such a barrel-chested dog. Grouchie shook its head, pawing at its neck, knocking the dart free, but the anaesthetic had already begun to have an effect.

The dog looked around as though confused, tottering on uncertain legs back towards where Holland sat, but it didn't get far before collapsing on the ground. The man bent over and picked up the dart, slipping it in his pocket for later disposal.

Holland put down his paper, laying his head back against the trunk, closing his eyes as the sun heated his face. Then hearing something, he flicked them open again, sitting up straighter. Someone was walking towards him.

"Sir Craig Holland," the man said in a well cultured voice.

Holland nodded. "And you are?" he asked in his usual arrogant tone, displeased that he'd been disturbed by a stranger this way.

And where was Grouchie? That bloody dog was never around when you needed it.

Something about the self-assured man staring down at him had set alarm bells ringing in Holland's head.

"The Senator sends his regards," the man said, pulling the air-gun from his pocket.

As the steel tip penetrated Holland's shirt, he scrambled to his feet, surprisingly nimble for a man his age. Pulling the dart from his chest he looked at it, realisation dawning in his eyes, his hand whipping up to his mouth.

"Nice try old timer," the man said, grabbing Holland's wrist before he could swallow the dart, watching as his target's eyes slowly glazed over. "Nearly had to do an autopsy on you right here in the woods."

Holland sank to his knees, then fell to his side, mouth slightly open, breathing gently. The special anaesthetic would take a few minutes for the target's liver and kidneys to disperse, so while he waited the man pulled Holland upright and lent him against the tree, the way he'd found him.

Taking a large penknife from his pocket, he opened it.

The cuts were deep, the blade grating against bone as the man slashed each wrist. The cuts themselves weren't enough to kill Holland, such cuts seldom were, but they signalled that here was a man who wanted to end his life.

Dropping the knife on the ground beside Holland's outstretched legs, the man pulled six packets of paracetamol from his pocket. He opened them, tossing the bubble packs on the grass. The packs were empty, each tablet carefully removed from its blister by gloved fingers and disposed of down the hotel toilet earlier.

Sitting beside Holland the man read his paper, waiting for the blood to pool on the ground. Satisfied, he folded the paper, putting it back in Holland's jacket pocket. Then he injected him behind the ear with a compound that would lead the pathologist to conclude that Holland had died of paracetamol poisoning.

Fifteen minutes later Grouchie shook its head and stood up, swaying from side to side, eyes still glazed. A little later the dog wandered back to his master, lying at his side, tongue lolling, waiting for him to wake up and take him home.

## **Day 7**

=02:22 hrs=

Private Matthew Adams staggered from the club, looking at his watch with bleary eyes. It swam in and out of focus and he couldn't make out what time it was. Shaking his wrist, he held the watch to his ear and gave a grunt, studying it again under the dim street lighting. Feeling suddenly sick, he steadied himself against the building and bent over, spewing the contents of his stomach onto the road.

Feeling a little better, Adams wiped the sweat from his forehead with his beret and tried to remember the way back to camp. He'd only been on the island for a day and was already bored by the operation. Shooting cats wasn't half the fun he thought it would be when his platoon had been posted here.

Operation 'KatKill' was dead in the bleeding water, he thought.

Chuckling at his joke, Adams staggered across the empty car-park into the quiet

back streets of Ryde. Spotting a dark alley he headed towards it, tripping on the kerbside as he crossed the road.

"Bleeding beer always goes straight through me," he muttered kicking a tin can out of his way.

The tin can rattled along the pavement, bouncing off a large wheelie bin before coming to rest alongside two dark figures watching him from the shadows.

Entering the ally, Adams undid his trousers and spread his hands on the wall, relieving himself with a satisfied groan of pleasure. As Adams' urine splattered over his boots unnoticed, the two shadows turned into the ally behind him.

Finished, Adams did up his trousers and gave a long, loud burp. Then turning around, his bloodshot eyes widened when he saw the two figures standing behind him. Alarmed, he looked down the ally for somewhere to run, but it ended in a high brick wall.

The first kick landed between his legs and Adams went down to his knees. The second kick landed on the side of his head and he dropped to the floor, rolling over onto his back.

The bigger of the two dark shadows stomped on the soldiers head, then kicked him in the ribs. When Adams didn't move, the shadow squatted down, rifling the soldiers pockets, pulling out a scuffed wallet. He smiled, holding it up to his companion.

But before the wallet could pass from one hand to the other, the ally was filled with a cacophony of loud hisses that seemed to come from everywhere at once. For a moment the mugger thought a nearby car must have blown a tyre, but then, through the gloom, he saw a line of yellow eyes watching him. Others moved along the ally towards him, hugging the walls.

The mugger's companion moved deeper into the ally, feeling behind her with an outstretched hand, her face drawn into a terrified mask. As the two teenagers were forced deeper into the ally, the entrance filled with more and more cats of all shapes and sizes.

The clowder had come together for one purpose only - to relieve the rage that filled their minds like hot coals.

=08:09 hrs=

Gonzalez dropped the throw-away razor in the waste-bin and washed his face. He felt a little better after the shower and was looking forward to eating, even if it was the crap that the English served up as breakfast.

It had been a long night and he'd got little sleep. The hotel was small and didn't have an internet connection so he couldn't pick up his messages, and anyway, the internet was down. Just one more petty irritation with which to start his day. He'd have to report in on his secure radio later. Right now he needed some food.

The waiter took his order for coffee and a full breakfast. They weren't serving waffles so he had to put up with toast. As he ate Gonzalez went over yesterday's events in his mind, making sure he'd miss nothing that could bite him in the ass later.

He had spotted Doctor McKenzie talking to a policeman, which hadn't registered for a few minutes. Those moments of inaction had cost him dear because when he realised

who it was, she had already disappeared. And wouldn't you know it, PC plod didn't have the faintest idea who she was or what car she was driving, let alone the numberplate. So much for the great British bobby!

After tearing a new asshole in the constable, Gonzalez had tried contacting Sir Craig Holland but had been told by his snotty PA that he was unavailable at present, and no, he didn't know when he would be. Using a secure line Gonzalez had contacted his employer in America and updated him on events. As expected his next assignment was to tie up any loose ends and get out. When he enquired whether Holland was considered a loose end, he was told that the man had already been taken care of.

Ordering more coffee Gonzalez turned his mind to Doctor McKenzie. He wasted no energy on worrying how she'd managed to escape, that was fruitless. He needed to find her again and quick. Why had she turned up at Area 7 and not gone straight to the police? At least if she'd done that, the good doctor would be in his hands right now.

Gonzalez toyed with his half-empty cup, thinking. McKenzie must suspect something bigger was going on. The quicker she was silenced, the safer they'd all be. The laptop hard drive was already on its way back to the States, as were the papers he'd recovered from Area 7 and Booker's study. With the doctor out-of-the-way, his employer would have sole ownership of the virus and Gonzalez would get his nice fat bonus.

Finished with his breakfast he left a tip on the table and went back to his room. The TV was flickering in the corner and he turned the volume up, not really listening as he packed his things - not until the name Sir Craig Holland impinged on his consciousness that is. Gonzalez turned the volume higher.

.” . . late yesterday afternoon in Wooten Woods behind his large estate. Sir Craig Holland's body was found by a man walking his dog, and is believed to have cut his wrists with a penknife and taken a large quantity of paracetamol. The Prime Minister . . .”

Gonzalez killed the sound and sat on the end of the bed, a smile spreading across his hard features.

One less loose end to worry about.

=09:23 hrs=

Dawn opened her eyes with a start. The sky was streaked with red. It was morning, she'd slept through the night!

Too afraid of what she might find if she checked on her dad, Dawn stayed in the car and turned on the radio, pushing the buttons, trying to find some music to listen to. She hesitated as the words came from the speaker before disappearing again.

.” . . octor Sheena McKen . . .”

Sitting forward Dawn desperately retuned the radio trying to find the station she'd skipped past, but by the time she did so, the news had moved on to a new item.

Jumping from the car Dawn rushed into the shack, her mind a whirl of confusion. As she entered the shack Sheena raised her head from the table and looked at her with sleep-filled eyes.

“Sheena you're on the news. I didn't hear what but . . .” Dawn stopped, looking at

her dad, her eyes taking on a glow. He was sitting upright, leaning against the wall, his eyes bright and alert.

"Hi baby," he said.

"Dad! You're okay," Dawn shouted, pounding across the floor and throwing herself down, enveloping him in a big hug.

"Whoa, easy there," he said hugging her back. "I still feel a little out of it."

Sheena knelt and checked Alex's temperature. It was normal. "How do you feel?" she asked.

"A little light-headed and I ache all over like I've run a marathon or something."

Sheena smiled at Dawn. "Looks like it worked."

Dawn launched herself at Sheena giving her the biggest bear hug she'd ever had. "Thank you. Thank you so much," she said, her breath tickling Sheena's ear. "You saved his life."

Sheena disentangled herself from Dawn's embrace and stood up. "You were saying something about me being on the news?"

"Yes but I only heard your name."

Dawn and Sheena turned as Alex shouted, "The door!"

A cat stood in the open doorway, watching them with alert, intelligent eyes.

Without hesitating Sheena swept the camping lamp off the table and threw it at the cat. The white glass shattered on the floor and the cat ran from the shack. Dawn jumped up, following it out.

"Dawn!" Alex shouted trying to get to his feet, his face twisted with pain. "Dawn come back."

A second later they heard the sound of a shot echo through the wood and Dawn reappeared back in the doorway, a sheepish smile on her face.

"Guess I forgot to close the door," she said.

Alex chuckled, shaking his head.

Was this really his daughter? His little girl?

He looked at the young woman standing in the doorway, so self assured, the shotgun cradled in her arms as though it belonged there, and felt a deep pride sweep over him.

Just when had she grown up?

"We'd better get out of here," Sheena said. "There's a house not far away on the other side of the wood and they may have heard the shot. We can't take a chance on the police turning up. Can you walk Alex?"

"I can with some help."

"Good. Come on Dawn let's get him on his feet."

Together they made it to the door where Dawn stopped them. "Hang on, let me check." She darted outside then back in again. "All clear."

They made it to the car with no further problems and settled Alex in the back seat. Dawn sat beside Sheena as she drove the car along the track, fiddling with the radio.

"Where too?" Sheena asked.

"The police I guess," Alex answered.

"Hey, listen to this," Dawn said as she found the station she was looking for.

The news item brought a depressed silence to the occupants of the car as they heard an account of how Doctor Sheena McKenzie, believed to be a terrorist, had taken part in the bombing of a government facility on the Isle of Wight known as Area 7, killing at least four people and injuring numerous others. An accurate description followed. Sheena's face turned a deathly white as she listened.

Dawn snapped the radio off and sat looking out of the window, tears of anger filling her eyes.

"Guess that rules out the police then," Alex said quietly from the back seat.

"Guess so," agreed Sheena. "Only trouble is, what do we do now?"

"We could still go to the police and explain it's all a mistake," Dawn suggested, turning to face her dad. "I'm sure they'd believe us."

"Not a chance," said Sheena shaking her head. "Not with this Gonzalez guy running things. He wants us all dead."

They lapsed into silence.

Reaching the main road Sheena stopped the car, looking first one way, then the other. "Which direction?" she asked.

"Okay, turn right," Alex said leaning forward. "We'll use the Dawn to get off the island."

"The Dawn?" Dawn asked.

"Yes," Alex nodded, smiling at his daughter. "My new sub. I named it after you."

Sheena turned the wheel and headed the car along Military Road praying that they wouldn't meet a road block.

"Not far now," Alex assured them a while later, leaning forward in his seat to point at a large rock shaped like a stooping figure. "I recognise that rock over there. It's just around the next bend."

Helping Alex from the car they hurried across some sand dunes towards the sea. The coast was a mixture of rocks, sand and shingle, the sun heating the lumps of seaweed so the sulphurous smell made them wrinkle their noses.

"Over there, by that rock outcrop," Alex said as they helped him across the beach, supporting him between them. "That's it, dig there."

Sheena dug in the sand with her hands, uncovering a pair of flippers, some goggles and a wetsuit. She laid them on the rock and looked at Alex.

"Sheena, you put the suit and flippers on and you can help me out to the Dawn," he said.

Sheena disappeared behind the rock and was back in five minutes wearing the wetsuit. Picking up the flippers and goggles she took Alex's arm.

"Where's this sub thing?" she asked.

"See that yellow shape out there?" Alex pointed. "That's a buoy. The sub's anchored to it."

Sheena squinted her eyes searching the waves. She could just make out a dark

shape. It looked to be miles away.

"The ocean's pretty calm thankfully," Alex said. "If you help me, Dawn can swim in front."

"No!" Dawn's voice trembled and she shook her head from side to side, eyes wide.

Alex turned to her, holding out his hand. "Come on Dawn, we have to. It's the only chance we have."

Dawn stood rooted to the spot, unable to move, watching the waves break along the shore. She hated the sea, it had taken her mother from her. What if there were jellyfish out there? At the thought Dawn turned and fled up the beach to the dunes.

"Stay here," Sheena said to Alex, running across the shingle after Dawn.

Dawn was standing with her back to the sea, head bowed, hands covering her face, sobbing gently. Sheena put an arm around her shoulders, speaking softly, telling her that she understood, that her father needed her now more than ever.

Dawn turned to look at Sheena, her bloodshot eyes filled with tears. "I can't do it. I can't."

Sheena drew Dawn down the beach again, speaking to her, telling her how brave she was and how her mother would be proud of her if she did this thing. Alex hugged his daughter tightly as they reached him, his own eyes misty.

"Dawn, you don't have to do this if you don't want to," he said quietly.

She pulled back and looked up at her dad, a half-smile on her lips. She nodded once.

"Yes dad, I do," she said, turning and walking into the water.

The swim out to the buoy was arduous for them all. Dawn hadn't swum for years, and Alex found it hard to do more than a slow crawl supported by Sheena. They were all tiring fast. The buoy had steadily grown in size and now they could see the top of the Dawn riding in the shallow troughs as the waves broke over it.

Alex turned his head, holding his hand up to stop Sheena, treading water, listening. What was that? A buzzing in the distance, like an angry wasp.

"Quick, get going," he shouted. "It's a helicopter!"

=10:47 hrs=

"There, over there," Gonzalez grabbed the pilot's arm, pointing down at the road. The car was pulled onto a grass verge, doors hanging open. "That's got to be it. Where the hell are they?"

The helicopter landed on the metallised road and Gonzalez scrambled out. "You get up there again and see if you can spot them," Gonzalez ordered the pilot over the two-way radio, plugging his earpiece in. "I'll have a look round here. They can't have got very far."

The helicopter took off with a clatter and Gonzalez walked over to the car. This was the part he loved. The hunt. Pitching his wits against the enemy. Chasing them down until he had them at the end of his gun. And then . . . Well that depended.

The car was empty, the engine still hot to the touch. He was right, they'd only left it a short time ago. Looking around at the secluded scenery Gonzalez frowned. Why the hell

would they stop out here in the middle of nowhere? No houses, nowhere to hide.

He turned around slowly and faced the sea, a smile puckering his lips. "Check with the coastguard," he told the pilot. "Find out if any small boats are showing on their radar."

A few minutes later a voice spoke in his earpiece. "Negative."

"Would their gear pick up a small row-boat?"

"They say it would."

"Okay get back down here and pick me up."

Gonzalez walked down the beach and stood beside the big rock staring down at the hole that had been dug in the sand. Footprints led away towards the water - three sets of footprints, one of which had the outline of flippers.

Interesting!

=10:53 hrs=

"Dog it tight Sheena, that's the way."

Having overseen the tightening of the hatch Alex settled himself in the pilot's seat. Dawn sat beside him and he held her hand, trying to settle her trembling.

"You did it," he said, looking into her eyes.

"Yes, I did."

Dawn couldn't believe that she'd managed the long arduous swim, helping Sheena with her dad towards the end, pulling him up onto the top of the submersible by herself because Sheena was too exhausted to manage.

"I'm so proud of you baby," Alex said planting a wet kiss on her cheek.

"Daad!" Dawn responded, rubbing her cheek with her sleeve, but never-the-less pleased.

Her dad laughed and she couldn't help joining in with a giggle.

"I think we'd better get going. That helicopter could be back any minute," Sheena said, a worried look on her face.

"Okay, I'll drop the Dawn to the seabed. It's not deep but it will be nice and murky, so if the helicopter comes back it won't see us. I need to take some time to check the sub out before we get under-way."

The small craft lurched as Alex released the grab and a muted whine came from underneath them when the pump began flooding the small ballast tank. They sank slowly to the seabed, settling into the thick seaweed.

Ten minutes later Alex was satisfied that everything was okay and the Dawn hadn't cracked any seals by being buffeted by the sea. He started the electric motors and they rose upwards, levelling off before breaking the surface.

"Okay, here we go guys. Hang on tight."

Dawn sat behind her dad on a seat facing Sheena, her body moving rhythmically as the craft was rocked by the swell. A while later they moved deeper and the rocking motion stopped. Dawn glanced at her dad, watching his eyes moving among the various instruments, his big hands almost stroking the levers and controls as he guided them home.



How could I have been so blind, she thought.

The realisation suddenly hit her that her dad was a man who led an exciting life. If she had bothered finding out, she'd have known. She felt a sadness when thoughts of her friend entered her mind. Carolyn, sweet Carolyn who she'd never see again. She wondered where she was now, what she might be doing, missing the loud laugh and mischievous smile her friend always had on her face.

I'm sorry dad, Dawn thought. Sorry I ever doubted you.

Dawn looked up and saw Sheena watching her. It was as though the doctor could read her mind, see the mixture of love and pride, sadness and emptiness that she was feeling.

Sheena smiled at her and nodded. Dawn lent back and closed her eyes, her mouth falling open slightly as she slipped into a light sleep.

=11:07 hrs=

"This is wonderful," Sheena said watching a shoal of fish pass by. "Pity its so murky."

Alex nodded. "Yeah, the seas around the Pacific are much clearer. You can see a far greater distance."

"Must be nice," Sheena mused leaning forward to look out of the Perspex bubble. "Like floating through a picture."

Alex looked at her and chuckled. "In a way," he said, "but not so poetic."

"Dawn told me your wife died when she was young."

"Did she?"

"Yes."

Alex trimmed the craft and tapped at a dial with his fingertip.

Sheena smiled. "You don't really have to do that, do you? That tapping thing."

Alex shook his head. "No, not really."

"Do you ever talk to Dawn about her mother and the way she died?"

Alex shifted uncomfortably.

"She loves you deeply you know Alex. She needs you to be there for her, not off on the other side of the world while she's stuck in a private school, no matter how good it is."

Alex's face hardened. "Look . . ."

"I'm just saying Alex, that's all." Sheena wet her lips and looked out into the murkiness around them.

Alex glanced over his shoulder at Dawn. She was snoring gently.

"It was hard for her," he said. "She blamed herself."

Alex told Sheena how his wife had died and how deeply it had effected his daughter. How it had taken years before she could even look at a picture of her mother, let alone talk about her. How he'd felt trapped all these years, knowing that she resented him, somehow blamed him for not being there to save her mother.

The cabin quietened as they stopped talking, each a bit embarrassed at what had been said. Then Alex jumped as an unexpected kiss was planted on the back of his neck.

"I love you dad," Dawn said in a quiet, self assured voice. "I always will. No matter what."

=12:15 hrs=

Alex brought the submersible to the dockside and undogged the hatch, telling Dawn to jump ashore and secure the mooring rope to a cleat.

It was early afternoon and he felt tired but drove himself onward, knowing their problems weren't over yet. He suspected they'd only just begun. Walking up to his workshop he inspected the lock carefully. It looked okay, but what did he know?

Leading the way into his office at the back of the workshop, he filled up the kettle and plugged it in, then dropped some teabags into three cups. Sniffing the milk, he wrinkled his nose. It had gone off.

They sat around his desk, drinking hot milk-less tea, discussing their options. Sheena said that she could go back home to Scotland but Alex doubted that was a good idea. There was a nationwide security alert out for her and she wouldn't last two minutes out on the street. They kicked ideas about for a while but couldn't come up with any sensible plan.

They jumped when the workshop echoed with a loud knock on the door. Alex walked over and looked through the crack between the rolling door edges. It was Harry, his big ruddy face scowling. Alex slipped out of the door, closing it behind him.

"What the hell's been going on Alex?"

"Look, about your boat Harry."

"What about it?"

"Isn't that why you're here?"

The big man shook his head. "Nah. There's a shady looking guy looking for you. What you been up to mate?"

Alex thought fast, knowing that the more outrageous the lie, the more it would be believed.

"Well, its Carol," he said, looking sheepish.

"The barmaid down at the Drake?" Harry's thick eyebrows had risen.

"Yeah, well like, her old man found out and has got a couple of his mates down from London looking for me. You know how it is. Anyway, she's terrified." As Alex unwound his tale of woe, an idea suddenly came to him. "Look mate, could you do me a big favour?" Harry looked uncertain. "Hang on here a sec, I'll be back in a minute."

Rushing back into the workshop Alex span the dial on the front of his old safe and pulled it open, grabbing a bundle of cash and a passport. Before Dawn or Sheena could say anything he'd disappeared again.

"How much was your inflatable worth?" Alex asked the big man when he reappeared at the door.

"Was?"

"There was a little accident Harry. I'm sorry, your boat sank."

They settled on a price and Harry turned to go.

"No wait a minute. I still need that favour."

"I thought letting you sink my boat was the favour!"

Alex took Harry by the shoulder and led him over to the dockside. "Look," he said, "That's my new submersible. Fully sea-trialled."

"And?"

"And Carol and I need to get away, if you know what I mean."

Harry nodded his big head, the skin at the corners of his faded blue eyes crinkling. "And?"

"And I need a boat. I want you to sell the Dawn for me, to raise some cash so I can buy a decent seagoing speedboat. Here." Alex held out his passport. "This'll do as proof of identity."

Harry took the proffered passport and flicked to the back, looking at the photograph. "Don't look nothing like me," he said, handing it back. "And why can't you buy the boat yourself?"

Alex sighed, his shoulders slumping. "I can't take the chance on being seen. You're my only chance Harry," he said.

Harry studied Alex for a moment, wondering if he was being conned. Then making up his mind, he nodded.

"Tell you what. If you're willing to take a loss on that there sub of yours, I think I can swing something. I got one or two contacts. Give me your mobile number."

The big man sauntered off and Alex made his way back to the office wondering if he was doing the right thing.

"What's going on Alex?"

The worried look in Sheena's eyes deepened as he slumped himself down in the chair at his desk.

"Look, someone's been poking around here asking about me. From the description I'm pretty sure it's Gonzalez. I'm trying to get my hands on a boat that we can take over to the continent or somewhere further."

"But what about passports?" Sheena asked. "Mines back on the Isle of Wight."

"Yeah, well let's cross that bridge when we come to it shall we? In the meantime I'd like you to take this and get us some supplies." He held out a bundle of notes and Dawn took them. "Sheena'll have to stay here out of sight."

"What are you going to do dad?" Dawn asked.

"I'm going back to the house. I've got some money there that we'll need to keep us going till we sort something out, and I'll pick your passport up while I'm there. Oh," he said turning back to Dawn and handing her two credit cards, "max these out before you use the cash, then dump them. I won't be able to use them after today anyway. And get us all some clothes too."

Dawn picked up the credit cards and smiled. "Max them out? You sure dad?"

"Get going," he growled at her with a chuckle.

After Dawn had left, Alex talked over his hastily devised plan for their disappearance with Sheena. He knew at the back of his mind that it probably wouldn't work but could

think of nothing else that might. Having Gonzalez after them put Dawn's life in danger - something he didn't even want to think about.

Sheena sat silently for awhile, then looked up at him, a sad smile on her face. "Wouldn't it just be simpler if I went to the police Alex?"

"We both know Gonzalez won't allow that to happen," Alex replied. "Or if it did, that he has ways of getting you on your own long enough to . . ." Alex didn't finish the sentence and Sheena didn't ask him too. "No we have to disappear, the three of us. Maybe we can find a way of sorting this out when things die down a bit."

They stood up and looked at each other for a moment, Alex strangely drawn to the woman who had jumped into his life. Sheena lent forward, head tilted, waiting for his kiss.

But it didn't happen. Instead Alex turned away and headed for the door.

"Stay here out of sight," he called over his shoulder. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

Sheena sat at the desk, rubbing her face with gritty hands. She could do with a wash. Hell, she could do with a shower. Standing up she walked through the office to a small toilet at the back. It had a sink and some soap. It would do.

As Sheena washed herself in the back office, the two big doors at the front of the workshop slid open, then closed. There was no further sounds except that of gentle breathing and the soft rustle of a mouse moving in the ceiling void.

=13:30 hrs=

Alex stood at the gate of his front garden, studying every window in turn, searching for signs that somebody might be waiting for him inside.

"Oh come on, don't be so bloody paranoid," he muttered, pushing open the gate.

Walking up the path he opened the front door and stepped inside. As soon as he did he knew something was wrong - a strange tingling at the back of his neck told him someone had been in his home. Nothing had been moved so far as he could tell, but he knew. Just walking into his comfortable lounge, he had no doubt that someone had stood there just a short time ago.

Gonzalez!

Alex stood head bowed, every nerve taught, listening to the noises the house made. He'd become familiar with every one of them over the years; the ticking of the hot water pipes as they expanded and contracted, the hum of the fridge in the kitchen, the drip of the bath tap, each one now loud in his ears.

Slipping off his shoes, Alex went to the kitchen and pulled a large carving knife from the black wooden block, its blade swishing free with a satisfactory sound. He knew he wouldn't be able to stab Gonzalez if he was here but at least it gave him a sort of moral support.

Keeping to the edge of the stairs Alex worked his way from step to step, stopping when the third riser from the top creaked underfoot.

How could he have forgotten that?

Easing his foot off, he cringed as the wood settled back with a groan, cocking his head to pick up any sound. All was quiet.

On the landing he was faced with three doors - his bedroom, Dawn's bedroom and the bathroom. He could see that the bathroom door was slightly ajar, the leaking tap hitting the bath with a steady tap, tap. Holding his breath he nudged it wider, his knife held low, ready to stab a leg rather than a chest.

Nothing. The bathroom was empty.

Taking a shuddering breath he backed out, his body tingling, the scent of aftershave alive in his nose. His bedroom door often stuck, so he stood with his hand on the handle, shoulder against the panels. Then turning the handle fully open, he pushed with his shoulder and the door came free, silently, without fuss.

His bedroom was 'L' shaped and as he came to the corner he looked over into his wardrobe mirror. He could see almost all of his bedroom reflected in it. He studied the reflection, his eyes darting here and there. It all seemed okay but he still had the feeling that someone had been here, someone who could search a room and leave no clue that they had.

Then he spotted it, a faint outline on the polished wooden floor. Walking over, Alex placed his foot beside it. The imprint was at least one shoe size bigger than his. He knew he'd been right!

One room left.

Dawn's room was a similar shape to his but smaller. The bed was to the left in the long leg of the 'L', her computer desk around the corner, alongside her second-hand dresser with the tilting mirror.

Alex licked his lips and slid the door open, holding his breath. Crouching down he checked under the bed. Nothing. Feeling better he stood up and walked to the corner.

As he turned into the smaller leg of the 'L' he was faced by a man holding a knife.

=13:45 hrs=

Dawn shuddered at the scampering above her head, looking up at the white ceiling. She didn't like mice, never had, couldn't understand how otherwise sane school friends, petted and kissed their pet rodents. Ugh!

Stacking the numerous bags she'd unloaded from the taxi against the wall so that her purchases didn't fall out onto the dirty floor, she walked through to the office at the back.

It was empty and for a moment she felt a flood of panic hit her. Then she heard the noise of a toilet flushing from behind a door in the far wall.

Sheena came out rubbing her hair with a small towel. "Could do with a shower," she said smiling at Dawn. "How did you do?"

"Got it all ready by the door," Dawn said proudly. "I think I thought of everything. I bought stuff we could eat cold. I hope that's okay."

Sheena dropped the towel on the table and fluffed up her hair. "Sounds good to me. I could eat a horse right now. I hope Alex won't be too long."

"Just going to the loo," Dawn said, disappearing into the toilet.

Sheena flicked her hair up one last time and smiled. Turning she headed for the

workshop, wanting to take a peek at what Dawn had got her to wear.

The door opened before she got there and a large figure filled the opening.

"Hello Doctor McKenzie," a soft voice said. "We'll have to stop meeting this way. Folks might get the wrong idea."

=14:50 hrs=

Alex shouted in alarm as the man turned to face him. Then he took a deep breath and slowly let it out, his heart hammering in his ears. It was just a reflection of himself in the dressing table mirror.

Jesus, much more of this and I'll have a bloody heart attack, he thought, turning to leave the room.

It was then that he saw the photograph on Dawn's bed. It was a picture of her that he had taken during her last school break earlier in the year. Someone had drawn a big red cross through her face and written the message: 'I'm coming for you and your daughter, Alex', across the bottom.

Alex felt his world tilt and the room shift out of focus. He sat on Dawn's bed, the photo clutched in his hand, a numbness flooding his mind. Then his eyes hardened and a deep anger rose in him.

Don't loose focus Alex, he told himself. That's exactly what this guy wants you to do.

Walking into his bedroom, Alex pushed the bed aside and slipped the blade of the knife between two floorboards, pushing the handle sideways, levering up a short piece of board. Feeling about in the space he pulled out a big bundle of banknotes.

Alex sat back on his heels, riffling through the bundle. He didn't need to count it, he knew exactly how much there was. Some of it was money that he'd put aside for Dawn's university education, but the majority was a slush fund he'd built up over the years. Most of his work took him abroad, to countries where bribery was rife and such money helped oil the wheels of industry. It was untraceable ready cash.

Back down in the kitchen Alex rummaged in a cabinet, pulling out a thick plastic shopping bag. Dumping the money inside, he took a last look around the house. A lot of things had happened here, good things and bad, and he was going to miss it. When they had settled down somewhere and knew what was happening, he'd get in touch with his solicitor and sell it. Wondering who would live in the house over the coming years, he closed the front door for the last time.

Nodding at Mr Waverley, Alex made his way down the garden path.

"A gentleman was looking for you earlier," the old man said.

"So it appears, Mr Waverley," Alex replied getting into his car. Winding down the window he stuck his head out. "Hey, Mr Waverley." The old man turned, looking at Alex with rheumy eyes, his back slightly stooped. "You take good care of those roses now, you hear?"

Alex drove back to his workshop and parked the car. Harry was waiting for him at the quayside. A small rusty tug was berthed where his submersible had been moored earlier.

"It's the best I could do at such short notice," Harry said, holding out some papers. "These are all in my name but when you get settled let me know and we can transfer ownership."

They walked over to the tug. Originally it had been painted white but now big red rust stains showed through every surface. Alex climbed the plank and Harry followed. They stopped on the aft deck.

"It's a Nordic tug," Harry said.

"Yeah I know. Didn't they stop building these things sometime in the nineties?"

"Ninety-seven I think. Sleeps four. Hundred and fifteen horse power."

"How much?"

"Fifty-five grand with a full tank. There's a set of charts in the wheelhouse too."

"Radio?"

Harry shook his head.

Alex went back to the car and pulled out the shopping bag. "Here you go Harry," he said tossing it over.

Harry caught the bag and stood looking at Alex for a moment. Then he shook his head and walked off.

Alex went over to his workshop, feeling a little more in control of what was happening in his life.

"Hey," he called opening the office door. "You ready to leave yet?"

Dawn and Sheena were sitting in the middle of the office on wooden chairs, their faces pale and drawn.

"What's the matter?" Alex asked, walking into the room.

The door closed behind him and something hard pushed against his spine. He instinctively knew that it was a gun.

"Go join the others like a good boy, Alex."

The voice was calm and measured and Alex did as he was told. Pulling his old office chair over, he joined Dawn and Sheena. The wheels set up a loud irritating shriek as he pulled the chair across the floor, adding to his already unsettled nerves.

Alex looked up into the cold dark eyes and knew he was going to die.

"Let them go," he managed between dry lips. "Let them go and take me instead."

Gonzalez laughed loudly, his face creasing as his body shook. Then he stopped and crossed his arms, tapping the gun barrel against his forearm.

"What film is that from Alex? Take me and let them go. That's really good."

"What do you want from us?" Sheena's voice trembled as she spoke.

Gonzalez stared at her for a moment then pursed his lips. "Oh I think you know what I want from you doctor. I need you to disappear."

"And that's just what we're planning on doing!" Alex retorted, his voice rising.

"I mean permanently," Gonzalez replied. "Such a shame really. Three nice people like you, killed in an explosion. These welding bottles can be so unreliable at times, don't you think?"

Alex followed Gonzalez's nod and saw the stack of acetylene and oxygen bottles

piled next to three large propane gas canisters.

"Should make a nice little bang," Gonzalez said, bringing his gun round, aiming it at Alex's head.

"But why?" Sheena cried out. "We can't do you any harm."

Gonzalez looked at her for a moment. "Loose ends," he finally said. "You could replicate your work and certain people don't want that to happen. They want to protect their investment."

"So this is all just about money then," Sheena said flatly.

"Isn't it always?" Gonzalez asked, raising his gun again.

Grabbing the arms of his chair Alex kicked out, catching Gonzalez's gun hand. The gun flew from his grip, hitting the wall, bouncing off to land on the floor near Sheena.

As Alex propelled himself out of the chair, Gonzalez caught him with an uppercut that rattled his brain and blurred his vision. Staggering backwards, he managed to fend off Gonzalez, recovering from the punch.

Alex backed away, trying to put space between himself and Gonzalez. He knew that if the man landed another blow like that the fight would be over.

Alex's foot hit something and he glanced down. It was Gonzalez's gun. Stooping he picked it up, but before he could use it Gonzalez had his arm around his neck, squeezing hard, gripping his right wrist so he couldn't bring the gun into play.

Alex's head began to pound and the room darken. In a panic he fired the gun, twice. It was enough to startle Gonzalez for a moment and he managed to break free of the man's grip.

Gonzalez rammed an elbow into Alex's side and he cried out in pain, disorientated for a moment. Gonzalez gripped Alex's wrist again, slowly forcing the gun around towards his head. Seeing the bandage on Gonzalez's arm, Alex bit into it, triumph flooding through him as he heard Gonzalez's scream of pain.

They both fell to the floor, the gun skidding away. Alex saw the glint of steel just in time to grab Gonzalez's arm as he plunged a knife towards his chest.

They rolled on the floor, grappling, their breaths coming in heavy grunts as they fought. Gonzalez rolled Alex over onto his back, his face reddening as Alex's fingers dug into his neck. Then slowly, his face contorting with the strain, Gonzalez pushed the point of the knife closer and closer to Alex's chest.

Alex fought to push the knife away, his breath hissing between clenched teeth, face bright red with the effort of holding the stronger man's arm back. He was tiring, fighting a losing battle. No matter how hard he tried to stop it, the blade kept coming, millimetre by slow millimetre.

Gonzalez's eyes were bright with the knowledge that he had won, adding to his strength.

Alex fought on, his legs and body twisting, trying to throw Gonzalez clear. Then his foot hit the gas bottles and as the tip of the knife pricked his skin, he slid his foot along the bottom of the pile, kicking away the wedge holding them in place.

The bottles clanged and rumbled down onto the floor. Alex threw himself sideways.



Gonzalez saw a bottle heading straight for his head and quickly rolled off Alex, stumbling clear.

Alex continued his roll, one of the bottles clipping his shoulder as it flashed passed.

The office was filled with the banging and crashing of metal on metal, then a deep silence fell over the scene.

Alex shook his head, sitting up, looking around for Gonzalez. The man was standing by the office door, gun in his hand, a jubilant smile on his face. He winked, squeezing the trigger.

Alex caught a flash of movement behind Gonzalez and the man stood stock still for a moment, a look of complete surprise on his face. The surprise quickly turned to pain and he dropped to the floor, revealing Harry standing behind him, tapping a crowbar in the palm of his hand.

"Have you killed him?" Dawn gasped.

"No, I just belted him in the kidneys. Painful but seldom lethal." Harry bent down, picking up Gonzalez's gun. "This the guy from London then?"

Alex nodded. "Sort of."

"Came back to give you your receipt," Harry explained, laying the gun, crowbar and receipt on the desk. He looked at Sheena, then back at Alex, his eyebrows asking a question.

"No time to explain Harry. We've got to get going. I'll email you as soon as I can."

Harry nodded, took one last look at Gonzalez, then made for the door.

"Hey Harry?" Alex called after him. Harry stopped and looked back. "There's six months rent paid on the workshop. Why don't you make use of it, and take the car as well."

Harry nodded, catching the keys Alex tossed to him. Then winking, he left, closing the office door with a soft click.

After Alex released Dawn and Sheena, they hauled Gonzalez into a chair and tied his wrists, then picking up the gun, Alex stuck it in his pocket. He'd dump it in the sea later. Collecting the backpacks and supplies Dawn had bought, they hurried out to the tug.

"Is that it?" Dawn asked, her face showing her scepticism. "Will it float?"

"Get on board before I keel haul yer," Alex growled. "Yer mutinous swab yer."

Dawn giggled, running up the gang-plank onto the vessel, looking about in distaste. Sheena followed at a slower pace, smiling at the interaction between father and daughter, knowing it was probably the excitement of what had just happened and that they'd all suffer a comedown later on.

Ten minutes later the tug's engine was vibrating beneath the deck and they were headed out to sea. Sheena spread the chart on the wheel-housing in front of Alex.

"Where are we going then mon capitan?" she asked.

"There," Dawn said, bringing a decisive fingertip down on a long coast line.

"There it be then, maties," Alex agreed with a big smile, spinning the wheel onto the new course.

=16:58=

Gonzalez finally felt like he could breathe properly again. It had seemed like hours since he'd been hit in the kidneys. The pain had been incredible, like getting kicked in the balls.

The cords binding his wrists hadn't been tied very tightly and he soon had them free. Easing himself from the chair, he stood up, still crouched over, rubbing his lower back, wondering if whoever had hit him had done any permanent damage.

Stumbling his way from the workshop, he found his hire car and sat on the drivers seat, feet outside the vehicle, unable to pull his legs inside just yet. Digging out his two-way radio from the glove box, Gonzalez got in touch with his base back on the Isle of Wight. They patched him through to his helicopter.

Having given his instructions to the pilot, Gonzalez settled down to wait, listening to the latest news on the car radio. The broadcasts were full of reports about the soldiers that had been sent to the Isle of Wight to cull all the infected cats.

Gonzalez smiled at the indignant uproar this was causing amongst the island's pet owners. Operation 'KatKill' was well under-way and he hoped every last damned cat on the island ended up dead.

Ten minutes later his pilot contacted him. "I'm over you now sir."

"Check the immediate area, then begin a search pattern using Christchurch as a start point. You're looking for any small boat heading away from the coast. If you see one I want its name and registration number."

Having set the search into operation Gonzalez felt better and decided to get himself a coffee. He'd noticed a small café down by the shore when he'd driven into Christchurch and easing himself into the drivers seat, started the car and headed for it.

Later that evening Gonzalez was back in touch with the pilot.

"I've done a complete sweep for a radius of ten miles and there was only one boat sir. A beaten up old tug registered to a Harry Granger out of Christchurch."

Gonzalez tapped his fingers on the steering wheel trying to think. The pain in his kidneys was growing, he needed to get to a doctor to check it out.

"What does this Granger do for a job?"

Gonzalez heard the rustle of paper over the radio, then the pilot again. "He's a semi-retired fisherman."

"Okay get back to the base."

Gonzalez started the car but didn't drive off at once. Instead he got back to his base. "Check if Alex Winters had any other vessels besides an inflatable," he ordered.

"Says here that he recently purchased a submersible," came back the reply.

Gonzalez killed the connection and swore loudly.

Fucking idiots! Why didn't they tell him that in his briefing notes. Did he have to do everything himself! No wonder Winters had managed to disappear without a trace like that.

The car lurched as he put it in gear, making him gasp in pain, he wasn't used to a stick-shift.

## Epilogue

=15:22 hrs=

Dawn sighed contentedly. She loved sitting on the Malecón sea wall looking out over the bay. Havana was such a lovely city.

In the eighteen months that they'd been here, her life had changed so much. She could speak Spanish like a local, helped out in the little tourist shop Sheena ran in the old city and was doing well at school.

She sat on her hands looking up and down the Malecón. It was quiet today, not too many people about, unlike the height of the season when it was heaving with tourists. She looked out to sea again, just about making out the small white dot that was the new Dawn.

Dawn smiled at the name her dad had given the old tug. Spruced up now, he used it to take tourists out on fishing trips in the summer, his baggy cut-offs and sleeveless vest, along with the deep tan he'd got, fooling people into thinking he was a local - an assumption quickly dispelled when they tried to talk to him in Spanish, because he couldn't utter the simplest phrase. In the winter months he found odd jobs to do and helped out in the shop.

Sheena and her dad had grown close, which Dawn found hard to cope with at first. She smiled, wondering not for the first time, when the wedding was going to be. Sheena would never replace her mother, but she seemed to make her dad happy and that was good enough for the time being.

Dawn was surprised at how resourceful Sheena had turned out to be. Not just with the shop - starting a new business as foreigners in Cuba hadn't been easy - but with the way she'd handled the release of her research to the media, drip feeding it to WikiLeaks a bit at a time.

Shortly after they'd settled in Cuba, Sheena explained that she was worried about what Gonzalez's employers might do with her research should they manage to recover the files from the hard drive he'd stolen from her laptop. She told Alex that she'd copied her documents to an on-line website called StoreMeBox before destroying the computers at Area 7 and she could access them whenever she liked.

Sheena wanted to release her findings to the world so that no one company had the formula to themselves, making it useless to them.

Alex expressed his doubts, calling Sheena naive, that it wouldn't make the slightest difference and might even lead to them being discovered. It was their first argument and both of them were a bit shocked.

After a long night of arguments, Sheena finally wore Alex down and he agreed to her proposal. The next day Sheena began what would eventually become a world-wide media frenzy.

Dawn smiled to herself at how easily Sheena had got her dad's agreement. Maybe

she should take a leaf or two out of Sheena's book when it came to having arguments with her dad.

An old Lada drove passed and Dawn coughed at the thick smoke belching from its exhaust. She stood up, wondering what her friend Carolyn was doing right then and whether she'd ever see her again. Casting a last look out over the bay, she headed back to the shop and the homework she needed to catch up on.

Down on the beach four cats ran towards a small fishing boat that had just beached, their hungry cries drowned out by the crashing of the waves.

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Peter Barns live in the Highlands of Scotland.

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