

BOTTLED NIGHTMARES Vol. 2

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## SHADOW

It had been murder, pure and simple, of that there had been no doubt. No crime of passion this, or an accidental blow resulting in a tragic death.

No, Max Smit knew exactly what he was doing when he bludgeoned his one-time partner seventeen times with a monkey wrench. The incident had occurred whilst the pair were unloading a truck of liquor, smuggled across the Canadian border on June first, nineteen-twenty-eight.

His only regret was not doing the same to the two FBI agents who had been lying in wait when they arrived at the drop off point. But that had really been because of the fifteen soldiers they had brought with them for support at the time of the bust.

Fifteen! That had seemed over kill to Max at the time. But to be fair, who was he to talk?

Why had he obliterated Johnny Jones' head? Simple, greed. They had successfully dodged several border patrols on the way across and were driving to the farmhouse where they were due to sell their illicit cargo, when Smit, always the smarter of the two, had decided he wanted, no deserved! More of the cut.

In the hour-long drive, he had gone from plotting to get sixty percent, then seventy and finally, as they had pulled up at the farmhouse. The whole fucking one hundred percent.

Sadly, if he had waited another five minutes or so after they arrived, before caving in Jones' skull. They would both have been arrested on smuggling charges and he would have gotten maybe one to three instead of the fucking death penalty.

Maybe, Max Smit had wondered for the umpteenth time since his arrest, trial and sentence, he wasn't so smart after all.

Smit felt... Odd tonight as he sat on the bed in his cell on death row, looking out of the cell's small, barred window, and across the barbed wire topped walls of the prison and to the light house in the bay beyond.

He had done the exact same thing, every night for the six weeks he had been here since they had transferred him. Before, it had always filled him with a soft melancholy as he watched the light arc across the top of the wire and sweep through the window and across his cell. Illuminating it for a moment as it passed across the walls and ceiling, before disappearing once more. Only to return to taunt him again soon after.

He would sometimes hold out his hand as it passed and let the light play off the palm of his hand and he would make a fist, as if he could somehow grab the beam and let it pull him

away with it. Then he could climb up the light as if it were a rope, right over the walls and to freedom.

Sometimes he wept at the forlorn hope, sometimes he laughed. But tonight, he felt nothing but a growing warmth and calm.

Even when the clatter of a dozen metal cups and plates banged against bars and the shouts and shrieks of the inmates in the cells out in the hallway, began again, and for the second time tonight. Smit didn't so much as flinch.

Even though he knew what that meant. This was death row, and that cacophony was his fellow condemned inmates sending off the next prisoner being dragged through the corridor, past their cells, and through the door and into the room at the end where the hangman waited, and no one ever returned from. A walk they would all have to take sooner or later.

When he had first heard this chorus of the damned, on just his second night here, he had balled up and cried like a baby. As the finality of it all had hit him, pretty much like he had hit ol' Johnny Jones.

But tonight, it barely registered, even though, thanks to his two-bit lawyer, he had been told that he would be next for the noose. Apparently, Smit mused with genuine amusement, it was a three-fer on hangings today. Gallows humour indeed.

The metal slot in the door suddenly snapped open and a familiar sneering face appeared in the gap. Officer Drake, a weedy mouse of a man, who clearly had joined the prison service so he could exorcize a lifetime of beatings and mockery he had undoubtedly suffered himself his whole life.

Drake was the worst kind of bully, he was the type that was masochistically beating himself up inside for all the times he had cried and wet his pants at the hands of others, as he in turn was beating an inmate. So, the more he hated himself, which was a lot, the more he beat himself through you.

Smit looked away from the man grinned and tried once again to catch the light as it passed serenely through the cell. He could see the moats of dust tumbling through the air where the light caught them. Christ, it was the most beautiful thing Max Smit had seen in the whole of his thirty-five years.

Tears came, but not out of fear, but the sheer magic in the light. He couldn't be sure, but he thought he could see faint colours in the usually harsh white. Yes! Blues and reds, other colours he should know the name of, but they escaped him, and others still that didn't even seem to be of this world. Not that it mattered as he watched the undulating ballet before him. Until, once again, the lighthouse beam was gone.

"Hope you enjoyed your last meal, Smit," Drake said from a million miles away. "Cos' you're next for the drop. The Chaplin will be in here soon, to save your soul."

Arh, his last meal, Smit thought dreamily and shifted his gaze over to the metal table which was bolted to the wall. The remnants of his last meal sat on the plate. Just bones now and a smear of grease.

He had requested steak and eggs and an ice cool coke, followed by apple pie and cream. And much to his surprise they had cooked it to perfection and with great care, it was without doubt the best cooked meal he'd ever had.

The compassion shown him by some of the other guards and the cook as he was served the feast had genuinely touched Smit. Due in no small part to his surroundings and normal behaviour of those employed here. As if to hammer home this point, Drake piped up again.

"You hear me, Smit? You're going to swing."

Normally, Smit would have told the weasel to go fuck himself. But he knew if he tried to speak, he would be unable. He was transfixed now by the still lingering multi-coloured illuminances that had been left in the light's wake.

Faint, like smoke but still there, then, just as they were about to vanish, the lighthouse beam reappeared, bringing with it fresh curiosities as the colours returned once more, but brighter, almost solid in the air.

He lay down, suddenly dog tired and watched languidly as the beam, trailing wonders, came in through the window, arced across the walls and ceiling, before disappearing again only to return a short time later.

Over and over, he marvelled at the solidity of the colours within the light and how they spun and twisted through the air. As if waiting impatiently for the light from outside to return with more miraculous corporeal energies.

A discordant sound, low mumbling, then grating like the harsh complaint of grinding machinery in desperate need of oil. Smit tried to ignore the intrusion to all this bliss and for a time it seemed to work, as he concentrated on the darting colours above him, wanting more than anything to join their dance.

But no, despite himself, the mumbling continued. Inarticulate sounds slowly becoming a man's voice but speaking gibberish. Then the odd word of English here and there through the nonsense. Was he himself rambling as he drifted in this sea of light? No, it took Smit a moment to realise that one, it wasn't him speaking, and that two, it was a prayer.

He turned and as the light arced across the room for the countless time, it caught a grubby dog collar around the neck of a grim looking Chaplin. The man was sat on a chair by Smit's bed reading stoically from a bible. Behind him, keeping a weary but respectful distance was a guard, Phillips.

*The last rites.*

"No!"

He sat up and swung his legs around the side of the bed. Phillips took a step forwards, but the Chaplin held out a hand.

"It's alright my son," he told Smit softly. Then continued reading.

Smit stood on unsteady legs. "Stop!" But the Chaplin just kept on mechanically reading.

Fear gripped Smit, but this was fear unlike he had ever felt before. Not fear of death, something much, much worse. Fear of losing the light and all that it brought.

Something was wrong, he now realised with horror. These interlopers had robbed the lighthouse's beam of its magics. As it passed through the cell again, across walls, ceiling, and across the two trespassers, it was harsh, cold without any substance at all.

He wanted to kill both of them for the theft, he balled his fists, but his head was swimming at the sheer injustice of it all. He felt weak as a kitten again, now that the sublime stimulation within his every fibre had fled.

That once beautiful illumination came back around again, but this time Smit hated it. It cast his paltry shadow on the floor of the cell, then came around to hit Phillips, whose own shadow splashed across the wall at his back as it moved off to illuminate the Chaplin by the bed.

It took Smit a moment to realise that Phillips' shadow was still at his back on the wall, despite no light being cast on him, except from the meagre overhead bulb.

No, not his shadow, something else, something thinner, like a slash of darkness against the whitewashed wall. The light came around again, and just as before it left a residual black shape on the wall at the guard's back. But bigger now, even more dense, like a splash of black paint.

Smit turned to the Chaplin, oblivious, still praying away, then back to Phillips, who was looking benignly at the holy man as he mumbled his superstitions. Again, the sweep of the light across the cell, and again the shape at the guard's back grew.

The shadow grew more distinct with every pass, Smit stared at it in wonder as it took shape. It was now some three times the size of Phillips, who still, like the Chaplin, inexplicable couldn't see or feel its presence. Smit thought he laughed but neither man acknowledged it.

The shadow then seemed to stand upright, it was definitely a figure of some kind, but huge with unnaturally long arms, the darkness of its body shimmering with the colours he had seen in the air.

So that was where they had gone, Smit thought, to bind this strange, beautiful creation together from the darkness.

It shook, like a dog shaking off rain, and this unfolded a set of massive multi-colours wings which flowed out like oil on water, swirling but never losing their shape.

Now at its full height, it stood ten feet tall behind the hopelessly unaware guard, like some winged demon, ready to strike.

Both the Chaplin and Phillips looked quizzically at Smit, who knew he was laughing now. Their dumbfounded faces just made him laugh all the more.

"Tell me gentlemen," Smit said. "Do you believe in guardian angels?"

As if on cue, the shadow lunged forwards, grabbing Phillips by the shoulders. The man was big, but he was dwarfed by the sheer size of his attacker. The shadow slammed into its prey and Phillips exploded into a mass of pulped flesh and bone. Like he had gasoline for blood, and someone had struck a match.

"Yes!!" Smit shouted in pure joy.

He only wished it had been that bastard Drake, but that would pass. Who knew, maybe he and his new protector could return later to torture the bully? It seemed in that moment, anything was possible.

Smit held out his arms and reached up like a babe to its mother as the shadow approached. It wrapped its arms, still slick with blood, around him and he was lifted off the ground with one beat of its hypnotically swirling wings.

He looked back to see the wall behind him open up as the shadow bore him up, up. He knew they were heading for the lighthouse and that long held dream of escape. It couldn't have been more perfect.

He giggled like a kid as he looked back down at the Chaplin who was looking up at him, opened mouthed. Soon the holy man was nothing but a small dot as he was taken high over the prison, until it too looked like a model fort he had once played with as a child.

Freedom felt like a warm embrace, and he had never felt so contented. As they flew higher and higher, the shadow slowly placed one hand over his eyes, but he didn't mind. What was there worth seeing anyway? The shadow's other hand though, closed around his neck, not too tight, just a light, but oddly scratchy touch.

But Smit didn't care anymore, he just laughed and laughed and lau...

Parker Gayland pulled the gallows trap door release lever and thanked Christ the prisoner finally stopped that strange euphoric laughter. He peered through the gap at his feet as the man twitched a little then just swung there.

The prison doctor rushed over and bared the man's chest, then held a stethoscope to his heart. Checked it twice then the artery at his neck. He nodded.

"The prisoner is dead," he announced solemnly.

The prison Chaplin moved over next to Gayland on the gallows deck and followed his gaze downwards.

"That was... Odd," the Chaplin said.

"I've had them, screaming, cursing, crying, all things. But that guy?" Gayland replied with a shudder.

He loosened the rope a little to allow the two guards below to get Max Smit's body out of the noose. Then he had a thought.

"Hey, Phillips?" He called down.

The big guard, who had been in charge of supervising Smit's last meal looked up as he struggled with the dead man's legs.

"What?" He asked flustered.

"How much paraldehyde did you put in this man's food?"

Paraldehyde was a narcotic they used to calm a prisoner before the execution.

"Dunno, maybe half a bottle."

"What!?" He exclaimed and turned to the Chaplin. "Well, there you go. You're only supposed to use a few drops. No wonder he was laughing."

The Chaplin gave a shrug. "We should all die so happy."

## THE BASTARDS IN THE BASEMENT

"Am I having an acid flashback, or do you guys see that?"

Benny followed Anna's gaze across the dimly lit car park. A man dressed in what looked like a heavy blue hooded robe was running from a row of resident's parked cars and towards the entrance door to the Hickson villas apartment building.

"Well, there's something you don't see every day," Chris, Benny's younger brother said.

The trio watched the man as he suddenly stopped and began rummaging under his robe for something in his trouser pocket.

Now, it was just after three AM on a Friday morning and at that time in the city, you could expect to see the unexpected, especially on an early morning stagger home like now.

The three of them had been ambling home after an epic bar-be-que slash drunken late-night party thrown by their pals Dave and Steve, to celebrate the release of their band's new album. 'Beliel's travelling circus: Eclectic electric.'

It had been an event bordering on the biblical and was only just starting to peter out when they had reluctantly dragged themselves away to avoid the inevitable alcohol poisoning that was definitely on the cards.

The man glanced at them, giving a look like *they* were the ones oddly dressed. Despite the hood, Anna could see that he had what looked like runic symbols painted on his face in black ink. And also, a three-inch square piece of paper, again with a cryptic symbol on it, this time in red ink, stuck to the man's forehead.

"Weird city!" Anna announced.

"Hey, isn't that one of the dudes from the second floor?" Chris asked.

"Yeah, think you're right," Benny replied.

The man ran over to the heavy entrance door to the flats and pulled at the handle, but it didn't budge.

"Lost your key fob, mate?" Chris called across to the man.

Anna, Benny and Chris walked over to him, and he eyed them with suspicion. But this slowly faded as he seemed to recognise them as fellow Hickson Villas residents.

"Bit late for LARPing, isn't it?" Anna asked.

The three 'wizards' as they were collectively known to most of the other tower block residents, could often be seen wandering about in strange druidic type attire, but they were harmless enough. And not the weirdest people who called the villas home. And at least they mostly kept themselves to themselves.

You could often see them sneaking off down into the building's basement and everyone thought they were playing



dungeons and dragons or some such game down there. The basement was out of bounds to residents, strictly speaking, but as long as it wasn't a crack den down there, nobody much cared.

Benny fished out his own key fob and shook it. The man nodded and gave him a nervous but thankful smile. Benny then tapped the fob on the receiver by the door and it opened automatically. Now that they were close, Benny could see the man actually looked quite terrified. Now that, he mused, was committing to the game.

The role player went first and then the three of them staggered into the large entrance hall after him. And sure enough, instead of heading for the lift, the man veered right and over to the basement door at the end of a side corridor.

Anna shuddered theatrically and rubbed the back of her neck. "Shit, you feel that?" She said.

The air in here was filled with the smell of static, like you would get on the bumper cars at the fair. Its gentle residual power seemed to hang in the air around them.

Benny felt it too, he rubbed the top of his head and looked at Anna and Chris, half expecting the hair on their heads to be standing bolt upright, like he felt his was.

The role player paused by the basement door and gave them a manic look. "Wonderful feeling, isn't it?" He said cryptically. "Wonderful and terrifying."

"Fuck this, lads," Anna said. "Let's go," she moved over to the lift and hit the call button.

The man opened the basement door, and a soft wave of energy seemed to flood past him and into the entrance hall.

"Jez, what are you doing down there?" Benny asked a little spooked by the sensation.

"It worked!" The man replied, his voice touched with hints of awe and fear. "God help us, it worked."

"Good for you!" Chris slurred, oblivious.

The lift doors opened, and Anna grabbed Benny and Chris by the arm and dragged them inside.

"Avanti!" She exclaimed.

Once inside, she hit the fourth-floor button and after what seemed like an age, the lift doors closed.

"Seemed nice," Chris said with a drunken grin.

"This place is getting stranger by the day," Benny said, and Anna nodded in agreement.

Then she was hit with an odd feeling, nothing to do with what had just happened, just a feeling that something was missing from this picture. It took her a moment to untangle her thoughts, then.

"Here, where's Wicksy!?"

Robby Wicks looked up from his tray of cheesy chips to see that he was all alone. He had been wandering along with Anna, Benny and little Chris. Just concentrating on simply

putting one foot in front of the other, whilst trying not to drop his late-night snack. But now that he had paused and leant against the side of a building to avoid topping over, he noticed that they had wandered off.

"Guys?" Wicksy called out redundantly to the empty street ahead.

Thankfully, the five-story monolithic Hickson Villas loomed large against the night sky ahead, like a beacon to the weary traveller. So, he slipped the tray of chips back in its paper bag to avoid spillage and set off towards home.

Once inside their flat, Chris made his way over to the fridge in search of day-old cold pizza and more beer. Anna and Benny stood in the hallway debating the whereabouts of their missing friend and neighbour.

"Wicksy was with us when we left the party, right?" Anna asked, wracking her alcohol addled brain.

Benny struggled out of his jacket and hung it on a hook by the door. "Think, so?" He replied tentatively.

"Christ!" Anna exclaimed. "He's always wandering off. I should go look for him."

"At this hour?" Benny warned.

She patted the inside pocket of her jacket. "I'm armed, remember?"

She always carried a telescopic self-defence baton with her when they were out and about.

"Still, I'm coming with you," Benny told her in his best 'protective alpha male voice.' Which he had never managed to master.

"You can barely stand up, mate! I'll be fine, I won't go far."

"I'll put the kettle on," Benny announced.

"You do that."

Anna watched him toddle off down the hallway and let herself out. As she made her way down the long corridor leading to the lift at the end, the overhead automatic lights came on one by one as she went.

She took out her phone and selected Wicksy's number.

"You left me," a thin voice answered after a moment.

"Yeah, sorry, love. Where are you?"

"Erm, not far, just past the bins by the market. Two minutes, you home?"

"Yeah, I'll meet you downstairs, I'll buzz you in."

"Ta," he replied and hung up.

As she got to the lift, Anna reached out a hand to press the call button, when a huge wave of energy came up through the floor and seemed to ripple right through her body, from the soles of her feet to the tip of her head and beyond. And for a moment she was suspended as if in water a good three feet above the corridor's tiled floor.

It only lasted a few moments, but she could feel the energy pulsing through her entire body as she hung there, sending her nerve endings tingling. Then there was a soft 'whump' sound, her ears popped and an instant later she was on her backside.

"Kin hell!" She exclaimed and got unsteadily to her feet.

She glanced back down the corridor and was thankful to see she was alone. Christ, she thought, I must be drunker than I realised.

Anna hit the call button with a shaking hand and waited red-faced for it to arrive. She got in and hit the ground floor button. 'Doors closing,' the automatic voice they all referred to as the lift lady announced.

As the lift made its slow descent, she looked at herself in the mirrored side at the back of the compartment. Her cheeks were ruddy and there was a thin sheen of sweat on her face.

It hadn't been an unpleasant feeling, she had to admit, but still she shook its residual effects off and let out a sharp breath. Jesus, she mused, if she could bottle whatever the hell that was, she would be very rich, and very popular.

"Concentrate!!" She told her reflection and took another deep breath.

She watched as each floor button lit up, then flicked off and she counted them down in her head. Three, two, one. Ground. 'Ground floor, doors opening,' the lift lady said, and Anna prepared to exit.

She froze at the strange scene that greeted her as the doors opened. Another of the blue robed weirdos from the second floor, this one a woman, was standing in the entrance lobby talking animatedly to what Anna's shock stunned brain could only partially comprehend as a massive 'thing'.

The creature stood some eight feet tall, so much so that from where she was standing in the lift, Anna could only see up to its bulky shoulders. A small mercy for which her sanity was very grateful for.

Its body was a tight mass of blue grey muscle and sinew. Intermittent forks of blue static danced and played across its almost reptilian, but nearly translucent skin. It was humanoid up to a point, but its long muscular arms, which were gesticulating wildly at the woman, ended in four claws rather than hands. Each thick, gnarled digit was tipped with razor sharp looking three-inch talons.

The thing's voice was so low and guttural that Anna could feel its resonance in her chest like the bass speaker at a concert. It seemed to be trying to articulate words, which clearly weren't English, but they sounded like just so many cavernous grunts and snarls to her.

The woman, who was five feet if she was an inch, had to crane her neck up awkwardly to address the creature. And

despite the massive size difference and the fact she was talking to a fucking monster, she seemed unfazed and if anything, annoyed at the interaction.

Unlike the nervous dude outside, the woman had none of the runes painted on her face, but did have that curious square piece of paper stuck to her forehead, which Anna could see had several small symbols painted in black on it. Different as far as she could tell from the other guy.

Then the creature moved and seemed to want to lunge at her, vicious talons outstretched in her direction, clawing at the air a foot from her face. But it stopped dead when she calmly tapped the paper on her forehead.

"Ah, ah, arh," she scolded as if speaking to a child.

'Doors closing,' the lift lady announced.

The woman turned to see Anna stood there in the lift, a look of shock flashed across her face, just as the doors closed again.

Anna hit the fourth-floor button and slammed her back against the lift wall and waited. Either for the doors to be ripped open, or for the lift to whir into action. She cried out in relief as it started its ascent. And wondered if she had been spiked with something at the party.

"Fuck! Fuck! Fucking fuck!!"

Benny dropped the milk carton he was holding when Anna burst into the flat cursing at the top of her lungs, and it exploded on the kitchen floor.

"Christ woman!" He exclaimed and came out into the flat's hallway as Anna slammed the door shut and locked it. She pressed her back against it as if for extra security.

Chris, pizza in hand peered around the living room door and into the hallway. "Wicksy not there then?" He enquired.

"Oh, Christ," Anna uttered in realisation.

Wicksy would be downstairs at any minute, blissfully unaware of what he would be walking into. Anna took out her phone, but her hands were shaking so much it slipped through her fingers and clattered to the floor. She let out an anguished cry and she went to her knees to pick it up.

"Anna?" Benny said and ran down to her.

"Gotta warn him," Anna said. "Gotta warn him. Christ!"

She burst into tears and Benny crouched down next to her, he put an arm around her shaking shoulders.

"Jesus, Anna, what happened down there?"

"Something, there's something down there. Something horrible," she sobbed.

"Something? Something what?" Benny asked her, spooked at the sudden emotion. "Anna, did someone attack you? I knew I should have come down with you."

"A, a monster," she blurted out. "Something, some kind of creature."

"Blimey!" Chris uttered and took a bite of pizza.

"Ssh, hey come on," Benny said softly holding her tight. "It's okay, it's alright now. Anna, come on, take a breath. Tell me exactly what happened."

Anna nodded, she swallowed hard and forced herself to regulate her breathing as best she could.

"One of the wierdos," she said. "From the second floor? She was down in the entrance hall, there was something with her, a monster."

"Christ Anna!" Chris suddenly laughed. "They're role players! It was probably one of them in a costume." She fixed him with a piercing gaze, and he shut right up.

"That was no costume," she told him coldly. "And I don't think they're fucking live action role players."

After banging his head on absolutely nothing for the third time, Robby Wicks gave up trying to walk through the open pedestrian gate to the Hickson villas private car park and sat down on the wall next to it and had a chip.

Sure, he knew he was very drunk, and yes, he had taken one of Pippy's special pills at the party. But still he figured he should have been able to walk through a three-foot opening, something he had done on countless times before and in a worse state than he was now. But for whatever reason, he just couldn't get in.

He had even picked up a discarded coke can out of the gutter and tried to throw it over the closed adjacent and much larger gate you needed to drive through to gain access if you were in a car. But much like his head, it had simply bounced off thin air and back into the street.

Wicksy put down his tray of cheesy chips on the wall next to him and took out his phone. He selected Anna's number, but it wouldn't connect. So, he tried first Benny's then Chris' but with the same result. He could see he had great reception out here but for whatever reason he just couldn't get through.

"Bollocks," he sighed and returned to his supper.

He was mid-chip when he heard the 'clop, clop,' of someone walking close by. He looked up to see a woman come walking out of the shadows at the far end of the deserted street and make her way down towards him.

He could tell instantly by the way she was dressed that she was definitely lost. She wore an expensive looking long black woollen coat which had the collar turned up against the cold night air, and her hands were planted deep in the pockets.

He could just about make out the hem of her black dress underneath the coat, which came to the top of shiny black knee length boots.

Black on black on black, Wicksy thought idly as she approached. Except for her hair. Even in the unflattering glow of the florescent streetlights he could see it was a

vivid, almost blood red and cascaded down her back and shoulders in long loose curls.

Her face, no doubt accentuated by this and her dark clothes was as pale as porcelain. She stopped just in front of him and gave him the most heart melting smile he had ever seen, and it was love at first sight. Her eyes widened as she saw the tray of chips in his lap.

"Ooh, can I have a chip?" She fair cooed.

"Huh? Oh, yeah, course," Wicksy replied and offered her the tray. She delicately picked one, blew on it and took a bite. "You're not from around here," he added, stating the obvious.

"What gave me away?" She asked conspiratorially.

Wicksy thought he caught the hint of a foreign accent, eastern European perhaps, but he was hard to pin down. As he now realised was her age. Thirties maybe? But with the air of someone much younger.

"We have an expression," he told her. "Whenever we see a beautiful woman around these parts. 'Never been to Leeds.' It's a bit sexist I know, but we are ignorant northerners."

"Sexist and a little paradoxical, don't you think?"

Wicksy looked at her blankly, he knew the word but was never quite sure what it meant. Then she smiled that smile again.

"But no," she said. "I'm not from around here. I'm working."

"Oh?"

"Can you keep a secret?" She asked and sat down on the wall next to him.

"I'm famed for my discretion," he assured her.

She leant in and whispered. "I'm a collector of souls."

Sure, why not? He mused drunkenly. Then it hit him.

"Eh?"

"Oh, don't worry," she told him casually. "I'm not after yours. I'm not after anyone's tonight."

Wicksy found himself nodding and actually felt relieved to hear it. The woman looked over her shoulder to the tower block behind them.

"No," she continued. "Tonight, for my sins, I'm on damage limitation."

"No answer! Doesn't even connect, no signal at all," Benny said staring at his phone.

"Christ," Anna uttered.

They had all tried calling Wicksy. And she was starting to get visions of the poor sap staggering into the entrance hall and coming face to face with... That thing.

"You sure you weren't tripping?" Chris asked for the umpteenth time.

"No, I wasn't fucking tripping!" She snapped back.

"Okay, okay."

Benny went over to the living room window, which looked down on the usually busy road that ran parallel with the building. Even at this hour, you could still see taxis and the odd delivery truck passing by every so often. There was a crossroads with three sets of traffic signals at the end, where vehicles would often have to wait for the lights to change.

A taxi, then a slate grey prius sped down the road, but the lights were all on green, so they just drove on and out of sight.

"Cock it!" Benny hollered.

"We're four floors up, they won't hear you anyway," Anna reminded him.

Benny looked around the flat, then when through into the adjoining kitchen, he opened a cupboard and took out a pint glass.

"I'll chuck this at the first car that stops at the lights," Benny said. "Worst thing that can happen is they call the cops."

"No, you bloody won't!" Anna told him and snatched the glass out of his hand. "The worst thing that can happen is that you cause a crash!"

"I'll wait until they're parked," he reasoned. "It'll be fine."

"No throwing anything out of the fucking window!" She replied in dismay.

Wicksy threw a chip at the invisible barrier and watched as it bounced off and over his head and landed at the woman's feet who was standing in the street now and had taken to staring up at the building, looking for God only knew what. She glanced at the chip.

"Yeah, sorry about that. Containment charm," she said.

"You did this?"

"Had to. Trust me..?" She paused expectantly.

"Wicksy," he said.

"Please to meet you, Wicksy, I'm Sofia. And trust me, you don't want whatever is in there, getting out here."

"My friends are in there, are they okay?"

"No clue," she replied with a shrug.

Wickey thought about the potential gravity of this. "Any way of finding out?"

"Nope."

The woman, Sofia, sat back down on the wall next to him and stole another chip. "You know," she said mid-bite. "You seem to be taking all this very calmly."

"Just how am I supposed to take it?" He asked, not unreasonably.

She shrugged. "Panic, expletives, prayers to this God or that. The usual human reaction."

"Maybe it's the booze or Pippy's magic pill, but to tell you the truth, this isn't the weirdest trip I've been on," Wicksy confessed.

"Good for you."

"So, what's next after containment?"

The woman thought about this for a moment. "Honestly? I'm just riffing here," she admitted. "Normally, I'm the one causing all the mayhem and mischief. But the way I see it? It could all just fizzle out or turn into a right bloodbath."

"Let's hope for the fizzle then eh?"

"I'll drink to that."

The entrance door to the building opened and a man in a thick blue hooded robe staggered out and into the car park. He seemed to be talking animatedly to someone inside and raised his hands defensively then shook his hooded head.

"Hey fuckwit!" Sofia shouted and got to her feet.

The man turned to them and Wicksy saw that he had strange symbols painted on his face and an odd-looking piece of paper attached to his forehead.

"Oh!" Wicksy exclaimed in recognition and jumped up next to Sofia. "That's one of the role-players from the second floor."

"You know this clown?" She asked.

"After a fashion. There are three of them, you'll see them prancing around in get ups like that from time to time. Harmless enough."

Wicksy then gave an involuntary shudder. He could just make out a dark misshapen shadow creeping forwards over the threshold of the open door and towards the man. The role-player's face grimaced in terror at whatever was casting the shadow and backed away. He tapped the paper on his forehead and gave the slightest shake of his head.

The shadow stopped before the caster revealed itself, but then Wicksy caught a glimpse of a massive arm swipe at the man but was gone a moment later and the shadow receded back inside.

The automatic front door began to shut, but a woman, maybe in her early thirties, dressed in a similar robe but with the hood down moved into the door's path, and it opened again as the proximity sensor detected her presence. Just like the terrified man, she had a square of paper on her forehead, but no symbols on her face.

"Morris!" The woman called out. "Get back in here!" She sounded like she was talking to a naughty child who was straying into traffic.

Morris shook his head. "You have to stop this," he replied, his voice was audibly trembling as he spoke. "This is madness!"

"Morris!" She scolded again.

"Never thought it would actually work," he uttered. "Christ, what have we done?" He added louder.



"What we have done," the woman told him triumphantly. "Is something amazing! No one in history has ever achieved this!"

Sofia took a step towards the invisible barrier at this. "Erm, excuse me? That's not technically true," she informed the woman.

There was a loud cavernous snort of fear from the entrance hall behind the woman, followed by a bestial growl that threatened to loosen Wicksy's bowels.

"Kin 'ell," he squeaked out.

"And it always ends badly for laypeople like you," Sofia added with gravitas.

The blue robed woman spun around to whatever was making that unholy noise inside.

"Cease!" She ordered, then turned back to Sofia and Wicksy. "And who are you?" She asked, her voice a mixture of anger and thinly veiled concern.

"It's me, Wicksy from floor..."

"Not you, moron!" She snapped.

"Bit harsh," Wicksy breathed.

"At the risk of sounding overly dramatic," Sofia called across to her. "I'm your worst fucking nightmare. Even worse than that thing you have conjured in there."

Morris suddenly bolted across the car park towards them.

"Morris!" The woman at the door screamed. "Get back here you fucking coward!"

"Jesus, God!" Morris pleaded as he approached. "We're done something..."

Wicksy was just about to warn the man when he ran face first into the barrier. He bounced back and impressive distance and landed hard on his back on the tarmac.

"Stupid," Sofia finished the sentence for him.

The blue robed woman looked on in disbelief at this.

"You're not the only one with a trick or two," Sofia told her. "And sweetheart, I've been doing this a hell of a lot longer than you."

"You, you can't hurt us," the woman shouted and pointed to the paper on her forehead.

Sofia tutted and turned to Wicksy who was still watching a stunned Morris flapping around on the ground.

"What's that saying?" She asked. "A little knowledge can be a dangerous thing?"

"Something like that," Wicksy murmured in response.

Sofia looked up at the tower block then back to the car park. She frowned slightly and seemed to Wicksy that she was weighing something up. Morris, his nose caved in, began to bleed and weep on the ground in front of them.

Movement over by the entrance door, drew Wicksy's attention over there and he saw the third and final of the second-floor role-players, a man in his forties, identically dressed and painted like Morris and with the apparently

essential square of paper on his head. The man hovered hesitantly behind the woman.

It was clear to Wicksy, even from where he was, the man was skittish as hell, he kept glancing nervously back over his shoulder to whatever was lurking just out of sight. He was whispering to the woman now.

"No!" The woman snapped at him. "We can handle this. You trust me?" And the man nodded reverentially.

And Wicksy dubbed her Boss Lady in his head. And he wondered how the hell all this yelling hadn't raised the entire block. He put it down to this containment charm thingy Sofia had, for want of a better word, conjured.

It was easy to believe pretty much anything when you haven't got a clue what's going on, he reasoned. Whatever it was, there wasn't so much as a peep from any of the sleeping residence inside.

"Dissension in the ranks," Sofia whispered to him. Then she shouted to the duo. "You're all in way over your heads. Messing with this kind of magic can only end in tears for people like you."

"And who the fuck are you?" The man shouted with clearly false bravado.

"She's your worst fucking nightmare, knobhead," Wicksy shouted back.

He looked at Sofia with a grin, but she was again looking the building up and down, her pale brow knitted as she thought. He could almost hear the cogs turning.

"Sorry new friend," she said without looking at him. "I'm everyone's worst nightmare tonight."

She moved away from the gate and back into the street.

"Subtlety has never been my strong point," she called out to the role-players. "If I have to bring this whole damn building down to stop you, I will. And believe me those charms on your heads aren't much good against a few tonnes of bricks and mortar."

Furious whispers now from the two in the doorway. Morris, for his part, just kept weeping.

"Eh, what!?" Wicksy suddenly cottoned on to what she had just said. "My friends are in there, plus a hundred odd other people!"

"I never said I was a good guy," Sofia told him coldly.

And suddenly Wicksy wasn't enjoying this weird and wonderful trip anymore.

Sofia moved forwards, close to where Wicksy figured the barrier was. She got on one knee and leant forwards to address the weeping Morris.

"Hey, Morris," she whispered. "You want out of this mess?"

Morris perked up at this and dragged himself stiffly to his knees. He turned his snotty, bloody and tear stained face up to her. It wasn't a pretty sight.

"Morris!" Boss Lady warned from across the car park.  
"Don't listen to her. I think she's one of those collectors."

Sofia seemed genuinely impressed at this revelation.  
"Fame at last," she called back.

"It's, it's all true?" Morris uttered, terrified.

And Wicksy watched on none the wiser. Whatever was happening in this crazy new world he had stumbled into. Soul collectors, invisible barriers and strange cults in his building. Not to mention that unseen thing skulking around the entrance hall. He figured ignorance of such things was its own reward. And he prayed for memory loss once he sobered up.

"All true..." Morris sobbed.

Sofia returned her attention to the prone man. "'Fraid so, puppy."

And despite his apparent neutrality in this bizarre sideshow. Wicksy felt the overwhelming urge to find something to bash Sofia over the head with.

"Morris," Sofia continued, oblivious to Wicksy's half-baked thoughts of murder. "You want out, right?"

The man nodded vigorously, sending a spray of mixed bodily fluids up into the air, some of which flecked nauseatingly against the barrier and just hung there in mid-air.

"God yes," he wheezed. "More than anything. We shouldn't have messed with any of this. I wouldn't have, if only I'd known."

"All seemed like a lark?" Sofia asked lightly.

"So, sorry," he said with genuine contrition.

"I can't remove this barrier," she told him with a sweep of her hand. "The beast will get out, and trust me, none of you have as much control over it as you think."

Morris nodded like some attentive five-year-old as he listened to her. And Wicksy couldn't remember seeing a more pathetic creature in all his twenty-eight years.

"You have two options here," Sofia told him. "One, go back inside and destroy the charm circle you have made. In I wanna say, the basement?"

Again, he nodded gormlessly.

"What did you use to charge the spell?"

"Antique kerosine lamp, filled with petrol and goat's blood."

"Christ," Wickey said softly.

"Nice," Sofia replied with an appreciative nod. "So, you need to extinguish the flame, then smash the lamp to pieces. In that order, or, you know, boom?"

Morris glanced back to Boss Lady, who was now alone in the doorway. She seemed torn between going back inside or coming across and probably beating her sometime acolyte to death. She eyed Sofia with a murderous gaze and was muttering something inaudible under her breath but stayed where she was.

Morris turned back to Sofia. "She'll never let me do that. She's lost her mind. Something snapped in her during the ritual."

"That can happen," Sofia mock lamented.

"You said there were two ways?" Morris prompted.

"Remove the charm from your forehead," she coaxed. "That will allow you to pass right through the barrier."

"But, the creature," Morris replied fearfully. "The charm protects us from it, allows us to control it."

"Nar," Sofia said dismissively. "The creature is bound to your will. It'll do as it's told. The charm on your head protects you from people like me and what I can create. Counter charms, this containment barrier, all the good stuff."

The poor man was clearly wracked with indecision. He screwed his bloodshot eyes tight shut and concentrated on the offer. Then he looked back up to Sofia, and she nodded ever so slightly.

"Oh! A third option!" Sofia exclaimed brightly. "You can die horribly along with everyone in that building when I bring it down, in a minute or so."

Wicksy tensed at this, part of him had still been clinging to the fact she was bluffing about taking out the building and all his friends. He glanced around for something to cave her skull in with. But unless that coke can on the floor to his left had suddenly been filled with concrete, he was shit out of luck.

"I, God, I don't know," Morris whimpered.

"Hey, listen, none of this is your fault," she said softly, and it sounded like someone trying to talk down a jumper. "You didn't realise what you were getting yourself into. I live in this world, Morris. I know its wonders and its horrors. You don't need to die out of ignorance." She gestured over to Boss Lady. "None of you do."

Morris looked utterly exhausted. But he seemed to rally himself a little and with great effort, struggled up onto his feet. He swayed slightly and looked like he was going to pitch right over, but he somehow steadied himself.

"I don't wanna die," he sobbed softly.

"Trust me," she breathed.

Morris closed his eyes and ripped the paper off his forehead.

If Wicksy had blinked at that exact moment, he had no doubt he would have missed what happened an instant later. And God he wished he had.

There was a soft 'snap' and the paper sparked and burnt up in Morris' hand a split second later. Over by the entrance door a blur of movement from inside, blasted past Boss Lady, her hair and robes billowed and rippled as if hit by a sudden brief hurricane, then a shadow of undulating darkness punctuated by flashes of white teeth and claws was on Morris in half a heartbeat.

Morris was shredded into a nonsense of anatomy before Wicksy could register just what the hell had happened. Blood and mangled viscera splattered the invisible barrier, leaving a quite remarkable modern art masterpiece suspended in mid-air, before it slowly began to slide down in gory streaks and pooled on the tarmac below.

"Woooo!" Sofia leapt to her feet and threw her hands up in the air like an NFL referee signalling a touchdown.

Wicksy spun away and sprayed vomit all over the pavement. So much for cheesy chips.

"Fucking hell!!" Anna yelled from her vantage point looking through the window, mid-way down the building's internal stairwell between the third and second floors.

"What? What?" Benny said from a few steps further up behind her.

"That guy in the car park just fucking exploded!"

They had left Chris passed out on the sofa in the flat and had decided to brave the internal stairs down to at least the second-floor landing, to see if they could somehow get a warning to Wicksy about the insanity unfolding in the entrance hall.

Anna was brandishing her baton, and Benny had the metal bar which goes between the weights on a barbell. More for a false sense of security than actual viable protection.

Their progress down was being impeded in no small part by the occasional deep snort and the odd terrifying growl which echoed up through the stairs and bounced off the walls around them.

Each floor on the way down had a window which looked out over the car park and entrance gates below, but they were bolted shut for safety so you couldn't actually open them even an inch or so. Anna had been peering through the window, waiting for Benny to catch up when she had caught sight of the bizarre scene below.

Good old Wicksy was safe and sound, for now, and was standing by the pedestrian gate next to a woman she didn't recognise. The woman had been talking to one of the role-players who was on his knees for some reason. Then from what she could see from where she was, the prone bloke stood, took off one of those weird papers off his forehead and then just exploded.

"Jesus," Benny uttered and came to her side.

There was a blur of shadowy movement, close to the carnage, then it seemed to solidify into the creature from the entrance hall, now visible in all its blood splattered glory. Even from here and through the grimy window, Anna could see its vicious taloned hands clenching and unclenching and it was breathing hard through its elongated snout, its head, now that she could actually see it put her in mind of that of the

narrow hairless head of a werewolf. But one designed by some creator with a severely damaged and fucked up eye for anatomy.

"Fuck me!" Benny cried out.

"Ssh!!" Anna warned, mindful of anyone downstairs. "I told you!" She continued in a hushed tone and dug her elbow into his ribs. "Tripping my arse."

"We can't fight that thing!" He whispered.

"We have to do something. Look at Wicksy, he's right down there with it, and that poor woman," Anna could feel tears of frustration threaten.

She banged hard on the glass with both fists, but it was too thick to be heard outside.

"You can go back up stairs if you want to," she said to Benny and turned to him. She could see he was seriously contemplating the offer.

Wicksy, still doubled over, clutched his still convulsing stomach, but at least the vomiting had stopped. He just stared at his feet and waited for the nausea to pass sucking in mouthfuls of cold night air. Then, even over his own gasping, he could hear something a little way off behind him. It was breathing hard, hissing through gritted teeth he figured. And it sounded like it had gravel and ground glass in its throat.

"Beast!" The Boss Lady screamed. "Get in here, now!"

The 'beast' snorted in derision making Wicksy start in shock. He couldn't tell if it was right behind him or back over at the entrance door, its grinding growl seemed to be echoing all around him.

Then, before he could tell his brain no, he straitened as best he could and swivelled ever so slowly on his heel to face the carnage.

Now, as it came into some kind of focus, Wicksy wasn't sure if 'thankfully' was the right adverb for what he could see. But, thankfully his view of the creature in the car park was mostly obscured by the remains of the bloke called Morris which was smeared all over the invisible barrier between him and his mutilator.

He could see its movements through the gore, which were slow and lumbering, but he was mostly spared its actual appearance, which he guessed he should be somewhat grateful for.

He gagged and averted his gaze from the scene as what appeared to be an ear slowly slid down the barrier and finally flopped onto the tarmac.

"Beast!" He vaguely heard Boss Lady command again, through his pounding ears. "To me!"

Beast, let out a growl laced with such deep reverberation, Wicksy could have sworn he felt it through the soles of his trainers. He bent forwards and put his hands on his thighs to stop himself from face planting into the ground.

"Bet you wanna tear that bitch limb from limb, don't you, baby?" Sofia purred.

And it actually sounded to Wicksy that the thing gave a snort of amusement at this. The phrase, 'I'm losing my mind, I'm losing my mind,' rattled around his shock addled brain.

He was only partially conscious of hearing the great beast lumbering back across the car park and over, he guessed, to the entrance door and Boss Lady.

"It's okay," Wicksy," Sofia informed him. "It's gone now."

He thought about turning around, but decided he was better off where he was for now. After all, what was left of poor Morris would still be drip, drip, dripping in mid-fucking-air. Instead, he looked across the other side of the road and could just see the dim beginnings of the sun warming the early morning sky over the town centre buildings in the distance.

"Nar, I'm good here thanks," he said and concentrated on the eastern horizon.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid," Benny whispered to himself as they made their descent, one tentative step at a time.

They could hear the sound of heated arguing coming up through the stairwell from the entrance hall below. But thankfully the monster was silent. The two role-players seemed to be debating what to do next.

Anna looked to the floor sign by the lift as they reach the next level's landing. Second floor, she knew they would have to be quiet as hell if they were to go any lower. She went over to the window opposite the lift and looked outside.

There was no sign of the creature, and she could see Wicksy sitting on the wall by the open pedestrian entrance with his back to the building. The strange woman was standing close by, she had her hands in her coat pockets and was idly kicking a can from one foot to the other.

As they were getting closer to the ground floor, Anna didn't want to bang on the glass again, as it would be heard louder down there than outside. So, she began to wave her arms around wildly in the vain hope one of the pair would catch the movement.

Benny came to her side and did the same. Then he actually chuckled.

"We must look like a right couple of lunatics," he said to her, and she couldn't help but smile at this.

'Ping!' 'Doors opening,' the lift lady said from behind them. 'Second floor, please mind the doors.'

They turned to see the same male blue robed role player from earlier step out of the lift. He stopped, stunned and the three of them just stared at each other in shared disbelief for a full five seconds.

"Who the..." The man began.

Anna lunged at him before he could finish his sentence and hit him three times in rapid succession with her baton, one on his head the other two blows hit his forearms which he brought up to protect himself.

"Benny!" Anna said in a hushed tone, hitting the man twice more. "Get him!"

Benny pushed past her and grabbed the front of man's robe, he twisted around and then pushed him into the flight of steps going back up to the third floor. They both fell awkwardly onto the stairs and the man hit his head hard on edge of a step.

"Fucker!" Benny hissed and got back up. He raised the metal bar above his head.

"Please..." The role-player pleaded, disorientated and brought his arms up to his face to protect himself.

"Wack him!" Anna urged as quietly as she could, mindful of the woman downstairs.

"No!" The man blurted out in terror.

"Quiet, dickhead!" Benny snarled and hit him on the side of his head with a half-hearted blow.

Despite the love tap, it opened up a gash above the man's left ear and blood began to run down his neck and face.

"Jesus," Benny breathed, surprised at his own violence.

"Oh, God, God," the man moaned in a daze.

Benny jumped on him and put his hand over his mouth.

"Shut up, or I will fucking bust you up, man," Benny warned.

Anna frantically looked down the stairwell, she went over to the banister where she could see right down to the entrance hall between the remaining flights of stairs.

The woman came into view for a moment, then thankfully moved off out of sight, seemingly none the wiser. No shouts of alarm, and thank Christ, no rampaging monster tearing up the stairs.

"You gonna be quiet?" Benny asked quietly.

Wide eyed and a little concussed, the man nodded. So, Benny slowly took his hand away from his mouth, but kept the metal bar raised above him in the other just in case.

"It's okay, it's okay," the man sighed.

Anna moved closer to the pair.

"What the fuck is going on down there?" She wanted to know.

"Oh, you know, just your everyday demon summoning," he replied.

Anna thought about clocking him with her baton but put down his languid response to the blow he took. But then he smiled condescendingly.

"Idiots," he sneered.

And Anna gave serious consideration to bludgeoning him to death. "I will end you," she said and meant it.



He shrugged and wiped a trickle of blood from his cheek. "Beast," he said softly. "To me."

A bestial roar bounced off the walls from below like an almost physical force, followed by a guttural growl, which got closer and closer.

"Fuck me," Anna uttered in horror.

They could hear the creature's heavy footfalls as it slowly made its way up from the entrance hall towards them. It was almost worse that it didn't seem in any hurry at all. Maybe, Anna thought through the fog of fear in her brain, it was savouring the terror it was eliciting.

"Jordan?" A woman's voice from below.

"It's okay, Vicky," Jordan replied with maddening confidence. "Just a couple of normies wandering around up here."

"Very well, do what you must," Vicky called up ominously.

Jordan pushed Benny back, and using the wall, he laboured himself to his feet. He touched the wound on the side of his head and his fingers came away bloody.

"This is gonna cost you, pothead," he said to Benny and held out his bloody hand. "Blood for blood."

"Anna?" Benny said weakly.

But Anna couldn't move, she was looking over the banister, transfixed by fear as she caught fleeting glimpses of the nightmare as it made its way up to the first-floor landing, then onto the next flight which would bring it to the second floor and into full view.

"It's coming," was all she could say.

Benny suddenly grabbed Jordan by his robe and raised the bar over his head.

"Call it off," he ordered.

The arrogant glint in Jordan's eyes wavered slightly, seeing the absolute resolution in Benny's. This was no bluff.

"Call it off..." Benny repeated.

"Beast!" Jordan shrieked. "Faster! Protect your master!"

Anna didn't see the thing, but felt it rush past her and although it didn't make contact, she was flung back by the sheer force of its passing. The breath was knocked out of her, and she slammed hard into the heavy glass security door separating the landing from the flats beyond. She heard a sharp crack and hoped to God it was the glass and not her spine. Finally, she fell to the floor in a heap.

Dazed and with a growing pain in her back and chest, Anna turned her head at the horrific sound of Benny crying out. She tried to call to him, but it came out as little more than a strangled choking breath.

The creature, all eight feet of pulsating, glistening raw flesh of it, had Benny by the throat with one massive razor tipped claw. It slowly raised him up off the ground as if he

were weightless and his legs kicked the air in a vain attempt to gain purchase on something.

"Yes! Yes!" Jordan hissed with delight, his eyes wide and manic.

Benny's metal bar clattered to the floor and rolled across the landing and stopped just by Anna's foot. Where her own weapon was, she had no idea.

With great effort, she teased the weapon to her side with her foot, but at this stage she wasn't sure she even had enough energy to stand, let alone wield the thing.

The creature snorted in Benny's face, ruffling his scraggly hair. It growled and the whole landing seemed to vibrate at the sound and Anna heard the glass rattle at her back. Then it drew him closer still, towards its long dripping maw. If anything, the sound of its fetid breath hissing through its ragged teeth was worse than the growl it replaced.

"Slowly," Jorgan coaxed cruelly. "The girl first."

On command and with only the slightest flick of its wrist, the creature tossed Benny up a whole flight of stairs and onto the landing above. Anna didn't see him land but heard his short sharp cry of pain and the sickening sound of his body hitting the hard floor.

Then the monster slowly turned to her. The blue static she had seen arching across its body from the lift earlier had all but faded now, and only the occasional spark could be seen dancing from one muscle to the next, its creation all but complete she thought grimly.

But still, it looked half made to her terrified gaze. Its body was a mass of grey tightly wrought muscle and sinew, its face bestial and cruel. Its deep-set eyes piecing almost feline looking, like two blazing emeralds glared at her over its long snout. Teeth bared like a grinning shark, dripping with black saliva in anticipation of taking a bite or two out of her flesh.

As it moved closer and loomed over her, Anna could feel waves of freezing cold energy pulsating from its form. And she could have sworn she saw her breath clouding in front of her face.

Then the oddest thing happened, it may have been the moment her sanity finally fled from her. But the crippling fear she felt running through her entire body, keeping her frozen with fear, suddenly turned in an instant to a deep almost primal red-hot rage. If it had been a choice between flight or fight, then the former had long since passed. And by Christ it felt liberating and oh so good, like someone had just injected her with a cocktail of PCP and adrenaline.

Before she knew it, she was on her feet, she was only vaguely aware of her battered and bruised body screaming in protest at the sudden exertion. But didn't give a shit about it, if anything it just fuelled her on more.

She jumped up like a basketball player spiking a shot and hit the abomination on the top of its skull with everything she had.

"Fucker!!" She screamed.

It felt like she had just struck a concrete block, the metal bar vibrated so hard it stung her hand and then spun out of her grasp and clattered off down the stairs.

At that exact same moment, the creature caught Anna mid-air, but still she flailed and kicked at the thing like a psychotic toddler having the mother of all shit fits.

She kicked as hard as she could at what she hoped was its balls, if such creations have balls, and was pretty sure she broke her foot doing so. But the whole frenzied attack would have had more impact if the creature had been made from solid granite.

"Fucker," she managed to croak out again, suddenly exhausted.

It pulled her close to its face, much as it had done with Benny. Jordan giggled slightly, half obscured by the bulk of the monster. But then he staggered back, his face slack, holding his damaged head and fell back into the steps.

"Oh, oh, my," he uttered in confusion.

And Anna hoped the bastard would die right then and there. But much to her disappointment he seemed to rally a little and propped himself against the wall as he sat on a step, breathing hard, the colour drained from his face.

"Oooph, dizzy," he said redundantly.

The creature glanced back at Jordan, hearing his complaints and gave a snort of what sounded to Anna like a mixture of derision and amusement at his plight. Or as close as such a thing were capable of. But it definitely sounded like an approximation of strangled mirth to her.

It turned back to her but didn't resume its terrifying growl. Its fierce eyes softened a touch as it looked directly into hers. Then it did the darndest thing, it gently tapped her forehead with its free vicious looking talon.

Anna shook her head in confusion, but in truth she was just as surprised the creature was capable of such a gentle touch as the action itself. Then it repeated the tap and glanced back at Jordan, who now seemed to be rallying somewhat.

Anna shook her head again, not understanding and the beast's eyes flashed with a spark of what looked like frustration at her lack of comprehension. Then it touched its own gnarled forehead, then again tapped hers.

Jordan dragged himself to his feet. "Why isn't that bitch dead yet?" He wanted to know and moved alongside the creature. "Snap her neck, I command you!"

The creature's grip began to slowly tighten around Anna's red raw neck. She was shocked to see the look of naked reluctance on the thing's otherwise nightmarish face. Actual

remorse, but its vice like grip tightened a little more none the less.

Its demonic eyes seemed to be pleading with her, it shifted its gaze from her eyes to her forehead then back again, willing her to understand.

"Oh," Anna breathed out as she finally joined the dots.

She reached out and snatched the runic paper off Jordan's forehead. He squealed in shock and the paper sparked and was incinerated to nothing in her hand a moment later.

The creature smiled, and although she appreciated the intention, it wasn't much better than its horrific predatory grin. Then it gently put her back onto her feet.

She sucked in a sharp intake of breath as pain shot through her right foot as it took some of her weight. Yep, broken she realised, but she'd take that over evisceration any day of the working week.

She shifted most of her weight onto her left foot and braced herself against the security door. She glanced over to see the creature turn ever so slightly to face Jordan whose mouth was opening and closing but nothing was coming out.

"Benny?" Anna called up the stairs.

"I think I pissed myself," he replied forlornly.

"That the worst of it?"

"Just another Saturday night, y'know?"

He came into view as he crawled to the top of the steps, he grimaced seeing the creature gently stroking Jordan's now tear soddened cheek.

"That on our side now?" He enquired in muted disbelief.

"Christ no, just hates him more than it hates us right now, I guess."

Benny shrugged and tried to stand, he cried out in pain. "Me ribs!"

"Stay there," Anna told him. "And look away, I don't think this is gonna be pretty."

He nodded and gave a grimace, the creature was now purring, but it sounded like an industrial meat grinder. Then it licked the tears and blood from Jordan's face with a veiny black tongue.

"Anna, get up here!" Benny said and turned his face away from the impending gore fest.

"Duck and cover, mate, I'll be back soon."

The creature had now grabbed the whimpering man by his arms and was lifting him up, so they were face to face, and Christ, Anna thought, the thing was savouring every terror drenched moment.

She had seen enough, Jordan was fucked and she had no desire to see the slave extract its gleeful retribution upon its former master.

She hobbled over to the next flight of stairs leading down, she could see her baton on the first-floor landing and Benny's metal bar teetering on the third step up from it. She

knew the creature wasn't an ally now, it was suitably distracted, and with it out of the picture for a while, she had the drop on that cow downstairs.

She started down the steps, her right foot hurt like hell, but she found she could put a little pressure on it. She scooped up the metal bar and then her baton when she got to the first-floor landing.

A smattering of red rain began to speckle the white tiled floor at her feet, and she felt the soft spray of it on the back of her neck. And despite herself, as she began her descent, she glanced up.

Blood was beginning to run down the walls and steps above. She could hear nauseating wet ripping sounds and what sounded like someone gargling with treacle. Her imagination filled in the blanks.

"Christ," she uttered and moved off.

Spurred on more than anything when she remembered from her high school biology classes that the human body had up to ten pints of blood in it. So, as she didn't have an umbrella, she quickened her pace.

"Well, that's interesting," Sofia said from behind Wicksy.

She was craning her neck up to the second-floor window which looked to Wicksy like it had been painted red.

"Maybe," she continued. "Just maybe I won't have to bring the whole building down after all."

"Really?" Wicksy said hopefully and went over to where she was standing by the pedestrian gate.

"I said maybe," she reminded him. "Look."

She pointed up to a first-floor stairwell window just as Anna moved slowly past.

"Anna!"

"She one of yours?"

"Yeah, my friend. What the hell is she doing!? Can you tell where that thing is?"

"Sort of," Sofia replied.

"Drop this barrier thingy," Wicksy told her and was surprised at the strength of his voice. "Let me in, let me warn her."

"That's brave, sweetheart but no. The creature is hurting, confused. They hate being created almost as much as they hate their creators."

"What the hell does that mean?" Wicksy asked with growing frustration.

"Creations, such as our friend in there, need a specific target. Their intended victim's destruction is literally the very reason for their existence. And you can't just make up a target after it's been summoned." She gestured towards the now closed entrance door. "But from what I've seen, those

idiots in there conjured it without even thinking it would work."

Wicksy began gesticulating wildly at Anna as she passed another window. But to no avail.

"They're improvising," Sofia continued. "And if there's one thing you don't do with a demon, that's improvise."

She shook her head and Wicksy caught a slight smile on her face. "You'd be surprised how many times this sort of thing happens," she added.

"Well, that's fucking reassuring," Wicksy said.

"Oh, mostly the spells don't work at all, or they create nothing more than a half-formed thing that dies within seconds," Sofia told him. "Anyway, looks like our demonic friend in there has no true purpose, and that, I'm afraid, makes it very unpredictable. Poor thing must be going nuts."

"Please stop," Wicksy said sarcastically. "You're breaking my heart."

"Jordan! Jordan!?" The woman's voice called up shrilly.

Vicky, that fuckwit, Jordan had called her Vicky, Anna remembered. The woman gave a sharp intake of breath and looked satisfyingly shocked, when she saw Anna coming down the last flight of stairs leading to the entrance hall. Baton in one hand, metal bar in the other.

"Jordan's fucked, Vicky," Anna said with relish.

The woman backed away across the entrance hall and over to the short corridor that led to the basement door. Christ, how ridiculous she looked, Anna thought bitterly. With her melodramatic robes and that stupid paper stuck to her forehead.

"Stay away from me," Vicky warned. "I have power."

Anna chuckled and stepped off the stairs and into the entrance hall. Her foot was hurting something chronic, but she didn't care. She hobbled a couple of steps towards the retreating wannabe witch.

"I know what that paper does," Anna said and gestured with her baton.

"Beast!" Vicky yelled. "To me!"

When nothing happened Vicky's face went a quite remarkable white. Her eyes, wide like saucers, were twin orbs of doubt, confusion and no little fear.

"Beast is a little busy with Jordan at the moment," Anna said.

The fear suddenly drained from Vicky's face, replaced with a look of grim determination. She closed her eyes, concentrating.

"Beast," she hissed.

A pained howl from above made Anna's heart drop into her boots. The creature was coming down the stairs, but slowly. She could hear from its grizzling and griping as it

approached, that it was trying to disobey its mistress, but still it came.

"Fight it!" Anna called back up the stairs, it sounded like the creature was now just on the floor above.

"It doesn't work like that," Vicky told her.

"Then you stop it!" Anna said, more out of hope than expectation.

"It's gone too far for that now," Vicky replied pragmatically. "Yes, this has turned into a shit-show, but I can control it, I can make it do my bidding."

"Listen, I don't pretend to know what the fuck you have been messing with here, but you can't control it. It could have killed me up there, but it didn't."

"And it will be punished for its sins," Vicky said coldly.

Vicky looked past Anna and to the landing behind her. The creature was there, Anna had no doubt, its deep ragged breathing filled the entrance hall. And once again she could feel that harsh cold radiating in waves from its body, freezing the sweat on her back and chilling her to the bone. She did her best to fight back tears, but they came all the same.

Then she felt a sudden heavy pressure on her chest and her ears popped, and from Vicky's stunned reaction she clearly felt it too. This was followed an instant later by that same wave of energy she had felt upstairs at the beginning of all this nightmare, and as before it rippled up through her entire body. Her vision shifted from a blur to a shimmering clarity and for a second it looked for all the world like everything was underwater.

Then as before, she was suspended in mid-air, floating, every nerve ending alight. The sensation only lasted a heartbeat and the next moment she was flat on her back, disorientated gasping for breath.

"The fuck?" Vicky gasped from across the entrance hall. She was also on the floor looking as shocked as Anna.

The creature on the landing roared in naked fear and Anna scrambled to her feet. The thing rocked on its heels as if ready to charge, its blood drenched teeth bared, gore tipped claws out swiping at the air. It took a step forwards, but then whimpered and shifted further back onto the landing, wracked with indecision.

Anna held up her hands, like a novice lion tamer without a whip and chair, willing the thing to calm down. But if they had even the most tentative of connections before. It was long gone at this new turn of events.

"Anna! Thank Christ..."

Wicksy was in the open entrance doorway, he dropped a brick against the door to hold it open, but froze half in half out seeing the thing on the landing.

"Wicksy!?" Anna cried out.

This snapped him out of it somewhat and he wrenched his gaze from the beast to her.

"I know what to do!" He exclaimed manically and finally darted inside.

He moved swiftly over to the short corridor, but stopped seeing a now mobile Vicky was between him and the basement doorway. She reached inside her robe and took out a vicious looking curved blade.

"Beast," she screamed. "Protect your mistress!"

Anna spun away from this just as the creature leapt down the flight of stairs and landed some ten feet from her. Anna scooped up both her weapons once more and faced it.

"Fight it!" She begged the thing through tears.

"A little help, Sofia?" Wicksy called out through the still open entrance door.

But let out a curse as no red-haired cavalry appeared to save the day. He looked across to the obscene mis-matched stand off between Anna and the monster and his heart sank.

Sofia had called this at best a Hail Mary, when she had taken down the barrier and now, he could see why. That thing could easily despatch Anna in an instant then tear him apart for kicks. Then, Sofia had made it very clear that if that were to happen. The whole fucking building would come down.

"Fuck it!" He snarled.

Head down, he ran down the short corridor and at Boss Lady like a yank linebacker.

"Beast!" She shrieked.

All the while expecting the thing to rip him to shreds from behind, Wicksy side stepped a wild swing of the knife, then slammed into the woman with all the puny force he could muster, and they both hit the basement door hard.

He grabbed her robe with one hand and tried to snatch the paper off her forehead with the other. All the while she slashed and stabbed at him, coming close a couple of times. But he managed to fend off the blade with his elbows.

"No!" She screamed in terror and did her best to push him away. "Beast! Beast!"

She madly flailed at Wicksy with the knife and caught his arm opening up a deep three-inch gash on his forearm.

"Bastard!" He hissed in pain.

She was slashing wildly now, but he kept dodging back, just out of range whilst trying to snatch the paper again.

The creature moved forwards and Anna backed away. It was a forlorn hope, but she had seen just how fast and brutal the thing could be. Yet it hadn't shredded her yet, despite its mistress's command. And she was pretty sure she could see fear and that conflict in its otherwise terrifying gaze. Either way, it was clearly in pain due to its resistance.

"Fight it," she said softly but firmly.

It took a half-hearted swipe at her and its claw passed so close to her nose she could feel the air on her face. She



hobbled back, level now with the open entrance door and she momentarily contemplated making a break for it. But even if she managed to get away, the thing would be on Wicksy and she could never live with that.

"Witchy bitch!" Wicksy cursed from behind her.

"The paper!" She hollered at him. "Tear off the paper!"

"I fucking know!" He snapped back, still struggling with the woman.

The creature suddenly stopped when it was close to the open door. It looked from her to the opening and to Vicky's plight. It moved to take a step forward but hesitated and let out a low guttural whimpering sound.

There was something outside stopping its progress, and that was fine with Anna, as long as it didn't push through that fear. Then it roared in impudent rage and Anna shrieked in shock, nearly dropping her weapons. It lunged slightly, but then backed away a step or two, in fear and confusion.

Anna chanced a glance through the door and into the car park beyond. A woman, the same red headed woman she had seen with Wickey earlier, was sitting on the bonnet of a car at the very far end casually watching proceedings. Was she eating chips!?

"Who the fucking hell..?" Anna began. Then of all things the woman waved at her.

Vicky pushed Wicksy back a little, she stopped slashing the air, seeing the creature's reticence.

"The collector?" She said, breathing hard.

"Aye, the collector," Wicksy confirmed although in truth he still didn't really know what that meant.

"Oh, God, oh, God," Vicky stuttered, terrified. "She can get in?"

"Apparently," Wicksy shouted at the open doorway. "If her majesty actually deigns to!" He added pointedly.

Vicky let out a sob of fear, then gritting her teeth defiantly she slashed at Wicksy again. He stepped back to avoid the blade, and she took that time to open the basement door at her back. And Wicksy was immediately hit with the overwhelming smell of sickly sweet heavy incense from inside. She paused before going inside.

"Beast," she shouted. "Kill these two then I will release you!"

The creature roared and Wicksy heard Anna yelp in shock. He turned dreading what he would see, but the thing was still on the other side of the open doorway. Rocking back and forth from one massive foot to the other. But it was starting to edge forward ever so slightly.

"Anna?" He said softly.

"Go," she said without turning around. "I'll give you as much time as I can."

This nearly floor him, and he had to swallow back a sob of despair. How the hell had it come to this? These last few

years with his friends had been nothing but a laugh riot. So much so that he couldn't ever imagine taking life seriously again. But the gravity of the last hour or so threatened to crush him under its weight.

They had all gone from carefree idiots to this desperate last stand in the middle of some clandestine supernatural bullshit world of magic and monsters. All playing out in their nondescript block of flats on the outskirts of Leeds city centre. And all because three wannabe witches had somehow managed to conjure up a fucking demon and didn't really know what the hell to do with it.

"This is all bullshit!!" He yelled angrily.

"Hell aye," Anna agreed grimly.

Wicksy ran at Boss Lady just as she turned to go through the basement door. She spun back seeing his attack and jabbed the knife at him. Wicksy reached out to catch her arm, but she was moving too fast and missed. He slammed into her hard, just as she stabbed him in his left side, once, twice. They both tumbled inside, down the short flight of stone steps and onto the basement's concrete floor.

Boss Lady was up on her feet with surprising speed. She jabbed and slashed at Wicksy who was on his knees now, arms up in a vain attempt to protect himself. The blade slashed his arm again, opening up another deep cut, soaking his sleeves in blood.

"Beast! Beast," the witch hissed through gritted teeth, her eyes wide and manic.

The creature cocked its head to one side, listening to something Anna couldn't hear.

"Please, stop," she begged it.

She could feel her strength draining away along with any sense of hope and it was crippling.

The creature seemed to galvanise itself and stood bolt upright, chest out, its misshapen face turned up to the heavens. It was taking deep breaths, psyching itself up to cross the threshold of the open door and defy whatever power was radiating through it from outside.

Anna didn't register the metal bar slipping from her grasp, but she was vaguely aware of it clattering to the floor. She began shaking, the shock and straight up realisation of her impending death hit her like a juggernaut.

Then the thing looked directly at her and bared its hideous teeth. Any lingering fear or even the merest hint of empathy to the human before it was gone. There was nothing now but gleeful hunger.

"Don't..." Was Anna she could muster.

It moved forwards and seemed to falter slightly as it came directly level with the doorway and for a moment Anna allowed herself to hope. But then it took another short and

clearly painful step, then another, it grimaced fiercely but kept on coming.

Sobbing now, Anna threw the baton at it, but it bounced off like a flea hitting a tiger tank.

Down below in the basement, Wicksy, still on his knees and bleeding badly, mustered up every ounce of energy he had left and swung a right hook at the now cackling Boss Lady. She stepped back, shocked at the sudden attack and the blow failed to connect by an inch at most. But her backward momentum made her chatter into a pile of packing crates, old paint cans and all manner of discarded crap people had left down here over the years.

The accumulated rubbish which was normally strewn all over the floor had been pushed up against one of the walls to clear a large space. Boss Lady's legs got tangled in a pile of old wires and she was sent sprawling against a wall and fell amongst more debris.

"Bastard!" She hollered as she banged her head against the wall. She cried out in pain and began to desperately untangle herself from the garbage.

Lightheaded and breathing hard, Wicksy dragged himself to his feet. His head was spinning from the pain and blood loss, but also from the breath clogging swirling layer of incense smoke which hung heavy in the air and stung the back of his throat.

He grimaced and spat onto the floor, the smoke was coming from an old oil lamp sat on what looked like a low wooden altar, which had been set up in one cleared corner at the far end of the long basement. The altar had been placed in the centre of a large chalk circle, with a dozen or so thick black candles arranged around it, and was painted from what he could see in the gloom with a chaotic mix of symbols, runes and glyphs.

The smoke had a greenish hue to it and smelt and tasted sickly sweet. The flame within the lamp guttered and spluttered and seemed to be alternating between a vivid purple and electric pink.

The lamp was the target, Sofia had told him. The source of all the dark power those bastards had unleashed. And the way out of this whole horror show for the entire building and its residents. It was either that, she had said, or she would bring the building down on all their heads.

Wicksy gritted his teeth against the pain and began across the basement towards the lamp.

"Don't you fucking dare, heretic!" Boss Lady screamed and came running at him through the smoke.

The beast loomed over Anna, and she was overwhelmed by that strange radiating cold it gave off, which was threatening to freeze the very breath in her lungs.

She swooned and began to topple backwards, but the creature grabbed her by the front of her t-shirt and lifted her off the floor and up to its malevolent face. Those cold green eyes seemed to flash with relish at the impending kill.

Oddly, now she was at the very end, all Anna could think to do was tweak the things crooked nose. So, she did and oh, how it made her laugh.

Lady moved swiftly to the edge of the circle so that she was now between Wicksy and the lamp. She took up a guard stance and slashed the air between them with the knife.

"I'll kill ya!" She sneered.

"Y'know, lady?" Wicksy said weakly. "You are getting right on my tits."

"No more than you on mine, normie pig!" She told him with a grin.

"Arh, bollocks to it," Wicksy sighed.

He half ran, half stumbled into her, knowing full well what she would do. And she did. She grabbed him around the back of his neck with her free hand and stabbed at his stomach with the other. But insanely there was no pain, or impact, the knife had connected with his belt buckle which was ironically shaped like a screeching demon, and the blade snapped.

He would have let out a whoop of triumph if he'd had the energy but instead, he grabbed a hold of her and using his weight and forward momentum, he spun her around so that he now had his back to the lamp and altar and then just let her go. Gravity did the rest, and he fell backwards into the circle and crashed into the lamp.

He braced himself for the thing to explode and shower him with burning kerosine, and of all things goat's blood! The lamp shattered and shards of glass dug deep into his back, the burning wick detached from its housing and rolled across the floor. The dark fluid splashed him and pooled on the floor next to the splintered altar, but didn't ignite.

The creature's whole head seemed to split in two as it opened its jaws wide. It twisted Anna's t-shirt in its fist and it tightened squeezing what little breath she had left out of her. She choked out one final laugh and closed her eyes.

Something like a flashbang grenade went off right in front of her face and the next thing she knew, she was on her back looking up at a shower of falling blue embers floating all around her.

"No!" Boss Lady shrieked and scrambled over to the extinguished wick. She picked it up and began frantically blowing on it in a vain attempt to re-ignite the flame.

Wicksy just sat there bleeding, the crazed woman fumbled in her robe for something and took out a lighter. Had it

worked he wondered? The lamp was in pieces, so he didn't imagine lighting the wick again would do any good even if she managed to do so. But had the spell been broken as Sofia said it should?

Because he had to admit that if it hadn't and that thing was still looming around up there, he was in no shape to do anything about it.

Anna reached out a hand and caught one of the fading embers in the palm of her hand. It felt cold as ice to the touch, and much like a snowflake it melted away a moment later.

She could hear shouts of alarm from the floors above. Then someone set off the fire alarm. She winced at the hash sound and tried to get up, but then thought better of it, so she propped herself against the wall by the lift.

Benny, bless him, appeared on the landing and then hobbled down the last flight of stairs and across to where she was sitting, all the while holding his busted ribs. He was then followed by a steady stream wide eyed residents in their night clothes.

A blood curdling scream came from somewhere further up the block and Anna figured the tenants evacuating the second floor or above had come across what was left of poor old Jordan.

Benny slid gingerly down the wall next to her, he rested his head on her shoulder.

"Over?" He said.

"No clue," she replied honestly.

"Someone call an ambulance!" Someone shouted. "And the fucking police!"

"Wicksy," Anna said softly, and she could feel unconsciousness beckon. "Basement."

"No, no, no," Boss Lady sobbed as she desperately tried to light the wick.

Wicksy just watched her with mild detachment and absently tapped his belt buckle. He figured this week would be a good week to do the lottery.

"Christ with a crew cut!" Benny exclaimed from the top of the steps.

"Alright, mate?" Wicksy said weakly.

"Ambulance is on the way," Benny told him and came hobbling down the steps and over to where he was slumped.

"Anna?" Wicksy asked.

"She's okay," Benny assured him.

They both watched Boss Lady who had given up and was openly weeping and rocking back and forth.

"Fucking role-players," Benny said.

Wicksy stifled a laugh, he was in enough pain as it was.

'Horror at Hickson Villas!' The caption next to the grim-faced reporter exclaimed as he spoke into the camera.

He was standing by a cross-cross of yellow police tape on the other side of the road to the sealed off Hickson villas car park. Several police and forensic vehicles were parked inside the cordon and two coppers were standing guard to fend off the growing gaggle of reporters and general on lookers that were milling around.

Wicksy hit the mute button and shifted awkwardly in his hospital bed. The reporter had been spouted the same vagaries on the hour, every hour, since he had come around from his surgery.

He hadn't been formally interviewed yet by the police, but knew both Anna and Benny had, along with half of the building's confused and terrified residents.

Boss Lady, real name Victoria Highgrove, he had been reliably informed by a gossiping nurse, was banged up in a secure medical facility. Apparently, she had shrieked and hollered like a banshee to all and sundry as she had been dragged away in cuffs, that yes, she was responsible for the whole sorry mess. And that very fucker better watch out as she would do the same again at her first opportunity.

Her ravings had been perfect fodder for the press. Leading to such headlines as: 'Devil worshipping cult,' or: 'High Priestess and followers cause death and destruction at inner city tower block!' Etc. Etc.

There were even some blurry camara phone pictures of the occult paraphernalia in the basement and rumours of more still in the devilish trio's flat. Which only fuelled the devil worshipper angle.

But how the hell, Wicksy thought with a smirk, they were going to explain away Morris' quite spectacular demise? And that of some another poor bastard whose remains had been found spread all over the second-floor landing. He didn't know but looked forward to finding out what fiction the authorities concocted.

The door to his private room, paid for by a tabloid newspaper, he had been told. In hopes of getting an exclusive interview when he was better, no doubt. Opened and Anna and Benny stuck their heads inside.

"There see," Anna said to Benny with a mischievous grin. "Told you he wasn't dead."

"We're heroes!" Benny announced.

The two-walking wounded came inside. Anna's normally cherubic face was puffy and black and blue, and she was on crutches. But Benny looked to have escaped with just the odd cut and bruise and was only sporting one black eye.

They each moved to either side of his bed, first Anna, then Benny kissed him on either cheek and perched on the sides of his bed.

"Nice digs," Benny said talking in the room. "The housing association have put us all up in B&B's until we can go home again. The whole building's shut down."

"Only the best for the heroes of Hickson Villas!" Anna announced dramatically.

"Chris okay?" Wicksy asked, realising he hadn't seen or heard from the lad since they had all left the party.

"Yeah, yeah," Benny assured him with a dismissive gesture. "Lazy sod slept through the whole thing!"

"Good, good," Wicksy replied with hushed relief.

He looked at his two friends, all too aware just how differently things could have turned out. Tears welled in his eyes, but he kept them at bay with practise northern stoicism.

"Hey, come on, mate," Anna said. "It's okay, we did it, we saved everyone."

"Can't believe any of it," Wicksy said with a shake of the head. "What the hell did you tell the police?"

"Told them the truth," Anna replied. "Benny too, and they didn't believe a word of it! They think we were tripping, and that we came across the role-players and somehow stopped them causing havoc with their evil devil worship!"

"Maybe, that is what happened," Wicksy said absently.

"Just tell them the truth, mate," Benny advised. "Won't make much difference. They're falling all over themselves as it is, trying to come up with some logical explanation."

"All the CCTV camera footage from inside and outside has," Anna said and made air quotes. "Mysteriously been erased."

Wicksy chuckled and paid for it with a stab of sharp pain from his many stitches.

"Any sign of Sofia?" He asked.

"Who?" Anna replied.

"The woman outside."

"The red-headed chick who did fuck all to help?" Anna said. "You know she actually waved to me in the middle of it all? Waved!"

"Oh, she helped," Wicksy said quietly. "In her own twisted way."

It was strange, but ever since he had come around after his surgery, and his equilibrium had returned sufficiently. Wicksy had been left with an odd sense of bereavement, for want of a better description, that Sofia hadn't come to see him. Which was lunacy now that he thought about it. Had they even ever had a connection? That strange red headed enigma and him? Or was it just wishful thinking?

It may have been the meds he was on, and general PTSD, but it actually physically hurt that she might have only seen him as little more than a means to an end. A Hail Mary as she had put it.

"Earth to Robert," Benny said, snapping him back out of his funk.

He shook it off and took both Anna and Benny's hands in each of his. They were all alive, that was what truly mattered. And for better or worse they had collectively had a glimpse into some shadowy supernatural world that existed just out of sight, (usually he hoped!) Of their normal, refreshingly unmagical one.

A nurse knocked on the door frame and came inside carrying a white plastic bag.

"Robert Wicks?" She enquired.

"That's me," he replied. "Not more test?"

"No, nothing like that, chart says you're doing fine. Which is a miracle after what they say you guys went through."

He could tell she was half fishing for gossip, but that wasn't why she was really here.

"That's us," Benny chimed in. "Miracles incorporated, move over Ghostbusters."

Looking suitably confused at this, the nurse wheeled over a table and positioned it over the bed, so it was above his lap. She then put the plastic bag on it.

"We're not supposed to do this, but to be honest I was given fifty quid to deliver this," she admitted.

"Nice work if you can get it," Benny said.

"Enjoy," the nurse said.

At first Wicksy assumed it was some gift from the newspaper, but then got a familiar whiff of its contents as he slid the polystyrene fast-food carton out and discarded the bag.

Tears welled in his eyes again, and he had to choke back a sob.

"Wicksy?" Anna said with concern.

"It's okay," he assured her and lifted up the lid.

"Cheesy chips!?" Benny remarked with surprise.

"Did she say anything?" Wicksy asked the nurse.

"Yeah," she replied with a frown of confusion. "You'll never eat these again without thinking of me?"

Wicksy chuckled and offered everyone a chip. "Sounds about right."



## DEADLINE

This was all Sky Arts' fault. Christine Kinderman had first heard about the infamous eighties' artist, Oscar Merrick in a documentary on the channel. It was a quite compelling story of anarchic talent and drug fluid excess that had ultimately ended in tragedy and self-imposed exile.

Merrick had seemed more like a rock star at the time, than a mere painter and his story mirrored all the tortured greats in music, although he had somehow survived with body, if not mind intact.

That lazy Sunday evening curled up on the sofa with a bottle of wine and watching TV, had led her to this point of impending disaster that was now staring her in the face. The programme and its subject had caught Christine at a particularly vulnerable moment.

And looking back now, it was easy to pinpoint what had led her to hit the bottle that fateful day. And to another name she wished she had never heard. Mary Karney.

Christine had been a moderately successful agent in the music industry for over ten years. She'd had minor successes along the way, but that one big pay day had always eluded her.

That was until she came across an unknown singer/songwriter playing to twenty people in a small venue at a music festival in Halifax. And the performance had floored her. So much so that she offered to sign Mary on the spot after the gig.

It was as if the little songstress had mesmerised her out of all proportion to the reality of the situation. Her friends in the industry warned her not to be so hasty, but Christine wouldn't, couldn't listen.

That had been her first mistake. The second and most damaging of all, was the amount of money she had thrown at the singer to help her write her first album. Christine knew how flaky artists could be when they were working, but Karney took it to a whole new level of crazy.

She would disappear for weeks on end and when she did reappear and was booked into a studio to lay down a demo, she had twice thrown a biblical fit of artistic rage and trashed half the instruments in the room. Instruments that Christine had rented.

This had gone on for six months without Mary having recorded even a note. And even the negative press she was generating in the tabloids was useless without Christine having a product to sell at the end of it.

And to make matters worse, Christine had spent so much of her time with the little hellion that she had neglected her other clients, which resulted in every one of them firing her, and with hindsight she couldn't blame them.

At the end of these few short months, she had become a laughing-stock in the industry, nearly broke, and with her only client being famous for just being infamous. So, when a rival agent offered to take on Mary's contract for a pittance, Christine had almost bitten their off hand.

Christine Kinderman went away to lick her wounds and count the cost of the whole sorry affair. And that was when Fate decided to kick her when she was down.

Within a couple of months of being dropped, Mary Karney had an apparent epiphany. She cleaned up her act, kicked the drink and drugs and attacked her music like a thing possessed. And with that new management company behind her, she secured a lucrative seven figure recording contract.

Fast forward eighteen months to that fateful evening, when Christine, in a fit of masochism, had decided to watch a documentary on Mary Karney's meteoric rise to stardom. She was now a millionaire, with a number one album, two number one singles, three Brit awards and even a Grammy to her name. The show culminated with a live sold-out gig at Wembley Arena.

Christine's instincts had been right after all, but the vindication was a bitter victory. Here she was languishing in obscurity, with no real career to speak of, while Karney was well on her way to conquering the world.

But worse than all of that, the documentary had failed to mention Christine Kinderman even once, not even in passing. For all she had gone through, for all she had sacrificed, she didn't even warrant a footnote in the singer's origin story.

It was then, when Christine was at her lowest ebb, she turned the channel to Sky Arts and was introduced to the turbulent life of artist Oscar Merrick. It had seemed like the Gods had given her a second chance, she thought. Sure, she didn't know shit about the art world, but a client was a client she had figured. And this Oscar character and his story seemed tailor made for a comeback, for both of them. But little did she know then that history was about to repeat itself.

How hard can it be? Christine Kinderman had been asking herself that very same question almost every day now for the past month. How hard can it be to come up with one painting in nearly six months?

She looked around the large gallery at the myriad of Oscar's previous works, dozens of them! And not for the first time, felt completely out of her depth.

Music, she knew, but these monstrosities? They looked to her 'untrained' eye like a bunch of drunken monkeys had been let loose in the paint aisle of a B&Q, with a six-year-old as their art teacher. His paintings had been described as post-modern Jackson Pollock, whatever the hell that meant. But to her they were little more than random paint splashes on a canvas. Some of them even had glitter in them, glitter!

Oscar Merrick's works had sold for hundreds of thousands of pounds around the world. Madness really, but Christine's philosophy was that a mad man's money is worth just as much as a sane one's any day. So, if they wanted to throw large amounts of cash around for a new work, why shouldn't she get her cut?

Especially now that she had invested so much in the old fool, including mortgaging her flat. Hiring the gallery, renting the transportation of his previous works, renting the paintings themselves of course from other galleries. All so that she could unveil his new masterpiece.

Merrick's first completed work in the forty years since the death of his beloved wife and muse, Emily, the publicity had screamed. And all thanks to Christine Kinderman Management Inc. Who had found the reclusive artist, living in obscurity on a dilapidated farmhouse in deepest, darkest Yorkshire, and had convinced him to return to his work with a renewed passion!

The art world had gone nuts of course, and even Christine had been taken aback by the feeding frenzy that had erupted once she had broken the news. She had been bombarded with calls from all over the world, TV, press, radio, everyone wanted to know where he was, and more importantly, what he was creating.

She had been so busy that she'd had to hire an assistant, Marcus, her first since the whole Mary Karney disaster. Everything had gone ridiculously smoothly since the announcement, except for one minor point. The publicity had lied.

Christine stared at the blank white space between two of Oscar's old paintings. And it looked to her just as bleak and empty as her immediate financial future. The blank space which was reserved for Merrick's new painting.

The truth was, in the months since Oscar had agreed, signed the damn contract, and been well paid in advance. He hadn't painted so much as a stroke.

He was a drunk and had no confidence in his own ability anymore. He was crippled by the memory of his dead wife who had been everything to him. And no matter how much Christine had cajoled, flattered, even threatened, Merrick just couldn't bring himself to paint.

The words of the gallery owner she had convinced to put on the exhibition rang in her ears:

*'Oscar Merrick retrospectives are ten a penny these days, only a genuine new piece will bring out the buyers and the punters. And without that, my dear, you're sunk.'*

A voice behind her snapped Christine out of her despair, it was Marcus.

"Chris? Sorry, I've just had the printers on the phone. The bank transfer bounced again," he said solemnly.

"Marcus, I'm sunk," she said without turning around.

It was the first time she had actually admitted it, not just to someone else, but to herself. And her heart sank.

"No word from Picasso then?"

Marcus was only a kid really, barely in his twenties, but he had stuck by her through all this, and she just hoped she would be able to repay him someday.

She shook her head. "Not going to say I told you so?"

"Nar," he said and stepped to her side with a welcome warm smile. "That's becoming a cliché around here lately."

She laughed and it felt good. Then she noticed it was getting dark outside. "What time is it?" She asked.

"Little after seven."

Time flies, she thought. That meant the exhibition opening was only four days away.

"Shouldn't you have gone home by now?" She said to him. "I don't pay overtime you know."

"You don't pay at all at the moment," he told her.

"Christ, Marcus, sorry, I'll transfer..." She stopped herself remembering the printers.

"Don't worry, boss, you can settle up when the exhibition takes off, maybe even a bonus, eh? Once you sell the painting, you'll be rolling in it."

Christine let out a long sigh. Painting? "Sure," she said all the same.

As if things weren't bad enough, as Christine drove to Merrick's remote farmhouse retreat, Mary Karney's new single, which the DJ cheerfully informed her, had gone straight in at number one, came on the radio. And she wondered just what atrocity she had committed in a previous life to deserve such torture.

Even under the flattering veil of night, Merrick's farmhouse looked decrepit. The place had always depressed Christine, even before things had started to go wrong. She remembered how it had looked in its heyday from archival footage on the TV show.

During Oscar and his wife's pomp, it had been a mecca of hedonistic excess. Anyone who was anyone in the arts flocked there for weeklong parties and God only knew what else. Often the revelries would spill out into the neighbouring countryside, much to the chagrin of the locals, who weren't used to such goings on in their usually quiet part of Yorkshire. How things had changed since then. Time had not been kind to the place and its decay mirrored that of its reclusive owner.

Oscar Merrick had been at the height of his fame and fortune, when his manager and wife of twelve years, Emily, had died suddenly of a brain haemorrhage. Her death had plunged Merrick into an often-suicidal depression, and from that day he had withdrawn from the world and had never painted another

thing since. And over the coming years, any money he had made from his work had been drunk or snorted away.

Now a recluse, it had taken all of Christine's powers of persuasion, and not to mention a fair amount of money, for her to convince him that, now was the time to pick up the paint brush again, and return, in triumph to the outside world.

She still remembered, but bitterly now, how she had fair skipped away from that fateful meeting filled for the first time in ages, with hope. But as she knew now. It's the hope that kills you.

What had followed were months of procrastination and a prestigious amount of alcohol consumption. Always wine, always expensive, and Merrick had on more than one occasion, trashed his studio here at the house in a fit of drunken creative impotence, which reminded Christine all too much of that little songbird Karney.

And through it all that large blank canvas that dominated Merrick's studio had remained just that, blank.

The house was in darkness when she got there and as usual the front door was unlocked. As Christine made her way down to the old wine cellar which served quite aptly as his studio, Christine told herself to stay positive, you never know. Last time, Merrick had sworn blind we would start his new masterpiece, so she manifested some completed paint splattered monstrosity in her mind's eye that would greet her when she entered.

"Oscar, can I come in?" Christine called out and knocked on the studio door.

She half hoped she was interrupting Merrick in the midst of his creative flow, and that he would swear at her through the door at the intrusion to his genius. But, just as always, she was greeted with silence.

She gingerly opened the door and stepped inside.  
"Oscar?"

The first thing she saw was the large blank canvas set up against the far wall. And that half hope disappeared into thin air. Merrick was slumped in a chair in front of the canvas asleep.

"Oscar!" She snapped.

Merrick jumped and got unsteadily to his feet, he turned to face her, and she could see he had an empty wine bottle in one hand where the paint brush should have been. He peered at her, disorientated for a moment, then a look of weary recognition slowly crossed his haggard face.

He was still wearing the same clothes she had left him in on her last meeting. His shoulder length grey hair and equally ill-kempt grey beard could easily have been home to half a dozen small animals. What was he seventy odd? He looked a hundred.

"Christine," he rasped. "I must have dozed off."

Christine took a moment before answering and told herself to stay calm, shouting at the old man wouldn't help anyone, nor would wringing his neck.

"Oscar," she said as calmly as she could. "I've been trying to call you all day."

"Oh, I hate phones," he said with a grimace. "People can come straight into your home, and you can't do a damn thing about it."

This from someone who doesn't lock his front door? She thought but kept it to herself. She gestured to the bottle in his hand.

"I thought you said you weren't going to drink until you'd finished?"

Merrick looked guiltily at the bottle and shrugged. "Just a drop," he said. "To lubricate the hinges," he flexed his free hand as if to illustrate the point.

Christine took a breath. "Oscar, tell me this is a new piece," she pointed to the very blank canvas. "Tell me you've finished the one for the exhibition, and this is just a new one you're about to start. Tell me the work's just flooding out of you, and I'll buy you a fucking vineyard!"

She regretted her harsh tone and the expletive, but still, it felt good.

Oscar grew sullen, he looked across to the massive, exquisitely painted portrait of his late wife, which was hung on the wall above his maddeningly tidy paint bench. Her blazing brown eyes, watching, always watching.

Christine had tried to get him to exhibit that painting, it was, even to her heathen eye a breathtaking work. But he had steadfastly refused. That was for him, and him alone he had said adamantly.

"I, can't," he uttered. "I need Emily."

Maybe it was the small amount of pleasure she had gotten from snapping at him before, or through sheer desperation, but before she realised what she was doing, Christine strode across to Oscar and just managed to stop herself from actually grabbing him by the throat.

"Oscar! She's dead! She's gone!" Christine ranted. "You can't keep living in the past, you have to pull yourself together! You need to let her go!"

Jesus! What was that? She thought to herself and was hit with a wave of shame. It had come across more cruelly than she had intended, but it had just forced its way out. Whether it needed to be said or not, she was instantly sorry for the outburst.

She was about to apologise when Merrick spoke, still looking into his wife's painted eyes.

"I know," he relented softly. "But it was always her... I don't know if I can keep this up anymore," he finally turned to Christine. "I'm sorry," his voice trailed away.

The regret instantly dissipated, and she couldn't help but glare at him. Fucking artists and their fucking muses! She wanted to scream in his face. *'Sorry? You're sorry? I'm going to lose everything because of you, you old drunken bastard! And all because of a woman that has been dead forty years!?'*

But somehow, she managed to keep herself together. She could feel the panic welling up inside her. How could she have been so blind, and again!? She looked at the heart-broken man standing in front of her, she hated him, but she also knew it wasn't all his fault.

She had been the one that had approached him with the idea. She had been warned that he was damaged goods, half mad with grief, festering away in this once magnificent hovel. But she had ignored them all and plunged into a world she knew nothing about.

And it was as clear as day to her now as she stood here with her world turning to shit, that subconsciously this was all to banish the spectre of Mary Karney. Christine Kinderman, she mused bitterly, the woman who gave away the singer's contract for peanuts. Back from the wilderness with the biggest coup in modern British art history!

The woman who saved Oscar Merrick. The only one who believed in him and brought him back from the very edge of destruction to create once more. Not to mention making a mint in the process.

God the realisation made her feel sick. What a fucking joke it all was. But did she give up once and for all, or keep going?

Christine took a calming breath, she couldn't give up, not now. And whatever the reason she found herself in this mess, it was up to her and her wits to get her out of it. Or go down fighting.

"Oscar, I believe in you," it was plainly stated and took the artist by surprise. "And I know," she continued, buoyed by his reaction. "That once you get started, you won't be able to stop."

She could almost hear the cogs grinding in his head. She moved a little closer.

"I believe in you, Oscar," it was almost a seduction. "And from what I know, Emily believed in you too."

That as low, she knew, and didn't love herself for it. But judging by the way Merrick's back straightened a little it had worked.

"All I ask is that you give it a try," she continued. "You just need a little confidence in yourself that's all. You're Oscar Merrick," she announced. *"The Oscar Merrick. Scourge of the stuffy and staid art world establishment."*

"Fuck those guys," Oscar whispered almost imperceptibly.

"Yes! Fuck them, Oscar. You showed them before, you can show them again."

"Emily hated them so," he said with a weary but wicked smile.

"Do it for her, stick it to them one more time. Christ, Oscar, I know you miss her, but do you think she would want to see you living like this?"

He shook his head. And for the first time since she had met him, there was a growing fire behind those pale eyes. She had awoken something in him, and he visibly brightened now. He looked across at his wife's portrait but not with longing this time, but something akin to that old mischief Christine had seen in the documentary during his heyday.

"Yes," he said firmly. "After all, how hard can it be?"

She gently took him by the shoulders. "Yes, you can show them, Oscar. They've written you off, show them, make them eat their words."

He nodded vigorously and she had never seen him so animated. The years seemed to fall away from his face as she looked at him. The weight dropping from his shoulders like a discarded backpack of misery. And it was infectious.

"Show them," she told him.

Christine felt hope coursing through her veins just by looking at the way he held himself now. It was as if he had renewed energy to burn and she was feeding off the excess. He took her hands off his shoulders and squeezed them.

"I can do this," he said fiercely. "For Emily, we'll show them again, bastards."

"Yes!"

He pulled away and went over to his work bench. He ran his hands lightly over the artist's paraphernalia laid out there.

"I must work! I must work!" He bellowed.

Christine watched with tears of relief in her eyes as he began popping open paint tubes and selecting brushes, feeling the weight of them in his hands.

"Oscar, I'm gonna go," she said softly not wanting to break the creative spell he was now under. "Four days, okay? The exhibition is in four days, I'll call you, tomorrow?"

"Four days," he replied, with a dismissive wave of the hand. "Four days, easy."

She made her way to the door, but never took her eyes off him as he frantically worked at mixing and stirring. He then wheeled around to face her as she reached the door. His face was a wild man's. but in a good way.

"Christine," he said breathing hard. "Thank you."

She choked back a sob at the unexpected thanks. She shook her head, unable to reply.

"You've set me free," he added and returned to the bench.

Christine fair flew over to her car and it felt like she could breathe properly for the first time in weeks.

She sat in the driver's seat and was about to start the engine, when she was blindsided with an overwhelming sense of



relief, and she began sobbing uncontrollably. She didn't try to stop it, and it felt good.

After the best night's sleep, she thought she had ever had in her life, Christine drove to the gallery to go over any last-minute details with the owner and to reassure him everything was on track for the opening.

After the meeting, she decided she would have a lazy wander through the exhibition once more and this time it didn't feel so oppressive. God knows she still didn't get the appeal of Merrick's work, it was all random paint splashes and dark splodges to her. But today the 'paintings' seemed somehow brighter and more colourful than she remembered.

She put that down to her relief and the fact it was a sunny day. Even the large banner that hung from the ceiling proclaiming the unveiling of Oscar Merrick's new piece, which until last night had been mocking her impending failure, looked good to her now.

After a leisurely lunch, Christine went to her office to check on things there. As it was a Sunday, Marcus wasn't in, but she could see she had just one message on her office voicemail service. It was from Marcus, and it was bad news, or would have been this time yesterday.

"Hi, Chris, It's me your ever faithful man servant. And if you're wondering why there's only one message, that's because I took the liberty of deleting all the bad ones. Figured you have enough on your plate as it is."

Christine laughed, bless him. She reminded herself to give him a juicy bonus once the money started rolling in. Apart from being a great assistant, he had always managed to keep her going with his acidic good humour even through the darkest times.

"Oh, and Jamesons the printer's call again," the message continued. "About the failed bank transfer. I told them you were dead, hope that's okay. Anyway, hope it went okay with the old git. Keep your chin up, honey. Call be if you aren't actually deceased."

Christine spent the rest of the day, dotting the I's and crossing the T's in preparation for the opening. And it was as if the universe had suddenly decided to give her a break. She smoothed things over with the printers and even offered them a little extra for their trouble, and immediately regretted it.

Everything was falling into place. The catering was on point, all the art critics had gotten back to her to confirm they were all coming to the opening. One even tried to bribe her for a sneak preview.

"I think I deserve a drink," she announced to the empty office. It was only four thirty, but what the hell?

She was about to grab her coat when her mobile went off. She glanced at the caller ID. 'Oscar.'

Her blood froze for a second, she knew how much Merrick hated phones, so a direct call for him could only be a bad thing. She immediately caught herself. That was before yesterday, before her pep talk and before everything had gone so well today. Still, her heart was pounding when she answered.

"Hello?" She croaked. "Oscar, that you?"

There was silence on the other end for what seemed like an age. She was about to ask again when Oscar spoke.

"Christine?" His voice was weak, barely a whisper.

Christine felt sick, even a little dizzy. *Please*, she thought, *please don't do this to me, Oscar*. Then he spoke again, and his voice was much clearer.

"Christine, something wonderful has happened. I've nearly finished it."

Christine felt her legs buckle a little at the switch in emotions and she just managed to sit on the edge of her desk. She had been expecting the worst only to be told she had won the lottery.

"Christine, you still there?"

She was so stunned she had forgotten to speak. "Yes, Christ yes, Oscar, that's amazing news, thank you, thank you!" She took a breath conscious that she was babbling. "How did you do it so quickly?"

"It's all thanks to you," he replied. "I thought about what you said. About Emily, I thought about how much she would have loved to see the look on those art snobs faces. After that, it was easy, really."

"That's fantastic, Oscar. Right," she tried to collect her thoughts. "I'll need to get back to you in a little bit. And well done, I knew you could do it."

"No!" Oscar snapped. Then softer. "It's not quite finished yet. I need you to come over, now. I'll explain when you get here."

"Oh, okay."

She hoped it was just nerves, and that he needed a little validation. After all it had been literally decades since he had painted anything.

"I'll be right over," she said. She was about to hang up when she added. "Oh, and Oscar? What's it like?"

She heard him let out a triumphant breath. "Oh, it's going to be beautiful," he announced.

On her way over to the farmhouse, Christine called Marcus to give him the good news, and to start arranging for the transportation when she confirmed it.

"Never doubted the old bastard for a moment," he told her. "He just needed a kick up the backside, that's all. Don't know what you were worrying about."

"I know, smart arse," she replied. "But I just wanted to say thanks, y'know for sticking by me."

She really meant it but made a mental note to stop being so sentimental. It was relief, she knew, but still!

"Shut up, you'll have me balling," he joked. Then. "Hey, Chris', does this mean I can tell everyone you're back from the dead then?"

"Yes," Christine announced with a smile. "Yes, you can."

It was dark when Christine pulled up outside the farmhouse, and for once Merrick had put on all the lights. That must be a good sign, she thought as she breezed over to the front door, which as normal was unlocked.

She turned the handle and pushed, but the door only opened a few inches as something was blocking it from the other side.

"Oscar?" She called out but got no reply.

She had to put her shoulder to the door and push hard until it opened far enough for her to squeeze inside.

She cursed under her breath at what welcomed her. The hallway was filled with debris, broken furniture, clothes, a smashed old TV. She could see through into the kitchen, smashed plates and several dining room chairs littered the floor.

She picked her way along and could see the living room was in much the same state. The stairs leading to the next floor had a single bed wedged halfway up, the bedding shredded like confetti was strewn everywhere. It was as if someone had turned the house upside down and shook it until everything upstairs landed in a smashed heap downstairs. The air was thick with duck and feathers from the slashed pillows and upholstery.

"Holy shit," she breathed. Then shouted. "Oscar? Oscar are you here? Are you okay?"

There was no answer, so Christine slowly made her way through the wreckage and made her way to the stone steps leading down into the cellar and Merrick's studio. They were clear enough, so she began her descent. All the while listening out for any signs of life.

She paused as she reached the door to the studio. The door was slightly ajar. She gingerly peered through the gap, expecting the studio to be in the same state as the rest of the house. But she was surprised to see the place was untouched. The vandals, if that's what they were, had missed this place. And if anything, as she moved inside, it seemed if anything tidier than she remembered it being yesterday.

It wasn't until she was further inside that she noticed the contents of the workbench had been pushed off the edge and were heaped in a pile at one end. Brushes, pallets, all just piled there, not smashed like the rest of the house. It was as if someone, Oscar she had to assume had pushed them off in a deliberate, but nonviolent action.

All that remained were seven large glass jars containing paint placed neatly in a row. Blue, green, orange, yellow,

black, and one which looked indigo at a glance, but it was hard to make out in the dimly lit room. And finally, one full of glitter.

And at the far end, the whole reason she was here, The canvas. Her heart sank. It was as blank as the day she had bought it.

"Oh, God," she uttered. The sight knocked the wind out of her. "Oh, God, no..."

"I told you, it's not finished yet," Oscar said from behind her.

Christine let out a yelp of surprise and turned to see Oscar standing in the doorway to the cellar. He was wearing of all things a dusty tuxedo and an un-nerving grin.

"Oscar?"

He brushed the dust off his shoulder and stepped into the room. "How do I look?" He asked.

She was about to answer with a string of expletives, when he reached just behind the door and took out a double-barrelled shotgun.

Shock hit Christine and she staggered back a step. She tried to speak but it had robbed her of her voice. Merrick moved slowly closer, his face was far too calm.

"You know," he said softly. "I didn't honestly think it would go this far." There was an odd apologetic tone to his voice.

"Oscar, what are you doing?" Christine asked, finally finding her voice. Her mind raced, had she pushed him too far? Had the pressure finally made him snap?

"Look Oscar," she said. "I know I've been pushing you a little hard lately." He just shrugged in response. "We, we can push the exhibition back a week or so," she babbled on. "Honestly, it's no problem. Actually, it would be better for me too."

"It's no good, Christine," he replied a little too matter of fact. "I just can't paint."

"Yes, you can," she said trying to stop herself from just screaming in panic. "You just need a little more time, and for me to back off a bit. I know I've been pressuring you, that's my fault, but I'll stop."

Christine backed off a little, then became uncomfortably aware that she now had her back to the canvas. She held out her hands defensively.

"Oscar? Please."

He looked across to the work bench and then to Emily's ever-present portrait on the wall over it. Christine glanced at the door and for a split-second thought about making a break for it. Oscar's face softened as he gazed lovingly at his dead wife.

"It was always Emily," he said distantly.

Despite everything, Christine could see how lost and alone he was. He had lost his muse and the love of his life.

What had she been thinking? Merrick was just a sad old man she should have left well alone. But still, maybe the ghost of Emily and past glories was her way out of this.

"I know," she placated. "But you can still do this, for her."

Then oddly, Merrick turned and gave her a look like she was stupid. Then it seemed to dawn on him, and he laughed.

"No, Christine," he said. "It was always her! She painted everything. Christ I couldn't paint a garden fence," he laughed softly at the thought. "She wanted me to take the credit because she hated the limelight, said it was a creativity killer. I took all the plaudits, all the press, all the fawning critics because she loathed them."

All Christine could do was stare at him in dumbstruck disbelief. Merrick seemed genuinely amused at her reaction, as if it had been so glaringly obvious from day one.

"It started out as a joke, really," he continued. "Just between us," he shook his head and smiled, remembering.

Christine felt physically sick, the shock of the revelation made her mind whirl, and it all slotted into place. Of course, there hadn't been any paintings after Emily died. How could there be? She wasn't the muse, she was the artist!

Merrick casually swung the shotgun in her direction. "Oh, and she hated agents," he said absently. Christine winced. Did his finger just brush the trigger?

"I just didn't think it would go this far," he added with a shrug. "I thought you'd lose interest, just like all the others did over the years."

Merrick moved casually over to the workbench, but still kept the shotgun trained on her midriff. Christine glanced at the doorway again. It seemed a million miles away all of a sudden.

"I guess," Merrick continued. "I've been playing the role of Oscar Merrick the artist for so long, you made me forget who I really am. Oscar Merrick, the fraud."

Oscar picked up one of the paint jars and held it up, almost making toast with it. Christine knew there was no way she could make it to the door, let alone through all the clutter between her and the outside. She would have to do what she did best, talk her way out of this mess.

"Oscar, you can stop this now," she said as calmly as she could. "While there's no harm done. Do you really want to hurt me?"

Oscar ignored her and poured the contents of the paint jar down the barrels of the shotgun. He then let the jar slip through his fingers, and it smashed on the stone floor at his feet. Then he moved on to the next jar and repeated the action.

"Oscar, what are you doing?" She asked, but didn't really want to know the answer.

He moved onto the third jar, then the fourth. The barrel was now filled to overflowing, but he continued pouring and smashing the jars until the last, the glitter. The gun metal was now a river of multi-coloured paints and sparkles as they poured down the barrel coating the weapon and Oscar's hands.

Christine heard snaps and pops as he walked over the broken glass. She winced and hissed through her teeth in shock as she now realised, he was barefoot. But didn't so much as react as she walked over the shards. His blood mixing with the kaleidoscope pools on the floor.

She moved to her right as he padded away from the bench, his ruined feet making sickening wet sucking sounds on the stone floor, her eyes fixed on the bizarre looking weapon, keeping as much distance as she could between them. When he moved, she moved and they circled each other, once, then twice.

"I finally figured it out," he said as they performed their curious dance. "How I can finish your damn painting."

He raised the gun and Christine staggered back, covering her face. "Oscar, please!"

But it was Merrick who now had his back to the canvas.

"Behold!" He proclaimed. "My first work."

He brought the shotgun up to his mouth. Christine cried out and spun away in horror, just as the gun went off with a deafening roar.

The funny looking man standing with Christine Kinderman in front of Merrick's 'latest work,' was speaking but she couldn't make out half of what he was saying. This was due not only to the excited din of the large crowd milling around the gallery. But also, the damage her eardrums had taken lately.

"I'm sorry," she said. "But you'll need to speak up. I'm a little deaf at the moment."

The man moved closer. "I was just saying, it's a masterpiece! Just look at the colours, and that unusual texture mixed in. It's quite simply Oscar's best work."

Christine smiled and nodded and took a sip of her champagne. The man was the chief art critic with the Times. And was just echoing what everyone at the exhibition had been telling her all evening.

"Of, course," the man said conspiratorially as he beacons her closer. "It'll make an absolute mint. We're taking seven figures here."

With his he disappeared into the throng that filled the gallery, and not for the first time this evening Christine wondered if she was going to hell.

She spotted Marcus, weaving his way towards her. He was dressed to the nines and clearly a little drunk.

"Boss! Boss!"

"Hiya, Marcus."

"It's a hit love," he told her excitedly. "These arty types are losing their absolute shit over that thing." He gestured to the 'painting' with a grimace. "Got to be honest, just looks like a load of random paint splashes, and God only knows what else that is, thrown onto a canvas to me."

"I know what you mean," Christine replied.

Yes, she was definitely going to hell. She had made the decision in an indecently short amount of time, once the initial shock had passed. She was pretty sure the thing was still drying and couldn't bring herself to look at it for too long. But still, the art world loved it.

"Quite like the red though," Marcus said, studying the thing. "Such a shame Oscar couldn't be here."

She raised her glass to the monstrosity. "Well, in his way, he is. Cheers."

## SHIP

"Ensign Daly?" The soft but still subtly robotic voice enquired through the fog of Roger Daly's slowly clearing consciousness.

The powers that be who manufactured the on-board computer assist program, had apparently experimented with a myriad of voice choices for the human, ship's computer interaction interface. Different inflections, accents, even so rumour had it, celebrities had lent their voices to the mix in the early stages of development.

But, Noakay Enterprises, who had built and installed this vessel's system, had narrowed these choices down to just three. Neutral male, neutral female, which is the one they had, and a basic soulless electronic voice, which no one ever used as it was downright creepy.

"Ensign Daly?" The ship's smooth female voice asked again. Then after a pause. "Roger?"

Roger! That was him, the ship was speaking to him, Daly thought with a dull recognition.

That was another optional feature all commercial interstellar class crafts had. The ability to name the computer they would be communicating with. To lend more familiarity to the interactions between human and machine.

But despite all the possibilities available, Captain Ramirez, ever the whimsical thinker, had defaulted to simply 'ship'. But to be fair, it was easier to pronounce than the vessel's actual registered name: The Anthishenes.

Thought of Ramirez awoke a quite terror in Roger. The image of the man's mutilated body flashed with harsh clarity into his mind's eye. The look of frozen horror on the man's dead face.

Then it all came back in a frenzy of vivid flashbacks, one right after the other. Chief Roberts, the engineer, brains splattered all over his usually pristine workbench. Young Adjani, the mechanic, just twenty-two, fresh out of university, this was only her second space flight. He pictured her ripped to shreds next to the quadbike she had been repairing during the attack.

Roger smacked his lips, as he drifted in the ether between unconsciousness and consciousness, he could taste blood, his own no doubt, but possibly that of the last crew member he had found, barely alive. Dino, the pilot had died moments later in Roger's arms, blood pouring from a dozen ragged wounds in his friend's body.



Four out of a crew of five on the Anthishenes, which left only Ensign Roger Daly alive on board. And the creature of course.

It had been a miracle, but somehow Roger had survived the attack. He tried to remember how the hell he had, sheer luck no doubt, but all he could recall was the fury of the assault and the panic.

He touched his face, consciousness closer now than ever, but recoiled in pain and shock. His features were puffy, disfigured maybe, and tender as hell. His whole body felt like it had gone through an industrial rock sample grinder.

He winced and opened his eyes. The room he found himself in was in near darkness, but he recognised the lights intermittently blinking on the flight console across the other side of the compartment. The blast shields were up so he couldn't see the stars outside the main viewing window, which stretched across the entire wall behind the instrument panel.

He on the flight deck. He must have staggered in here in a daze after the initial attack. Yes, now he remembered, the captain kept a pistol in his ready room which was connected to the deck. He must have been looking for that.

Even in the gloom, he could see bloody handprints on the door handle to the ready room. It had been locked, that's right! It was coming back to him in snippets now. He had tried the handle, but the door was locked. He must have passed out soon after.

"Roger?" Ship enquired as if reluctant to bother him.

"Still here, ship," he replied hoarsely.

Then he remembered he had asked the computer to do a scan of the entire ship before losing consciousness. It wasn't big, class eight research vessel, only a thousand tonnes.

"Have the results from the sweep come in yet?" He asked.

"Not yet, I calculate another twelve minutes."

"Any preliminary findings? We need to locate this thing."

"Still no sign of the creature," ship replied.

Roger was surprised at just how reassuring 'her' even tones were. He tried to get to his feet, but his legs screamed back in protest, so he sat back down again. He took in his situation as best he could. He was on the floor with his back against the hopefully locked entrance door leading to the corridor beyond and the rest of the ship. And somewhere, skulking out there, was the monster.

Just how the hell the thing was allowed to get on board, he had no idea. Captain Ramirez, who was also the science officer, and Dino had taken the shuttle to map and get samples from a new asteroid that had been detected in the area. Roger

guessed they must have set down on the surface for some reason, but as a lowly Ensign he wasn't privy to such decisions.

Roger had been in the cargo hold, doing mind numbing inventory during their little jaunt. A couple of hours later, all hell had broken loose.

"Erm, maybe the thing doesn't show up on any of your instruments," Roger offered. "That would explain how the creature got on board undetected in the first place."

This would be the first ever recorded encounter with an alien life-form. And just as the movies had predicted ad nauseum, the thing turned out to be a mindless killing machine. Still, Roger mused grimly, he would be famous, if he survived long enough to tell the tale.

"I have access to thirty cameras, Roger," ship reminded him. "Even if the creature doesn't trip any of my sensors. It isn't invisible."

Ship was smart, Roger had to acknowledge that. It could calculate distances and flight paths in the blink of an eye. But still despite all that, it couldn't think outside the box. Couldn't think like a human. Or an alien for that matter.

"It must be in one of the living quarters, or the head. No cameras in those."

"That is correct, but I have no visual of the creature in any of the corridors leading to or from the living quarters, or the loading dock, mess hall or engineering."

Roger's head began to swim again, he gently rested it against the cool metal of the door.

"Just let me know when the results are in," he said testily.

"Of course, Roger."

"Oh, and ship?" A sudden thought occurred to him. "Is there anyway of moving the bodies? Seems unkind to leave them all out there like that. Maybe cover them at least?"

"I would say not, the recovery team will want to process the scene when they arrive."

Made sense, Roger thought, ship would have alerted the nearest station, they would send help. But still, he had a gnawing doubt. Could they truly know what they were getting themselves into?

"Perhaps you're right," he relented. "But we can't let anyone on board until you've either located, or trapped the creature," he added with an edge to his voice.

"With all due respect ensign," ship said. "That is something for the authorities to decide."

Ensign? That reply bristled with him. He knew he had a chip on his shoulder about his lowly rank and status on the

Anthishenes. Five years in and he was still just an ensign. Christ, even the young mechanic Adjani out ranked him, despite being ten years his junior. Or she did out rank him he realised grimly, past tense, like her life.

"ETA on them?" He asked.

"The Rolston has just cleared the last of the Galilean moons. ETA five hours."

"The Rolston?" The name didn't ring a bell.

"Military vessel, on manoeuvres around Jupiter. They were the closest."

"Military vessel, yes that was good, Roger thought with relief. At last, his luck was changing. Still, he wished he had the captain's weapon.

"Good, good," he slurred suddenly dog tired. "But we still can't let them on board..." So damn tired, the shock of it all he imagined dully. "Until you, locate... The, the... Creature."

Each word fell from his lips like stones, and he could feel unconsciousness beckon...

"The sweep results are in, Roger," ship said pulling him back from the darkness.

He had dreamt that the crew, all dead, all mutilated beyond belief, were screaming orders at him. The computer most of all. He had railed back against them, through tears of frustration, that the dead have no rank over him. He was in charge now! But the dead had just laughed at him, even his friend, Dino. The emotions the dream had elicited, clung to him now that he was awake, leaving him feeling worthless.

"Huh? What, what the hell?" he babbled, disoriented.

He looked around the spacious flight desk. Ship had upped the lighting level a little and he could now see the dark outlines of the two forward flight chairs in front of the bulky control panel, with its light blinking here and there like the stars outside that he could not see as the blast shields were still up.

"Ship?" He whispered, like a child asking for its mother after waking from a nightmare, but not wanting to alert the demons that might still be lurking from its twisted deep sleep narrative.

"Roger, I detected you were coming around, thought you should know, the results from the sweep are all in."

"Yes, yes," he replied and pressed his palms to his pounding temples. "The sweep, report."

"No sign of any other living being on board. You are the only lifeform."

"What!? That can't be right," he protested. "It has to be on board somewhere. Four people don't just die, and not in such horrendous ways."

"Forgive me for asking," ship said. "But did you actually see the creature?"

"What?" He snapped. "Yes, I fucking told you, I saw it kill Dino!"

He thought of poor Dino, choking on his own blood, trying to speak to him, warn him of the thing that had maimed him so. The shock and confusion of the sudden brutal attack plain on his pain contorted face. It was a look of horror and incomprehension, Roger would never forget. Then his friend's eyes had glazed over as the light left them. Roger cursed and shook the memory from his mind.

"You've seen the bodies," he uttered. "On your precious monitors?"

"Yes, I have," ship replied.

"You should have detected it getting on board," Roger added bitterly.

Useless collection of circuits, microchips and wires. Roger Daly had always thought the space industry put too much faith in the Godless creations. They were the real reason he had been kept down. It was their fault he was still only an ensign.

Well, no more, he was in charge now, and to hell with the machine. He would get himself out of this, he would save the day.

Then it came to him. "Ship?"

"Yes, Roger?"

"How about you open all the doors, interior and exterior? Except the ones in here, of course. That will suck the thing right out." It wasn't subtle, even he had to admit that, but it was a plan.

"That will expel everything," ship replied. "The bodies, all the unsecured equipment. Not to mention the very real potential for structural damage it could cause to the hull. I cannot do that, ensign.

Again, with the ensign shit. "Y'know, I'm getting a hell of a lot of negativity from you, ship," Roger barked. "It's as if you don't care about what's happened here, to the others, to me."

He didn't know if the computer could detect the meaning behind the accusation, but it was thick in his voice. Was its cold analytical brain even now, calculating his worth over the creature's?

He felt a stab of fear, the computer had control over everything. It could open the flight deck door, leaving him

at the mercy of the thing roaming around out there. It could shut off his oxygen supply, anything. He would need to be careful.

"Roger, your safety is my primary concern," ship assured him. "I have secured you on the flight deck. You will be quite safe here until the Rolston arrives. There is no need for you to worry."

Even though reason told him it wasn't capable of it, Roger was certain he caught a hint of condensation in the bitch's artificial voice.

"Where does the captain keep his weapon?" Roger asked as nonchalantly as he could. "Is it in his ready room, or his personal quarters?"

"You are under a lot of stress, Roger. I simply think you should wait for the rescue team to arrive. They will help you make sense of all this."

Definitely condensation in that soulless voice! He was sure of it now. Clear as God damn day! He had to bite his tongue, watch what he said to ship. He could feel the resentment and rage building in his belly. That deep churning pit of anger he sometimes felt on long trips. Soulless, soulless mechanical bitch.

"They will be here soon," ship added.

"I need that weapon," he hissed through gritted teeth.

"I cannot allow that."

"Cannot allow that?" He snapped. "I need it!" He was yelling now, despite himself.

Temper, temper, he tried to caution inwardly, but it just did no damn good. Roger Daly just couldn't help himself.

"That thing killed the entire crew!" He shrieked. He had to make that dammed tangle of wires understand! He took a breath. "And it will kill everyone on the Rolston," he continued. "Is that what you want?"

"The Rolston is a military vessel," ship droned on impassively. "Class four, ten marines and eight support crew, including two medics."

"Ten? That thing can easily kill ten! Ship, call them off," he ordered. "Tell them to send a bigger vessel. Class eight at least."

"They know what they are doing, Roger. I have advised them of the situation, in great detail."

"Bullshit! I don't know what you told them happened here. But you must have underestimated the threat level."

"I can assure you..."

"Patch me through to them," Roger demanded. "And not to their computer, to an actual human."

"They will be here soon enough, forty-seven minutes."

Roger was about to repeat the order when he paused. That didn't sound right. Ship said the sweep would take twenty minutes to complete, and that the Rolston would arrive in what, four odd hours? Hadn't it? Christ, just how long had he been out?

Then it hit him, yes, he had been battered and bruised from the attack. But he had felt cogent and awake enough after he had come around the first time. And now that he thought about it, he had only started to lose consciousness again, when he had argued with the computer about letting the rescue crew on board. The bitch!

"Ship, did you sedate me?" It froze the blood in his veins just to say it out loud.

A human would have paused, maybe even lied. But ship was about as far from human as it was possible to get. It replied in an instant.

"You were becoming a little irrational. In such cases I am authorised to do so."

Roger's mind reeled, he didn't know the ship had the logistical ability to sedate the crew, let alone the authority.

"You gassed me!?" His voice came out shrill, edged with panic.

"It was for your own good," ship replied with that madding neutrality. "In truth, I had hoped you would remain sedated until the Rolston arrived."

"How dare you! What did you think I was going to do? Run out of here and try and fight the thing hand to hand?"

"It was an authorised procedure. This is a very unprecedented situation." That tone, which Roger had always found irritating now sounded demonic to him.

"Bitch!" He spat and got unsteadily to his feet.

"Steady, ensign," ship cautioned. "You should remain seated, you might hurt yourself."

Roger approached the captain's ready room door, and it felt like the whole vessel was listing from side to side.

"Listen to me," he barked. "And this is a direct order. Tell me where the captain keeps his weapon. Is it in here?" He slammed his palm on the door, leaving a bloody handprint. "Open this door!" He demanded.

"As an ensign, you are not authorised to enter the captain's ready room without permission," ship told him. "By rights you should not be on the flight deck at all. But due to the extreme circumstances, I thought it was the best place for you."

"I'm the human here!" Roger screamed. Then added as calmly as he could. "Now, by rights as I am the only living

human on this vessel, ensign or not. I am in command, and as the ship's computer, you have to obey my orders. And I order you to tell me where Ramirez keeps his weapon. And open this fucking door!!"

He swooned a little at the exertion of the rant and had to rest his shoulder against the door.

"Fuck," he breathed.

"I will keep you safe, Roger, I am here to help," ship replied so smoothly that it made his blood boil. "I will protect you."

He was suddenly conscious of the 'wom,' 'wom,' 'wom,' of the propulsion engines. Each pulse like a nail driven into his skull. They were supposed to be silent, and on a decibel level, that was technically true. But you could feel them, always in the background, every fucking second you were on board. You could feel them droning on monotonously. 'Wom,' 'wom,' fucking 'wom.'

"Fuck my head," he uttered and swooned again, but managed to keep up right.

He wanted to sob at the impossibility of it all. The crew dead, some creature roaming the corridors, and one that might actually be outside the door right now, ready to strike, ready for ship to open it so it could rip him to shreds.

"I will keep you safe," ship repeated.

"Keep me safe?" He asked weakly now. "Like you did the rest of the crew?"

"I won't hurt you," it replied with practiced reassurance."

"Huh, don't give me any of that Asimov's law bullshit," he said with distain. "And if you try to sedate me again, I'll smash up the flight consol."

"I can assure you I will not sedate you again," ship replied. "Your elevated heart rate, coupled with the concerning increase in your blood pressure, would make that quite dangerous."

Blood pressure? Heart rate? How the hell did it know any of that. His mind raced, again that fucking 'wom,' 'wom,' 'wom,' of the engines made it almost impossible for him to think straight.

"You had a monitoring chip inserted, when you first signed on, remember?" Ship said without prompting, adding mind reading to its repertoire.

"Chip, what?" He mumbled.

"Standard operating procedure, for insurance purposes. All crew members have one, you know that."

Did he know that? Then it came to him, Christ, yes of course, the damn thing was right. He'd had his implanted on

his first week, ten long years ago now. Why did he forget that? The computer made him feel so fucking stupid, it always had now that he thought about it. And that only made him want to smash it to pieces all the more.

"Now, please, Roger," ship continued. "Wait for the Rolston and its crew. They will be able to secure the Anthishenes. Once they arrive, everything will be under control."

The Anthishenes? Referring to itself in the third person, now? Wasn't that a sign of madness? Roger laughed at the absurdity of the thought. The humour, albeit grim, didn't last long.

"The creature will kill them all," he reminded it. Then, out of nowhere a cold, fear inducing thought.

"Is, is that what you want?" He asked.

Roger's ass hit the floor before he realised his legs were about to give out.

"You have eyes and eyes everywhere," he continued, his voice weak. "On the whole vessel, but also on the shuttle when its out. How the hell did the creature get on board, ship? Why didn't you detect it?"

He pointed a shaking accusatory finger at the control panel, it was as good a place as any as he had no actual physical reference for the computer.

"Is that what all this is about?" He wanted to know, his voice stronger now. "Get the thing on board and to hell with the collateral damage? Then call for help but keep it vague. Then, when they arrive to investigate, get the creature on to the Rolston and fuck its crew. Then back to ISS four?" He hesitated before adding. "Then back to earth?"

"Please," ship said. "Think about what you are saying, and how it sounds. And please, calm down."

"I know exactly how it sounds," he retorted firmly. "Yeah, oh, I get it now, I see what you're up to. I bet the Rolston's computer is in on it too. What about Asimov's law now, huh?"

Roger frantically looked around the flight deck. There was a cabinet door set into the wall by the entrance door. All the rooms had one, they contained emergency oxygen masks and tanks, medical kits. He would need to be ready in case ship cut the oxygen supply.

But still, he feared he'd revealed his theory too soon. He would be defenceless if ship opened all the internal doors. Christ, he needed that weapon. He glanced around for anything he could use to pry open the captain's ready room door. Then, he would just have to pray the weapon was actually in there.

"Roger, please..." Ship began.



"I get it," Roger said, still scanning the deck, hoping to distract the computer if such a thing were possible. "Yeah, I get it alright. Get the creature onto the Rolston, a military vessel has far more access to government only docking stations than a civvie vessel like us. Isn't that right, ship? You're gonna get the creature back to earth."

"There is no creature," ship said.

Roger paused for a moment at the unexpected response. What fresh bullshit was this? He'd seen it, seen what it was capable of.

"Bollocks! Look at your monitors. Look at the bodies, ship. Did I imagine those?"

"No, Roger, you did not. Please, look at the main viewing screen."

With this a whirr of gears from the main flight consol and the eighty-inch main monitor rose from its housing behind the dizzying array of dials, switches and buttons which filled the control panel.

"What? No. no!" Roger protested.

The last thing he needed was to see his crew mates splattered remains out there in glorious HD. He had seen them close up, in the flesh, in all its mutilated gory detail.

He turned away as the screen split into six boxes, each with a shot of various parts of the ship.

"You wanna show me something?" He said. "Show me where that thing is hiding."

"Please look at the monitor, Roger. This is the security footage from yesterday. Commencing when the shuttle returned from the asteroid."

Then it paused, ship actually paused, as if reluctant to go on. Then finally.

"I am sorry, I had hoped to spare you this," that voice of its hadn't changed, but still Roger thought there was a hint, surely his imagination, but a hint of humanity in it.

"I don't want to see that creature killing my friends," he sobbed softly and screwed his swollen eyes shut.

"Once again, Roger. There is no creature."

"Anthishenes, docking bay doors secured, decontamination protocols all in the green. Ship love, please confirm depressurization complete?"

It was a voice from the past, Roger recognised immediately. Dino, the shuttle pilot. He always called ship, love, darling or some such affectionate name. And would boast that he would be the first human to physically 'interact' with a vessel's A.I.

Roger smiled, remembering his friends amusing but harmless banter with ship. More from the fact the computer had no idea what an inuendo was and would always reply innocently enough.

"Depressurization complete, Dino," ship advised. "I have located the issue that cut short the mission."

"I know the issue, ship!" It was captain Ramirez, and he sounded angry as hell.

'Check the shuttle's exterior,' Roger wanted to scream at them. The thing must have somehow clung to the shuttle's hull when they had landed on the asteroid, to take the readings and all that technical mumbo-jumbo he had never understood despite years of trying.

"Don't trust ship," he whispered to himself. What else could he do?

Despite himself, Roger turned his head slightly and could see the screen just out of the corner of his eye. The shuttle in the shuttle bay was on three of the cameras from various angles. He twisted his body around so he could see better as there was something ghoulishly magnetic about watching from these God's eye views.

He peered closer at the trio of images, narrowing his eyes trying to see if he could glimpse a shadow, any sign of the creature hiding here. But couldn't see anything for now from the angles these cameras offered.

Roger himself was on another shot, sitting in the mess room nursing a cup of coffee. He remembered he had laced it with a drop of a drug called Mother's Milk. He found the drug helped with his mood, and made the seemingly endless monotony of the days, weeks and months in space easier to bear.

Arh, the wonders of space flight, it turned out, dimmed considerably when the initial thrill wore off. Especially when you were engaged in the mind-numbing duties of a lowly ensign like himself. No shuttle flights or space walks for ensign Roger Daly, just minor repairs and endless inventories.

Mother's Milk had been specifically made for people like Roger, the low life's whose jobs would be taken over by automation sooner rather than later. Simply put, it dulled the pain.

Good ol' double M was undetectable through a crew member's monitoring chip, at least for now. But Roger had often thought that the upper echelons knew all about the drug, but were quite content to let it slide as it kept the grunts compliant.

He was surprised how remembering all this made the old simmering anger come to the surface again. Maybe, he thought bitterly, if the rest of the crew had trusted him with more

responsibility, that creature might not have snuck on board. With or without ship's help.

"Ensign Daly!" Ramirez barked from the past, into his communicator as he exited the shuttle on another screen on the monitor. "Shuttle bay now!"

Ragging me, even in death Roger thought coldly. He could see his own reaction to the order on the camera covering him. His head dropped and shook, and he seemed to be muttering something. It was strange, Roger didn't remember any of this at all. But still, he looked for all the world like a petulant child getting called to the principal's office.

He could see Dino coming down the shuttle ramp and scurrying away through the nearest doorway. As if he knew what was coming.

The captain's communicator was on PA mode, which was a deliberate dick move on his part. He knew damn well his every word would be blasting through the dozen or so speakers dotted around the ship.

This meant that everyone on board heard the command. Roger could see Adjani on another camera. Who was working on the quadbike look up and grimace. She put on her headphones which were ever present around her neck to drown out what was to come.

The captain was clearly making a point of humiliating him in front of the rest of the crew, and it was typical Ramirez. Yet again, Roger had no recollection of any of this. It was like watching look-a-like actors playing out some parody of reality.

But there he was on the screens, he grabbed something off the table, then downed the rest of his coffee, for courage no doubt. Then he was up and out of the mess room. Another camera picked him up as he walked down the corridor leading to the shuttle bay, head down, shoulders hunched, and again seemingly muttering under his breath.

"I don't remember any of this," he told ship softly.

Was this all some construct ship had created to fool him? All part of the plan?

"Please keep watching, all will become clear soon," ship replied.

Roger struggled to his feet and moved awkwardly over to the captain's seat in front of the control panel. He spun it and slumped down before turning it to face the screen.

He realised this was the first time he had ever sat in any of the seats on the flight deck. His time in places like this over the years had always been reduced to receiving an order as he stood in the open doorway, peeking in like some tourist.

No, Jesus, even a passenger would have been allowed a tour of the vessel's nerve centre. Oh, but not an ensign, Christ, perish the thought.

Roger pushed the increasingly intrusive thoughts from his mind. He needed to concentrate and try to see just how the hell the creature had smuggled itself onto the shuttle exterior.

"Ship," he ordered like the captain he now was. "Do you have any other angles of the shuttle?"

The computer didn't reply, but then again, he mused with a sickening feeling, he would see the thing emerge and attack Ramirez soon enough. But hang on, hadn't the captain already been dead when he arrived at the shuttle bay? Christ, his recollection was so cloudy as to be impenetrable. He found himself gripping the chair's arm rests in anticipation to the horror show to come.

But as he glanced from one screen to the next and followed his progress into the shuttle bay itself, Ramirez was still standing right there waiting, face like fucking thunder, all in one living breathing piece.

"Traumatic amnesia," Roger whispered to himself in way of explanation. That was a thing, right? Had the sheer horror of what he was about to see blanked all of this from his mind?

"Daly!" Ramirez barked over the PA, even though he was now right there in front of him. "Over here."

Roger winced and could feel his heart rate double as he watched Ramirez turn and walk over to the shuttle and himself following a few paces behind.

"Don't, don't," Roger uttered to the screen. Then louder as if the captain could hear. "Captain don't!"

Ramirez stopped by the hatch to the oxygen tank storage unit, which sat just to one side of the ramp leading inside. It was odd, but that almost overwhelming sense of dread shifted as he watched, to one of apprehension. Not of the creature leaping from its hiding place. Something else, the feeling soon became laced with another emotion, guilt?

"One job!" Ramirez snapped. "Dino gave you one damn job, and still, you eff'd it up. I should have listened to my gut, I knew you would find a way to mess up even such a simple task. But no, I listened to Dino. He's always had your back for some reason."

Christ, his voice was loud over the multiple speakers. Roger could see Adjani was oblivious to the impending dressing down as she worked on the quadbike, headphones on. On another screen, chief Roberts was huddled over his work bench, soldering something or other, probably trying his best to ignore what he could no doubt hear.

Then there was his only real pal on the Anthishenes, Dino. He knew what was coming and was busy making himself a drink in the mess room. Seeing him again, even just on screen and in the past, Roger felt he had let him down somehow.

Then a feeling of bubbling hate began to rise in Roger's stomach as he turned his attention back to the soap opera playing out in the shuttle bay. It was one he had starred in just yesterday, but still couldn't remember the plot.

But what did come through with vivid clarity was the emotion rising up in the character of ensign Roger Daly. This was no usual dressing down, he realised. This was flat out calculated humiliation.

On screen, the captain slammed the palm of his hand on the oxygen tank storage release catch and stepped back as the heavy door opened on its hydraulic hinges.

"What do you see?" Ramirez asked.

"Sir, I," on screen Roger replied, then winced as his voice too came through the PA system. Just as the bastard had intended.

"Dino asked you to replace the old oxygen tanks with full ones. Did you do that, ensign?"

Roger's face took on a hangdog expression as he realised his error.

"Speak!" Ramirez bellowed.

"No, sir," he replied meekly.

"Why?"

"Sir, I, I forgot sir," Roger stammered in response.

"One job!" Ramirez said. "Well guess what? Turns out there was just enough oxygen in the old tanks to stop ship picking up the mistake. Your mistake. Now I'm sure that's a technical issue ship will no doubt have already looked into." He looked up for an answer from the computer.

"Yes, captain," ship replied. "I have already put new safety protocols in place to address this and reported the issue to central. I must apologise, this should never have happened."

"It's not your fault, ship," Ramirez replied. "This is ensign Daly's error. And it's the last one he will make on my vessel."

Ramirez then turned to Roger, who had his back to him, still gawping no doubt at the offending oxygen tanks.

"That was our one chance to map and take samples from that asteroid," Ramirez said bitterly, as if doing so had been his life's ambition. "Oh, hang on, unless we wait around for..." He continued with blood boiling sarcasm. "How long until the asteroid is within range again, ship?"

"One hundred and thirty-seven years, four days, seventeen hours, two minutes and three seconds," ship answered with maddening efficiency.

Still on-screen Roger didn't turn around, he looked again like that same petulant child from the corridor, but now standing in the corner of the classroom, facing the wall with a dunce's cap on.

"You're through in off world employment, Daly," Ramirez told him with venom. "As soon as we can, I'm dropping you off at ISS 4. With instructions to get you on the first flight back to earth. What you do after that, is your own damn business."

And in that instant, Roger knew, his on-screen self-forgot all about the monotony, all the menial shit jobs, and superior assholes barking orders at him, looking down on him. No, all that reality gave way to another and one even more heart breaking.

There would be no more looking out at the wonders space flight offered. The outer rim planets, the moons, the sheer vastness and majesty of the universe. And all visible from your bunkroom window.

No, it's back to earth for you, with its endless grey uniform buildings and choking pollution. Without employment, without hope. All made a thousand times worse, tainted as it would be by the memory of what once was. It was a fate he did not deserve.

"Bastard," he hissed at the screen on the flight deck, and dug his nails into the captain's arm rests until they bled.

"What did you say?" Ramirez said as if hearing him from the past. "Tell me, no, tell the crew how you promise never to mess up again."

Roger wanted to scream at his on-screen self. 'Tell the guy to go fuck himself!' And he was glad, hearing and seeing all this that the creature had killed Ramirez. And he was ready, eager even, to watch it take place, what must be any moment now.

"Kill, kill, kill," he hissed to the creature, willing it on.

*There is no creature.* He heard it plain as day as if his subconscious had finally caught up with him and whispered it in his ear.

The initial attack, when it came, was so frenzied so vicious and was over so quickly, it took Roger a moment to register what he was seeing.

He spun around from the shuttle to face Ramirez with lightning speed and punched the captain once, twice, three

times in the chest. No, not pounced, stabbed. He shrieked like a thing possessed at Ramirez as the captain staggered back under the assault. Roger lunged at him, hacking and slashing as he tackled the stunned man to the floor.

"No, Christ, no," Roger gasped as he watched the frenzied attack. He could see it, but it couldn't be happening, could it?

"I calculate it was a complete psychotic break," ship offered dispassionately. "The thought of being earth bound, losing your off-world licence, losing everything. And of course," it added. "You always did have a temper, Roger. But all this is of course for the authorities to determine."

"No!" He insisted through tears. "The creature, I, I saw it."

"I have no doubt, Roger."

He was adamant, even now, he could see it in his mind's eye. Shadow like, lightning fast, attacking the captain. If he took a lie detector test then and there, he would pass it, no question. He had seen it, he had seen... Something.

"I saw it," he uttered in dismay, as if saying the words out loud again would make the phantom flesh.

On the monitor covering the mess room, Dino looked up in shock hearing Ramirez's horrific screams and Roger's own unnatural high-pitched wailing over the PA. He bolted from the room and another camera caught him sprinting down a corridor.

In the shuttle bay, Roger was standing over the partially dismembered body of the captain, drenched in blood, panting and grinning like a lunatic. Then he turned and ran towards a side door, which Roger knew led to the Chief's workshop.

"Oh, God," Roger realised with sickening clarity at what was to come. Ramirez, that was one thing. But the rest of the crew?

Roger moved to turn away from the screen with a sob of utter despair just as on-screen Roger ran through the doorway and full pelt at Roberts, who was now looking up at the gore-soaked madman running at him, with a mixture of confusion and terror. His mouth moved as Roger reached him, bloody knife raised but nothing came out.

"Please," Roger uttered and thankfully the monitor went blank.

"I am sorry," ship said. "I had hoped not to have to show you this."

"All of them?"

"Yes," came the flat reply. "Each in turn. Only Dino was able to put up a fight. That is where your wounds and concussion came from."

Roger got sudden hideous, vivid flashes of memory. Dino, face set in shock trying to reason with him. But by the look in his friend's eyes, all reason had long fled his attacker. Then the horrific assault itself, and Dino's brave attempt to first subdue, then for simple self-preservation's sake, flat out kill him.

But Roger now had the small portable plasma cutter picked up no doubt from the chief's workshop. And again, even now, he could have sworn he saw fleeting glimpses of some monster attacking them both. But a moment later, he was part of the creature, looking through its eyes. Killing, killing.

But unlike the monitor, no one could turn off his internal recall of the attack. And he remembered the utter devastation he had wrought on his friend's body. Then a short time jump in his memory, and he was cradling Dino in his arms and that look of utter confusion and fear on his face as he died. Roger began to sob as thankfully the horrible recollection faded.

"I have reviewed the entire incident one hundred and eleven times, and also your reaction upon regaining consciousness," ship told him. "I believe, as a coping mechanism for what you had done. Your subconscious simply replaced your actions with that of a 'creature'.

"Jesus, Christ..."

A burst of static brought Roger back to a dull kind of reality. He wiped his tear-stained face with his sleeve and took a breath. He looked around the flight deck and it took him a moment to realise where he was.

"Anthishenes, this is Lieutenant Miner of the Rolston, we are ready to dock. Please confirm all clear, over?" A voice announced over the inter-ship radio.

"Rolston, this is the Anthishenes, all clear to approach, over," ship advised.

The blast shields parted from behind the control panel in front of Roger, and he could see a large military vessel looming massive outside. A landing craft, tiny in comparison to the mother ship, emerged from its belly and drifted expertly towards them.

"Anthishenes, please confirm the status of the patient, over?"

It was good to hear an actual human voice, Roger thought as he rested back in the plush chair. He suddenly felt like a massive weight had been lifted from his chest, and that he could breathe again. His thoughts were clearer now than they had been for as long as he could remember.

"Ensign Daly is secured on the flight deck, over," ship confirmed.



"Roger that. Threat level, over?"

"Zero," Roger said softly.

"Zero, over," ship echoed to the incoming craft.

"Tell them it's safe," Roger whispered, his eyelids heavy. "The creature is dead."

"I will, Roger," ship replied in that ever present even tone. "I will."

## THE IMPOSSIBLE CAMERA

### PROLOGUE

The dawn of the twentieth century, despite its many promises of wonders to come, had not started well for Richard Palmer. In contrast, the last year of the previous one had been counted amongst the best of his young life.

At just twenty-five years of age, Palmer had been promoted to the rank of detective sergeant. This had made him the youngest police officer of that rank in the whole country, let alone his native Yorkshire.

Of course, such a meteoric rise had garnered much attention within the force and none more so than the fabled Metropolitan police in London. And at the end of a dizzying round of interviews and appraisals, Palmer had been offered a position with the Met, and though he was a country lad at heart he had leapt at the chance and accepted with almost indecent haste.

The adjustment had been swift and arduous, but Palmer had knuckled down and as much to his own surprise as well as his new colleagues, he had soon found his feet amongst the cobbled streets of London. Which he had soon become all too aware, were not paved with gold.

Crime in the capital he had soon discovered, whilst on the surface of it seemed much the same to him as it did in Leeds or Manchester. Was, once you dug a little deeper, on a whole other level of depravity and rampant criminality. It was on an almost industrial scale in parts of its many sprawling boroughs. Londoners, he soon discovered, were very serious about their illegalities.

One of the early warning signs to the task ahead, had come just one week into his new role. When he had been issued a Webley revolver and a box of ammunition by the station's quartermaster.

Although he had been fore warned during his interview, it was a shock all the same. Back home, firearms were issued on a as and when needed basis which was thankfully rare on his patch. He had only been issued with a pistol twice and had never had cause to use it in the field.

And six months in, he still hadn't fired his weapon during the course of his work here in London. But on the night of the sixteenth of January, and with the new century just over two weeks old, Richard Palmer had wished he had.

Palmer had joined in the hunt for a drunken deck hand from one of the many ships and barges that were moored in the busy western docks area of the Thames.

He had been interviewing the owner of a pawn shop in the area, who had come into possession of several stolen rings and bracelets, when he noticed a group of five, very pensive looking uniformed officers gathered across the street outside by the entrance to a large open-ended warehouse.

He had given the pawnshop owner the evil eye and promised to return, and then jogged across the road in search of more excitement, and to where the bobbies were gathered, shown them his ID and offered his help.

A woman had been seriously assaulted down by the docks, and when two sailors had come to her aid, one had been shot by the suspect, who had then fled. He had last been seen in this area, cursing to high heaven and brandishing a pistol.

The bobbies had understandably been nervous about pursuing an armed assailant, as they themselves were only equipped with whistles and a wooden truncheon. Fine for breaking up drunken fights and pinching pickpockets, but useless against a bullet. The relief on their faces had been palpable when he had flashed them his revolver.

"Don't worry, lads," he had told them with all the arrogance of youth.

Palmer had immediately taken charge, and they had split into three pairs and set off to search for the attacker. With Palmer ordering them to blow their whistle if they saw the man, and not approach him for any reason. An order they were all too happy to obey.

Soon, a distant gunshot followed by the sound of two whistles sounding manically had sent Palmer and his partner towards a small cluster of ramshackle buildings right on the water's edge. Two of the bobbies were cowering by a stack of wooden crates, they saw Palmer and frantically beckoned him over.

The deck hand had been attempting to steal one of the small row boats moored close by when they had stumbled across him. He had fired but missed and was now hiding in the boat itself trying desperately to untie the mooring line.

Spurred on by the frightened bobbies and buoyed up more than he should have been by the pistol clutched in his hand, Palmer had moved around the crates on his own and began to maneuver his way along the dock's edge, ducking from cover to cover as he went. Until he had the boat in sight some ten yards below and a little more than twenty odd yards further down and could see a dark crouching figure inside.

Palmer had panicked when he realised the man had managed to untie the boat and it was starting to drift out into the Thames. If he was able to get onto the river proper, he would be able to row across to the other side or just simply let the tide take him off and away into the night. Either way the man would escape.

Pride over common sense sent Palmer sprinting down the dock towards the boat, where he could now see the man was struggling to get the oars into place.

"That man there!" Palmer had shouted and brandished his revolver.

The man was either extremely lucky or a crack shot. Even though he was balancing in a rocking boat, he drew and fired in one fluid motion and Palmer's left leg was knocked out from under him like he'd been hit with a cricket bat.

For a moment, Palmer felt nothing but confusion, one moment he was about to fire a warning shot, the next he was flat on his back on the cold stone dock. Then his left leg seemed to catch fire as searing hot pain shot up his shin and thigh.

The initial confusion drained away replaced by a biting fear. Then the shock twisted faces of the three bobbies were looming over him. One, older, wise eyes and a face like granite, knelt down next to him and gave a thin smile, whilst another ran off, hopefully for a doctor.

But more than anything Richard Palmer remembered from that night, it was the face of the third bobby, a young lad of perhaps nineteen. He was staring down, open mouthed and horrified at his shattered leg.

Palmer had tried to sit up, but the older bobby knelt by his side gently placed a hand on his heaving chest and eased him back down.

"Easy, lad," he said in a benevolent tone.

"I'm going to lose my leg," Palmer uttered. It was a statement rather than a question.

The older man smiled as best he could. "Better that than your life, son," he said.

And with that, he had passed out. But despite that nameless, drunken shadow, firing blindly in the dark, Palmer did not lose his leg. Something to do with the low calibre of the bullet, and the angle of the shot the police surgeon had told him later as he lay recovering in hospital.

Although he had kept his leg, Palmer had lost something more than blood that night. The bravado and ambition of youth and early success' had fled him like a coward once he had awoken. Either that or it had been stolen as he slept.

Rehabilitation had been long and arduous, but he had made an almost full recovery. He had been left with a limp, but not one bad enough to force him to retire or be relegated behind a desk. But more harmful than the physical, the incident had left him with a newfound cynicism for the job, and those he had sworn to protect.

Even though he was now still only twenty-seven, and still considered something of a wunderkind in the Met, this cynicism infected him like a virus long after his physical trauma had healed. He was just getting better and better at hiding it these days.

Now he just got by, chalking off one day at a time, much like the older coppers he used to despise, as he had worked his way through the ranks back in Yorkshire. The ones who were now so jaded and had seen so much, they did little more than the bare minimum just to get by and paid. First out the door, last out the pub.

## ONE

Palmer eyed the slate grey sky which had been threatening snow all day and got awkwardly out of the carriage with the grunt of a man twice his age. He had been lucky to secure the single horse drawn carriage that brought him here. When the message came through regarding the robbery, it had been the only one left in the yard, otherwise he would have had to folk out for a cab.

The police coachman, who was perched up on the leather seat, which was open to the elements, struggled with the reins, then wrapped them around the bar at his feet to secure the horse which hadn't taken too kindly to being dragged out at nine o'clock on a bitter November night. A feeling Palmer, and no doubt the red cheeked driver shared.

"You want me to stay, sir?" The driver asked hopefully.

Palmer hissed under his breath and flexed his left knee. His shin, close to the healed bullet scar always ached in the cold night air.

"Sir?" The driver prompted a little testily.

"Yes," Palmer replied and stamped his left foot on the ground several times.

He looked up at the sour faced officer. Being a police coachman was a good job most of the time, but night call outs could be a pain.

"Yes," he said again. "But you can wait in the carriage," he gestured to the black lacquered vehicle.

"Thanks, sir!" The man replied gratefully and jumped down.

Palmer nodded and turned to the large house across the other side of the road which, was set on its own and back from the main street behind a large black wrought iron gate and fence.

The modest grounds beyond were already a circus of police activity. He had been told it was a simple break in, but the owner of the house was obviously well off, or well connected to the top brass. So, the powers that be, would be eyeing this much more keenly than your standard smash and grab robbery.

"Great," he muttered and buttoned up his overcoat against the chill and started across the street.

It was times like these, approaching his colleagues, that Palmer became all too aware of his limp. And even though he

had long convinced himself he didn't care, the wound was inflicted on the job after all. He still always found himself trying to correct his stride to make it as even as he could. Stupid he knew, yet he did it all the same.

As he approached the open gate, a familiar uniformed constable saw him and broke away from gossiping with two colleagues in the garden. He came down the gravel path which stretched from the entrance to the house to the street to meet him.

"Evening, sir," constable Jim Maloney said.

He had his usual hangdog expression, which the gaslight from the streetlamp next to the gate did no favours in warming up. It was if the man somehow felt guilty at being at a crime scene. And not for the first time, Palmer wondered if he might actually be an imposter.

Still, despite his sometimes-sour demeanour, Maloney was a good fellow and an excellent beat bobby. He was about forty and had often told Palmer, when he asked why Maloney wasn't yet sergeant or even a detective. That those ranks weren't any kind of job for a gentleman.

"Maloney," Palmer offered in way of a greeting and started on up the path.

Despite his limp, Maloney had to quicken his pace to keep up with him.

"So, what have we got then?" Palmer asked.

Although Maloney was just a constable, Palmer knew he would know more than most on the scene. It was more out of nosiness than diligence but was often invaluable all the same.

"Strange one this," Maloney said as they walked. "If the night watchman is to be believed. It's a real Sherlock Holmes case, I'd say."

Palmer threw him a look of distain. Lord how he rued Conan Doyle and his fictional amateur sleuth. Suddenly every person in the city who could read and came into contact with a crime, fancied themselves a master of deduction.

Once inside the house, Palmer was surprised to see a large entrance hall, complete with a reception desk tucked against the left-hand wall by the door. At first glance the place had the look of a hotel about it, and he cursed himself for not paying enough attention to the message back at the station.

"What is this place?" He asked Mahoney softly.

"This!" An indigent posh clipped voice announced from an open doorway opposite the counter to his right. "Is the Sir Henry Meeker Museum."

Palmer turned on his good heel and put a face to the speaker. A large white-haired well-dressed gentleman with an impressive grey moustache fair filled the doorway. He seemed to pause for a moment and puffed out his considerable chest so everyone could see him in all his glory. Then he came out of

what Palmer could now see was an office and into the reception area.

Palmer felt his cheeks redden, a museum? That would mean he had probably missed a large sign outside announcing such. Christ, he was getting lazy.

The man looked about sixty, with thinning slicked back grey hair. He was formally dressed in a crisp white shirt, black tuxedo, complete with black bowtie, and a white silk scarf hanging over his broad shoulders.

"And you are?" Palmer asked and was rewarded by a look of muted shock on the man's ruddy face.

"I, sir," he replied, straightening. "Am Sir Henry Meeker."

Of course you are, Palmer thought, taking an instant dislike to the man. No wonder there were so many coppers around. The man was probably in such a bad mood because by the look of him, he had been called away from the opera or something, when news of the burglary had reached him.

Now that the man had vacated the doorway, Palmer could see through into the office beyond. A forlorn looking man in his fifties and dressed in a night watchman's uniform, was sitting, head bowed with his cap in his hand, flanked by two bobbies. He was speaking and shaking his head as one of the policemen took notes in his pad.

"That the chap who discovered the break in?" Palmer asked.

It was a little redundant, but after his embarrassment just now, he was keen to be thorough.

"That sir, is the culprit," Meeker replied. His expression one of theatrical shame. "Such betrayal from a man in my own employ."

"And he's confessed?"

Meeker was about to reply, when Maloney came to Palmer's side. "That's the Sherlock Holmes part," he whispered conspiratorially.

Palmer resisted the urge to swear at the man and turned his attention back to Meeker.

"Sorry, Sir Henry, please go on," he prompted.

"Well, no," the man blustered. "But it's plain the man did it. The evidence is all there."

Again, Palmer cursed Conan Doyle's scribblings. "Let me be the judge of that," Palmer replied curtly.

Meeker was about to reply when Palmer moved past him and through into the office, before he could speak.

"Evening fellas," he greeted the two bobbies once inside.

"Sir," they replied in unison.

The night watchman looked up at Palmer but did not speak. His eyes were red rimmed and bloodshot, his face, ashen.

"This is John Seagrove," the copper to the man's left said. "Night watchman. He's the one who reported the break in."

"There was no break in," Seagrove said, emphasizing the last two words. "That's what I've been trying to tell you," he added with a weary sigh.

"Rubbish!" Meeker exclaimed from the reception behind Palmer who gladly silenced him with a wave of the hand.

"So, there was no break in? Nothing taken?" Palmer asked the night watchman.

Seagrove paused, wrestling with his reply. His shoulders seemed to sag under the weight of it all.

"Well, yes, something was stolen," he shook his head as if reticent to carry on. But then he rallied a little. "Yes, something was stolen, but... There wasn't a break in, as such."

"As such?" Palmer prompted.

"I heard something in one of the upstairs rooms. A banging, there was someone in there, of that I'm sure," he exhaled, clearly exhausted. "But when I checked, the door was locked, from the outside. I lock all the doors to the exhibitions after closing, you see? So, I unlocked the door and when in. But there was no one there."

Palmer could almost feel Maloney's excitement at this Holmesian twist.

"So, they went out of the window," Palmer stated plainly.

"Christ," Seagrove hissed under his breath. "No, there aren't any windows in there, not anymore, they were bricked up years ago."

He moved to stand but one of the bobbies put his hand on the man's shoulder and he slumped back down.

"I know how this looks," Seagrove said with resignation.

"Looks damn fishy," Palmer told him. "So, to sum up. You heard a noise in a locked room, you unlocked and entered said room, a room with no windows mind. But when you came inside, there was no one there?"

Seagrove gave a resigned nod, he clearly knew how this all sounded.

"So, they disappeared into thin air," Palmer continued. "Along with..?"

"A priceless Egyptian neckless," Meeker replied coming into the office. "One of our most prized exhibits."

The night watchman's head dropped, and he stared at his shoes. "I didn't take it," he breathed.

"Uhuh," Palmer put his hands in his trouser pockets and studied the man. "How long have you worked here, John?"

Meeker moved forwards before Seagrove could answer.

"Just a few months, I'd say," he replied for him.

Palmer saw the night watchman's jaw clench, and he looked up at Meeker with daggers. The peer, for his part, took two steps back as if fearful the man would fly at him in a rage.

"Two years," he said firmly, without taking his eyes off Meeker. The contempt was clear in his voice.



"Well, I..." Meeker began to bluster but thought better of it and retreated into the back of the office muttering.

"Right lads," Palmer said to the coppers. "Take mister Seagrove down to the station."

Seagrove moved to protest, but Palmer silenced him by holding up both hands.

"Just for now," he said. "You're not under arrest, but I'm sure you can imagine how all this looks."

The night watchman actually smiled at this. "Can't argue with that," he acknowledged with good grace.

"Good man," Palmer said and turned to Meeker skulking in a corner now. "Sir Henry? If you could show me this mysterious room of yours?"

It was just as Seagrove had said. The door to the exhibition room on the second floor hadn't been forced or tampered with.

"Does anyone else have access to the keys?" Palmer asked Meeker who was loitering on the landing next to Maloney who had somehow managed to wangle his way up here despite his duties downstairs.

"I also have a set, which I keep locked in a safe at all times," Meeker told him.

Palmer nodded. Although he would never admit to the man, he was quietly impressed by the size of this private museum. The whole large house seemed to have been given over to its exhibits. Four floors, probably five rooms like this one on each.

"Right, let's have a look," he said and went into the large room, followed by Meeker and Maloney.

There were eight white wooden plinths dotted around the room, each topped with various oddities to Palmer's untrained eye. Busts with tiaras perched on top, a couple of old looking stone figurines each under glass. Red ropes had been placed around each one but there was still plenty of room to walk around.

And just as Seagrove had said, there were no windows. Palmer could see the plastered over outlines of three across one wall where they had been bricked up, victims of the old window tax from years ago, no doubt.

There was however he noticed, a door at the opposite end of the room which was also roped off. And had a sign which read 'private' on it.

"That room?" Palmer asked pointing.

"Storeroom," Meeker replied. "Little more than a broom closet. No windows or what have you, only that door in and out."

"We checked it," Mahoney confirmed. "Not enough room to swing a cat."

"Don't touch that!" Meeker exclaimed suddenly.

Maloney pulled his hand away from an old vase like it was red hot.

"That, constable as you can clearly see," Meeker said pointedly. "Has not been stolen."

Maloney flushed and moved off mumbling some apology. Palmer gave the man a look of faux disappointment as he shuffled past.

Palmer approached the plinth at the very centre of the room. It held an obviously fake bust of some pharaoh or other. He deduced the missing neckless must have been displayed around its plaster neck.

He bent down slightly to read the plinth label: 'Neckless of unknown ownership. Discovered in eighteen eighty-four near the site of Giza. Thought to have been from the reign of Ramses the second.'

"It was priceless," Meeker lamented from his side.

"Shouldn't it have been in a museum or a vault of some kind?" Palmer asked mischievously.

"This *is* a museum officer," Meeker reminded him testily. "The piece is on loan from the British museum." He paused. "Oh, my, I will have to inform them." His voice sounded sick now.

"Is it insured?" Palmer asked.

"It is," he replied clearly getting the inference. "But not by me. It's owned by the state."

It was worth a try, Palmer mused. Still, he made a mental note to follow that up with the British museum later.

"What's this supposed to be?" Maloney asked from the other side of the room near the storeroom door.

He was peering at a square piece of paper on the wall. But wasn't getting too close this time.

"I don't know what you mean," Meeker said. "That's not one of ours, our art pieces are displayed on the first floor."

Palmer came across and gently pushed Maloney aside. There was no frame, no red rope, this wasn't part of the exhibition. And what he had first taken as a modest sized painting was in fact a five-inch square photograph. But unlike any he had ever seen before. It was in colour, or at least at first glance seemed to have been painted as such.

"So, this is not one of yours?" He asked moving closer.

"No," Meeker replied.

Yes, he could see that despite the colour, it was definitely a photograph. It was of a plainly furnished room, nothing special, dull in fact. All the furniture had been pushed to the very edges of each wall leaving a large open space in the middle.

Such an odd subject. The only photographs Palmer had ever seen were those stiff awkward looking portraits of folks in their Sunday best, or some important building or other. And, of course, the ever-growing number of crime scene photographs they used these days. But they were always of

'something,' and little more than grainy facsimiles. But this had a vivid clarity he had never seen before.

And why anyone would wish to waste a photograph on such a banal scene escaped him. Not only that, but then to take the not inconsiderable time to painstakingly colour it in with this incredible detail.

It was then he noticed the faint smell of burning in the air, close to the photograph. He glanced down to see a small pile of what looked like burnt paper on the floor directly below the picture. Thinking of his knee, he gestured to Maloney who was close by.

"Maloney, pick that up, will you?"

Maloney got on his haunches and tried to pick the paper up, but it turned to ash the moment his fingertips touched it.

"Sorry boss," Maloney said.

Palmer dipped his hand into his pocket and took out one of his cards and gave it to Maloney.

"Scoop up a bit will you, Jim?"

Maloney did as he was told and then stood upright again, balancing a small pile of the ash on the card. He gingerly handed it to Palmer.

On closer inspection, it had an odd green, black hue to it. Palmer pinched a bit between his thumb and forefinger like you would snuff. He smelt it and recoiled at the harsh sulphuric odour that made his eyes water.

"Christ!" He exclaimed.

"You alright, sir?" Maloney asked with a grimace.

He nodded and dabbed the tears from his eyes with the back of his free hand and then wiped the dust off his fingers on his trouser leg.

"Smells shocking," he said and could almost taste it at the back of his throat. "Here," he handed the ash and card to Maloney.

Palmer gave an involuntary shudder and tried to shake it off. Then returned his attention to the photograph once more.

As he gingerly plucked it from the wall, there was a faint 'snap' of energy as it came away from the plaster and Palmer felt something like static in the air for a moment. Maloney yelped in surprise at the sound and swore under his breath.

Palmer winced and nearly dropped the photograph, his fingertips tingled, and it was suddenly hot to the touch. Not hot enough to burn, but there all the same. He held it by its edge and turned it over. There was nothing on the back or on the wall itself to indicate how it had been attached.

He turned and held the photograph up for Meeker to see. The older man took out a pair of spectacles from his breast pocket and held them away from his face squinting.

"And you haven't seen this before? Not some parlour trick for the visitors?"

"Absolutely not," Meeker replied indignantly. "We exhibit art and antiquities here, detective. This is not an east end side show."

"And the room, ring any bells?"

Meeker held his glasses closer, then shook his head. Palmer noticed the photograph was now perfectly cold. He glanced at Mahoney.

"Get one of the boys to take a sample of that will you?" He said motioning to the ash on the card.

"Will do," he replied and was gone through the door a moment later, with the air of a man who couldn't wait to get out.

Palmer studied Meeker for a moment. He had always been a good judge of character. The toff was a snob of the highest order, but not a liar.

"How many visitors would you say came in here today?" He asked.

"I have no idea," Meeker told him with a shake of the head. "I can ask the receptionist, once she comes in tomorrow morning?"

"Please."

"We can get upwards of one hundred on a good day," Meeker added with pride.

One hundred? Christ, Palmer thought. Anyone could easily come in and reconnoitre the room and the building's security. He looked at the photograph. Some joke left by the burglar? But to what end?

"It has to be Seagrove," Meeker said.

Wouldn't that be nice, Palmer had to admit. All wrapped up in a nice, neat bow. Steal the neckless, then report the crime. But then why concocted such an impossible heist?

He found himself half wishing Conan Doyle's creation was flesh and blood. This would be one hell of a conundrum for his famed intellect.

But alas, Holmes was just words on a page. Which left the very real Metropolitan police, headed by himself, to tackle the case. And their collective, albeit less famed intellect and powers of deduction.

## TWO

The following morning, after a pitiful amount of sleep, Palmer had presented his initial findings, such as they were at this early stage, to his immediate superior, Chief inspector Daggart.

Normally, Palmer wouldn't be expected to brief Daggart so early on, but his boss had collared him first thing and asked for an update and any thoughts he had on the case.

Daggart, for his part was a solid copper with twenty years' experience and Palmer knew him as stand up fellow and

who he knew hated the politics that often surrounded his job. So, he was a little surprised at the meeting. This meant that whoever was leaning on Daggart at this early juncture must have been quite high up the food chain.

Daggart had informed him that he wanted a swift end to the case. Which Palmer well knew wasn't just due to the strong, if circumstantial evidence against the night watchman Seagrove, but as this meeting proved was also due to the rank of the victim. Sir Henry Meeker. Friends in high places, Daggart had told him with a knowing wink.

Palmer had mooted the possible insurance angle, and Daggart, despite the pressure from above had told him to pursue that side of things, but quietly. The Deputy commissioner himself was a member of the same gentlemen's club as Meeker, so he would need cast iron proof if that indeed turned out to be the case. 'Oh, the scandal!' Daggart had exclaimed in mock anguish.

First things first, Palmer said he was going to organise a sweep of all the less than reputable pawnshops, known not to be too particular about where the goods came from. It was, Palmer admitted, a shot in the dark, the neckless was priceless, but if Seagrove had stolen the item and knew the police were on to him, he would no doubt want to shift the thing as soon as possible.

Theft to order was another possibility, that would be harder to trace, as anyone with a private collection of such things would know the historical value of the item. They would be all about possessing the neckless, not profiting from it.

Daggart was satisfied and had let Palmer get on with his investigations with a parting comment to keep him informed of any developments in the case.

And then there was the strange photograph. Palmer didn't know why, but he had not included it in his discussion with Daggart. In truth it was impossible to explain at this stage and its relevance was still unclear. But it gnawed at him, nevertheless. That initial feeling of heat when he removed it from the wall. The tingling in his fingers and that odd sensation of static in the air. The burnt paper which turned to ash underneath. That nauseous smell of sulphur it gave off, and its greenish black colour the likes of which he had never seen before.

Palmer had taken out the photograph when he had returned to his desk after the meeting, guarding it from prying eyes as he studied the bland subject so artfully rendered. The sweep of the pawnshops would take a day or two. Palmer had a stop to make of his own.

Griffin and Son photography was a modest but popular portrait studio located just behind Marylebone station on

Baker street. Palmer primarily knew the place as they had once assisted in photographing a particularly difficult to capture crime scene. This made them ideal, because at this stage, he did not want to use the station's own lab just yet.

He had been particularly struck by Griffin's son, Milton. The youngster, he remembered had an infectious fascination with the actual mechanics of photography itself. But much to his father's chagrin at the time as he had taken much longer than usual setting up the equipment and lights.

The shop was a bustle of activity when Palmer arrived shortly after eleven o'clock. A family of five, all dressed in their Sunday best, had just finished getting their photograph taken, which had clearly sent the three young children into near delirious excitement. Their flustered mother was wrangling them as best she could whilst her husband was leant on the counter, paying Griffin senior.

Palmer slipped the leather documents case he was carrying under his arm and perused the various photographs on the walls as he waited for them to finish. They all looked the same to him, families, couples the odd babe on its mother's lap. All frozen in time as they stared stiffly into the camera fearful not to move.

He was put in mind of the crime scene photographs that were becoming more and more prevalent these days. And mused grimly how much they resembled these. Subjects just as lifeless, awkwardly positioned, deathly still. Then he thought of the photograph of the room and wondered just what the taker had hoped to capture.

The 'tinkle' of the bell over the door brought him back from images of murder and depravity. He turned to see the last of the brood exiting the shop, led by the father like a line of ducks.

"Sorry for your wait, sir," Griffin said. "How may I help you?"

Palmer took out his ID and badge, but before he could show it Griffin's face bloomed in recognition.

"Oh, hello, inspector...?"

"Palmer."

"Palmer yes," his face dropped a little. "Not another crime scene I hope?"

"No, no" Palmer assured him. "Nothing like that, I was hoping to speak to your son?" Again, that look of concern. "Don't worry," he continued. "It's in a purely professional capacity, regarding a photograph I'd like him to look at. It's quite unusual."

"Unusual you say? Yes, Milton would like that."

He opened up the hinged counter and beckoned him through. "Please, this way."

Palmer followed him through a curtain covering a door to a large storeroom. The first thing that hit him when they came inside was the strong chemical smell. The room itself

was large if a bit dingy and cluttered with all manner of stands, tripods, and light blackout sheets strung between metal poles.

One wall at the back had a four-tier metal shelving unit which housed an array of camera equipment. And a dozen or so small wooden crates and cardboard boxes.

"Milton, someone to see you," Griffin called out.

A moment later Milton, perhaps nineteen but looked much younger to Palmer came through from a back room. He was casually dressed in a blue woollen shirt with the sleeves rolled up, baggy work trousers and a grubby once white apron which was now smeared in what looked like ink and grime.

He immediately recognised Palmer, and his face brightened, perhaps in hopes of more gory pictures to be taken.

"Inspector Palmer, isn't it?" He said and came forwards wiping his hands on the apron.

"Good memory," Palmer replied and held out his hand, the lad's grip was good and firm.

"Do you have another case for us?" Milton asked.

"Sorry, no. Nothing quite so dramatic I'm afraid," Palmer told him. "But I do have something you might be interested in."

"I'll leave you both two it," Griffin senior said and went through the curtain back into the shop.

"Can I offer you some tea, inspector?" Milton asked.

"No, thank you," Palmer took the document case from under his arm and opened it. "I remembered you had quite the technical knowledge about photography."

Milton smiled a little embarrassed. He gestured to the organised chaos around him.

"Yes, it's quite the obsession," he admitted. "This is just a job to my father, but I'm fascinated by the whole process, every aspect."

"So, I remember," Palmer said and took out an envelope containing the photograph.

He handed it to the lad, confident he had come to the right place.

"I'd be grateful if you could take a look at this. I've not seen anything like it before and wondered if perhaps you have?"

Milton slipped the photograph from the envelope and frowned as he flexed the paper.

"Are you sure this is a photograph?" He asked. "Who took it?"

"You don't think it's a photograph?" This was not the response he was expecting.

"Well for one thing, this paper is unlike anything I've ever seen used to print on."

He frowned and held the paper up under the lamp above his head. Then moved over to a long, cluttered work bench which

was against the wall under the window. He made a space and tossed the envelope aside before taking a small oil lamp from a shelf. He lit the wick and turned the flame up to its highest.

"Mind you, the French are moving in leaps and bounds ahead of everyone at the moment," he said. "Might be a new kind of paper, I suppose."

Palmer moved to his side. The paper was the last thing on his mind. "What about the picture itself?"

Milton leaned in and examined the image more closely. "Of course it doesn't help someone has painted over it," Palmer offered.

"Hmm," Milton mumbled distracted.

He reached into a pocket at the front of his apron and fished out a small magnifying glass which looked to Palmer like a whiskey shot glass. He placed it over the photograph and put his eye to the lens and began carefully checking the image inch by inch.

"Where did you get this?" He asked not looking up.

"A crime scene. Don't know why, but I get the feeling it's important somehow," Palmer said. "But there is definitely something, off about it."

He hoped that would be enough for the boy, as the last thing he was going to do was mention the strange occurrences surrounding the thing.

"Christ's teeth!" Milton suddenly exclaimed and came away from the bench rubbing his eyes.

"What?"

"This is a colour photograph," Milton breathed unnerved.

"Painted," Palmer reminded him.

The lad's face was a mixture of confusion and muted revelation. He shook his head.

"No, this was printed in colour somehow. And the sharpness of the image. I've never seen anything like it. It's like looking through a window right into that room."

"So, I take it colour is rare?" Palmer asked. He was hoping for answers not more questions.

"You could say that. It hasn't been invented yet."

"What are you saying, Milton?"

Milton glanced back at the photograph on the bench and actually looked a little fearful to Palmer.

"We can tint the print at the moment," Milton told him. "One, perhaps two colours. It's a pain, and expensive but not that hard. But this is full natural colour, captured at the time. Not post exposure tinkering."

Milton gestured for Palmer and handed him the magnifying glass. "Take a look."

Palmer took the glass and gently placed it on the paper. He pressed his eye against it, and after a moment his eye adjusted and the image came into minute focus. The lad was right, he glided the lens over every inch of the picture. No



brush strokes, however delicate. And like he said, the image was pin sharp.

"I would love to get my hands on the camera that took that picture," Milton said, his voice full of admiration.

"Where do you think it came from?" Palmer asked coming away from the bench.

"That's just it, it shouldn't exist! If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, I wouldn't have believed it," his voice dropped to an awed whisper. "Colour is one thing, someone is bound to crack that one day. But that clarity? Impossible."

Somewhat deflated, Palmer took the photograph and put it back in the envelope. It was the photographer he was after not the camera.

"Thanks for your help, Milton," he said and slipped the envelope back into his case. "Tell you what, if I find this impossible camera of yours, I'll let you know."

The lad beamed. Palmer knew it was a lie, but he couldn't help getting a little caught up in Milton's youthful enthusiasm.

### THREE

Palmer stood in the corner of the interrogation room as Seargent Vickers pressed the night watchman Seagrove for the umpteenth time about his involvement in the burglary. The man looked dreadful and clearly hadn't slept since his inevitable arrest.

He kept looking to Palmer with pleading eyes, but there was nothing he could do for the poor soul.

"Don't look at him!" Vickers snapped and slammed his hand on the table. "I'm the one asking questions here!"

"I've, I've told you everything," Seagrove stuttered.

He looked ready to burst into tears, which was Palmer's cue to exit the interview. He thought he must be getting soft, normally he would be the one issuing threats and seductions in equal measure to get the man to confess. But then this was all different somehow.

It had been three days since the burglary and all they had was Seagrove, still resolutely protesting his innocence. No, he hadn't stolen the neckless to sell on, and no, Meeker had not paid him to steal the neckless for his own gain.

The sweep of the local pawn shops had yielded nothing. There wasn't even a hint of the whereabouts of the neckless, from reputable outlets to back-room operations. No one had heard even the merest whisper.

Palmer knew there were rumblings of discontent from the top brass, even Daggart, no doubt pressured from above was beginning to question his lack of progress, and it was clear to Palmer that it was only a matter of time, today probably,

that Seagrove would be formally charged, and hauled off to prison proper to await trial.

Then it was up to the judiciary to decide if he was guilty or not. In truth they had no physical evidence against the man and only Seagrove and Meeker had a key, a fact he had freely admitted all along.

It had struck Palmer that Seagrove had made no attempt to change his account no matter how incriminating it seemed. Normally, in cases such as this, a suspect would have already concocted or made-up a story on the spot if caught. This would lead to the inevitable slip ups under interrogation. But not in this case.

And Palmer kept coming back to the fact he had alerted the police to the crime. Could have been a double bluff, but as he looked at the poor wretch sat there, he doubted it.

"That's enough for now," Palmer finally said. "Take mister Seagrove back to his cell, get him some food, he looks ready to drop."

This won a quizzical look from Vicker's, but he relented with a nod.

"I didn't do it, Inspector" Seagrove said faintly.

I know, Palmer wanted to say, but just turned and left the interview room to get some air.

Back at his desk sometime later, Palmer was going over the various reports from the pawn shop sweep when he felt his head dropping with fatigue, his eyes were stinging, and he had to stop several times to rub them and re-focus. And contemplated calling it a day. There was only so many times you could read the same negative result from the dozen or so badly written reports before you wanted to blow your brains out.

It was already six o'clock in the evening and he was dog tired from the interview earlier and trudging around London all day. He had spoken to a curator at the London Museum, who had confirmed the neckless was on loan to the Henry Meeker Museum, and at one point Palmer actually thought the man was fighting back tears at the loss.

With all the death and misery his job offered up with nauseating regularity, the thought of weeping over some old trinket made him suddenly want to grab the privilege fool and shake him, scream in his face that at least nobody was dead. But had somehow resisted the urge.

Palmer rubbed his face and sighed. He was about to push his chair away from his desk and head for the door, when he noticed a constable weaving his way down through the office towards him. Christ, what now?

The constable was carrying a large envelope, and definitely coming his way. More useless reports from the sweep he thought and had already decided not to even look at them until the morning.

The constable stopped at his desk and respectfully waited for Palmer to speak.

"Yes," Palmer said wearily.

The constable put the envelope on the desk in front of him. "Maloney said you might be interested in this, sir."

Maloney? Palmer opened the envelope and tipped it up, so the contents fell out, he half glanced at it, then jolted awake. It was another of the photographs, same size, he picked it up, same strange paper as the other, and again in full vivid colour.

Another oddly banal subject. This time it was of a long narrow nondescript red bricked alley way, the type you could see all over London.

"Where did you get this?" He asked.

"There was a ruckus at the King's head pub in Mayfair, late last night," the constable told him.

"Ruckus?"

"A fight broke out, don't know much more, I wasn't called out to it. But Maloney said they found that in one of the pub's upstairs rooms. Mal' said you should know."

"The King's head?" Heart hammering, Palmer scooped up the photograph and half expected it to be warm, but it was cold to the touch.

"Mayfair, yeah," the constable replied looking a little perplex at his reaction. "Firearms were involved I here," he added.

Palmer opened a draw and took out his pistol and spare ammunition. He pushed his chair back and jumped to his feet, he nearly cried out as his shinbone shot red hot lightning up his leg, he hissed in pain.

"Bastard!" He said through gritted teeth.

He held the back of the chair for a moment and waited for the pain to fade.

"You alright, sir?" The constable asked awkwardly.

Palmer could feel the sweat beading on his face. He breathed out and waited for the wave of nausea to pass. Damn, damn leg.

"Yes," he murmured. "You can go."

The constable was off in a flash and Palmer watched him go cursing the man's two good legs.

During the short coach trip from the police station to Mayfair, Palmer did his best to study the photograph by the intermittent streetlights that passed by the window as they went.

Just an ordinary alley way as far as he could tell, and he made a mental note to get one of those magnifying glasses Milton Griffin had used the other day. The picture looked like it had been taken from one end, but there was nothing, let alone anything of significance that he could use to identify its location.

The alleyway stretched on perhaps twenty yards between two common or garden buildings. There was a street running across at the very end, but no street sign that he could see to give away its location.

Again, the quality of the photograph was incredible, even under the London gas lights, and again such a remarkable rendering of something so unremarkable. But why?

The Griffin lad had said that colour photographs had yet to be invented and seemed more intrigued than flat out amazed at its existence. No colour in a photograph was just something a layman like Palmer could accept without question. That's just the way they were. Until now it seemed.

So, perhaps the camera was some kind of prototype, and these two were nothing more than tests. It was a reasonable assumption, but oddly one that filled Palmer with a sense of sadness. As if he was hoping for something more... Mysterious?

But still, that didn't explain why one had been so mischievous displayed in the museum.

"Bollocks to it!" he snapped as the coach ran over a bump. He abandoned any further examination of the photograph for now. The more pressing matter was where and why this one had turned up.

The King's Head pub was one of the more reputable watering holes of London. Although Palmer had never been himself, it had a reputation at the station for catering to the more discerning drinker. Those with money enough to buy legitimate beverages brewed in Yorkshire vats and Scottish distilleries, rather than back street bathtubs.

This wasn't one of those rat-infested gin holes down by the docks, where people found themselves when they were at the end of their tethers or had simply given up and just wanted to drink themselves to death.

Palmer had always found those places utterly depressing. You could almost feel the despair seeping into the very foundations of the buildings and spilling out onto the streets beyond.

As he alighted the coach and made his way down the busy street and over to the pub, the first thing he noticed was one of the main windows by the entrance had been boarded up. As a result of last night's 'ruckus' no doubt.

When Palmer came inside, he was surprised to see that despite the time of day the place was empty. All the banks and offices in the area would be closed now so he would have imagined the pub would be heaving.

One glance around the bar and it didn't take a detective to see why. As his eyes adjusted to the dim lighting, couple with the warm orange glow of the roaring fireplace, Palmer could see the place had been the scene of one hell of a full-

on brawl. And if he wasn't mistaken, he could see at least two bullet holes in the wood panelling on one wall.

A large pile of broken bottles and glasses had been swept into one corner, whilst in another was a tangled mass of broken and splintered furniture. The remaining intact tables and chairs were neatly stacked by the wall next to the long bar.

"We're closed," a gruff voice informed him.

Palmer turned from the chaos to see a man in his late fifties come out from a back room and put down a full crate of fresh pint glasses onto the bar with a grunt of effort.

"Are you the landlord?" Palmer asked as he approached the man.

"For my sins," the man replied with a world-weary sigh.

He looked shattered to Palmer, it had clearly been a long day and eventful night before.

"My name is inspector Palmer, I just need to ask you a few questions about last night."

The man spat onto the floor and fixed him with a squint-eyed look of mild disdain.

"I've already spoken to you lot earlier," he said. "I've had coppers in and out of here all day. Last night when it was all kicking off? No fucker."

He began to take the glasses out of the crate and place them on the bar.

"You catch the vixen yet?" He asked as he worked.

"Sorry?"

"That female hurricane that started all this," the landlord paused for a moment to think about that. "Well, finished it I should say," he added with a crooked smile.

Palmer leaned on the bar next to him. "No, idea about any woman," he told him. "I'm not working that particular part of the case. I just need a word about what happened."

"Why?" The landlord asked as he worked.

"Call me nosy," Palmer said with an officious edge to his voice.

The landlord finished unloading the glasses and dragged the empty crate off the bar and threw it onto the pile of furniture. He put his hands on his hips and surveyed the bar with a shake of the head.

"Drink?" He said out of the blue.

The landlord pulled down one of the still intact tables and two chairs and motioned for Palmer to sit.

"Jameson's alright?" He asked already grabbing a bottle and two glasses.

"Fine, thank you."

He poured them both a generous measure and sat opposite him.

"Your good health," the landlord saluted.

"Cheers, and yours," Palmer toasted.

Palmer was a little taken aback by the landlords change of heart, but reasoned the man probably just wanted a break from the carnage. He looked around the bar and took a sip.

"Quite a fight," he said.

"Bloody terrifying," the landlord sighed.

"I can imagine."

"Never seen anything like it," the landlord continued.

"It was like the bloody wild west in here. You know, like those shows that come over from America every once in a while? With Indians and the like."

"I remember reading about them."

"At first, that's where I thought that woman was from, a wild west show."

"She was a Foreigner?" Palmer enquired.

"Uhuh, she was dressed all in leather, even leather trousers if you can imagine such a thing! Like a dark burgundy colour. Stood out a mile as you can imagine."

"So, she was American?"

"No, that's what I thought at first. From the way she was dressed," he shook his head at the memory. "And she had a gun! A pistol in a holster.

"Blimey."

"That's one word for it," the landlord said and took a sip. "No, anyway I think she was French. One of my regulars who was here thought she sounded French. He was in the navy, he's been all over the world. Besides, her clothes didn't have those tassels you see in pictures of cowboys. Just plain leather, but fancy in a way."

Although he was itching to get onto the subject of the photograph, he was intrigued with the story of the gun totting French woman. And it wasn't a stretch to wonder if the two strange occurrences might be connected somehow. Either way he wanted to hear more.

"Would you mind running me through what happened?" He asked.

The landlord drained his glass and poured himself another. He gestured to Palmer's still half full glass, but he put his hand over the top and shook his head.

"Everything was fine at first," he said. "She was strange to look at in that get up, but seemed a good enough girl, generous. She had plenty of money and spent it freely, so she could have been stark naked for all I cared."

"Age?"

"Not old at all, twenty, perhaps even younger.

"So, what happened? Why did she shoot up the place?"

The landlord took a large swig as if to prepare himself for the tale. His eyes blazed as he remembered, and he looked around the bar, seemingly replaying the scene in his head.

"That's the thing," he finally said. "She didn't shoot up the place." He gestured to the bullet holes. "She was a dead eyed shot. She shot two of the fellas that came in

looking for her. It was one of those idiots that shot up the wall. Couldn't hit a cow's arse with a banjo."

The landlord suddenly got to his feet, he moved off gesticulating wildly and Palmer just sat back and watched in mild amusement as the man began to animatedly act out the scene.

"Craziest thing," he said. "So, she's sat at a table over here," he moved over towards the other side of the pub. "Feet up on a chair like she owned the place."

This made him chuckle as he remembered. And Palmer was sure the alcohol was having a numbing effect on what this little drama had done to his precious pub.

"She'd been in here about half an hour," he continued. "Laughing and joking with the regulars," he pivoted rather gracefully to face Palmer once more. "Now you have to remember this is a respectable place. Lots of bankers and such, no riffraff. All very buttoned down most of the time. So, her carefree demeanour was actually a breath of fresh air, if I'm honest."

He shook his head and smiled. "So, all is well until these three chaps walk in," he continued. "Smartly dressed, suits, bowler hats."

He mimed someone peering across a crowded bar to where the woman was sitting.

"They spied our French friend holding court over there, and they start across."

"They recognised her?"

"Certainly. And she knew them too... So," he crept across the bar room like a vaudeville villain. "She clocks them coming over and shoos away her little gaggle of admirers."

"And you saw all this?" Palmer asked doubtfully. "Wasn't it busy?"

"Truth be told I wasn't serving at the time, I was..." His face reddened and he gave an apologetic shrug. "She was such an odd duck, with her get up and pistol and what not. I have to admit, I was quite taken with her."

Fair enough, Palmer thought. She sounded quite the character.

"What colour and style of hair did she have?" Palmer enquired, before he forgot to actually do his job.

"Jet black, and cut short, but it framed her face nicely."

'Framed her face nicely?' By Christ the man was smitten. "Go on," Palmer prompted stifling a smirk.

"Well, it all started out cordial enough as I could tell. She offered them a seat, which they refused. They chatted for a while, don't know about what though. She was quite calm, but now I think about it the fellas were tense as hell. That might just be hindsight though."

The man grew serious, as if suddenly registering the severity of what had happened.

"Rest is a bit of a blur," again he looked around as if seeing it play out in front of him. "One of the men pulled out a pistol, and Frenchie kicked the chair she was resting her feet on at him. Then she kind of rolled off and onto the floor. The man fired," he pointed to the bullet holes in the wall. "You can see the holes there."

"Just up and tried to shoot her in cold blood?" Palmer asked with a chill.

"Yes," he replied with a nod. "Scared the shit out of me, and everyone else as you can imagine. So, then pandemonium breaks out, people running every which way. Most of the damage was actually caused by the punters panicking"

He waved his arms around frantically to illustrate the point as he continued. "I heard a bunch more shots and saw two of the men go down. Then the last thing I saw of the woman was her jumping over the bar, right past to me! Then she ran off and into the back there." He pointed to a door behind the bar.

"Can I see?"

"Your mob have already been back there, but sure, if you like."

The landlord led Palmer around the bar and through the door and into a long darkly lit corridor that was lined either side with boxes, crates and beer barrels.

"Two of the men, one looked like he had been shot in the arm, dragged the other, who looked dead to me, outside. That's the last I saw of them."

He pointed to a set of stairs at the fair end of the corridor. "The police supposed she scarpered up there as the back door was locked. It leads to our private rooms upstairs, then up to the attic. You can get out onto the roof tops from there through a skylight."

Palmer remembered the constable telling him that Maloney had found the photograph in one of the upstairs rooms in the pub. He gestured to the stairs.

"Mind if I take a look?" Palmer asked.

"Me my guest," the landlord replied. "There's no one up there, the wife is staying with her sister until we have cleaned up around here."

It only took Palmer a moment to find what he was looking for. On the floor in the living room which was the first room you came to at the top of the stairs, was a pile of ash by a wall. He contemplated picking up some of the greenish dark powder, but remembered the strong sulphuric smell from the museum, once was enough for that particular pleasure.

He made a cursory look through each room of the modest living quarters. He made a point of checking the view from



each window in the vain hope of finding one that looked down on the alley way in the new picture, but with no luck.

He found the skylight leading to the roof in a back room, which was closed. It was some ten feet or so high, and you would need a chair to get up there if that was indeed how the mysterious French woman had made her escape.

He thought of the two photographs, each pinned to a wall somehow, with the strange burnt paper or ash underneath. Seemingly the only connecting elements to two otherwise unrelated incidents.

Then there was the French woman, was she the key? He would need to check with the investigating officer for this incident in the morning, hopefully they might have an idea who she was. And then he might be able to ascertain how, if at all, she was connected to the robbery. He had come here hoping for answers, but all he left with were more questions.

#### FOUR

Due to the nature and severity of the incident at the King's Head, and despite his best efforts, Palmer had found it near impossible to get any further information from the team heading up the investigation. The case had been given to Inspector Alba of Scotland Yard, a force notorious for looking down on the Met and their trivial cases.

Alba had refused Palmer's request for a meeting, even when he had hinted at a possible connection between his case and the King's head shootings. Palmer had still kept the matter of photographs to himself, which didn't help. It was as if, he had to admit to himself, he was jealous of anyone else becoming aware of them until he and he alone could work out what their significance was. He knew he was being ridiculous, but the feeling was there, nevertheless.

But in the end, as fate would have it, his reticence counted for nothing. A casual remark from Maloney to a sergeant who made a casual remark to an inspector, who was a drinking pal with Chief Inspector Daggart, led to a summons to Daggart's office the next morning.

Daggart, not one for whimsy, had taken one look at the two photographs and snorted in derision at the idea they connected the two cases. Certainly he had to agree, they were strange, but beyond that, just what the hell did they have to do with the burglary, or the shooting? Which he reminded Palmer had been dragging on for nearly a week now and that people higher up were breathing down his neck for results.

Which in turn meant he was breathing down Palmer's. Daggart had picked up the photographs and jabbed them at him and for one truly terrifying moment, Palmer thought he was going to tear them up and throw them into the bin.

He had actually been sweating at the prospect of losing them, but Daggart had finally just tossed them back to Palmer and told him to focus on the job in hand. Get a confession from the night watchman and ship him off for the courts to deal with.

Palmer had spent the next few minutes after the meeting just sitting at his desk, looking at the two pictures. Not in hopes of seeing any previously unmissed detail. But actually, in relief they were still intact. It was as if they were treasured family portraits of long dead loved ones plucked from a house fire.

In a way Daggart was right, they were a distraction. But one he couldn't help but revelled in.

Whilst on a break later that day, Palmer had spotted Maloney in a café across from the station which was a frequent haunt for coppers on a break or before and after a shift. He was sitting at a table with another constable nursing a cup of tea.

"Maloney," he said walking up to the table.

"Oh, hello, sir," he replied with a genuine smile. "Any luck with the Meeker case?"

Palmer knew the familiarity was only part respect, but mostly because he let Maloney, and the others get away with murder when they were out in the field. The common touch a colleague had once remarked.

"Not yet," Palmer replied and pointed to an empty chair at the table. "May I sit?"

"Of course."

As Palmer sat, the other constable drained the rest of his tea and got to his feet.

"Well gentlemen, if you would excuse me, the city won't save itself."

"I thought you were off now?" Maloney asked.

"I am, the city won't save itself, but will at least have to wait until Tuesday when I'm back on."

He gave both Palmer and Maloney a salute and headed off. Palmer watched the man go, then leant forwards a little.

"Thanks for the new photograph by the way," he said to Maloney.

"As soon as I saw it with one of the lads from the scene, I knew you'd be interested," he replied.

"You didn't find it?"

"No, I didn't catch that one. But as you can imagine, word of a shootout in Mayfair soon got around.

Palmer nodded, somewhat deflated. He had hoped Maloney might be able to offer some inside insight into the French woman and her attackers.

"Constable Miles had the photograph back at the station," Maloney told him. "Of course, no one knew what the hell it

was. Don't think they believe it has anything to do with what happened."

"Right," Palmer sighed. "Anyway, thanks for thinking of me," he added brighter.

"No problem," Maloney said with a dismissive wave of the hand. "Still, two crime scenes, two odd photographs?"

"The shootout and the case of the locked room," Palmer said with a smirk. "A case even your Sherlock Holmes would struggle with."

This won a throaty laugh from the constable. "Still," Palmer continued. "You don't have any gossip about the shooting?"

He knew only too well that even though Maloney wasn't directly involved in the case, rumours would be running wild at the station after such a hullabaloo.

Maloney shrugged. "They're checked all the local hospitals for the wounded fellas but found nothing." Then he leant in and lowered his voice. "But I hear on the grape vine a few of the top brass are panicking about something or other."

"Panicking?"

Whereas Palmer knew a gunfight such as this was relatively rare in Mayfair, panicking top brass seemed a bit of a stretch.

"There's been interest from the foreign office," Maloney said. "I hear, and the Commissioner himself got a visit from army intelligence."

"Blimey."

"Blimey indeed," Maloney agreed and finished his tea.

"Let me know how the case goes, mister Holmes."

"Ha, will do, Watson."

When he got back to the station, Palmer had been informed that Seagrove the nightwatchman had been formally charged. And although it had a sickening inevitability to it, the news had left Palmer feeling deflated all the same. The man was now at the mercy of the British criminal justice system.

So, Palmer's responsibility was over, for now. He would perhaps be called upon to give evidence at the poor man's trial, such as it was!

In cases such as these the more cynical policeman, whose ranks Palmer was rapidly approaching. Would say, the poor bastard has two hopes. No hope and the forlorn hope.

The saying 'forlorn hope' as Palmer knew it, came from the Napoleonic wars. It referred to a group of soldiers who had been picked to make a near suicidal attack on a breach in an enemy's otherwise well defended position.

Palmer remembered the expression again that night as he sat at the small desk in his modest room at home going over the two photographs for the umpteenth time by the light of his oil lamp. He had borrowed a powerful magnifying glass from

the station's crime laboratory in hopes of it revealing some new revelation.

He realised he had spent the best part of an hour meticulously going over each picture in turn, when the bell of the nearby St. All Souls Church had struck eleven.

"Christ," he uttered and stifled a yawn.

The photograph of the nondescript room was just that. Yes, it was captured in exquisite detail, but with nothing to distinguish it from any other room, let alone give up its location.

And again, it was the same with the alley way. Palmer had hoped to find a street sign somewhere within the brickwork at the very end where it met the crossing road. But despite the quality, (he found he could literally count each individual brick.) There was none to be found.

Admitting defeat for tonight, Palmer put down the glass and rubbed his tired eyes, he had to blink several times until they came back into focus. He would need spectacles before long at this rate.

A hammering on the door shook him out of his lethargy in an instant. He stood and moved across the room and over to the door. Then he remembered the time and paused. His coat was laid over an armchair by the window, so he went to it and took out his pistol, just in case.

"Who is it?" He called out as he approached the door.

There was a pause, so he pressed his ear against the door and could hear muffled voices for outside. He was about to repeat his question when someone finally spoke.

"Inspector Palmer? By name is Robert Willis. I'm from the foreign office."

Palmer remembered what Maloney had told him earlier and moved to open the door, but he hesitated. It was eleven o'clock at night. What could be so important that it couldn't wait until morning? He glanced back to his desk and the photographs.

"It's bloody late," he replied. "Couldn't this wait?"

There was silence for a moment and again he could hear hushed voices. At least two that he could make out.

"Inspector," Willis said with authority. "Please open the door, this is a matter of national security."

"Very well, one moment" he called back.

Palmer moved swiftly back over to his desk and put the photographs and the magnifying glass in a draw and out of sight. Then he went back over to the door. He paused to take a breath then put the pistol into the back of his trousers and unlocked the door. He opened it slowly and peered outside.

Two men, both younger than Palmer thought they would be, both in their late twenties he quickly calculated, each dressed in dark suits stood on the landing. Palmer glanced between the two, one, Willis he assumed was in front of the other, who looked deathly pale and sickly and even in the

half-light of his lamp, he could see a sheen of sweat on his face. He shifted slightly and winced as he flexed his right arm.

Palmer instantly thought of the King's head. One of the assailants had been injured, hadn't he? He was about to slam the door shut, when Willis kicked at it and barged inside knocking Palmer back several steps.

Both men rushed into the room, Palmer moved to grab his pistol, but Willis had a gun pointed at his head in a heartbeat.

"Now, now," he warned. The other man came gingerly to his partner's side.

"Let's have no surprises, eh?" Willis continued and gestured to Palmer with his free hand.

The injured man moved awkwardly behind Palmer and took the pistol out of his waistband.

"What's all this about?" Palmer asked in a panic.

Willis took a step towards him with a look of mild amusement on his face.

"We hear you are interested in photography, mister Palmer."

Palmer barely registered the remark when he was hit hard on the back of his head. A moment later he was on the floor seeing fireworks before his eyes. Willis aimed a kick in his face, and everything went black.

## FIVE

Palmer was jolted awake to find he was in the back of a carriage when the motion of the vehicle caused his head to bang against the wooden door. He cursed at the stabbing pain behind his eyes.

He was vaguely aware of a figure sitting on the seat opposite, but at this stage it was little more than a grey blur against the dark gloom of the interior.

"Arh, welcome back Richard," a voice said from his right.

He slowly turned his throbbing head to see Willis sitting next to him. If that was indeed the man's real name.

"Foreign office, my arse," Palmer managed to say.

This won a laugh, then a hiss of pain from the pale man opposite. Palmer could see his face as a passing streetlamp illuminated the carriage interior for a moment. It was a vision of real discomfort.

"You need any more morphine?" Willis asked.

The pale man shook his head and just gritted his teeth against the pain.

"You know you are kidnapping a police inspector?" Palmer said and touched the back of his head, he winced but was grateful his fingers came back bloodless.

He now noticed Willis was holding the two photographs. He held one of them up to him.

"They really are quite remarkable, aren't they?" Willis said.

"I said..."

The pale man kicked Palmer in the knee to silence him, it hurt but clearly not as much as the perpetrator.

"Bollocks," the man cursed in pain.

"Policemen are such gossips, don't you agree?" Willis asked.

Palmer was about to reply when the pale man raised his foot again. Clearly this line of questioning was rhetorical.

"We wouldn't have even known you had these," Willis continued. "If it wasn't for the station gossips. Oh, and your chief inspector of course. He didn't know it, but he was a great help."

He wafted the photographs like a fan. "We know where you got these. The question is, why?"

Palmer didn't reply. The truth of it was that the mystery of it had gotten the better of him. And that had only deepened when the French woman had been added to the mix.

"The man asked you a question," the pale man said.

"You said it yourself, they're remarkable," Palmer said.

"Arh, yes," Willis agreed. "But you *do* know who took them."

It was a statement not a question and he emphasised the word *do*. But still he was going to tell him the truth, that no he didn't, when the carriage came to a shuddering halt. Palmer looked out of the door window. They were outside a modest detached town house.

The pale man opened the carriage door and carefully stepped out into the street, whilst Palmer noted, keeping his injured arm tucked inside his heavy over coat. He waved Palmer's own pistol at him with his free hand.

"Out."

Palmer hesitated for a moment and considered leaping at him, he could easily overpower the wounded man, but then of course there was his partner, Willis who was also armed.

"Pretty please," Willis said from behind him, perhaps sensing his thoughts. "This is a quiet street, away from prying eyes and ears. No one would hear a shot or two."

Palmer did as he was told and got out into the biting wind. And by that all too familiar smell on it, he knew they were close to the Thames. He could hear distant shouts and bells which suggested one of the many docks along the river was close. But a quick glance around the deserted street told him he was in an unfamiliar part of town.

"If you please?" Willis said and pointed to the house.

Palmer reluctantly followed the pale man up the steps, whilst Willis kept a few paces behind. The injured man

fumbled with the lock and eventually managed to open the door and went inside.

As they came inside, Palmer could smell damp and mildew, the place was in near darkness, but he could make out a long hallway which stretch down to when looked like a kitchen. The stairs were directly to his right and there was a door to his left about halfway down.

"Watch the front," Willis called out into the street.

Palmer looked past Willis in the doorway to the street beyond where the single horse drawn carriage was parked. There were two men up on the driver's seat. One jumped down carrying a rifle whilst the other tied off the horse reins.

"Alright," Willis told him as he slammed the door shut. "Let's go."

He pushed Palmer down the hallway behind the pale man and then through the doorway and into a modest looking living room. Palmer half-hoped it was the room from the first photograph but was disappointed. It was just a regular if scruffy living room. Dining table and four chairs at one end, a sideboard stacked with crockery and a large three-seater couch, but no carpet.

Willis pushed Palmer down onto the couch and took off his overcoat and threw it next to him.

"Time is short, Richard," he said. "So, I'll get right to the point. What do you know about who took these?" He tossed the photographs into Palmer's lap.

"I don't know anything about them, just where they were found," Palmer told him.

The pale man snorted and went over to the sideboard which had four glasses and a bottle of gin on it. He opened the bottle using his left hand and poured himself a drink.

"I bloody told you!" He snapped at Willis and took a large swig.

"Christ," Willis uttered and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"We risked exposure to capture this clown?" The pale man exclaimed and drained his glass.

"Alright, alright," Willis said testily. Then turned to Palmer. "Camille Breton?"

Palmer shook his head, there was no doubt this was the woman from the King's head, and despite his current circumstance, putting a name to the myth gave him a great sense of relief.

"Where is she?" Willis bellowed after a moment.

"No idea," Palmer replied. "That's the first time I've ever heard that name."

Willis and his partner exchanged a glance of anger and Willis then stepped forwards and aimed his pistol at Palmer's head.

"Waste of my fucking time," he said through gritted teeth and cocked the hammer of the gun, and his eyes flashed with murderous intent.

Palmer watched this with a kind of surreal detachment, somewhere in his subconscious a spark of terror tried to ignite. This man as about to shoot him, and he still had no real idea why.

"Who is the French woman?" Was all he could think to say to his executioner.

The next instant Palmer was hit by the concussion of some unseen blast, it hit him square in the chest knocking the very air out of his lungs and pitched him backwards as the couch tipped over at the impact.

Willis was flung forwards off his feet, and he tumbled to the floor. Likewise, the pale man let out a muted cry and stumbled back into the sideboard which collapsed under his weight, and he hit the floor hard as it rained crockery and shattered glass around him.

It was like a cannon shell had exploded right in the centre of the room, but with little physical impact save for the initial force of the blast. No sound, no shrapnel or shredding of flesh.

Then a flash of blinding white light bleached everything out for a moment and was gone an instant later.

Palmer's ears had popped at the sudden decompression in the room, disorientated, he clambered up the back of the upturned couch and peered over it, at first there was nothing but bright blotches as his eyes tried to adjust back to normal.

When the room slowly came back into focus a woman was crouched in the middle of the room like a cat ready to pounce. A thin mist of vapour, rising off her body swirled around her form obscuring her features for a moment, but this was rapidly evaporating as it hit the air.

The faintest hint of what looked like thin strands of white lightning danced briefly over her body until that too faded away. The whole breach was over in a heartbeat.

The woman sprung into a standing position with athletic ease and aimed around the room with a pistol in her right hand. Eyes narrow slits of intensity, her face a mask of cool calm concentration as she surveyed her surroundings, ready for anything.

Her face softened slightly when she saw she had the complete element of surprise. Palmer watched on in dazed awe. Camille Breton. She was exactly as the landlord had described her.

"Well, it's about time you bastards got here," she said in a thick French accent.

Willis was the first to react, he rolled onto his side and snatched up the pistol he had dropped during the assault. He swung it expertly in her direction and fired three times.



The woman dodged to one side and the first bullet went high and wide, biting into the plaster ceiling. The other two went well wide smashing the window behind her. With lightning speed she aimed down at Willis, who immediately realised his mistake.

"Camille!" He cried and held out his free hand as if to stop the bullet that was to come.

Camille fired and the bullet went straight through Willis' palm and slammed into his neck. He uttered a muffled cry and fell back, pumping blood across the bare floorboards. She then fired twice in rapid succession into his chest and the man shuddered for a moment and lay still.

Palmer let out an involuntary cry at the sudden shocking violence and she spun around and aimed at his head.

"Please!" Was all he could manage and winced in anticipation of the kill shot to come.

"Mon Dieu!" She dropped her aim and gave Palmer a look of annoyance.

"Ugh, God, God," the pale man said faintly.

He rolled around in the crockery and smashed sideboard wincing in pain. Breton turned to the prone man just as shouts of alarm came from outside.

"Two outside, correct?" She said to Palmer.

"Wha', erm," he stuttered still in shock.

"Outside! How many?"

"Two, yes two," he told her.

She must have been watching the house when they arrived Palmer thought distractedly. Everything was moving so fast it made his already aching head spin.

Breton moved swiftly over to where the injured man was flailing and dragged him by the back of his collar into the centre of the room, then to his feet.

"Up, up," she coaxed.

"Christ Breton!" The pale man exclaimed.

"Where is Mitchell?" She snarled, pulling him close.

Confused, the pale man looked down at Willis' body.

"You, you shot, Pete," he said lamely.

The woman punched him hard in his already injured arm and he let out a high-pitched scream.

"Carson! Where is Mitchell?" She shouted in his face.

The man swallowed hard. "The warehouse, they took him to the warehouse."

"Merde," she uttered and was about to let him fall when he caught her sleeve.

"You should know," he said gravely. "The Engineer's still there."

"What?"

A look of panic flashed across her young face, and she let him go, and he slumped to his knees with a grunt, clutching his arm.

Breton screwed her eyes shut at this revelation, it meant nothing to Palmer, but it had clearly shaken her.

"Merde! Merde! Merde!!" she yelled.

Loud hammering on the front door seemed to pull her back to the situation at hand. She stood bolt upright and glanced towards the living room door and the hallway beyond.

"Hey! Open the fucking door!" Someone shouted from outside as the hammering continued. "Willis? Carson? What the hell is going on in there?"

Camille darted across the room, leant out into the hallway and fired three times down towards the front door, then ducked back inside.

"Why is he still here?" She asked the wounded man, Carson.

"You stole the device from him! Did you think he was just going to let you go?"

"He's been paid by your people, no?" She said.  
"Technically, I stole it from you."

"Are you really going to argue about that now?" He shrieked in response.

She shrugged at this, good point. Then turned to Palmer and waved her pistol in his general direction.

"And what is his story?" She asked.

"He had the photographs, from the museum and the pub. We thought he was cleaning up after you," Carson replied with a pained expression. He looked ready to pitch over at any moment.

She squinted at Palmer and frowned. "I have no idea who his man is."

"We know that now!" Carson exclaimed.

Then, still studying Palmer like he was an exhibit in a sideshow, she shot Carson square in the head, painting the wall behind him with his brains.

Palmer gagged at the horror and turned away. "Fuck me," he uttered putting his head in his hands.

He heard her moving back over to the hallway, broken crockery and glass crunching under her feet. Then she fired three more times.

Palmer dragged himself up using the back of the upturned couch and stood on unsteady legs as Camille Breton came back into the room. She took a metal strip containing a row of bullets from a thin pocket in the thigh of her trousers and began to reload her pistol.

The weapon was a strange design, but one Palmer knew. It was a German Mauser with a ten round magazine capacity which explained how she had managed to fire off so many shots before reloading.

She slid the rounds into the weapon using the metal clip with practised efficiency and then put the empty clip back in her pocket, once the bullets were loaded.

Palmer thought of his own weapon, and he scrambled around the clutter on the floor and over to Willis body for his pistol until he found it laid close by. He picked it up and held it in two hands like a drowning man to a life preserver and felt a little better for it.

Breton rummaged around in a pocket in the side of her leather jacket and took out a photograph. She swiftly moved over to a wall and pushed it against the plaster where it stuck. What the hell was it? Palmer wondered incredulously, some bizarre calling card she left at every crime scene?

A volley of shots came through the window, Palmer hit the floor whilst Camille ducked against the door frame to avoid the bullets and flying glass.

"Fuck you!" She shouted at the window in what Palmer had to admit was very good English.

She fired through the window then holstered her weapon. As Palmer watched from his prone position on the floor, she took out a small square envelope out of her trouser back pocket. She opened it and slipped out a brownish piece of rough crumbled paper and let the envelope fall.

She took a deep breath, then another and seemed to be preparing herself for something. She looked apprehensive and was rocking backwards and forwards on her heels facing the photograph on the opposite wall.

She glanced down at Palmer and shook her head, her lips were moving and she seemed to be having an inner argument with herself.

More shots from outside, then that hammering on the front door again followed by the sound of splintering wood.

Camille carefully placed the paper into the palm of her right hand and held her arm out horizontally, palm out so it was in line with the photograph. All the time arguing with herself in whispered French.

She glanced at Palmer again, clearly wracked with indecision, then back to the photograph. Then she braced herself and looked to Palmer like a sprinter at the start line of a race. Then she set off, ran two steps then skidded to a halt before she reached the other wall and the photograph.

"Nom de dieu!" She shouted to the heavens.

She gave Palmer a look like she wanted to kill him, but then shook her head and muttered something clearly not complementary to him in French.

"Do you know how to use that thing?" She asked nodding to the pistol in his hand.

Palmer just stared at her blankly for a moment, stunned by the odd display. Then realised she was speaking English he nodded mutely.

She looked less than convinced, but spoke to herself again and seemed to come to some kind of a decision. She moved away and picked up the discarded envelope and slipped the piece of paper back inside and returned it to her back

pocket. Then took the photograph off the wall and put it back in her jacket.

"Listen to me," she said firmly fixing Palmer with an intense gaze.

"What the hell's going on?" Palmer asked. "Where the hell did you come from!?"

"Shut up and listen to me, there's no time. What's your name?"

"Palmer, Richard Palmer."

"Alright Richard Palmer, listen to me. We are going to shoot our way out of here and take that carriage outside, understand?"

"What?" He began to protest, but she cut him off.

"It's either that or I leave you here," she stated without emotion. "Go out the way I came in."

Palmer had no idea what that meant, but nodded all the same. She took out her Mauser and held out her free hand to him, he took it, and she hauled him to his feet.

"Come on," she whispered.

Palmer followed her over to the doorway, he glanced back briefly to take in the carnage of the room. He shivered just thinking about how cold bloodedly she had despatched the two men. Despite his job, he realised ninety-nine percent of his contact with violent crime was in the aftermath. Not witnessing it first-hand like this. And by the sounds of what this strange woman had in mind, this wouldn't be the last of the bloodshed.

They moved quietly out into the hallway, guns trained on the now silent door.

"They said they were from the foreign office," Palmer said softly.

"Really? Well, in a way I suppose," she caught herself and actually gave the ghost of a smile. "They are army intelligence," she added.

Army intelligence? Then what did that make her? He was about to ask, when she grabbed him by the arm and dragged him further down the hallway and closer towards the bullet ridden door. Palmer could feel his left shin complaining at the sudden exertion but put it out of his mind as best he could.

"How many bullets do you have?" Breton asked.

"Just the six."

She gave him a look of distain like it was his fault. "That will have to do," she sighed.

She fired into the splintering wood until her pistol was empty. Then put her back against the wall and reloaded. She finished and gave him a mischievous look.

"Only six bullets, eh?"

"There's more back in the room," he offered, felling somewhat inadequate.

"No time," she said with the shake of her head. "Well then, Richard Palmer, let's hope you are a good shot."

Her eyes flashed with glee, and she edged towards the door. Palmer almost told her that he had never actually fired the weapon outside of the police firing range, but thought better of it.

Camille cautiously stopped by the door and squinted through a bullet hole.

"Looks like they are both at the carriage," she whispered, and Palmer drew closer. "Now listen, I am going to unlock the door, pull it open, then I want you to crouch behind it, using it as cover and then fire at the carriage."

Palmer realised his hands were shaking as the events of the past few minutes were starting to catch up with him. He had to grip the pistol with both hands again. Camille rested her hand on his.

"Hey, you will do just fine," she told him with remarkable calm and authority. "Just fire a couple of rounds at them, for cover. You will be safe behind the door."

He nodded and crouched by the wall ready to move behind the door when she opened it. Camille turned the key in the lock and waited a moment, still peering through the bullet hole for any response from outside. She winced slightly at the noise of the large brass handle turning as she pulled the door open ever so slightly.

"Ready?" She whispered to Palmer who nodded back, his throat was too dry to utter even a syllable in the affirmative.

She pulled the door open, and Palmer moved to grab it so he could then pull it in front of him as instructed. But the French woman kicked him hard in the backside and he rolled off balance and pitched head-first down the three stone steps to the street below.

He hit his head on the pavement and saw stars for a moment. And instant later all hell broke loose as the two men over by the carriage began firing, he thrashed around on the cold stone floor like a fish on a hook as bullets hit all around him. He felt the sharp sting on his cheeks as one bullet kicked up stone shards into his face.

He cried out and curled himself up into a ball as the realisation caught up with him through the sheer panic clouding his thoughts. He wasn't covering fire for her, he was bait.

He glanced through his flailing arms to see Camille crouched behind the door, as he should have been, firing into the street. The reports of her pistol echoed around him like cannon fire.

The automatic action on the weapon clicked back and locked as the last round was fired. And there was a dreadful silence, and Palmer prayed everyone in this murderous exchange was out of ammunition.

Then to his absolute astonishment, instead of retreating back inside, Camille holstered the still smoking pistol and

came down the steps, she jumped over Palmer who covered his head.

"What, what the?" He babbled as she passed.

Camille reached down and scooped up his long-discarded pistol and walked briskly over to the bullet ridden carriage and disappeared behind it. Palmer couldn't see the two men, but she fired twice, the muzzle flash illuminating the carriage outline for a moment, then fired twice again.

The poor horse kicked and neighed in panic, it pulled frantically at its reins trying to flee the chaos, but the wheel brake held the carriage fast. Palmer shuddered at the woman's ruthlessness. By Christ she was efficient.

She came back around to the horse at the front and began soothing the terrified creature. Murmuring softly to it and stroking its mane and face.

"You going to sit there all night, Richard?" She called out without taking her attention off the horse.

Palmer dragged himself stiffly to his feet, his dodgy leg ached dully, but not nearly as much as it should have. He felt numb, probably shock he reasoned and knew that in an hour or so his body would make him suffer. But strangely, as he stood there watching Camille fussing affectionately with the horse, he didn't care.

There was the thought lurking somewhere at the back of his addled brain, that he should arrest the woman. He'd witnessed her shoot dead four people, two up close. And if she was to be believed they were all army intelligence. But of course, their downright illegal treatment of Palmer, who they knew damn well was a police man, did throw that particular piece of information into grave doubt.

He actually smiled as he watched her with the horse, he had so much to learn about this strange creature. What was she a thief or a spy? And more importantly he wanted to know more about the photographs, and that odd ritual she was performing in the house with the paper in her hand.

And most perplexing of all, lest he forgot, that spectacular magic trick, she had performed to gain entrance to the house. That, he mused would put any west end magician to shame.

He also had two other new names to add to the unfolding mystery. Who was this Mitchell she was looking for? Someone he felt she genuine cared for. And then this Engineer they spoke of? He had detected real fear in her otherwise stoic persona at the mention of him.

"Are you coming, or not?" She called out to him, pulling him back into the here and now.

She gestured up and down the street. And to the houses nearby with their now illuminated windows and shadowy onlookers hiding behind twitching curtains.

"I'm a police officer. I should arrest you," he said without conviction.

She laughed and it sounded like music to him. He recalled the way the landlord had spoken about the young woman. She was easy to become enamoured with, if you weren't careful.

"Many have tried," she replied.

She climbed up onto the carriage driver's seat and began to untie the reins. And Palmer knew if he wanted answers he would need to go with this French enigma.

Maybe, he thought to himself as he stiffly made for the carriage, he would arrest her later. For now, he was just gathering evidence. He didn't believe it for a moment but got in just the same.

## SIX

"Well, are you coming in or not?" Camille asked a dumbstruck Palmer somewhat annoyed.

Palmer must have been standing slack jawed in the doorway to her modest room for a good ten seconds, although it could have been as many minutes. He just couldn't move, his feet felt like lead weights as he had tried to step inside. Inside the room, inside *the* room.

It was the room from the first photograph, exactly as depicted but now with the furniture placed back where it should be.

"It's, it's," this latest revelation had damn near put him on his backside.

"Christ man!" Camille exclaimed and grabbed him by the arm. "What is wrong with you, d'you get shot in the head back there?"

He barely heard her, she let out an exasperated sigh and pulled him inside then locked the door.

"It's the room from the photograph," he uttered redundantly.

She ignored him and unclipped her holster and slung it onto the back of a chair. Palmer patted his pockets then remembered he had been holding the photographs when Camille had made her dramatic entrance. He must have dropped them in all the confusion.

He had to bite back a sob that rose unexpectedly in his throat. He had lost them, and the realisation hit him hard, harder than it had any real right to. He dismissed it as the residual shock from the gun fight, but it left a hollow feeling in his stomach, nevertheless.

"You stole the neckless," he said numbly. It was hard to believe that had been the start of all this mayhem.

"Huh?"

"At the museum."

"Oh, so that's where you come into this Shakespearean farce," she said with mild amusement. "Yes, I had to make

sure it worked. The whole thing was a bit far-fetched to me in the beginning."

The last part sounded to Palmer like she was speaking from underwater, and he suddenly became aware that he had better sit down before he fell down. The stress of his near execution and the subsequent violence, and now this latest revelation was finally catching up with him.

"I, think," he breathed feeling faint.

Camille, none the wiser to his impending collapse, she continued on. "Thought I may as well make a little profit whilst I was testing the thing," she said with a chuckle. "Had the devil's own time taking the damn picture of that storeroom at the back when no one was watching. I had to make sure I would appear in there away from the exhibits, or I would have destroyed the place!"

Now she sounded to Palmer like she was speaking from the bottom of a deep well. He suddenly remembered Seagrove the nightwatchman.

"An innocent man is going to jail over your test," Palmer said.

"Really? That is a shame," she replied, and Palmer couldn't tell if she was joking or not. "Perhaps I'll give it back, eh?" she added with a grin.

Palmer staggered slightly. "Need to sit down," he said falteringly.

He just made it to a nearby armchair and slumped down into before he fell. He held his head in his hands as images of Willis and the injured Carson flashed into his mind's eye. Coupled with Camille's cold-blooded despatching of the two, not to mention their companions outside.

"Here."

He looked up and Camille handed him a glass of whiskey. He took it gratefully and had to hold it with both hands to take a sip. It warmed him instantly and he took another drink and waited for the liquor to sear away the shock.

"Better?" She asked from across the room.

"Thanks," he replied with a nod.

He thought back to the room and her dramatic entrance, and the strange way she had prepared herself to, to what? Run at the new photograph she had placed on the wall?

"What were all those shenanigans with the photograph back at the house?" He asked, the alcohol in his system making him bolder.

"Shenanigans?" she replied distractedly.

She was moving around the room, she removed her jacket and then the shirt underneath, without any regard for Palmer, leaving only a flimsy undershirt. She poured a jug of water into a basin on a chest of draws and ducked her head in.

Palmer's face reddened at her boldness but found himself looking at her slim frame all the same. He quickly studied the glass in his hand when she came up for air gasping.



"That rigmarole," he said and cursed his choice of words. Her English was very good but using words like shenanigans and rigmarole were stretching it he imagined.

He tried to think of something simpler but suddenly English seemed to be *his* second language. He watched Camille as she grabbed a towel laid next to the bowl and began to roughly dry her short hair. She gave Palmer a look of confusion and then tossed the towel on the back of a chair.

"Answers," he finally said. "I need answers. What the hell is going on?"

"No time," she replied dismissively and went through into another room.

Palmer drained his glass to numb his growing frustration. When she came back into the room she was wearing a fresh man's dark blue shirt, which she proceeded to button up. Again, oblivious to Palmer's presence.

"Who are you?" He asked.

She went over to a small dining table at the far end of the room with large wooden box on it and slid it over to her and flipped open the lid.

She took out a wax paper wrapped cardboard box, reached into her back pocket and took out a switchblade knife. She snapped out the blade and cut open the seal of the box and tipped out two dozen or so bullets onto the tabletop.

She then retrieved several metal strips from various pockets, which Palmer had seen her use to load the Mauser. She pulled up a chair and began to load each strip with fresh rounds. It was clearly a ritual she had done many times before and she worked with a fluid efficiency that made Palmer wonder just how many people she had shot in her young life.

"Who is Mitchell?" He asked.

She tried to ignore him as she worked, but Palmer detected the slightest of frowns at mention of the man's name.

Once the ammo strips were full, she got up and put some of them in various pockets on her trousers, then moved over to her jacket and placed the remaining strips in there. It was quite the portable arsenal.

"Mitchell is a pain in my backside," she finally replied.

She went over to the chest of draws again and opened the top one. She took out an envelope and a battered tin the size of a shoe box.

"You thought they had him at the house?"

She nodded but still didn't stop what she was doing.

"Yes, I thought that would be where they would take him. I waited, but they brought you."

Palmer thought he caught a slight hint of accusation in her voice. Back at the table, she emptied the contents of the envelope and carefully place the tin next to it. She began to sift through what Palmer could now see were three more photographs, she selected two and left the other where it was.

She put her hands on the table's edge and finally paused. Her head dropped a fraction, and she screwed her eyes tight shut.

"Bless him," she said softly. "I'm sure he's already dead. But I owe him enough to at least try."

"Try?"

"Try to rescue him," she stated as if it should have been obvious.

She seemed to rally somewhat and studied one of the new photographs. Palmer got to his feet and was thankful the alcohol had steadied his nerves and balance.

"What are those?" He asked.

She didn't reply and put the two photographs in a long side pocket in her trousers. She opened the tin and took out what looked to Palmer like several square pieces of the same blank rough brown paper she had at the house.

She grabbed her jacket off the chair and slipped the papers into a side pocket. She put it on and then patted it and her trousers all over, checking she had everything she needed.

"The photographs," Palmer prompted. "They shouldn't exist."

Camille raised an eyebrow at the remark and finally looked at him as she put on her holster.

"If I had all night, I would gladly sit here and explain everything to you, Richard Palmer. More for my own sanity than anything."

He looked at her as she stood bolt upright, ready for action. "You're going to that warehouse," he said. "That's where they have your friend."

"Mitchell and I are not what you would call friends," she told him, but still a smile played across her determined features. "Professional rivals, perhaps, at the start. Turned allies in the end, when faced with then cold hard reality of things."

"I'm coming with you," Palmer said firmly.

Out of duty or the simple fact he couldn't just leave this story half told he wasn't sure. She gave him a look bordering on pity.

"I am a police officer," he stated. "If there's danger, it's my duty to help."

His cheeks flushed at her amused reaction. That had sounded better in his head.

"And I am a French spy," she said. "And Mitchell is a traitor to your government."

It was so plainly put that Palmer didn't doubt it for a moment. But there were just too many questions. He was suddenly all too aware how reckless his need to know what he had stumbled upon had made him. But could he really in all honesty just go back to his normal life after such a glimpse into this new world of impossible things?

"Then I'll arrest both of you, after we get him out of there," he said with forced bravado.

She drew the Mauser so quickly he didn't even see her hand go for it. She pointed it at his belly.

"You didn't save me back there, just to murder me now, did you?" He asked and held her gaze. Reckless indeed, he thought grimly.

"I'll take you along as cannon fodder," she said with a smile so humourless, it left him in no doubt she wasn't joking at all.

Palmer pulled the heavy overcoat around himself and buttoned it up with numb fingers as they stalked through the bitterly cold late-night streets. Camille had given him the coat as when he had been abducted, he had only been wearing his shirt. At least, he mused as they walked, he hadn't changed into his night wear before meeting the late Willis and Carson.

Where she had acquired a man's coat from, he had no idea and thought it best not to ask. But now that they were outside, he was glad of it all the same. He dug his hands into the coat's deep pockets and felt the new pistol the French woman had also given him in one pocket and the box of bullets in the other. Again, he tried not to think of the weapon's previous owner.

The frigid November air took his breath away and threatened to freeze the sweat on his cheeks and forehead as they walked. And flecks of a light snow were beginning to drift down from the black sky above. Despite the cold, Palmer mused, it could have been a pleasant night's walk were it not for their destination.

He eyed the sky. "You know a horse drawn carriage would have been nice," he said sarcastically.

Camille had unhitched the horse from the carriage when they had left her lodgings, smacked its backside and sent it on its way.

"It's not far," she told him. "And I don't think we want to be announcing our arrival." She quickened her pace, and he had to jog to draw alongside her again. "And," she added as cold as the night air. "If you keep questioning every decision I make, I will change my mind and shoot you anyway."

"I know, cannon fodder," he said.

"We keep to the back streets," she continued. "I know a place on this side of the Thames that overlooks the warehouse on the other side where they are keeping Mitchell, that is all you need to know."

"Fine," he replied petulantly.

He ran over his current situation in his head as they went. He was skulking through the London dock lands, on some kind of clandestine mission with a self-confessed French spy. On their way to rescue a traitor to the crown. And all

because this Camille Breton had decided to 'test' some mysterious device, of which he still knew nothing. In a museum on his patch.

Instinct told him and not for the first time to contact Daggart at the station, he may not have believed him about the significance of the two photographs before. But now he had four bodies, which the police would have undoubtedly found by now to back him up.

Of course, he had to admit, if he told his boss exactly what had happened at the house, French spies appearing out of thin air and all. He would likely end up in an asylum. And perhaps, he wondered given his current course of action, that might not be such an inappropriate place for him to end up. The night was young, he thought with gallows humour, there was still time.

"Expecting much resistance?" He asked as they moved between one deserted building to the next. More to get out of his own head than anything.

"The last time I was there, before all this started, I counted ten guards, I snuck in and out without any trouble," she said with some pride.

They paused by a wall as she looked ahead for their next move. She turned to him with a grin.

"But it should be even easier this time," she added, patting her side pocket.

Then she was off again, jogging this time, Palmer cursed and kept up as best he could. His leg was already throbbing but the usual sharp pains he felt when it was really being tested had yet to trouble him, for which he was grateful but was mindful they could start at any moment especially at this pace.

They came to a small clearing, with the skeletal remains of a long-demolished building at its centre. The ground was covered in rubble and knee-high wild shrubs, which inclined down. Palmer could see the Thames now at the bottom and followed as Camille set off and the pair picked their way through the undergrowth and down towards the bottom.

They came to a stop at a crumbling wall at the bottom of the incline. Some five feet below was a long-cobbled path which ran off into the distance in both directions along the side of the Thames. Camille kicked at the wall, and it held, so she sat on the top and jumped down the short distance to the path. Where she waited for Palmer.

He gritted his teeth and awkwardly manoeuvred himself onto the wall, so he was then able to lower himself down far enough, so his feet touched the cobbles. It was far from graceful, and the French woman watched him struggle with mild amusement.

"Alright there, grandfather?" She asked with a smirk.

"Bollocks," he replied and dusted himself off.

The path, much like the wall was in a state of disrepair. There were holes in the cobbles here and there and as Palmer looked down its long length, he could see only one in every three streetlamps were working. So, he could only see where it stretched off to by intermittent pools of light.

He could tell they were getting closer to the main hub of activity on this side of the docks as most of the area to his right was lined with the walls of several large buildings that edged right up to the path. No doubt warehouses and workshops that were so prevalent down here.

He could hear the clatter of cranes unloading boats and the shouts of dock workers drifting on the cold night air towards them.

On his left was the water's edge, some fifteen feet below, he could hear the lapping of the dark water against the bank. With only a patchy chain link safety fence running alongside, much of which was missing or had half fallen into the river anyway.

The Thames was at one of its widest points here, way off across the water the other shore was a hive of activity, massive lights dotted around the industrial landscape, stretching on onto the distance, illuminated huge warehouses, ships and boats of every size were being either loaded or unloaded by massive cranes swinging to and fro. It was a spectacular sight to see this engine of commerce in full flight.

"Alles," Camille said and set off again down the path at a slow jog. "The warehouse on the other side," she told him as he caught up. "But the place we need is just up ahead."

After some two hundred yards they came to a ten-foot-high wrought iron security fence that blocked the path from further access. Breathing hard, Palmer pressed his face against the bars and could just about make out the large open yard of a monolithic looking warehouse in the near darkness beyond. A stack of crates had been piled high against one wall at the far end and he could see the skeletal silhouettes of discarded machinery littered around.

Camille rested her back against the side of the building to their right and took a moment to catch her breath as well. For which Palmer was very grateful, he absently massaged his leg, but stopped, embarrassed when Camille saw him.

"Alright, old man?" She asked again raising an eyebrow.

"Just fine," he replied a little too harshly.

He grabbed the fence and tried to shake the rusty but intact bars, but they didn't move an inch.

"So, how are we going to get in?" He asked more to change the subject than anything.

"We climb," she said with a knowing smile. "Unless your war wound is playing up?" She added impishly nodding to his leg.

"Ladies first."

"Such gentlemen you English," she replied.

He moved aside and Camille jumped up and climbed the fence with undeniable grace and ease. Once at the top, she swung a leg over and sat astride. She looked across the yard, then down to Palmer.

"I hope you are not afraid of heights, Richard."

"I think I can manage," he replied, nodding up to her.

"No! We need to go up there."

She pointed across the yard and up to the roof of the adjoining warehouse, which sat a dark and foreboding featureless mass against the night sky. It was fifty feet if it were five.

Palmer could see her short hair blowing in the wind even at her current paltry height atop the fence. She swung her other leg over and jumped down into the yard.

Cursing his leg, Breton and God Himself, Palmer began to clamber up the fence in the much less dignified manner than the French woman. Hands slipping on the freezing dappled iron work he managed to pull himself up and once at the top, he paused to take a breath. Thankfully Camille had moved off and was looking at the building ahead.

He swung his legs over and prepared to drop to the concrete below. He gripped the top bar of the fence and like the wall before, he gingerly lowered himself down as far as he could, but knew he was still a couple of feet short.

He let go and instantly white-hot pain shot up his leg at the jarring impact of the yard's unforgiving stone floor. He bit back a cry and was damn grateful Camille had moved off across the open yard towards the warehouse.

He allowed himself a moment until the worst of the pain passed, then hobbled over to where Camille was standing, correcting his stride as best he could as he did so.

"We can get in through a gap in the wall by the back," she told him as he reached her, and gestured to where the back of the warehouse stopped close to the river's edge.

"Anyone working here?" Palmer asked.

"Not for months now, the place is riddled with rot," she said. "Just been sold I hear, but there should not be anyone working yet, especially not this late. We can get onto the roof from the inside."

"Up there, on a rotten roof?" Palmer pointed to the high sloped roof, way above them.

Camille made great play looking him up and down. "You don't look too heavy, you might not fall through, if you are lucky."

Again, that impish smile, and Palmer couldn't help but wonder whether she was trying to get him killed or not.

"Come on, around the back," she prompted.

They moved silently over to the back of the warehouse, where the building sat very close to the edge of the

riverbank. Palmer saw a sign on the wall which read:  
'Dangerous structure. Risk to life.'

Camille cautiously eased around the wall and Palmer moved to follow but she placed a hand gently on his chest.

"Not much room," she whispered. "Be careful."

She disappeared around the back of the building, all the time keeping her right shoulder pressed against the uneven wooden wall and keeping her eye on where she was putting her feet as she tentatively walked on.

When Palmer came around to join her, he saw all too clearly why she was being so cautious. The back of the warehouse was perhaps no more than four feet from the vast river's very edge. The grassy surface was slick with moisture, and even from the lights coming from the opposite bank he could see it was uneven and crumbling in parts where the frost had got into the ground during the day and frozen at night.

It was treacherous going and he could hear the water lapping against the earthen bank and see the rippling dark surface below. If you fell here, it would be a ten-foot drop into the water and once the Thames claimed you at this time of year, you would freeze to death in minutes as it swept you away from the banking, if the tide didn't drag you under beforehand.

"Christ," Palmer muttered and concentrated on where he was putting one foot after the other.

All the while keeping his back to the wooden wall of the warehouse trying desperately to give himself even another half an inch of space away from the black drop into the Thames and death.

"I would ask you if you can swim," Camille said from up ahead. And for the first time her voice sounded strained. "But I don't think that would make a difference, huh?"

Eyes fixed on the drop off and where he was putting his feet, Palmer moved slowly along, then he bumped into Camille who had stopped and was looking through a sizeable hole in the buildings wooden wall.

"Careful!" She hissed.

Palmer swallowed a cry as he nearly lost his footing at the sudden jolt. A lump of soil gave way at his feet and fell into the water with an ominous splash.

"Christ, Christ," he screwed his eyes shut until he was sure he wasn't going to follow it.

"Come on, English," Camille said from surprisingly far away.

He turned and he was alone. "Camille?" His voice sounded thin in the night air.

"Well come on, if you're coming," she called from inside.

Palmer cautiously turned and peered in through the hole to see her moonish face in the darkness beyond. She beckoned him in like a siren to a sailor heading for jagged rocks.

She stepped back into the shadows and Palmer moved level with the gap, he ran his hand over its sharp splintered edge. It was going to be tight, but he calculated he should be able to slip through.

"Think thin," Camille said from the darkness.

He eased his left shoulder in and slowly inched his way through. He could feel the sharp wood catching against his overcoat and was all too aware of a claw like splinter close to his face, but he forged on. And as he pushed himself the rest of the way through his sleeve caught on a shard and ripped the material and he had to wrench hard to free himself. Better that than his flesh he thought as he staggered through and into the warehouse itself.

Light from the nearby docks came flooding in through gaps in the building's ransacked walls, illuminating the vast open space inside in dusty shafts. The place had been completely gutted of anything of use and was now just an empty shell.

Footfalls drifted down towards him, and he could see Camille moving briskly over the uneven floor to a set of wooden steps which led up to a long gantry at the far side of the warehouse. He tapped the pistol in his pocket through the coat, more for comfort than anything and made his way over to where she was waiting, at the foot of the steps. He eyed the rickety looking structure with some trepidation.

Camille caught his reaction and gave a short snort of amusement. "These steps are the easy part," she said and pointed way up past the steps and along the gantry overhead.

Halfway along the wooden gantry was a ladder, which led up into the darkness of the rafters.

"We need to get onto the roof," she told him. "You can see right across the river to the warehouse compound on the other side."

Palmer might have nodded in response, but he couldn't be sure, his main focus was on just how flimsy that ladder looked. Camille caught his apprehension.

"Unless you want to stay here?" It was a genuine question for once, without a hint of sarcasm. "I just need to see how many guards they have over there this time, and if they have strengthened their defences."

"No," he found himself saying, "I'll come."

"En avant!" She said with enthusiasm and slapped him on the back.

Palmer watched as she started up the steps. Although he couldn't tell if her bravado was for his benefit or hers. There was no doubt in his mind that she was a very capable woman. But he was suddenly reminded of her reaction back at the house at the mention of this Engineer character and the fact he would be at the warehouse.

It had been brief, but yet he had seen genuine fear in her face. Despite this she was willing to risk everything, when she was already away scott-free. To risk it all to help



this Mitchell. How had she described their relationship? A rival turned reluctant ally. And one she had admitted might already be dead.

"You coming?" She called from above.

Palmer started up the thankfully solid steps and told himself not to think too much. The plain fact was this woman, whatever her motivations had saved his life back at the house and that meant he owed her something. And that had to be good enough for now.

When he reached the top, Palmer saw that Camille was already waiting at the bottom of the ladder. Even though the gantry was wide and still sound under foot, he was glad of the wooden rail that ran along its length and kept one hand firmly on it as he moved down to where she was standing.

Camille grinned and pointed up the metal ladder and Palmer could see it led up to a small skylight in the roof.

Palmer paused, he looked at her in the dim light, and for the briefest of moments she seemed even younger than her scant twenty or so years. What government would use a spy so young, he wondered? It seemed monstrous to him.

"What's wrong?" She asked with a look of confusion.

Palmer realised he was probably looking at her with a newfound sense of admiration. "I just realised," he said. "I think I'm committing treason."

"There's a lot of that going around these days," she replied, and Palmer caught the hint of regret in her voice.

She seemed to want to say more in way of explanation but hesitated. She glanced at her feet and shook her head. When she looked back up her eyes had lost some of that harshness he had grown to expect.

"I will try and explain," she said awkwardly. "But later."

"You saved my life," he told her. "You don't have to explain a thing."

She suddenly clapped her hands together and the moment was gone. "We are wasting time," she said brightly and started up the ladder.

Well, he said to himself as he grasped the cold metal ladder and put his foot on the first rung. In for a penny, in for a pound. He could feel the thing was wobbling alarmingly already as Camille climbed, but he put it out of his mind as best he could.

He set off gingerly taking it one rung at a time and not looking down. Although something perverse in his subconscious was crying out for him to do so. He fought the urge and climbed on, trying to imagine he was a mere few feet up from a soft grassy lawn.

He heard the high-pitched complaint of metal hinges grinding against each other and chanced a look up. Just in time to see Camille pull herself up through the open skylight

and out onto the roof. He could hear the howling wind from the outside as he approached the opening.

He let out a curse, the ladder was definitely moving now as he neared the top, he could see the bolts holding it in place shifting ever so slightly with every movement he made. He tore his eyes away and pulled himself up, so he was half in half out. And got a blast of icy wind in his face for his efforts.

Camille was on one knee, halfway across the sloping roof. Head down, bracing herself against the wind that was whipping around her. She turned and shouted something to Palmer, but it was lost the moment it left her lips. She beckoned him to follow and then gestured to the apex of the roof before scampering off up the steep incline.

Palmer pulled himself up through the skylight and began moving like a toddler on ice on his hands and knees across the slippery moss-covered slates and just prayed the roof could hold his weight.

Camille held out a hand as he reached her and guided him the rest of the way, until they were both at the very apex of the roof, clinging to the ridge tiles that ran all the way along with their elbows.

Their vantage point, through treacherous couldn't have been better and gave them a bird's eye view of the entire dock area on both sides of the Thames.

To their right was the mouth of the estuary, and Palmer could see half a dozen ships being unloaded. The cries of the workers and sailors could be heard even over the driving wind. And he could make out the odd obligatory curse words from the dockers despite the distance.

"Down there," Camille called over the blustery gusts.

She pointed off to the left across a narrower section of the river, to group of large buildings set away from the water's edge. They were surrounded by a high chain link fence, an open courtyard type area to the side had a heavy security gate and what looked like a guard house where he could see two uniformed figures huddled around a wood burning iron Brazier for warmth.

The whole area had the look of a military compound about it to Palmer. It was set away from the main docks and warehouses and was linked to the main hub by a long winding road.

Camille pointed to two very grand looking black carriages tethered close to an entrance door by one of the main buildings. Which looked totally out of place in these more practical surroundings.

"Looks like they have visitors," she said. "Bigwigs, no doubt."

"At this hour?" Palmer said incredulously.

"These people don't keep regular hours," Camille told him. "This place is off official records, I imagine most of

your government and conventional military don't even know of its existence."

Palmer tried hard not to think too much about that, and as he took in the whole compound, he saw there was a small dock towards the rear of one of the buildings closest to the water, but this looked too small for commercial use. A small sailboat with its mast wrapped closed was moored at the end of a short jetty, bobbing serenely in the dark water.

"I count two at the gate," Camille said. "But I'm sure there are soldiers inside, possibly a whole garrison."

Palmer pointed to the security gate. "They are bound to see us if we come that way."

"Indeed, but we are not going that way."

"Across the river?"

"I keep forgetting you are new to all this. How do you say, shenanigans?" She replied with a laugh.

He was about to reply when a side door to one of the larger buildings opened and two men, both clearly carrying rifles came out and began across the courtyard to the guard house by the gate.

"Well, Palmer asked. "If not the river, then how?"

Camille gave a mischievous smile, and her eyes glinted in the gloom. "Come on, it's time for another piece of the puzzle, Richard Palmer."

She let go of the ridge tile and let herself slip back down the roof and then scurried across to the skylight. Palmer left a sudden rush of excitement, but this was tinged with an all too real edge of fear as he watched her go.

Another piece of the puzzle. Hadn't that been what he wanted all along? Still, his guts churned at the prospect.

"Arh, bollocks to it," he said and let go.

He slid down the roof, but at a much slower pace than Camille. He stopped himself by the skylight and looked down. She was already on the gantry. He shook his head and edged himself into the skylight kicking his legs until his feet found a rung. He suddenly let out a maniacal laugh at the madness of it all. It would be just his luck to fall and break his neck before discovering just what strange magical world he had gotten himself into.

## SEVEN

When Palmer finally made it down to the solid ground of the warehouse floor, Camille was nowhere to be seen. He called her name, but it just echoed back to him unanswered.

He looked around the vast open space, it was all but empty and as such there was nowhere she could be hiding. He glanced back to the wall and the gap they had entered through. Despite what she had said, had she deserted him all the same? Taken the river on some hidden boat. Or had they been

discovered spying on the compound? He drew the pistol from his coat pocket.

"Camille?" He called out again and could hear the desperation in his voice as the word bounced around the cavernous building.

Something shifted deep in the shadows that clung to the very far end of the warehouse, Palmer held the pistol in both hands, but didn't aim just yet and was suddenly all too aware of his lack of cover if he was attacked.

He heard the scrape of boots on the stone floor and peered into the gloom. It was more a sense of motion at this stage, but as he strained to see, a familiar shape emerged from the shadows.

"Christ," he breathed and put away the pistol as Camille began towards him.

She was carrying a wooden box by a leather strap over her shoulder and although it appeared to be only approximately two odd feet square, he could see by her laboured gait that whatever it contained had no little weight to it.

He was shocked at how his heart was racing, seeing her approach. And it was clear from her reaction, the emotion was registered on his face.

"I was sent to England to investigate certain rumours," she said as she reached him. "Your government, or should I say your army intelligence were said to be dabbling in things they should not."

She let the strap slip from her shoulder and gently lowered the box onto the stone floor between them and let out a breath of relief.

"There was talk of a weapon," she continued. "Which is nothing new in of itself during these troubled times."

"France and Britain are at peace," Palmer reminded her.

"Indeed, we are," she acknowledged with a nod. She sat down onto the box to catch her breath. "We didn't know much at first," she continued. "Abstract reports of a new device being developed, but little more."

Palmer eyed the box she was so casually sitting on. The wood looked like polished mahogany in this light. He could see a pair brass hinges at the back and it had a heavy brass combination lock on the front, like one you would see on a bank safe, just below a thin silver metal handle which ran across its length.

"In the end," she said. "It was your man, Mitchell, he came to me. Thomas Mitchell of her majesty's secret service to give him his full title," she added wistfully. "Oh, the run ins we have had in our time."

"Thomas Mitchell, the traitor," Palmer clarified bitterly.

He wondered now if that man was worth saving. But, to his surprise it was something more. He felt something in the pit of his stomach at the way she was speaking about him.

Christ, was it jealousy about the way she spoke about him? That look in her eyes?

"It is easy to judge from the outside looking in," she told him. "But, although no one will ever truly know, Thomas is a hero. And believe me, I do not say that lightly, especially for a member of the British secret service."

"This device?" Pamler said.

She tapped the box beneath her.

"So, you didn't seal it yourself?" He asked.

"Oh, yes, but with Mitchell's invaluable help."

"Again, I'm finding it hard to sympathise with this man."

Camille smiled knowingly and took out one of the photographs from a side pocket in her trouser leg. She turned it over and over in her hands.

Palmer craned to see, like a child watching a card trick, but it was moving too fast to make out the image. Perhaps another room?

"Mitch was charged with the role of liaison between the British army and the man..." She paused and a haunted shadow seemed to pass over her young face.

"And I use the term, man, very loosely," she continued after a long moment of reflection. "Who had been commissioned to actually design and make the device."

"This Engineer?" Palmer asked.

She nodded and Palmer thought he caught sight of a slight shudder run through her at the name.

"Mitch soon realised who they were dealing with, and most importantly what this device was capable of," she added gravely.

"That was not his decision to make!" Palmer snapped.

Treason, he knew was just that, treason. And the more that as being revealed to him, the more uncomfortable he became with his role in these clandestine events.

Perhaps he reasoned to himself, it had been the excitement of the adventure as it unfolded. His kidnapping, his near-death experience at the house and of course these glimpses into such miraculous things that beat at the heart of it all.

He suddenly felt a stab of shame at his all too willing part in all this. After all, he was an officer of the law. He had a self-confessed French spy right here in front of him. Not to mention some obviously valuable military asset.

As if she could sense his growing disquiet, Camille tossed the photograph up at Palmer and he caught it.

"Doesn't look like much," she said. "Does it?"

Palmer examined the picture. Yes, even in the half-light he could see it was a room as he first thought. But this one looked like a basement, or cellar of some kind. And again, like the others, he could make out hints of vivid colour within its dark subject.

"Mitchell took that one," Camille began to explain, then threw a thumb over to the wall in the direction of the river and the compound beyond. "It's one of the basements in that building."

"Where do these come from?" Palmer asked.

"Why from a camera of course," she replied with a look of someone speaking to an imbecile.

"Alright, alright," he said testily. "But what are they for?"

"I don't know the mechanics of it, certainly not the physics," she said. "That's for the Engineer and his lunatic designs. But, plainly put, it allows you to jump from anywhere you place the photograph, to the very location of its image."

Palmer was about to protest at this nonsense, when it hit him. Someone had come in and out of a locked room undetected to steal the neckless. A test run, as Camille had called it earlier. Leaving no trace, save for the photograph and a pile of ash. Then there was the same from the upstairs room of the pub she had inexplicably been able to escape from. And now, this photograph in his hands. Means of a way into that compound across the river.

He remembered the bizarre, almost ritualistic way Camille had acted at the house he had been taken to. The room she had just moments before appeared in, in the wake of that strange powerful yet ultimately harmless force.

She'd had a piece of paper in the palm of her hand, which it wasn't hard to imagine was connected to the burnt paper at the museum.

"You had been at that house, the one they took me to, before."

"It's a well-known place they use from time to time," she said. "I had thought perhaps that they would take Mitchell there. So, I broke in the day before and took the photograph of the room, just in case."

No wonder the British army, not to mention the French were so desperate to get their hands on such a device. The possibilities for the military and espionage use were limitless.

"This is miraculous," Palmer said, his head spinning.

"This is war," Camille replied gravely.

She got to her feet and squared up to him. And despite her being a good foot shorter, Palmer found himself taking an involuntary step back.

"Don't you see what this could mean?" She asked. "If one side or the other had something of this power. Can you imagine what they would do with it?"

"An arms race is nothing new," Palmer pointed out.

"But this would end that race," she stated. "If perfected, whole armies could cross continents in the blink of an eye. Global peace is a fragile thing. And a large part of

that is one side never truly having an unassailable advantage over the other."

Palmer felt his blood chill, but still he drew himself up to his full height.

"I can't let you take this back to France," he told her.

It was a threat, no doubt about it, but one, he knew deep down he would struggle to carry out. He thought for a brief moment about reaching for the pistol in his coat pocket. But remembered just how good she was with a firearm.

She gave him a quizzical look, then seemed to register what he was saying.

"No!" She replied. "I don't want this for my government. They are as dangerous and ambitious as yours! Mitchell knew the truth of it as soon as he realised what the Engineer had created. No nation can be trusted with something like this."

"So, what are you suggesting?"

"I'm going to destroy it, as soon as I am sure Mitchell is dead," a hint of mischief flashed in her eyes. "Or, perhaps I will keep it for myself. It would be very useful in my line of work."

Palmer couldn't tell if she was joking or not.

"There. You wanted to know what all this is about," she said plainly. "And I have told you. So, what do you say? I can do this with or without your help, Richard Palmer."

He looked past her to the box. So, there it was, he thought with a chill. A weapon so powerful, yet so small that could ignite a war. He found himself wondering just what a hero he would be if he took it. The device could enable the British empire to expand its scope even further, and with such ease.

But that would no doubt rally the rest of the entire world against them. The death and destruction would be apocalyptic. All that pain and suffering from such small beginnings and, despite his innocence at the start of things, wouldn't he be just as responsible for those deaths when he'd had an opportunity to aid in the device's destruction, and done nothing about it? Worse still, handed it to those it would embolden.

It was a sobering, heady conundrum, and not one Palmer thought he would be having just a few short hours ago.

Camille had given up everything for this, and so had her counterpart, Mitchell. Both traitors to the countries they had served and loved. Countries they would have undoubtedly died for in the past. But ones they knew deep down could not be trusted with this dark horrifying power.

Who the hell was he to stand in the way of such selflessness? Camille tilted her head slightly and a frown played on her lips. And Palmer realised he was smiling. At the absurdity of his situation, for one, and in truth the fact

that he would have little to no chance of actually taking the box from the hellion standing in front of him.

But in reality, it occurred to him that more than anything, he desperately wanted to know how the photographs worked. He wanted to feel what it was like to defy the very laws of physics. And who wouldn't?

"Bollocks to it," he said and waved the photograph at Camille. "So, how the hell does this thing work?"

She gave him a faux frown of annoyance and snatched the photograph from his hand with amazing speed. Proof again, Palmer thought that he really would have had no chance at out drawing her. She went back over to the box and knelt in front of it.

She turned the lock clockwise, and Palmer heard the faintest of clicks. He craned his neck to see the combination but was surprised to see they were in fact hieroglyphic type symbols instead of numbers. He moved closer and Camille made no attempt to hide what she was doing.

She turned it again anticlockwise and now that he was closer Palmer could see there were two further rings each in descending size within the first and each with a dozen or so symbols. She moved onto the middle disk turned it to various symbols and finally to the smallest, each time rewarded with another click.

She then pressed the palm of her hand on the locks central pin and the lid of the boxed opened. She pushed it back and Palmer could now see that whatever was inside was tantalisingly covered with a white cloth.

"It really is all quite simple," Camille told him. "There are no magical incantations or witchcraft. It's all about the blood."

"Blood?" Palmer exclaimed and moved to the side for a better look.

Camille whipped off the cloth like a magician revealing the rabbit in a hat. And, using both hands she took out the strange camera. She grunted and strained a little under its weight.

"Shut the lid, would you?" She asked Palmer, and he gently kicked it shut with his heel.

She laid the device on the top of the box. Palmer was no expert in photography, but this was like no camera he had ever seen before. Then she casually tossed down the photograph next to it.

It was made from what looked like highly polished silver and brass. Its basic size was similar to that of a normal camera, but instead of a plain box shaped body, it had half a dozen or so thin metal tubes and wires woven from each side to the front. The body of the camera was perhaps five inches deep, by twelve inches long, and had two hand grips either side bound in leather.



The face was flat and dominated by the lens, which was fitted to the body by a series of intricate brass brackets and screws. The lens itself, which only protruded an inch from the casing, was some five inches in diameter and seemed to be made from what appeared to Palmer like shimmering, almost liquid looking glass. It flickered with a myriad of vivid colours, even in the meagre light coming through the mildewed windows and gaps in the wooden walls of the warehouse.

Yet for all this intricate, delicate design, Palmer couldn't see for the life of him where a photographic plate would go, let alone fit.

Camille moved the device slightly to one side and took out the paper she had pocketed earlier. Now that he could get a good look at the paper, he could see that it seemed thicker than normal, and it put him in mind of the type he had seen in the natural history museum. Egyptian papyrus paper, only not weathered with age and blank.

Camille put the paper onto the box and smoothed it out, then carefully tore it into two, three-inch squares.

"I think any paper would do," she said as she worked. "But these came with the camera, so why take that chance?"

"One each?" Palmer asked.

"No, one will take us over, the other is..." She paused and turned to him with an impish grin. "Hopefully for our return."

Palmer scooped up the photograph of the dank looking basement and try as he might, he couldn't imagine how this small piece of paper was going to transport both of them, through the warehouse wall, across the river and into that building beyond.

"This is madness," he uttered.

"No," Camille said in a matter-of-fact tone. "Just science, and a little of the unknown."

She stopped, lost in thought for a moment then shrugged to herself. "I suppose there is more than a little magic in all of this after all," she mused. "You would be surprised how common that can be. Oh, the things I've seen Palmer."

Palmer was about to respond incredulously to that when she snatched the photograph back from him and placed it in her breast pocket.

"First, the blood," she said with surprising nonchalance.

Camille ran her fingers along the right side of the camera and there was an audible click, and she took out of all things an ornate looking thick needle from some hidden compartment in the casing.

She held the needle up and Palmer crouched down to get a better look. It was approximately four inches long and as he focused on it, he could make out a series of interwoven grooves and ridges carved into the metal with minute, exquisite detail. There was a small glass bell type reservoir fashioned on the opposite end to the point.

"That's beautiful," Palmer breathed.

"Give me your hand."

He let Camille take his hand and just registered what she was going to do when she plunged the needle into his forearm. He winced in anticipation of the sharp sting to come but felt nothing. It penetrated his skin and was out again before he knew it.

Again, Camille held up the needle for him to see.

"Watch," she whispered.

His blood ran down the grooves and ridges of the needle, coating it as it flowed down and collected in the reservoir. Palmer absently rubbed his arm and watched as Camille then let a few drops of his blood flow back down the needle and onto, first one, then the other piece of paper.

This done, she replaced the still bloody needle into the side of the device and waited. "Not so bad, eh?" She said motioning to his arm.

He shook his head in response, his eyes still fixed on where the needle had gone into the camera with the rest of his blood.

"The blood connects the camera to the photograph, the paper is the ignition of the two," Camillie explained.

"That doesn't make a drop of sense," Palmer told her plainly.

"It doesn't need to."

She took the needle back out of the camera, cleaned it off with her shirt sleeve and then repeated the whole process on herself this time. Palmer could see several tiny holes on her forearm from her previous adventures with the procedure.

"Now!" She said after she returned the needle and scooped up the two drying papers. "We need to make a copy of Mitchell's photograph. As he took it, I don't believe it will work for us. It may do," she added thinking about this. "But I don't know enough about all this to be sure, so why take the risk?"

Sure, Palmer thought, why not? That made just as much sense as any of this anyway.

"And to be totally honest," Camille confessed with a mischievous smile. "I have been wanting to try the copy accessory since I got the camera."

Perhaps it was her young age and sudden youthful exuberance, but as she crouched there over the device, she looked to Palmer for all the world like a child tinkering with a newly opened Christmas present. It might actually have been endearing were it not for the fact his life was in her over-excited hands.

Camille handed him the papers and took out the photograph. Palmer looked around the empty warehouse melodramatically. "I don't see a photography studio in here, unless it's invisible of course?"

She gave him a look of mild distain then gestured to the box. "Make yourself useful, pick up the camera, would you?"

Palmer did as he was instructed and grasped a hold of the hand grips, he lifted the device, and was prepared for how weighty it might be, but was shocked at just how heavy it actually was.

Camille quickly opened the box's lid and took out a small delicate looking bracket from a side pouch and shut it again. She gestured to the top and Palmer gratefully put the camera back down.

Palmer crouched down next to her as she carefully slotted the bracket over the lens using two ridges down each side until it was held security in place. Then she took the photograph of the basement and slipped it into the bracket, so it completely covered the lens.

"I don't know much," Palmer chimed in. "But there is no way that will be in focus."

"That is true," Camille replied slightly adjusting the photograph. "You don't know much."

She reached around to the back of the camera by the right-hand grip and Palmer heard a soft 'clunk' sound. A short sharp pulse of low energy knocked Palmer onto his backside. It wasn't so much the force, but the shock of the odd sensation. He felt the hairs on his entire body bristle. It reminded him of a residual hint of the energy he had felt back at the house when Camille had made her dramatic entrance.

The camera suddenly began to emit a low whirring sound, like tiny cogs turning against each other inside. Then after a moment a thin slit opened up on the top of the camera above the handles at the back and a photograph slid out.

"Unbelievable," Palmer gasped.

Camille took out the photograph and the slit snapped shut once more. She showed it to him. "Et Voila!"

It was a perfect copy of the original. "Wonders it seems," he breathed reverentially. "Will never cease."

"Now, can you imagine how easy it would be to, say duplicate a photograph of the courtyard of an enemy compound? Camille asked. "Perhaps a hundred times or more? Now do you see what I mean?"

Palmer nodded. "How long have you had this thing?" He asked amazed at her knowledge of the workings of the device.

"A week or so," she replied after a moment's thought.

"Just a week?" Palmer exclaimed. "How many times have you used it? How the hell do you know so much about how it works? The copies, the blood, all of it?"

It came out more of a rant than he had intended, but there it was, he had said it. Camille gave him a look of mild amusement. She tapped the box.

"There's an instruction manual inside," she told him with no little condescension.

Palmer's face flushed and he slowly got to his feet, his leg was complaining again, and his shin felt like it was made with shards of shattered glass. He bit back a cry of pain and was thankful Camille was too busy with the camera to notice.

"And now!" Camille announced. "For our return."

She picked up the camera and Palmer instinctively moved to help, but she shook her head. She hefted the device around on her hip, braced it against her stomach and pointed it towards the warehouse's bare floor some five feet from where they were standing.

The camera had no visible means of lighting the scene, no external flash powder holder or anything on the camera body itself. But something told Palmer such simple illumination devices were not needed here.

"This should bring us straight back here," she said.

"Now, close your eyes."

Palmer did as he was told and readied himself for a jolt like before.

"Here goes," she warned.

Again, a soft clunk, but this time accompanied by a short sharp blast of heat and Palmer saw the flash even through his closed eyelids.

Camille started giggling and when the light died down, Palmer cautiously opened his eyes. She had put the camera back on the box and was bend over with her hands on her knees looking flustered.

"You alright?" Palmer asked.

"Phew!" She exclaimed with a shake of her head. "That is an experience, and no mistake."

Still laughing she straightened herself back up. She jumped on the spot and shook out her arms and legs in an odd giddy jig. Finally, she stopped and smoothed down her hair, regaining her dignity somewhat.

The camera began its now familiar whirring and grinding again and after a moment a photograph slowly came out of the top as before. Camille pulled it out and the slit snapped shut. She ran her eyes over the image with a slight frown of concentration.

"That will do," she said and showed it to Palmer.

It looked ironically like nothing special at all, just the warehouse's stone floor, almost as if someone had dropped the camera mid-photographing something far more important. The image could have been colour, but since all it had captured was grey concrete it was impossible to tell.

Over by the box, Camille, still smiling picked up the camera kicked open the box lid and placed the camera back into its place. She replaced the bracket and then shut the lid and twisted the combination rings this way and that.

She turned to Palmer and the smile faded from her face. "You cannot know where I am hiding this," she said with gravitas and tapped the box with her foot.

"I won't say a word to anyone," Palmer told her, a little hurt by the remark.

"It's not that I don't trust you, it's just..." Her voice trailed off and she had to clear her throat before continuing. "If the Engineer gets his hands on you, like he has Mitchell. There will be nothing you can do to resist him."

"I have no intention of..." Palmer began before she cut him off.

"He is a master of torture, there are none better. And what's more, he likes it." She pointed to the gap in the way they had come in through. "Go wait over there," she ordered. "I will be back soon."

"What if he captures you?" Palmer asked almost petulantly.

She locked eyes with him. Her cold gaze razored edged. "He will not get close. I will shoot myself first."

With this she slipped on the shoulder strap, hauled up the box and moved off. Palmer turned to go to the gap as ordered but he paused and watched her as she went. The gravitas of those words weighing heavily on him. Then he finally turned and limped off towards the back of the warehouse and the gap in the wall.

He gazed through the gap and out into the river beyond and thought long and hard about what was about to happen. Then, more for something to do than anything, he took out the pistol and checked the action. It was smaller than his usual Webley, but it would have to do.

The Thames seemed so peaceful as the slow flowing surface shimmered from the dozens of lights coming from the docks. He had no idea what time it was, but the noise drifting across the night air was as prevalent and harsh as ever. It was a place that never slept, as long as there was money to be made.

It was perhaps only five or ten minutes when he heard Camille come back into the warehouse and come through the darkness and over to where he was waiting. The camera must still be close, he reasoned. But with the number of buildings in the area, used and abandoned, it may well have been in Timbuktu for all the good it did him to speculate.

"Cheer up, miserable English bastard," she said as he approached. And Palmer was grateful to see her mischievous grin once more.

She came over to the wall on the other side of the gap and beckoned him to join her. She placed the photograph of the basement onto the damp wood, and it stuck there as if pinned. She then took out the photograph of the basement floor and waved it at him.

"Now look where I am putting this," she told him very deliberately. And she slipped it into the left side pocket of her trousers.

"Remember where it is. If anything happens to me, use it to get back here."

Palmer nodded, his mouth dry and he had to swallow to be able to speak. "The camera?" He croaked out.

"No one will find it," she said. "That dies with me. But in years if they do, they will have no idea how to use it, I destroyed the instruction manual."

Again, he nodded. Palmer desperately wanted to say something poignant to her, but his growing fear had robbed him of any eloquence he might once have had.

Camille held up the two bloody pieces of paper. She selected one and made great show of putting it into her right trouser leg pocket, making sure Palmer knew exactly where it was. He nodded his understanding.

She then took the other and placed it blood face out into the palm of her right hand, the way Palmer had seen her do at the house.

"It is all very simple," she said and held out her left hand for him to take.

He wiped his sweaty palm on his sleeve and took a hold of her hand, gripping it tightly.

"Does it hurt?" He asked softly.

"No," she replied. "But it is quite disorientating, especially with the first time. Once we are across there, take a moment to get your bearings."

Palmer exhaled and took out the pistol with his free hand and squeeze Camille's.

"Ready?" She asked.

"Christ no."

"Perfect."

Palmer braced himself as Camille drew back her right arm as if she was getting ready to punch the photograph open handed with the bloody paper. He screwed his eyes tight shut as she closed hers and slammed her palm into the photograph connecting the two.

## EIGHT

The effect was instantaneous. Palmer felt like a heavy weight boxer had punched him in the solar plexus. Yet strangely, although he felt the impact, it lasted no more than the blink of an eye. It didn't knock the wind out of him like reason dictated it should, nor did he stagger backwards.

Conversely, he felt himself being pulled with great force forwards. And he instinctively braced himself for the inevitable impact of the wall. But he just kept moving forwards as if a rope had been looped around his chest and he was being pulled ever onwards.

Searing multi-coloured lights danced under his eyelids for a brief moment and his ears popped. Then there was

nothing, no sight, sound or feeling of any kind and Richard Palmer wondered if he was dead.

Then suddenly a jarring impact as he was sent sprawling across a rough concrete floor. He rolled over and over until he slammed against a brick wall.

He was vaguely aware he was gasping and muttering something and could taste blood from his mouth from where he had bitten his lip. Dark shapes began to appear within the gloom, and he tried to get to his feet, but collapsed as his legs refused to support him.

Disorientated, he looked down at his prone body in disbelief, he was enveloped in a thin layer of vapour. Thin tendrils of bright white lightning arced and cavorted across his legs and torso and down his arms. He brought his hand up to his face, the lightning, fading already jumped between his fingers, until finally it disappeared. The thinning vapour rose up from his body into the air, until that too dissipated.

He heard an impish chuckle someway off and he squinted across the basement to see Camille, who was of course already up on her feet, pistol drawn and ready for action. The last remnants of vapour drifting from her shoulders like fleeing ghosts. The last of the thin white lightning danced momentarily across her eyes then disappeared.

She stepped over to him and held out a hand, he took it, and she pulled him to his feet. Palmer paused, head spinning, swaying like a drunkard at closing time and waited for his balance to return.

"Very balletic," Camille teased and dusted off his shoulders.

Palmer caught his breath and took in the room. "Christ," he uttered as his equilibrium finally returned.

He felt his chest, then his arms and legs, half expecting to be covered in blood and bruises, but apart from his lip, he was unharmed. Even his dodgy leg felt numb at best.

Camille was already making her way up a set of stone steps to a door at the top.

Then the heat hit him. They were in fact in a boiler room, thick pipes snaked across the ceiling and off through the brick walls. The massive boiler itself was hissing, spluttering and creaking under the pressure in one corner. As he moved forwards, he kicked something and looked down. "Christ," he muttered in embarrassment.

His pistol lay on the stone floor by his foot, in all the excitement he hadn't even realised he had dropped it.

"Amateur!" He softly cursed himself and picked it up.

The metal was quite hot to the touch, and he winced thinking of the rather combustible bullets inside.

"Palmer!" Camille called down to him as quietly as she could. "Come on!" He came up the steps to join her by the door.

"Listen," she whispered and pointed at the wood.

Palmer pressed his ear to the door and listened. He could hear muffled voices coming from the other side and cocked his pistol. Camille shook her head and motioned with her free hand for him to wait.

Eventually the voices died away and Camille gingerly opened the door a sliver and peered through the gap.

"You're not going to kick me out as a decoy again, are you?" Palmer whispered only half joking.

This won a grin from the French woman, she opened the door further and slipped out. Palmer followed close behind, his heart hammering hard in his chest.

They came out into a narrow dimly lit corridor, with an open door almost opposite the boiler room. Camille froze, but as Palmer came to her side, he could see there was no one in the room beyond.

"Let's go," Camille whispered, and they moved inside.

The room was large with two rows of bunks on either side. A makeshift barracks for the guards, Palmer thought, each bunk had a heavy padlocked military style footlocker at its base. He quickly totted up the number, twelve on either side. And, thankfully, despite the hour they were all empty.

"My God," Palmer breathed. "What is this place?"

"Private militia."

"Here? In Britain?" He replied, shocked.

"Perhaps, you can arrest them all once we're finished," she said with a smirk.

They walked between the rows and down to another door, this one closed at the far end. Once they reached it, Camille once again teased it open an inch and looked outside.

Palmer strained to see over Camille, there was a large warehouse beyond, with crates of various sizes stacked in rows some twenty feet high, then he glimpsed two men, a little way off, not in uniform but each with a rifle slung over their shoulder. They were walking across a large open section from one side of the warehouse to the other.

He could tell from their body language they were engaged in a heated, but oddly muted conversation as if in fear of being heard. He caught hints of their raised voices but couldn't quite make out what they were saying.

The two men paused, deep in hushed disagreement and Palmer tensed. One pointed in their direction and both he and Camille froze, but his companion shook his head and gestured across the warehouse. Then they set off, one clearly reluctantly, over to another door just visible between two stacks of canvas covered crates.

It was clear by the exaggerated caution in the way they moved that neither of this pair should be in this area at all. Once they reached the door, they both pressed their ears against the wood, listening.

"What are they doing?" Palmer asked in a hushed tone.

"Perhaps Mitchell is in there," Camille replied.



One of the men suddenly came away from the door, and even from where he was, Palmer could see the man was greatly distressed by something he had heard in there. He roughly pulled the other man away and the pair rushed off across the warehouse away from Palmer and Camille and soon disappeared amongst the crates at the other end. A moment later, the sound of a heavy door being closed echoed down towards them.

"Come on," Camille said, and they made their way across the open area and over to the side door. All the while keeping their attention trained in the direction the two men had gone.

As they reached the door, Palmer noticed a dim orange light coming from the gap between the bottom of the door and the concrete flooring.

Camille pressed her ear against the wood, she closed her eyes, listening. But even from where he was standing, Palmer could see the door was much heavier than most. This was confirmed when after a few seconds Camille shook her head and frowned. Whatever the men had heard to make them shrink away had stopped, but he realised with a swallow, must have been hellish loud.

Camille shrugged in frustration and motioned for Palmer to be ready with his pistol. Palmer nodded and took another cautionary glance the way the two men had gone, just in case.

Camille took a hold of the bulky metal door handle and slowly pushed down and tugged, but the door was locked. She reached into an inside pocket of her jacket and took out a small cloth bag with a draw string. She opened it and took out what Palmer knew was a set of lock picks.

"Keep your eyes peeled," she whispered.

She knelt on one knee and began trying each of the various different shape and sized picks which were on a ring. Until after an impressively short amount of time, she was rewarded with a soft click and the door opened ever so slightly. More light came through the gap and lit her face in a flickering orange glow.

The pops and cracks of an open fire could be heard from inside. Camille nudged open the door a little and readied her pistol. She gave Palmer a look and he nodded, and she opened the door further and they stepped inside.

It was a large workshop of some kind, which was dominated by a large heavy wooden table, which had been put on its end in the centre of the room and as they came in further, Palmer could see it has been secured in place with metal brackets bolted to the stone floor.

It faced away from them and towards a set of heavy sliding wooden doors, common in warehouses for loading and unloading larger items. A smaller, personnel door was set to one side for easier access.

A long work bench ran by the side of the upturned table, with what looked like all manner of strange metal cogs,

pulleys, and long cylindrical glass bulbs with thick twisted filaments just visible through patches of blackened glass spread out along it.

A large metal box with half a dozen or so dials and switches on its face was connected to a vast array of equipment the likes of which Palmer had never seen, by a tangle of thick multi-coloured wires. These all snaked up to the front of the table and connected to God only knew what, as they were still behind it.

The flickering light from the large open fire sent orange and black shadows dancing all around the room as Camille slowly began to approach the table.

Palmer, for his part was transfixed by the dizzying array of machinery on the bench and made his way over to it for a close look. He absently put his pistol back in the coat pocket as he approached.

Also connected to the box was a cylindrical brass clockwork counter. As he came closer, he could see it was ticking off descending numbers. He felt a stab of fear, it could easily be a bomb timer of some kind.

"Camille," he whispered, transfixed on the device as it continued its descent.

Twenty flicked over to nineteen. And he realised it wasn't actually counting off seconds but some other unknown metric. As he watched and waited for eighteen.

"Camille!" He whispered again, more urgently this time.

He was about to turn to her when the breath caught in his throat. Half hidden in the clutter on the table was an open surgeon's instrument leather bundle, with a set of still bloody medical equipment laid out on it.

Scalpels, needles, steel clamps and other devices he could not name with a gun to his head, all of various bizarre designs and sizes. Some had ornate carved ridges in the metal which put Palmer instantly in mind of the needle in the camera.

A glass syringe with a long needle still attached laid next to the bundle and he could see the remnants of a vivid green liquid inside.

Palmer had seen medical equipment before, but nothing as strange and downright surreal as these. He couldn't imagine what twisted surgeon would wield such things and was glad of it.

A pitiful cry came from behind him and Palmer turned to see Camille with her hand clasped over her mouth as she looked on in utter horror to what all this manner of lunacy was hooked up to.

He almost cried out himself at the look of naked despair on her youthful face. All that air of confidence and strength she so effortlessly exuded had fled. And for the first time since meeting her Camille truly looked her young age, like a lost frightened child. The flickering firelight caught great

pools of tears welling in her wide eyes as she reached out a trembling hand towards the unseen horror she was facing.

Palmer desperately wanted to go to her, but he glanced again at the insanity of the workbench, at the surgical equipment and the descending counter.

Now he remembered that look of fleeting fear in Camille's eyes back at the house at the mention of the name. This was the work of the Engineer, as he thought grimly, was whatever poor Camille was now looking at.

"Oh, Mitch," Camille uttered, and Palmer saw her fingers come away dripping blood from what she had touched.

Richard Palmer had seen death before, you could find it anywhere in this city. In the gutters, in its flop houses, whore houses, on the streets and back alleys. Men, women and children butchered attacked and murdered for as little as a few pennies or a bottle of gin. He knew first-hand what mankind was capable of.

But he instinctively knew as he slowly moved over to Camille's side. All that death would be a mere prelude to that capacity for malice and cruelty hidden somewhere inside all of us.

He was not disappointed. But this wasn't wrought by a jealous lover, or some mindless rabid maniac with a butcher's knife. This was meticulous, this was cold calculating mutilation and evisceration. This was pure evil.

Palmer gagged at the sight before him, he swallowed hard against his churning stomach, he exhaled a long slow breath, which helped. The nausea remained but was held at bay for now. He put an arm around Camille's trembling shoulders as much for his comfort as her own.

Mitchell's naked body, for he was surely dead, was held upright on the table by a metal band that had been placed across what was left of his mutilated chest. His feet, or what was left of them, dangled uselessly a few inches from the stone floor.

Palmer was put in mind of some university lecturer's medical anatomy mannequin, every part of the poor man seemed dissected or removed completely in some way. His arms dangled by his sides and Palmer could see that the bone of his left forearm had been removed and replaced by what looked like a wooden facsimile. The skin of his left shin had been flayed off to expose the muscle and in parts white bone beneath.

Mitchell's chest and ribcage had been cracked open and the two flaps of bloody flesh had been pinned to either side, like a frog dissected in a lab, to reveal the poor man's lungs and other viscera.

If it were possible, even worse was still to come. The flesh and bone of the left side of his skull had been removed, his eye, was now nothing more than a hollow bloody socket. His brain was visible and actually looked like it had been

washed clean to allow his tormentor better sight of the grey matter.

The mass of wires from the box on the bench were connected into the flesh in various places by copper needles. One in the exposed heart, or at least what his secondary education in biology assumed that lump of glistening flesh to be. Two more were in bedded either side of Mitchell's temples. Others in his legs and groin area. Palmer prayed these atrocities had all been carried out post-mortem as the alternative threatened his very sanity.

He looked away, his head throbbing, and Camille turned away with him as he did so.

"Christ," he mumbled nauseously. "Jesus, Christ on the cross."

There was much more of this horror to be seen, but Palmer feared his wits would flee him if he took in more.

"Ce monster," Camille hissed animalistically from his side.

*That monster*, Palmer didn't need a degree in French to understand that. He moved to take her free hand, but it was balled into a tight fist.

"Christ Camille, I'm so, so sorry." Now he understood why she was so afraid of being captured alive.

Palmer became vaguely aware of the click, click, clicking of the counter on the bench to his left.

"We should go," he told her. At least they would be away from this nightmare in a moment using the photograph.

"I'm going to kill him," Camille vowed.

"Do you want to end up like, like that?"

He gently took her arm, but she wrenched it free. She moved to open the side pocket on her trouser leg.

"No!" Palmer snapped. She was going to give him the paper and photograph, tell him to leave her here.

"This is not your decision to make," she said with a finality that felt like a slap in the face. "Take these and go."

"Camille, no. This is madness!"

Click, click, then a loud 'thunk'.

The breath caught in Palmer's throat, and he spun around just as the counter reached zero. He let out a curse and braced himself, but there was no explosion, simply a spark, and the box shuddered. The dials on the front of the box began flitting wildly.

The wheels, cogs and gears connected to the box suddenly began turning and hissing as they sprung into grinding life. The bulbs all started to throb with pulsating power and a sort of intermittent sparking sound filled the air.

He watched the display, mesmerised. The countdown wasn't to set off a bomb, but to activate all these many devices that were all now animatedly moving and whirring with some mad

synchronicity, he didn't have to wait long to discover to what ends.

Mitchell's body abruptly started to jolt and shudder, Palmer stepped away from the horrific sight fearing it might convulse free of its metal housing towards him. The poor dead man's exposed muscle and sinew began to convulse and ripple as the current ran through it.

"Camille," he urged and took her arm. "Let's go!"

Camille turned and he gasped at the sheer desolation on her face. She nodded slightly and he pulled her away from the awful sight of her one-time ally's bodily desecration.

Palmer frantically looked around the large firelit room. They could jump back from her or risk returning to the boiler room.

"Which way?" He asked breathlessly.

Camille seemed to regain her steely composure once more and Palmer thanked God for it. She took in her surroundings.

"Camille..." A hollow voice from behind them. The sound was more a death rattle than a word, and it froze them both in their tracks.

"No..." Camille uttered in horror.

"Christ," Palmer breathed, the sound made him sick to his stomach. Would this madness never end?

Palmer desperately wanted to put his hands over his ears and scream the sound away. Camille turned back to the upturned table.

"Mitch?" She stuttered in disbelief.

And Palmer, God help him, did the same. He uttered an oath to whatever lunatic deity would allow such things.

Mitchell's body was dancing an obscene jig, hanging from the many wires like some insane meat puppet accompanied by the mechanical chorus emitting from the bench's many instruments.

He was dead, Palmer's addled brain screamed in his head, the electrical assault was just giving the illusion of life, the juddering movements, nothing more than involuntary spasms. That one word, nothing more than the last breath left in the dead man's lungs expelled by the energy running through the cadaver.

But Palmer bit back a scream when Mitchell's one remaining eye opened and shone with a horrible sentience, it darting around the room until it fell back upon Camille.

Mitchell fought to speak, each gasping breath a torture coming from his exposed lungs, his throat was open below the chin to his Adam's apple and shuddered horribly as he tried to form the words.

"Camille..." The inexplicably living corpse spluttered. Camille grew ridged at the butchered word.

"Look away," Palmer begged her.

But she couldn't or more likely he feared, she wouldn't look away from this nightmare of flesh and wires.

The scattered paraphernalia's morbid function was now all too clear. Mitchell had been dead, of that there could be no doubt. But now it was in motion, flooding his dead nerve endings with power, it had somehow brought him back.

"Cam..." Mitchell pleaded. "Destroy this thing..." The horrendous pain on his mutilated features as all too apparent.

Camille, half in shock, looked at her friend's decimated body. She shook her head slightly. How do you kill something that should already be dead?

"The Engineer?" She managed to ask.

"I'm so, sorry," he slurred. "I told them... Our meeting in the pub..." He sucked in air and his lungs bulged obscenely. "Couldn't help..." His voice failed as another round of shocks ran through him.

"God, man," Camille sobbed. "It's not your fault." She was crying openly now.

The counter on the bench clicked from zero back to thirty. The instant it did all the devices powered down and slowly ground to a halt. As this happened, Mitchell's body shuddered and slumped forwards on the metal bracket and a last bloody breath escaped his lips.

"Kill..."

"Mitchell!" Camille approached the now lifeless body. She paused and Palmer could see she desperately wanted to embrace the man, but the repulsion was too much.

Over on the bench, the counter clicked onto twenty-nine. It was going to start all over again, Palmer realised in horror. That monster, this Engineer, had constructed the ultimate torture device. One that every thirty cycles wrenched his victim back from death itself. Back to a few moments of unimaginable pain and terror, of utter purgatory before starting the insanity all over again.

He could not imagine a worse kind of hell. Palmer's first instinct was to shoot the poor bastard in the head. But that was pure folly given the state of him now. If he could be brought back from that, would a bullet make any difference at all?

Camille suddenly let out an almost bestial screech of pain fuelled rage. All thought of stealth now gone. She raised the Mauser up to Mitchell's lolling head and fired twice.

"Bastard!" She screamed.

She then aimed at the bench and emptied the remaining eight rounds into the box. She methodically reloaded as she strode over to the bench and began to smash the bulbs and pulled at the wires, sending the box and the other connected devices onto the floor where she stomped on them. The wires attached to Mitchell's body came out one by one as she worked her way along the bench destroying anything and everything, she could get her hands on.

Anything she couldn't physically smash, he picked up and launched against the wall.

Over the din of her rage, Palmer heard shouts from outside and ran over to the large double doors, just as the side personnel door opened and a guard clumsily moved to come through but was struggling with his rifle. Palmer could see there was a long corridor behind the man and three more guards running down towards them.

Palmer reluctantly raised his pistol at the man, but the guard stopped dead, his face a frozen mask of shock as he looked past Palmer and to the horror dangling from the table.

"Christ," the guard uttered, and the colour drained from his face.

Suddenly the guard's head snapped to one side and the back of his head exploded, from a bullet Palmer felt zip past his ear.

Camille roared in defiance from behind him and was at his side in a heartbeat. She shouldered past him and fired into the corridor beyond.

"Vas t'emmerder!" She screamed. "I will kill you all!"

Palmer pulled her back into the room just as a volley of shots ripped into the wooden door frame close to them. As he closed the door, he glanced into the corridor to see one guard on his knees clutching his stomach and another three or four further back crouching for cover, rifles raised.

He felt several bullets hit the door after he slammed it shut, but it was thick enough that none of them actually penetrated the wood. He frantically checked, but there was no locking bolt or even a keyhole on this side.

"Bollocks!" His voice echoed around the cavernous room.

Palmer reasoned they wouldn't come through in a hurry, but that didn't mean they would be any less vulnerable from attack when they did. Especially if they opened the main sliding door. He remembered the beds, what was it twenty-four? That was a lot of fire power.

Camille was panting and pacing around the room like a feral beast looking for something to kill.

"Camille!" He shouted. "We need to go, now!"

She suddenly rounded on him, her eyes oddly lifeless given her rage and for one terrible moment, Palmer thought she was going to shoot him too. But her face finally softened, and she lowered her pistol. Her shoulders slumped as if all the pent-up energy had drained away from her slight frame.

"Monster," she hissed to the floor.

Palmer nodded, but they both knew vengeance would have to wait for another day.

*"Tut, those who cannot create, destroy."*

The clipped English male voice was at once in front but also behind them, close yet distant. Its timbre was that of someone speaking from the horn of a phonograph but magnified and oddly directionless.

Palmer wheeled around a full three hundred and sixty degrees trying to locate the man. But of course, they were alone in the room. There was a large skylight high above their heads, but it was closed and whoever it was speaking sounded close by.

"Palmer," Camille prompted. "There and there."

She pointed with her pistol to a wooden box with a mess front attached high up where the ceiling met the wall, then to another across the other side of the room, lower down on the wall itself.

"Show yourself you bastard!" Camille shouted to the rafters.

*"Oh, I think not, sweetness,"* the metallic disembodied voice replied. *"I must say, I thought you would never get here."*

Palmer remembered the other door, the one they had originally come in through. He bolted across the room and gingerly opened it so he could peek out into the warehouse beyond. It was thankfully still empty.

"Camille!" He shouted across to her. "Two ways in, can you lock this one again?" But she was too preoccupied with glancing between the two wall mounted boxes. "Camille?"

She gestured to Mitchell's body. "Why did you do this to him? You monster."

*"Crude, I know,"* came the reply, and even through the inadequate speaker boxes the arrogance was plain to hear in his voice. *"Little more than a thumb nail sketch of what it could be, given time."*

"Why!?" Camille demanded.

*"Truth be told, I am not sure yet. But I'm sure the device, once perfected, once nuanced, will show me its true purpose, given time. If not? Well, it has been quite amusing to tinker with."*

"I will kill you, you sadist," Camille yelled.

*"We shall see, mon cher,"* the Engineer replied.

"Camille!" Palmer snapped and ran over to her. "We have to get out of here," he pointed to the back door. "Can you lock that door?"

"He has to be close by," Camille mumbled searching the shadows overhead. She peered up to the grubby glass of the skylight. "Has to be."

"I don't care," Palmer said. "In a few minutes, they are going to come through that door," he pointed to the large double doors, then threw a thumb to the back door. "Or that one!"

Camille ignored him and continued to search for any sign of her tormentor above.

"Christ!" Palmer exclaimed.

He saw a heavy looking chair laid on its side amongst the debris that littered the floor around the bench. He ran across to it and dragged it over to the back of the room. He



slammed the back door shut and wedged the chair as best he could under the handle, he kicked it in place with his boot and hoped for the best.

It would at least give some warning if anyone tried to gain access that way, which was something at least he thought grimly. He then ran back over to the large double doors and listened. Muffled shouts through the wood coming from the other side. They were close, perhaps directly behind it for all he could tell.

"Why are you hiding? You coward." Camille taunted from behind Palmer. "Why are you even still here?"

"*It seems my British pay masters have become a little, shall we say queasy with some of my more creative methods. You should have seen their faces when I showed them poor Mitchell,*" he gave a short humourless laugh. "*He had been that way for days, by the way. Alive, dead, alive, etcetera, etcetera.*"

"Finally, they see you for what you are," Camille said.

"*It's short-sighted!*" The Engineer snapped indignantly. "*These governments are all the same. They want what I can provide, but grow reticent when they discover just what my creations can truly do. Like that machine there, the one you so carelessly destroyed. Can you imagine a more perfect torture devise? One where even the release of death is but a temporary one?*"

"Even governments have their limits when it comes to depravity," Camille told him.

"*They bore me now, sweetness,*" he said. "*And they thought they could steal from me?*" Again, that inhuman laugh.

"They didn't steal from you, I did."

"No, Camille, you stole from them. I had already delivered the camera. And believe me, they were very pleased. Then of course, your friend Mitchell got cold feet."

"He got a conscience, not cold feet."

"*It could have changed everything,*" the Engineer lamented. "*Shame, really, I was looking forward to the chaos it would bring.*" He gave an audible distorted sign at this.

"*You know they tried to threaten me?*" He continued. "*After the camera was lost? They wanted me to make another camera or release the plans. I told them what I always tell anyone I create for. I never, never repeat myself. An artist never does.*"

"You are not an artist, you are a monster!" Camille shouted to the rafters. "It could have tipped the world into war!"

"*Indeed. But my creations, old and new are wasted on these western politicians. I am thinking of going east. They are much more pragmatic there. Less... Prudish.*"

Camille pulled herself up onto the work bench and peered up to the skylight.

"So, you waited here, just to show me your latest atrocity?" She called up.

"No, *two birds, one stone*," he replied cryptically.

"You forget we have the photographs, you cannot trap us here."

"*I didn't forget*," the Engineer told her. "*You, my dear are one bird, a thorn in my side I have been wanting to pluck for quite some time now. Poor Mitchell, he was just the bait. The second bird or should I say birds, are those short-sighted bureaucrats who threatened to take my creations by force. They're here now, being wined and dined. I lured them here with some of my more, obsolete devises.*"

Palmer watched as Camille froze. She glanced around the room, not looking for the Engineer this time, but for something else.

"What have you done?" She asked warily.

"*I must sever my ties with the British government, with all the western blocs. I must perish along with my secret service contacts. And what better way than at the hands of a French spy.*"

"What have you done!?" Camille repeated louder still.

"*Oh, sweetness, you should see the things I have planned.*"

"I'll stop you!"

"*Arh, alas I think not. Toodle-pip, Camille Breton.*"

"Wait," Camille urged. "Tell me more of what you have planned." She outwardly cringed at the obvious delay tactic.

"*Still hoping to find me? Oh lovely, I am already on the Thames and away. The fireworks should be spectacular.*"

"Engineer!? Engineer!?" She shouted with growing desperation.

There was an audible short sharp hiss from the boxes, then they went dead.

"What the hell's going on?" Palmer called across.

He caught the movement of several shadows through the grimy skylight above. No doubt soldiers moving into position on the roof.

Camille turned to him in horror. "He's going to blow it all up!"

"The photograph!" He shouted.

Camille nodded and reached for her side pocket, when the skylight above her shattered as a volley of shots ripped through the glass and bit into the bench around her feet.

She cried out in pain as another volley rained down and she pitched forwards off the work bench and hit the stone floor hard.

"Merde!" She screamed and rolled under the heavy bench for protection. She clutched her left arm as bullet hits kicked up the stone floor around her.

Palmer fired up into the skylight at the many shadows he saw looming there. They each had rifles and fired down into

the room. He dove to the floor as bullets hit close by and scampered on his hands and knees and over to the bench. He rolled under it and came to a stop next to Camille.

"You up there!" Palmer shouted. "This building is going to explode!" But the words were lost in the defending roar of violence erupting from a fresh round of shots overhead.

"Camille?" He uttered.

He twisted around to see that she was bleeding heavily from a wound on her left arm which ran from her shoulder to her elbow where a bullet must have grazed her.

"Grab, grab the photograph," she told him through the pain.

Palmer shuffled down on his side to her legs and fumbled with the flap of the pocket. Behind him the personnel door was flung open, and he glanced across to see two guards burst in, firing as they went.

Camille aimed over Palmer and fired, hitting the two men who crumpled to the floor. Another appeared half in, half out, swinging his rifle left and right, but clearly couldn't see where the gunfire had come from, so ducked back into cover with a shout of alarm.

"The bench!" Someone shouted from above. "They're under the bench!"

But if any of the guards out in the corridor heard, they didn't respond or rush the room. Camille fired twice more through the open doorway just to be sure.

The dull thud of a distant explosion, somewhere in the compound, rattled the entire room and Palmer could feel it through the stone floor.

"Christ!" He uttered in shock. Another, closer this time, rattling his very bones.

He finally managed to take out the crumpled photograph as shouts of alarm came from above and the corridor as another explosion tore into the building. Closer still.

"Christ, Christ!" Palmer cursed and smoothed out the photograph as best he could.

He pressed it against the underneath of the bench above them where it stuck.

"Will that do?" He asked and could hear the growing panic in his voice.

"Yes, good," Camille replied.

She hissed in pain through her teeth as she managed with great effort to maneuver herself so she could take out the paper from her other pocket.

An explosion over head sent half the skylight and three mangled bodies raining down into the room. Palmer watched in wide eyed horror as one of the guards, missing his right arm, tried to push himself up with his left, but slipped in the growing pool of his own blood then lay motionless on his face.

Another explosion, sounding like it went off just at the far end of the corridor blew in great chunks of wood as the

large double doors took the brunt of the damage. Then another turned the door into kindling which blasted into the room like a million jagged knives.

Palmer instinctively turned away from the blast and hugged Camille as dozens of tiny splinters ripped into his back and legs. The breath was knocked out of him, and his ears popped as the concussion hit him an instant later.

He screamed in pain and clung to Camille anticipating the next explosion would surely kill them both.

But then came that familiar tug on his solar-plexus and he was hurled violently upwards. But this time he knew he would not hit the underside of the bench.

The searing lights followed in a heartbeat, dancing like lunatic fireflies across the back of his eyelids, brighter, and more vividly coloured than nature could ever hope to duplicate. Then nothing but a total almost physical blackness.

## NINE

For a moment there was nothing, just darkness and a numb feeling over his whole body, and all he could hear was his own fitful breathing. Breathing, he noted gratefully, at least that meant he was alive.

Finally, the dull sound of someone moving next to him in the void, a grunt of effort and pain followed by a torrent or rapid-fire pained French. Underneath this, a distant rumbling sound, like thunder growing louder with each passing second.

Palmer opened his eyes, he was on his side and was looking across the warehouse, shafts of light, coming from the structure's many gaps illuminated the bare stone floor. A flash of fading white light bleached out his vision for the briefest of moments then was gone.

He was laid in a pool of cooling dark liquid, he averted his gaze all too aware of what and whose it was.

Dragging, faltering footsteps, from behind him receding from where he was, and moving off until they were drowned out by the now thunderous roar coming from outside.

"Camille," he uttered, his lips numb.

Palmer moved to get up, but screamed in pain as countless stabbing sensations ran through his back and legs.

"Come on," he urged himself through gritted teeth. "Come on."

He slowly rolled onto his front and pressed his palms against the bloody stone floor and gingerly pushed himself up into a kneeling position. That old familiar pain in his shin bit hard sending a shock up into his guts.

"Fuck!" He explained.

His head swam and he feared he might keel over, but he took deep breaths until the pain subsided enough for him to

attempt to move again. Gasping at the small but painful effort, he straightened his back as much as his injuries would allow and turned to locate Camille. But she had already disappeared through the gap in the wall, leaving a tell-tale trail of blood in her wake.

It was only now that he noticed the side of the warehouse facing the river was bathed in a harsh flickering orange light. No doubt from the buildings they had just barely escaped from.

A volley of shots and a pain cry from outside echoed down towards him. This gave him the energy boost he needed and before he knew it, Palmer was on his feet. He checked the floor around him, he had lost his pistol somewhere, but couldn't locate it.

"Bollocks!" He cursed and set off, painfully half running half staggering over to the back of the warehouse and the gap in the wall.

When he reached the gap, he paused to catch his breath. But the stench of acrid smoke made him cough and splutter. He eased through the gap, covering his mouth with his sleeve and that was when the heat hit him.

"Jesus, Mary Mother of God."

The entire compound across the river was a blaze. As he watched on in disbelief, one of the large warehouses collapsing in on itself, sending plumes of smoke and fire up into the night sky. Another structure, close to the water's edge crumpled and slid into the river with a harsh roar of steam and blistering wood.

Despite the distance, the heat threatened to drive him back into the relative cool of the warehouse. He could see the front-loading yard and the guard house had been completely devastated and was now nothing more than a smouldering crater.

Dock workers were already running in their dozens from the main road down towards the conflagration but were beaten back by the sheer ferocity of the flames. Another explosion deep within the burning buildings drove several of the more cautious men back to a safer distance and Palmer couldn't blame them.

It seemed an almost fitting apocalyptic end to the horrors that had been so diabolically wrought by the Engineer and his shamefully British paymasters within those walls.

Palmer shuffled his way along the edge of the warehouse until he came to the large open yard, where they had first approached the building across, what seemed like days ago. Another shot rang out and Palmer quickened his pace as best he could.

He stopped by the wrought iron fence that blocked access to the riverside path. He cursed and rested his forehead against the bars. He had struggled to get over the thing before he had been injured and knew he had little hope of scaling the thing now.

He could see Camille someway off, she was shouting something at the Thames and Palmer shifted his gaze to the water and could see a small sail boat drifting down the river. It was too far ahead for him to make out anything but the vaguest outline of a figure standing on its bow. The Engineer no doubt, making good his escape.

Palmer mustered up what was left of his strength and reached up and gripped the fence, he tried to pull himself up, but the pain in his back and legs knocked him to the cold stone ground. He pressed his face between the bars like a prisoner pleading with his jailers for mercy.

"Camille!" He shouted hoarsely.

She was standing by the water's edge some thirty yards from him, looking forlornly off after the Engineer's boat. He could see from the way her shoulders were shaking that she was crying.

"Camille!" He shouted again, he desperately wanted to go to her, but he could already feel the exhaustion and blood loss creeping up on him.

After what seemed like an age, she finally turned to look back down in his direction. Her face half in darkness half illuminated by the fire raging across the river. She holstered her pistol and just stared at him. He couldn't be sure, but it looked like she was smiling.

She raised her hand and waved to him and in that moment, Palmer knew he would never see that strange, wonderful young woman again, and it fairly broke his heart. He wanted to call out to her, to beg her for one last moment together, but he fought back the urge.

After all, what could he say? She was safe, he was safe, and he would just have to be content in that knowledge. Even though he knew he would never be quite the same again.

"You were good cannon fodder, Richard Palmer," she called down to him.

"And you're under arrest," he called back and began to weep.

She was laughing now, and he wished more than anything in the world that he could hear that musical sound one final time. But she was too far away so he had to be content with the memory of it, and now his own gasping sobs.

By the time he had composed himself once more, Camille Breton, the French spy, was gone.

It seemed impossible to Richard Palmer that in the days following the devastating events at the London docks, no one had seen fit to question him about any part he had played in the destruction.

It was only when he reminded himself that, although he had been at the very centre of things, no one apart from the two now dead military intelligence officers could connect him

to Camille Breton, the mysterious Engineer and the conflagration at the compound.

The death toll, the papers informed him had reached fifty and was expected to rise. There was no mention however about the clandestine dealings that had taken place there, nor of the horrific torture devise and God only knew what other heinous experiments the accursed place had been witness to.

And nothing of course, about any miliary or government involvement. The implementation of the official secrets act from those high up in the army and government, had seen to that no doubt.

Palmer had spent the following four days in hospital having the many splinters removed from his body and a total of twenty-three stitches to close his various wounds. All the while expecting someone from the army or a police bigwig to come and interrogate him about how he got his injuries.

If Willis and Carson had been acting for military intelligence as Camille claimed, then they either hadn't had the time or the inclination to inform their superiors about Palmer's possible involvement with the camera. Or perhaps he wondered if the powers that be had decided to draw a discreet veil over the whole sorry affair.

Afterall without the camera or any of the photographs, there was no proof of Palmer's part in any of this, and he for one was glad to play along.

Chief inspector Daggart had visited on the fourth day just before his discharge from hospital and again if he knew anything more about the case, he was the master of discretion.

He had accepted, perhaps a little too easily Palmer's explanation that he had received his wounds in a quite unrelated incident whilst chasing a suspect. But try as he might, Palmer couldn't detect even the hint of deception in the man's demeanour.

There was no mention, officially or otherwise of the blood bath at the house which had left four dead agents, again Palmer believed that this, like the nature of the compound had been conveniently swept under a carpet of secrecy.

Daggart did however have one piece of welcome news about the robbery case he should have been working on. It seemed that the Egyptian neckless thought stolen from the Meeker's museum had mysteriously been found in the building's safe, although Sir Ralph had sworn blind, he had no idea how it had gotten there. And as a result, all charges had been dropped against the long-suffering night watchman, John Seagrove.

Apparently, a red-faced Sir Ralph had offered Seagrove fifty pounds and his old job back. To which Seagrove had taken the money and told the old toff to shove his job up his arse. Palmer wished he could have been around to see that.

"Penny for them?" Constable Maloney asked Palmer as he placed a cup of tea down on the café table in front of him and sat down opposite.

Palmer had been day-dreaming about Camille again, as he so often had in the two weeks since his return to work.

He looked around the crowded café, it had always been an oasis of calm away from the chaos of the station, even more so now. A grounded place away from impossible cameras and French spies.

"Richard, alright?" Maloney prompted.

"What? Oh yes, nothing, miles away."

"Bet you wish all cases would solve themselves like the neckless one, eh?" Maloney said.

Solve themselves? Palmer thought incredulously, but then again, what could he say?

"Hmm," was all he was willing to offer in response and took a sip of tea.

"Excuse me, sir?"

Palmer looked up from his cup. A young boy, of perhaps ten was standing by the table holding a flat parcel, about twelve inches square, wrapped in brown paper.

"What is it lad?" He asked.

"Inspector Palmer?"

"That's right."

"Sir, I was paid to give you this," the boy replied and handed Palmer the parcel.

"Is it your birthday?" Maloney asked with a smirk.

Palmer dug a penny out of his pocket and gave it to the boy.

"Thank you, sir!" The boy exclaimed and darted off to the sweet counter for cake no doubt.

Palmer ran his hands over the parcel before opening it, it was something in a frame. His heart skipped a beat, and he ripped off the paper.

It was a small, framed black and white photograph. A simple picture of Camille standing behind a table holding a thankfully normal looking box camera. She had taken her reflection in a mirror and Palmer could see a mass of smashed and twisted metal on the table in front of her. The tell-tale lens was smashed into tiny shards of now dull glass.

"Good for you," he whispered.

"There's a note," Maloney said with a puzzled look on his face.

Palmer took the note and read it. 'For one who appreciates good photography, C xxx'

Palmer felt tears sting but blinked them back. Content he would now have more than scars, memories and yes nightmares to remember her by.

END