

PRIORY PARK

Security Novels Series - Episode XXIV



John M Upton

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Priory Park

The City of Haychester, Monday 18th September 1989

Duty Operations Commander Peter Judd was the sort of man you could depend on in a crisis.

In his twenty years of service to the Police, and later the Department of National Security & Civil Defence that succeeded it, he had remain loyally allocated to the small cathedral city of Haychester throughout.

One of his regular duties in recent years had been the Duty Control Room Supervisor at the regional headquarters for the county of Sussex in Haychester, overseeing everyday operations and that morning he was on duty as usual.

It had been a quiet morning so far, the usual traffic issues with the early morning school run and commuters on the Haychester ring road, a couple of minor accidents and a report of a leaking water main were all that had really troubled the Control Room staff in the last hour.

Judd was about to contemplate a cup of coffee when the Area Commander, Superintendent Jim Edwards put his head around the door.

“Morning everyone” Edwards called, “All quiet on the Haychester front?” he asked as the telephone on the desk of one of the Duty Operators began to ring.

“Nothing exciting Sir” Judd confirmed, “Seems to have been a quiet night” he then confirmed.

Edwards looked across at the Duty Operator who was taking a call, instinct telling his experienced mind that something was brewing.

“Sir!” the Duty Operator called across, turning towards them covering her headpiece microphone, “I have got the Archaeological Supervisor from that dig in Priory Park, apparently they found something in their trench that definitely shouldn't be there.”

“I take it we are not talking Roman or Medieval here?” Judd asked.

“Err No Sir” the Duty Operator confirmed, “Blood stains and what appears to be a woman's bag.”

“Right, tell them not to touch anything and we are on the way” Judd confirmed.

“Sounds interesting” Edwards remarked, “Who is the on-call Duty Commander?” he then asked which prompted him to turn and look at the whiteboard with the area operational status.

“Erm...” Judd began to hesitantly respond as he watched Edwards run his finger down the board until he reached the name of the on-call Duty Commander.

“Oh boy...” Edwards remarked, rolling his eyes upwards “and it was looking to be such a nice quiet morning” before nodding towards Judd, “Okay, make the call.”

“Whisky X-Ray One Three One from Control” Judd then proceeded to call over his headpiece radio.

Across the other side of the city, Lieutenant Commander Sam Edwards, the adopted son of Superintendent Jim Edwards, was looking over the driving documents of the battered old Ford Escort that he had just pulled over on the main Bognor to Haychester road.

He was another officer who had spent his entire career so far based at Haychester since he passed out from the Security Service Academy five years earlier, all be it under considerably unusual circumstances that, not for the first time in his short existence, almost cost him his life.

Indeed, trouble seemed to follow him wherever he went, being well known for his lack of subtlety and extreme determination to get the job done, not suffering fools gladly but also getting noticed for being one of the best thief takers in the Service.

Despite his rank, he had also gained a nickname, for want of a better word, being known to most simply as The Commander, a suitably official yet mysterious identity for someone who's personal life and history were a complete mystery, which was exactly how he preferred it.

“Are you seriously telling me that this bucket of bolts actually has a valid MOT?” The Commander asked the driver as he walked around the vehicle, tapping the exterior with his steel toe capped safety boots which saw flakes of rust fall away from the bodywork.

“Honest officer” the young man sat behind the steering wheel insisted, “I just bought it.”

“Where from?” The Commander asked with a disbelieving look, “Rust Buckets Are Us?”

“A bloke in a pub” the driver confirmed.

“Why am I not surprised?” The Commander quietly remarked to himself.

“Whisky X-Ray One Three One from Control, are you receiving, over?” the call over the radio saw The Commander look across to his marked patrol car parked immediately behind the aging vehicle he had pulled over.

“Don't go away” The Commander then warned the driver before looking down at the car, “Not that you would get far in this death trap” he then added with a smirk.

“Thanks...” the driver despondently responded.

“Whisky X-Ray Control, this is One Three One” The Commander called.

“Sam, got a job for you” Judd called.

“It might be your lucky day” The Commander called to the driver, “Okay Pete, what have you got for me?” he then asked.

“The archaeologists working in Priory Park have found a woman's bag and some possible blood stains in their trench this morning” Judd confirmed.

“I don't suppose it dates from the third century by any chance?” The Commander asked, “Or are we talking mid 1980's Woolworths?”

“Definitely the latter I am afraid” Judd responded.

“All right, show me on the way and get the forensics guys over there as soon as you can” The Commander instructed, “One Three One out.”

“Good news” The Commander called as he returned to the driver and tore off the reporting sheet from the pad, handing it to him through the side window, “It *is* your lucky day.”

“Thanks, I think...” the Driver responded, not entirely sure how to take this news.

“Get this rolling death trap fixed or weighed in for scrap, pronto” The Commander then assertively advised before turning smartly on his heels and returning to his car.

The Commander's car was a fully marked up Security Service traffic pursuit specification patrol vehicle in standard dark red with insignia, reflective orange and white stripes down the side and light bar across the roof, based on a 1986 model Ford Sierra saloon with appropriate upgrades and modifications.

The Commander watched the old car he had pulled over make off amid an excessive cloud of exhaust smoke before starting the powerful engine of his own vehicle and moving off into the flow of traffic.

Using the blue flashing lights and occasionally the siren, The Commander quickly cut through the traffic on Haychester's ring road, making his way around the roundabout where the fire station was located before turning off into North Street.

From there it was a short drive before turning left into the narrow Guildhall Street that led straight to the main gate into Priory Park.

The park, named after the old Franciscan priory that once stood on the site, was the only significant public open space within the Roman city walls, the north east quadrant of which formed part of its perimeter.

A single building stood in the park, the last remaining section of the former Priory still standing, dating back to medieval times, and now used as a storage facility by the

Haychester City Archaeological Service whose activities in the historic Roman city were extensive.

The Commander parked his patrol car up outside the Park Cafe, near the main park gates and silenced the siren.

“Control from One Three One” The Commander called over his radio as he got out of the car, “I am in Priory Park now, show me dealing” he confirmed.

The archaeological excavation project for that summer was located in the section of park to the south of the old Priory building with the cricket pitch over on the east side and the perimeter footpath curving around the other side.

“Ah, Commander!” called a voice from the tent next to the archaeological excavations, “I thought I recognised the entrance style!”

“Adam” The Commander responded as he greeted the head of the City Archaeological Service, Adam Brentwood with a shake of hands, “You have been finding stuff that shouldn't be there I hear?”

“You could say that” Brentwood confirmed, “This way” he then showed The Commander towards the trenches, “Your forensics lady is already here.”

“Blimey, you were quick Gail” The Commander remarked to Professor Gail Harriman, the Haychester District Forensic Scene Examiner who was already down in the four foot deep trench in her white paper overalls, taking an initial look at the scene.

“I was in Woolies buying a set of saucepans when my pager went off” Harriman explained as she looked up, “As I had the company van with me and I was only around the corner, I thought I may as well come straight over.”

“City this small, practically everywhere is just around the corner, isn't it?” The Commander mused.

“You have a point there” Brentwood agreed.

“So, what have you got for me?” The Commander then asked as he knelt down on the edge of the trench.

“One good quality designer lady's handbag” Harriman confirmed, moving aside a little so that The Commander could see for himself the bag in situ, “It doesn't look like it has been opened or ransacked in any way.”

“That probably rules out a mugging or bag snatch then” The Commander replied.

“I would say that someone just chucked it in here as they passed, sometime late last night judging by the dew on it” Harriman continued “but whoever dumped it was injured, see the drops of blood here and here?” she indicated the spatters in the immediate vicinity.

“Ah, but whose blood?” The Commander asked, “The owner of the bag or the person who dumped it?”

“Assuming that they are not one and the same of course” called a familiar voice to The Commander, causing him to look around and see his colleague Lieutenant Commander Alfred Longton approach.

“Hello Al, welcome to the party” The Commander called.

“I thought you could use some backup” Longton explained.

“In other words, the Chief is worried I am on the case and sent you over to be on standby in case I put my foot in it and create a major diplomatic incident?” The Commander sarcastically suggested.

“Well...” Longton admitted with a shrug, “Things do tend to escalate pretty fast whenever you are around.”

“I think we will be all right with this one though” The Commander tried to reassure his colleague, “All we have is a handbag and some spots of blood, I don't think we have enough to declare a major crisis yet.”

“Ah, there is that word” Harriman remarked “Yet...”

“Cynic...” The Commander jokingly responded.

“Okay...” Harriman declared as she finished taking photographs of the handbag in situ, “Could you pass me down an evidence bag?” she then requested, indicating her open equipment bag on the ground next to the trench.

“Here you go” The Commander passed her a large official plastic evidence bag whereupon she proceeded to carefully lift the handbag from its resting place and slide it into the bag before sealing it.

“There you go” Harriman called as she duly passed the bag back up to The Commander.

“Al, what do you know about women's fashion?” The Commander then asked as he looked over the handbag through the clear plastic.

“Why are you asking me?” Longton asked.

“You've got a fiancé” The Commander explained “by that very fact you are far more qualified on the subject of women and their fashion accessories than me.”

“Let me have a look?” Longton asked whereupon The Commander passed the bag to him, “It's about time you got yourself a girlfriend you know?”

“No one in their right mind would have me” The Commander admitted, “Besides, I come with more baggage than the London Transport Lost Property Office.”

“Well, it is definitely designer, not some cheap knockoff from down the Cattle Market” Longton confirmed as he looked the handbag over carefully, “That means money, a lot of it.”

“Probably set someone back a few hundred quid that” Harriman suggested.

“For a bag?” The Commander responded with a sense of disbelief.

“I forgot; you are more a Tesco plastic carrier bag kind of guy” Harriman then recalled with a smirk.

“It's got two handles, carries stuff, what more do you want from a bag?” The Commander asked.

“Well, someone will be upset they lost this” Longton concluded, “Especially as it seems to be full.”

“Definitely rules out robbery then” Harriman agreed.

“One Three One to Control, are you receiving over?” The Commander called into his radio.

“Control receiving” Judd responded, “Go ahead One Three One.”

“Did the night shift report any bag snatches, muggings, anything like that last night?” The Commander asked.

“Nothing on the logs Sir” Judd confirmed, checking the computer terminal in front of him, “Looks like it was a quiet night.”

“I'll take this back to the office and go through the contents” Harriman confirmed as The Commander helped her out of the trench before she took the evidence bag back, “Meantime I will get these blood swabs off to the lab.”

“Al, get this all taped off and for God's sake, don't let that snivelling little twerp from the local chip wrapper anywhere near the scene” The Commander instructed, “Or anywhere near me for that matter” he then thoughtfully added.

“You really don't like the press, do you?” Longton asked.

“I would rather have my annual medical” The Commander admitted.

“Call me in about an hour and I should have something for you” Harriman confirmed as she picked up her bags before returning to her van parked nearby.

“Cheers, will do” The Commander confirmed as Longton returned with his reel of police tape.

“Just this trench or the whole lot?” Longton asked.

“Best do the whole lot” The Commander confirmed, “I am going to find the Park Keeper” he then informed him.

“Rightio...” Longton agreed as he tied the end of the tape around a small tree before heading off, unwinding the reel of tape as he went and whistling to himself cheerfully.

Brentwood was stood by the tent where the archaeological dig was being coordinated from, watching on with interest.

“Adam” The Commander called as he strolled over.

“Yes Guv?” Brentwood responded.

“What time did you close up for the day yesterday?” The Commander asked.

“It must have been about four o'clock in the afternoon” Brentwood confirmed “and there was nothing in the trenches that should not have been there then.”

“What about this morning?” The Commander then asked.

“Erm, I got here about nine this morning” Brentwood recalled, “took my usual look around the excavations before the rest of the team arrived, found the bag and the blood and went over to the telephone box over there to call you guys.”

“And none of your people went in the trench, touched anything?” The Commander sought reassurance.

“No, no, nothing like that” Brentwood confirmed, “We hadn't started yet and as soon as I called it in, I sent the team over to the Guildhall to do some exhibits sorting.”

“All right, thanks” The Commander responded as he made a few notes, “You don't know where I can find the Park Keeper or Supervisor by any chance?” he then asked.

“Probably in his little shed behind the bowling green” Brentwood suggested, “drinking tea and doing sod all whilst getting paid for it I shouldn't wonder.”

“Thanks again” The Commander replied before heading off.

Crossing the grass, The Commander made his way toward the bowling green, located on the opposite side of the old Priory building, and then up the steep path that separated the bowling green from the club house.

Located around the side of the bowling clubhouse was a small brick shed like building in the shadow of some ancient fruit trees, this being the Groundskeeper's office.

“Hello?” The Commander called as he knocked on the old wooden door before gently pushing it open and looking inside.

“You looking for me?” came a voice from nearby, causing The Commander to look around and see the Park Keeper approaching, pushing a wheelbarrow which he then set down with a clunk.

“Yes” The Commander responded, “You are the Park Keeper?” he then asked.

“One of them officer” the Park Keeper duly confirmed.

“I take it you have heard about the bag being found over there in the archaeological dig trench?” The Commander then asked.

“Yeah, old Adam told me about it” the Park Keeper replied.

“What time was the park locked up last night?” The Commander inquired.

“Let's see now” the Park Keeper thought for a few moments, “Sunset was about eight fifteen, but I wanted to get away early so did my rounds at seven fifty, everyone was out, and I had locked up by eight.”

“Did you see anyone about when you locked up?” The Commander then asked as he made some notes.

“The pub over the way was doing a good trade as usual but you know this town officer” the Park Keeper remarked, “Anything after four in the afternoon is classified as late night around here, apart from a couple of pubs, this city is dead after five.”

“Yeah, I like it that way...” The Commander admitted with a knowing smirk, “So tell me, how many entrances are there in and out of the Park.”

“You've got the main gate, there is a side gate over there near the cricket pavilion, oh and the little side gate at the back corner behind us that takes you into Priory Lane and the North Walls area.”

“And all three were locked all night?” The Commander then sought confirmation.

“Well, yes of course” the Park Keeper confirmed “but if someone did want to get in, it is not exactly difficult to hop over the boundary hedge from Priory Road or just jump the gate down there near the cricket pavilion,”

“And what time did you open up this morning?” The Commander then asked.

“About half seven, there was nobody about and nothing out of the ordinary happened until Adam found that handbag in his hole” the Park Keeper replied.

“Right, thanks” The Commander responded, “I may have some more questions for you later, depending on how this goes” he then admitted.

“Someone been naughty you think, officer?” the Park Keeper then asked.

“Maybe...” The Commander admitted.

A few minutes later, The Commander was walking back towards his car, looking all around him at the Park in its position situated in the shadow of the old Roman city boundary walls when Longton came over.

“The area is all taped off” Longton confirmed “and we have a couple of the lads standing by to make sure the local nosey parkers don't start getting inquisitive.”

“Lovely” The Commander responded.

“Did you get anything from the Park Keeper?” Longton then asked.

“Just confirmation of when he locked up last night and opened up this morning” The Commander confirmed, “Of course, a locked gate would not deter anyone from entering outside of opening hours given how low the fence and the Cricket Pavilion gate is.”

“It would have been dark though” Longton pointed out as he looked all around, “Apart from a couple of streetlights in Priory Road, there is no artificial light at all in the Park itself.”

“Hmmm...” The Commander mused before looking across at the exotic bird aviary where there was much tweeting coming from the various parrakeets and other small birds of paradise inside, “No point asking those guys I suppose?” he then remarked with a wry smile.

“Probably not” Longton agreed, “What about the bogs?” he then nodded towards the brick building containing the public lavatories immediately behind the aviary.

“They would have been locked up” The Commander replied, “Still, maybe worth getting them searched just in case, and let's get the bins gone through as well just in case the person who dumped the handbag, dumped anything else.”

“I'll get right on it” Longton agreed.

“Right, I'll head back to the office and see what surprises are waiting for us when Professor Harriman opens the handbag” The Commander confirmed, “Meet me in the canteen at about half eleven” he then instructed, “We can compare notes and get first dibs on the dinner menu.”

“Why are you always thinking about food?” Longton then asked.

“First order of business, survival” The Commander explained as he returned to his car, “I'll see you later” he then confirmed before getting back in the driver's seat and starting the engine.

Longton watched as The Commander carefully reversed the car with a perfectly executed three point turn before heading off through the main gate and out onto the road outside.

Had Longton not turned away at that point, he might have seen what happened next.

As The Commander departed, his car passed a pale coloured Vauxhall Cavalier saloon car that was parked outside the main gate. No sooner had the patrol car passed than the engine started and the Vauxhall, with two men inside proceeded to follow at a discreet distance.

“Hi Dave!” Professor Harriman called as she came into the Forensic Service office located on the second floor of 'B Block' in the Security Service Regional Headquarters, a sprawling complex of 1960's and 1970's concrete buildings located over on the western side of the city of Haychester.

“Prof!” Dave Gorham, the day shift duty lab technician called from his workstation, barely looking up from his microscope as his superior arrived, “Anything interesting in the park?” he then asked.

“One handbag and some swabs of blood” Harriman confirmed, taking out the evidence bags and holding them up, “Not much I will admit but then again, I know who the lead investigating officer is.”

“The Commander?” Gorham tentatively asked to which Harriman nodded in confirmation.

“Better alert the Administrator General and get the Home Secretary on a secure line then...” Gorham wryly remarked.

“Not everything he gets involved in turns into a major incident you know?” Harriman pointed out as she handed the blood swabs to Gorham, “Here, see what you can get from these” she then instructed.

“Will do” Gorham confirmed, taking the evidence bag, and taking it over to a different examination station nearby.

“Right then” Harriman declared as she placed the evidence bag containing the handbag on an examination table and turned on the overhead light, “Let's see what secrets you are holding.”

Before proceeding, Harriman put on a fresh pair of latex gloves and then proceeded to take the handbag out of its containing bag and place it carefully on the table.

She then brought a camera, mounted on a swivelling arm, across and overhead, pressing a button causing it to take couple of photographs of the handbag in place.

With the bag captured on film, Harriman began to open it by releasing the gold-coloured clasp and lifting the flap before proceeding to carefully take out the contents and place them on the table, neatly arranged and then photographing each individual item in turn.

Among the various items were a passport, purse and a neatly folded piece of ivory coloured A4 size paper which was what caught Harriman's attention in particular as she unfolded it, the neatly printed writing on it prompting her to raise an eyebrow in surprise.

“Well, that makes things a lot easier...” Harriman then remarked with a smile.

If you had looked at The Commander's official file, it would say he was raised in Haychester ever since he was a small boy, in reality though, he first set foot in the city at the age of fourteen after a remarkable and almost fatal previous life but despite this, he now knew the area and its people like the back of his hand.

Driving through the city, The Commander's thoughts wandered for a while, thinking back to his previous life when his father taught him how to drive when he was just eleven, racing along the concrete strip of an old abandoned World War Two airfield in Essex, at the wheel of a powerful Jaguar saloon, a skill taught at an early age that meant when, several years later when it came to doing his advanced specialist pursuit driving course, he passed it with the highest mark the Service had ever recorded.

As was normal for Haychester in the mid-morning, the railway line that runs across the southern perimeter of the city centre and its three separate level crossings meant the traffic was slow moving and it took some effort and patience on The Commander's part to make it around the Southgate one way system, past the bus station and on to the road that leads around to the front entrance of the Regional Headquarters of the Service.

Turning into the entrance driveway, the pale-coloured Vauxhall Cavalier that has been discreetly following continued past and then stopped in a bus stop layby a short distance further on, much to the annoyance of the driver of the 700 route double decker bus who was right behind them,

The Commander proceeded up to the front entrance and then carried on around and down the side service road before reaching the dedicated parking spaces for the C Division offices where he was based.

As he got out of the car, a window directly above him on the second floor opened and a voice The Commander knew well called down to him.

“Lieutenant Commander!” Superintendent Edwards called which caused him to look up.

“Yes Guv?” The Commander responded, slightly despondently.

“Professor Harriman wants to see you urgently” Edwards informed him, “and when you have done that, I would like to see you as well.”

“Err, right Guv” The Commander agreed.

“Don't forget about me now...” Edwards reminded him.

“Of course not Guv” The Commander confirmed with a wry smile, before heading off towards the connecting corridor entrance.

“Fiver says he forgets...” Edwards then knowingly remarked as he shut the window and returned to his desk.

A couple of minutes later The Commander was passing through the double doors that lead into the Forensic Service office and looking around.

“Professor Harriman around?” he then asked one of the Forensic Service officers as she passed him.

“Room B211 Sir” the officer confirmed.

“Thanks” the Commander replied before heading off in the direction indicated, knocking politely on the door when he reached it.

“Ah, glad you could make it Lieutenant Commander” Harriman called, “Come and have a look at what we have found” she remarked.

“That is a lot of stuff” The Commander remarked on seeing the numerous items laid out on the table.

“This is all the property of one Sophie Elizabeth Grey, twenty-one years old, born in Redhill, Surrey, has seven O Levels, three A Levels and a degree, resides at twenty-three, Francis Lane, Haychester, and is currently employed as a facilities manager at a hotel near Wadhurst” Harriman confirmed.

“You managed to find out all that from a handbag?” The Commander responded with a sense of understandable disbelief.

“A copy of her CV was in the bag” Harriman explained, passing him the document.

“Well, that is awfully nice and convenient” The Commander remarked.

“We also have her passport, birth certificate, purse, credit cards, bus pass and various rail tickets which were purchased on a Young Persons Railcard” Harriman continued.

“Practically her entire life in a bag” The Commander commented, “I wish all cases were as easy as this.”

“I am just about to examine the bag itself if you want to watch?” Harriman then asked.

“By all means” The Commander readily agreed.

“Nice bag this” Harriman remarked as she looked it over carefully, “Wouldn't mind one of these myself.”

“You could always buy one of your own you know?” The Commander then suggested.

“On my salary?” Harriman scoffed, “I should be so lucky.”

“So, hang on a minute, I admit I know exact nothing about women’s fashion accessories...” The Commander remarked.

“No, really?” Harriman sarcastically responded to which The Commander gave her a momentary scornful look before continuing.

“This bag is expensive I take it?” The Commander then asked.

“Retail, probably three or four hundred quid” Harriman estimated.

“That strikes me as a bit out of reach of the wallet of the average twenty-one year old graduate working in a hotel and restaurant” The Commander remarked.

“I agree” Harriman confirmed “unless she has some sort of side line...” she tailed off as something was revealed inside the bag.

“Something interesting?” The Commander asked, stepping forward.

“Internal compartment, definitely not manufacturers specification” Harriman explained as she showed him the partially disguised inside pocket which would have easily passed unnoticed to anyone casually looking inside the bag.

“Anything inside it?” The Commander asked.

“Pass me those long tweezers over there, will you?” Harriman indicated a tray of instruments nearby.

“Here you go” The Commander handed over the long tweezers and then watched as Harriman used them to open the compartment wider and extract the items inside.

“It looks like there are two items in here” Harriman confirmed, “Here comes the first, what do you make of this?” she then produced some sort of miniature electronic circuit board based device.

“What the hell is that?” The Commander asked as he held open a fresh clear plastic evidence bag and Harriman dropped the object inside.

“I have no idea” Harriman admitted.

“Well, whatever it is, I don't think she picked it up in Rumblelows somehow” The Commander concluded.

“And to follow that up” Harriman then proceeded to extract the second item from the secret compartment, “We have...” she then lifted the object out and held it up.

“Oh no...” The Commander groaned as he saw the object, a small clear plastic bag containing an unknown white powder of some kind, “Drugs, I hate drugs.”

“It could be baking powder” Harriman suggested more out of hope than expectation.

“The way my luck usually runs, I doubt it” The Commander admitted as he made some notes, “Still, at least I now know who we are looking for and what she looks like” he then confirmed as he examined the passport.

“I'll see what this is and let you know” Harriman then took the small bag of white powder back, “but at the moment, the smart money should say cocaine.”

“What about this thing?” The Commander then indicated the mysterious circuit board device.

“Try our new tech guy” Harriman suggested, “err, Fuller I think his name is, apparently he is supposed to be the expert on these sorts of things.”

“I'll do that” The Commander agreed as he picked up the evidence bag with the device inside, “and with an address, I will get someone to go round her place and see if she is at home.”

“Did I hear right? The Commander is heading this one?” Lieutenant Graham Forrester asked as he stopped the patrol car in Francis Street.

“He is the on-call duty officer” Lieutenant Julie Phillips confirmed as they got out of the car and looked around the quiet little side street in North Haychester, “I guess it is the luck of the draw.”

“Control from Whisky Sierra X-Ray Two Seven Five” Forrester called into his radio as they stood on the pavement in front of a large block of 1930's Art Deco apartments, “Can you confirm the address we are looking for please?”

“Two Seven Five, the address is Twenty-Three, that is Two Three, Francis Lane” the Control Room confirmed.

“Received, thanks” Forrester responded.

“Up there I think” Phillips indicated ahead before they made their way along the street, counting the door numbers until they found number twenty-three.

“You have the honour” Forrester duly indicated the door whereupon Phillips duly stepped forward and rang the bell.

The two young officers listened intently for a few moments for any form of response but there was none, so Phillips leant forward again and knocked on the door.

“Hello?” Forrester called through the letterbox, trying to see inside.

“I’ll take a look around the back” Phillips suggested before making her way via a side alley to the rear of the property.

As Forrester remained by the front door, he momentarily paid attention to a pale coloured Vauxhall Cavalier saloon car that slowly passed him before it accelerated away.

Disregarding this, he turned back to the door of number twenty-three and tried knocking and ringing the bell again.

At the rear of the property, Phillips was able to access the back courtyard by unlatching the wooden side gate. The rear of the property was unremarkable, a few bedding plants in planters and a small patio area with a couple of folding sun chairs was all that was to be found.

Peering through the windows revealed nothing untoward inside and so she tried the door handle, discovering that it was firmly locked.

“Two Seven Five from Two Four One” Phillips called into her radio but was then interrupted as an ear-piercing scream from some sort of intruder alarm suddenly began to sound.

“What the hell is that?” Forrester called as the alarm sound also emitted from somewhere in the region of the front door where he was standing but the sound drowned out his voice and that of Phillips over the radio.

Back in the Haychester Regional Control Room, the staff on duty were forced to pull off their headsets when the screaming alarm noise came through the speakers.

“Control to Two Seven Five or Two Four One” Judd called, “Can either of you hear me?” he then asked.

There was the sound of movement over the radio frequency and the alarm sound began to recede before Phillips was heard again.

“Two Four One to Control, can you hear me now?” Phillips then asked having moved some distance away from the building and the source of the noise.

“That’s better” Judd confirmed “What’s going on?” he then asked.

“There is definitely nobody home at the address, no signs of any intrusion or disturbance but there is a state-of-the-art anti-intruder alarm as you have just heard” Phillips explained.

“My ears are still ringing...” Forrester added.

“One Three One to Two Seven Five and Two Four One” The Commander's voice then came over the radio, “That sounds a bit over the top for a young hotel worker on a meagre wage” he remarked.

“The place is locked up tight as a drum” Forrester then confirmed, “Nobody is home.”

“All right” The Commander instructed, “Stay there and keep an eye on the place, she may turn up.”

“Will do” Phillips confirmed.

“Ah, there you are!” Superintendent Edwards called as he came out of his office at just the wrong moment from The Commander’s point of view which was as he was passing in the corridor.

“Sir?” The Commander responded, trying to look surprised and not in the least bit deflated at having been collared by his superior officer.

“This way...” Edwards then strongly suggested, gesturing with his right index finger for The Commander to step into his office.

“Sir...” The Commander agreed, surrendering, and duly proceeding inside whereupon Edwards shut the door, probably to make sure he did not escape.

“Right, have a seat Lieutenant Commander” Edwards instructed as he went around to the back of the neatly organised desk and sat down himself, facing The Commander directly with a knowing smile.

“Sir?” The Commander then prompted.

“It is time for your annual review” Edwards announced as he opened the personnel file in front of him before looking directly at The Commander again.

“Ah...” The Commander simply replied.

“Promotion” Edwards then announced.

“Oh no, no this again...” The Commander despondently responded.

“All right, call it career enhancement” Edwards conceded.

“Isn’t that the same thing, just with a fancy new name put together by a focus group of analysts in the Home Office in order to justify their existence and make it look like they actually do something?” The Commander retorted.

“Probably” Edwards readily admitted, “Look, cards on the table.”

“Okay...” The Commander agreed.

“Off the record, Operations Commander Donaldson is not coming back” Edwards explained, “He is being pensioned off whilst he still has some usage of his legs with the really good pension payout in his back pocket.”

“Can’t say I am surprised” The Commander admitted, “He has been seemingly at deaths door on and off for years.”

“I am getting a lot of strong hints from above” Edwards then continued, “They recognise your potential, you are a good thief taker, you take no nonsense, and they want you promoted up the ladder ASAP.”

“Really?” The Commander slightly despondently replied.

“Oh, you are an odd one, aren’t you son?” Edwards remarked, “Anyone else would jump at the chance of promotion. Think of the pay rise?”

“What on Earth would I spend it on?” The Commander asked.

“Wine, women and song?” Edwards wryly suggested.

“I don’t drink, I can’t sing and as for the female of the species” The Commander regretfully concluded, “No sane woman would be interested in a heavily laden baggage carrier like me with a potentially short life expectancy.”

“Yeah, you have rather used up quite a few of your nine lives” Edwards admitted.

“I have been declared dead at least once, almost twice” The Commander reminded his adopted father and superior officer, “Besides, aren’t I supposed to be all incognito and keeping my head down?” he then reminded him, “If I start becoming more prominent, it is not inconceivable that someone from my previous life in Lewisham may recognise me and decide to finish the job.”

“Hmmm...” Edwards mused.

“Like I said, heavily laden with emotional baggage” The Commander then added.

“You still have the dreams?” Edwards asked, clearly concerned.

“The one where I am lying in a pool of my own blood on the pavement outside New Scotland Yard, bullet holes in my school uniform and my life draining away?” The Commander recalled, “Every time I close my eyes to sleep, the gunshots are still echoing in my brain to this day.”

“I am guessing you are not getting much sleep then?” Edwards then asked.

“Err, not much no” The Commander admitted, “You know me, you know who I really am, Eddie is still here, hiding away behind this uniform, behind this false persona I am forced to keep up all the time because I saw something back then, all those years ago.”

Edwards looked on as The Commander continued.

“I dedicate myself to work because, apart from a lot of model railway projects, it is all I have” The Commander explained, “but gradually over time, the real me is coming back, bleeding through into the light, soon I will become myself again, only the name will be different and that scares me a little.”

“You? Scared?” Edwards responded with clear astonishment.

“I feel like the real me is hiding behind this uniform, this job” The Commander pulled at his uniform tunic as if to emphasise the point and that one day he may escape and then who knows what could happen.”

“That’s why you are afraid of relationships” Edwards concluded, “You are worried what will happen if you have to open that box the real you is hiding in and let someone in.”

“Scares me more than anything else” The Commander agreed, “Well, maybe not as much as spiders though, or heights for that matter.”

“Or boats” Edwards reminded him, “You hate anything that floats on water.”

“Ah yes, I had forgotten about that” The Commander wryly admitted, “That was the primary reason I never joined the Thames River Division, that and the fact I can’t swim of course.”

“So, aside from the fact that your last annual, and I stress the word annual medical was three years ago” Edwards checked the file again, “I reckon that is your review wrapped up.”

“Thank God for that” The Commander quietly remarked under his breath.

“So, what is the S.P. on this handbag in Priory Park?” Edwards then asked.

“One apparently expensive designer lady’s handbag” The Commander confirmed, “Admittedly I don’t know much about ladies’ fashions, so I am just going by what Al and the good Professor Harriman told me” he then admitted.

“Contents?” Edwards asked.

“Quite an extensive amount of belongings including the owners CV, driving licence, passport plus a couple of surprises” The Commander proceeded to produce the plastic

evidence bag containing the mystery electronic device and passing it over to Edwards, "This for a starter and also a small bag of white powder, possibly a narcotic, Professor Harriman is testing it now."

"Ah, drugs..." Edwards reluctantly remarked.

"Yes, I know..." The Commander responded.

"It is just I know how you feel about drugs, especially after what happened to the last dealer you ran into in this town" Edwards reminded him.

"He fell in the canal basin!" The Commander replied to a somewhat disbelieving look from his superior, "How was I supposed to know he couldn't swim? You would have thought with all those plastic bags on him, at least he could have floated."

"Well, let's try and avoid a repeat of that debacle, shall we?" Edwards strongly suggested, "If this does turn out to be a narcotics based case..."

"...call the Drugs Squad" The Commander finished the sentence, nodding his head, "Yes, I got it."

"Have you found the owner of the bag yet?" Edwards then asked.

"Not yet" The Commander confirmed, "I have a couple of our guys at the owner's address now, but nobody was home and while they were looking around, they seem to have set off some sort of very sophisticated intruder alarm system."

"You will want to take the lead on this, I presume?" Edwards remarked, "Sounds like your sort of case, lots of mystery."

"Please" The Commander agreed, "I would like Al Longton on it with me too, apart from his superior knowledge of women's fashion, he is a good seeker of the lost and hidden, I may need his skills."

"You got him" Edwards readily agreed.

"In which case Sir, if there is anything else?" The Commander then asked.

"No, no" Edwards responded, "You get off."

"Thank you, Sir," The Commander then got up and turned to leave.

"Just, keep me informed, okay?" Edwards then requested as The Commander opened the office door, "I don't want to be kept in the dark or find out what you are up to or who you are getting up the nose of through the illustrious pages of the Haychester Gazette, all right?"

"Of course, Sir" The Commander confirmed, "I am on it" he then confirmed before leaving and the door closing behind him.

“That’s what I am afraid of, Eddie...” Edwards then remarked with a wry smile.

“Three sugars Al” The Commander called, tapping him on the shoulder as he caught up with him in the canteen queue.

“And I suppose you will be wanting a choccie biccie too?” Longton wryly responded.

“Well, seeing as you are buying, why not?” The Commander readily agreed.

“His usual Love?” Longton asked the Canteen Lady.

“So, anything in the park?” The Commander asked.

“No” Longton confirmed, “Checked the public bogs, the bins, the cricket pavilion, even looked in the apiary, nothing.”

“Thanks love” The Commander called as he and Longton collected their tea and then headed off to the seating area.

“You heard about the house?” The Commander then asked as they sat down.

“Yeah, I heard about it over the radio” Longton confirmed as he stirred his tea thoughtfully, “Why does a young hotel worker have a state of the art intruder system?”

“That is what I was thinking” The Commander agreed, “There is something very odd about all this, something stinks here.”

“You and your nose for trouble...” Longton remarked with a chuckle.

“It’s legendary don’t you know?” The Commander admitted.

“Oh, there is the Prof” Longton then remarked as he saw Harriman enter the canteen whereupon he waved at her, and she came over.

“Hi guys!” Harriman called as she joined them at the table, “Who’s in the chair?” she then asked.

“That’ll be me” Longton confirmed before leaning around and calling over to the canteen servery area “Daphne? Another cuppa over here please, on my tab?”

“On the way love” the Canteen Lady confirmed.

“Your mystery white powder” Harriman then placed the evidence bag on the table between them, “To the casual eye, it is Class A, cocaine to be precise except, it isn’t...”

“Huh?” The Commander responded, clearly confused and a response reflected in Longton’s expression too.

“That there is a little known and rarely found substance called Dimethocaine” Harriman confirmed.

“Okay, you’ve lost me” The Commander admitted.

“In layman’s terms, it is fake cocaine” Harriman explained, “It has the look, feel and taste of the real thing and when snorted, the casual observer will see the user have the normal effect, but it is in fact, completely harmless.”

“Why?” Longton asked.

“Well, the only real practical use for this stuff would be to impress someone who was a cocaine user without actually taking the real thing” Harriman replied, “Your mystery young woman wanted someone to think she was a user when in fact she isn’t.”

“So, this erm, whatever it is called...” The Commander began to ask.

“Dimethocaine” Harriman confirmed.

“Yes, that” The Commander then continued, “It’s not illegal?”

“No, it isn’t” Harriman shook her head.

“Well, I have never heard of it” Longton then admitted, “Where do you buy it? I presume this isn’t something Boots sells over the pharmacy counter?”

“That is where it gets interesting” Harriman picked up the evidence bag again and looked at it, “I did some ringing around our lab’s pharmaceutical suppliers and apparently this stuff is pretty rare, usually only sold to very specialist outlets, private Harley Street clinics, that sort of thing.”

“A designer drug that isn’t even a drug” The Commander concluded, “Whatever will they think of next?”

“This is a full list of the contents of the bag” Harriman then handed over a lengthy printout, “The actual contents are on their way over to your office now.”

“Purse, credit cards, cash, passport, driving licence...” Longton methodically read through the list, “CV, keys, train tickets, make up, unidentified electronic device?” he then looked up.

“That would be this” The Commander showed Longton the evidence bag he had, containing the mystery device.”

“Oh...” Longton remarked before returning to the list, “bus ticket, miscellaneous wallet litter, receipts, bag of white powder, hairbrush, condoms...”

“Five packs of them” Harriman confirmed, “No evidence of a boyfriend to use them with though.”

“Hmmm...” The Commander mused over his cup of tea before taking a sip.

“You err, do know what those are used for, don’t you?” Longton cheekily asked The Commander to which he got a scornful smirk in return.

“Of course I do” The Commander then admitted, “You use them to plug a hole in the fuel system on a Series II Land Rover...”

“That was said with the voice of experience!” Harriman commented to which The Commander merely smiled over his teacup knowingly.

“Oh, believe me Professor” Longton remarked, “I have been working with this guy for years and nothing surprises me anymore.”

“Give me a little time, I am sure I can come up with something” The Commander replied, almost relishing the challenge.

“So, what now?” Longton then asked.

“We need someone to organise the exhibits back in the office” The Commander thoughtfully declared.

“Julie Phillips is the best organiser we have got” Longton remarked.

“Yeah...” The Commander readily agreed, “Call her in and see what she can do with the stuff we have so far, maybe a female eye might spot something we missed.”

“More than likely...” Harriman remarked.

“Al, I want you to check our mystery girl’s background” The Commander then instructed, “See if you can trace her life, find out who her relatives, friends and work colleagues are.”

“You do realise that she could just walk in the front door and report her bag missing at any moment?” Longton then suggested.

“That would save an awful lot of work if she did” The Commander agreed, “However I have this feeling that isn’t going to happen, there is something about all this that is flashing up too many red flags for my liking.”

“Well, if it is of any help” Harriman remarked, “We should have something back from the blood tests in the next hour or two.”

“Thanks” The Commander responded, “All right, as soon as I have finished my tea, we’ll get to work.”

“What’s your first move?” Longton then asked.

“Drop this little thing into our tecno-jedi to see if he can shed any light on it” The Commander indicated the mystery electronic device, “Then take the keys from her handbag and go and give her drum a spin.”

Lieutenant Simon Fuller was a very recent arrival at Haychester, fresh from the Academy where he passed with flying colours, specialising in advanced electronics, computers and communications, he was already an invaluable member of the team to both the regional office and nationwide where his skills had been quickly recognised and utilised.

Back in those days, computers were still very much in their infancy in terms of real-world application, green screens, magnetic tape-based storage systems and dial-up modem connections that were often unreliable and painfully slow were the core of what little modern technology was being used at that time.

Fuller however had embraced this potentially bright future with every fibre of his being and had become a well respected expert in his field.

Even though he was only a few months out of the Academy, he already had his own office located on the top floor of the Haychester Regional Headquarters building, equipped with computer terminals, noisy dot matrix printers and integrated dial telephone equipment.

At the time, he was working on an early prototype for a Police National Computer system which had the aim of eventually providing a centralised information system that would be accessible across the entire Service.

The idea was sound, the problem was that the technology was not quite there yet with what was required to make it reliable and there was always going to be the hurdle of an entire Service of personnel who barely knew how to switch a computer on, let alone actually use one.

“Lieutenant Fuller?” came a polite voice at his door, causing him to swivel around in his big black office chair.

“The one and only” Fuller confirmed, “Welcome to my little corner of the empire” he gestured around the office.

“Lieutenant Commander Sam Edwards” The Commander introduced himself as he entered.

“Better known as The Commander” Fuller responded, “Your reputation precedes you...”

“I am not sure how to take that...” The Commander admitted.

“What can I do for you?” Fuller then asked.

“I am reliably informed that anything with a wire, plug or circuit on or in it, is your speciality” The Commander explained, “I was wondering if you could tell me what this could be?” he then produced the mystery device in its evidence bag and handed it across.

“Where did you find this?” Fuller asked as he took the device out of its bag and placed it on the desk before bringing over a desk lamp magnifier and taking a closer look at it through the large magnifying lens.

“It was hidden in a compartment inside a lady’s handbag that was found in Priory Park this morning” The Commander explained as, at Fuller’s invitation, he sat down alongside him.

“And this lady would be...?” Fuller asked, not taking his eyes off the device as he continued to examine it in minute detail.

“Missing” The Commander confirmed, “According to the numerous identity documents and other material inside the bag, one Sophie Grey.”

“I don’t suppose you know what the mysterious Ms Grey does for a living by any chance?” Fuller then asked.

“Works in a hotel restaurant apparently” The Commander replied.

“I very much doubt that” Fuller remarked as he continued to examine the device.

“That’s the trouble” The Commander admitted, “Instinct tells me nothing about this fits, and then there is that” he indicated the device.

“This is a custom piece, a specialist device” Fuller remarked as he continued his analysis, “In technological terms, this is a work of art.”

“What does it do?” The Commander asked.

“It’s a tracking device, a sophisticated one too” Fuller explained, “You have got a multi-band transmitter, a receiver, backup battery and a very sophisticated miniature processor all in one neat little package.”

“My technological knowledge peaks at twelve-volt power feeds for a model railway” The Commander admitted, “So I presume this is not something she picked up in Woolworths then?”

“Definitely not” Fuller confirmed, “This is custom made, really specialist stuff.”

“You say it is a tracker” The Commander then asked, “Would she have known it was there?”

“Oh yes, it hasn’t been activated yet” Fuller indicated part of the device even though The Commander had no idea about any of it, “This is designed to be planted somewhere like in a vehicle or sewn into the lining of a big coat where it wouldn’t be noticed, you turn it on by flicking these tiny microswitches on the circuit board, set your frequency with these switches here, plant it on your target person or vehicle and then follow it around using some sort of receiver with a display screen which would show distance and direction.”

“Sort of like an electric radio compass?” The Commander tried to summarise using his limited knowledge of anything even remotely technical.

“A bit more sophisticated, but basically that is how it works” Fuller agreed, “Have you found anything that may be a receiver or similar?” he then asked.

“Not that I know of” The Commander admitted, “Mind you, I probably wouldn’t know it if it were standing right in front of me with a big flashing illuminated sign on it.”

“Ah yes, as I said earlier” Fuller remarked, “Your reputation precedes you...” he then smiled knowingly.

“If I wanted to buy one of these, where would I go?” The Commander then asked as Fuller handed back the device.

“Well, apart from needing deep pockets as these most definitely don’t come cheap” Fuller summarised, “There are a few private sales outlets if you know where to go, strictly cash in brown envelopes and a lot of it but in terms of manufacturer, there are maybe four or five people in the country who can make these.”

“Anyone you know?” The Commander asked, more out of hope than expectation.

“Two of them work in the technical support department at a little place called Thames House in London” Fuller then explained, “two others are the professors of technological research at Oxford University who taught me the trade and the fifth one is sitting right in front of you.”

“Like I said to my colleague earlier” The Commander remarked, “There is a lot more to this case than a simple lost handbag.”

“You are not wrong...” Fuller agreed.

“Thanks for this” The Commander then replied, “I like you, you’re useful!”

“Look at it this way” Forrester remarked as he and Lieutenant Phillips stood outside the front door of the house, the alarm still wailing away in background, “It could have been raining.”

“Yeah, thanks Graham for that ray of sunshine...” Phillips responded.

“Ah, here comes The Commander” Forrester then nodded down the road towards the patrol car approaching which came to a stop immediately behind their own vehicle.

“Bloody hell!” The Commander remarked as he got out of the car and his ears were assaulted by the sound of the intruder alarm still blaring out.

“We can’t get the door open or switch the dam thing off!” Phillips explained, having to shout to make herself heard.

The Commander momentarily looked around at a pale coloured Vauxhall Cavalier saloon car passing by, before approaching the two officers.

“Julie, I need your organising skills with the exhibits” The Commander requested, “and I suspect your ears probably need the rest.”

“More than you can believe” Phillips admitted as she gratefully headed for the patrol car, “Have fun guys” she then called before driving off.

“Right then, Graham” The Commander declared as he produced an evidence bag from his pocket with some keys in it, “Let’s see if these fit.”

“Are those from the bag?” Forrester asked as The Commander took the keys out and tried one of them in the lock.

“Yes” The Commander confirmed as he tried the first key but with no success, “Well, it’s not that one” he then concluded.

“There are a lot of keys on that ring” Forrester remarked as The Commander tried another key.

The second key proved just as useless as the first which saw him try a third.

“Ah, that’s got it” The Commander declared as the third key turned successfully in the lock and the door opened.

“Do you think we can do something about that alarm?” Forrester asked as they entered the hallway.

“Absolutely” The Commander readily agreed as he unceremoniously pulled out his six-shot revolver from its holster and then twice shot the intruder alarm control panel, causing it to spark before the system thankfully fell silent.

“You don’t really do subtle, do you?” Forrester then remarked as he looked on at the smouldering and wrecked control panel.

“Nope!” The Commander admitted as he duly holstered his firearm, “Right, let’s take a look around, see if she is here.”

“I’ll take the upstairs” Forrester confirmed before heading up the stairs.

“And I’ll sneak around down here” The Commander agreed.

Forrester’s footsteps could be heard upstairs as The Commander began to look around on the ground floor, passing through the very neat living room and on into the immaculate modern kitchen.

Taking out a handkerchief, The Commander used it to press the play button on the telephone answering machine which beeped and clicked but as it turned out, contained no recorded messages.

“What is going on?” The Commander then remarked to himself before opening the fridge and seeing it was almost empty and then closing it again.

Upstairs, Forrester looked around the two bedrooms, he too only found neatly arranged rooms, nothing out of place or disturbed in any way.

“Graham?” The Commander then called up the stairs, “You got anything?” he asked.

“Not a sausage” Forrester confirmed as he returned to the top of the stairs, “The place looks like a show home, as if nobody has ever lived here.”

“Same down here too” The Commander admitted as Forrester came down the stairs and rejoined him in the hallway, “The answering machine has a few blank messages on it, no one left an actual message though.”

“Ah, hang on a minute...” Forrester then noticed something in the cage that catches items that have been posted through the letterbox.

“What have you got?” The Commander asked as Forrester extracted the post from the cage and looked at it.

“An electricity bill and a postcard” Forrester confirmed, passing the items to The Commander to look at for himself.

“Addressed to Ms S Grey” The Commander confirmed, “This is the first time we have found anything that connects our missing woman to this place, and the postcard...”

“Rolling downs of East Sussex” Forrester read the printed description on the back.

“Addressed to someone called Claudette Grey though” The Commander remarked, “No message other than love from your Uncle.”

“A relative somewhere?” Forrester suggested.

“Let’s get someone posted on the door in case our missing woman turns up” The Commander then suggested, “and see if there is some way of finding out where this postcard came from.”

“Yes, that’s great” Longton called over the telephone, “Can you fax copies of the certificates over?” he then requested.

Phillips was over on the other side of the office where she was carefully cataloguing the exhibits that consisted of the contents of the handbag.

“Cheers Dave, owe you a drink” Longton confirmed before hanging up.

“Anything interesting Al?” Phillips called across the office.

“Maybe...” Longton confirmed as he stood up and went over to the fax machine, hovering over it with much anticipation.

“Hang on a minute...” Phillips picked up a small piece of paper and took a magnifying glass to look at it in more detail, “This could be crucial.”

“You got something?” The Commander asked as he and Forrester came into the office.

“A till receipt” Phillips passed the little slip of paper over.

“The Co-Op supermarket in North Street” The Commander read the details, “Dated yesterday afternoon, three pounds and thirty-seven pence at three minutes past four.”

“Assuming that it was her, that means we have a date and a time for a possible last known location” Forrester remarked.

“All right” The Commander went over to the board on the wall where a large-scale map of Haychester was displayed, “Let’s put a pin in North Street, that is the Co-Op and then another pin here in Priory Park where the bag turned up and finally a third pin all the way up here where her supposed place of residence is.”

“Supposed?” Longton picked up on The Commander’s remark.

“The place is too tidy, too clean” The Commander then explained, “Either someone has cleaned it very thoroughly to remove something they don’t want us to see, or she hardly ever set foot in the place.”

“I have been doing some background research on our missing woman” Longton indicated the blown-up copy of Grey’s photograph, scanned from her passport, and mounted on the wall, “Everything checks out so far, but I am awaiting some documents to be faxed over.”

“Friends and relatives?” The Commander asked.

“Nothing so far” Longton confirmed, “Midhurst Office sent someone around to her workplace and her manager and colleagues confirmed she works there but that she never turned up for her shift last night, and that in terms of knowing her, she is a bit of a blank canvas if you know what I mean.”

“Hmmm...” The Commander mused, “We do have this though” he then produced the postcard recovered from the house and passed it around.

“So, she has an uncle it would seem?” Phillips asked.

“Presumably somewhere in the East Sussex countryside” Forrester added.

“What is the postmark?” The Commander then asked which prompted Phillips to pick up her magnifying glass again and examine the rear of the postcard in closer detail.

“East Grinstead?” Phillips then suggested as the print of the postmark was not entirely clear.

“That fits in with the East Sussex countryside picture” Longton remarked.

“But no name so almost no way of tracing him” The Commander then concluded which was the point he turned to look at the office door when a polite knock was heard, and Superintendent Edwards came in.

“I hope I am not interrupting?” Edwards remarked.

“No, not at all Sir” The Commander reassured him, “We were just going through what we have found.”

“Which is?” Edwards asked.

“Not a lot...” The Commander then admitted, “Our missing woman probably bought some shopping in the Co-Op in North Street just after four o’clock yesterday afternoon, she didn’t show up for work that evening and she has an uncle in East Grinstead.”

“That’s it?” Edwards responded.

“Pretty much” The Commander admitted, “I was considering taking a few of our guys into the city centre around about four this afternoon and see if anyone remembers anything.”

“Sounds like a good idea” Edwards agreed, “but watch the overtime” he then warned.

“Understood Sir” The Commander confirmed.

“So, she has either done a runner, been abducted or is lying dead in a ditch somewhere” Edwards then summarised.

“That is pretty much a good a summary of the situation as any” The Commander admitted.

“Right” Edwards declared, “In which case I suggest you crack open the Section 28 File and start knocking on doors.”

“Section 28 File?” Phillips asked.

“Our registered list of every single peeper, pervert, nonce and fiddler on our manor” The Commander explained, “Essentially the membership list of the local chapter of the Dirty Mac Brigade.”

“Right...” Phillips responded as The Commander went over to a filing cabinet, opened a drawer and took out a file.

“We need to track down every single name on this list, find out where they have been, who they have seen and what they have been up to since four o’clock yesterday afternoon” The Commander then announced.

“Better start hitting the phones then Sir” Phillips remarked.

“Just make sure you have had your shots if you have to meet some of these guys face to face” Edwards then suggested.

As Edwards left the office, Longton saw the fax machine begin to print some incoming documents and he wandered over to it.

A look of extreme concern came over his face as he saw the documents emerging on the fax machine and saw some of the details appearing.

With a beep, the transmission printing completed and Longton look around a little apprehensively. Seeing that everyone else in the room was busy, he took a discreet look at the documents before tucking them inside his uniform tunic, out of sight.

The Commander was at his desk, rummaging through files and munching thoughtfully on biscuits when Longton discreetly came up to him.

“Lunchtime...” Longton quietly remarked to which The Commander looked up in response.

“Right...” The Commander then agreed on seeing Longton’s expression and then checking his watch.

Longton then discreetly left the office whereupon The Commander waited for a couple of minutes before locking his packet of biscuits back in his bottom desk drawer and standing up.

“Just popping out, won’t be long” he then called across the office before grabbing his uniform tunic and leaving.

It took a minute for The Commander to head down the stairs and then across the courtyard towards the central corridor before heading along it to the canteen at the far end where Longton was waiting by the entrance.

Making sure that there was nobody nearby to overhear them, Longton indicated the documents tucked inside his tunic.

“We need to talk; I think I have found something, and you are probably not going to like it” Longton ominously warned.

“In which case, let's eat” The Commander duly agreed, and they headed into the canteen, proceeding up to the servery area at the top end.

“Let me guess, your usual?” the Canteen Supervisor asked The Commander.

“Of course...” The Commander confirmed with a smile.

“How the hell are you still alive with all that greasy crap you eat?” Longton asked as the Canteen Supervisor duly loaded The Commander's plate with a generous helping of chips accompanying the couple of battered fish fingers.

“I am a firm believer that you should never work on an empty stomach, the CWE diet and when it comes to my health, I have been declared dead at least once so, what the hell?” The Commander declared.

“CWE?” Longton asked.

“Chips With Everything” both The Commander and the Canteen Supervisor replied in unison.

“Salad please...” Longton then requested.

“Dear oh dear” The Commander remarked as he looked at Longton's plate while they walked over to a vacant table.

“Fiancée’s suggestion” Longton then explained, “She wants me around for as long as possible.”

“Ah, you see that is where you and I are poles apart” The Commander remarked as they proceeded over to a vacant table over on the far side, away from anyone else and duly sat down, “You have something to live for, I don't except for this job which will almost certainly kill me off, probably sooner rather than later.”

“Oh, come on, you are a survivor” Longton responded, “One of the toughest guys I know.”

“Tell that to the half dozen holes in me” The Commander mused as he proceeded to eat his dinner.

“You are still alive, aren't you?” Longton then pointed out.

“That is a matter of some debate...” The Commander regretfully remarked to himself.

“Cheers” Longton then held up his fork of salad with a noticeable lack of enthusiasm which made The Commander smile again.

“Cheers” The Commander then responded in kind with a well loaded fork of chips and fish finger which he then proceeded to eat with noticeably more enthusiasm.

It being towards the end of the lunchtime session in the canteen, it was quiet and as the three admin personnel vacated the table nearby, Longton and The Commander were now isolated and alone.

“All right Al, what is really on your mind?” the Commander then asked.

“Strictly between you and me” Longton quietly began as he took out the papers from his inside uniform tunic pocket and placed them flat on the table, facing The Commander, “I think I have uncovered evidence that this is way more fishy than you first suspected and probably kept to ourselves for the moment.”

“Colour me intrigued” The Commander thoughtfully replied, “Go on...” he then prompted.

“My old man once told me that if you have a mystery you cannot solve, go right back to the beginning and start from there” Longton began, “So here we are, birth certificate for Sophie Elizabeth Grey, born at four minutes past twelve on the fourteenth of April 1965 at St Charles Hospital, Bristol.”

“So at least we know she actually exists” The Commander remarked.

“In a manner of speaking...” Longton remarked ever so slightly hesitantly, “I did the trawl of all the usual sources, the DVLA issued her a driving licence in 1983, the Passport Office confirms her passport being issued and all the numbers match up, a perfectly matched paperwork trail.”

“Except for...?” The Commander began to sense where this was possibly going.

“The Register of Births, Deaths & Marriages has another entry for her following her birth” Longton moved aside the papers to produce another official document that he placed on the table and pushed forward.

“Oh...” The Commander realised the significance as he saw the document.

“One death certificate for Sophie Elizabeth Grey, dated 23rd June 1968, recording her death from trauma after being hit by a car in Cheltenham” Longton confirmed, “Our mystery woman died when she was just three years old.”

“I can see why you wanted to keep this strictly under our hats” The Commander agreed as he looked at the documents again, “This isn't an admin cock up, is it?”

“Nope...” Longton confirmed, “All checked and double checked, I even spoke with the Coroner in Cheltenham, he remembers it well.”

“This whole case really stinks now” The Commander then remarked as he finished his dinner, “There are other parties at work here I reckon, ones who don't play by the same rules we do.”

“I'm sorry, you play by the rules?” Longton rather sarcastically commented.

“I give the appearance of playing by the rules, there is a difference” The Commander explained with a broad smile, “Let's keep this strictly between us for the time being.”

“Got it” Longton agreed as they both got up, “Err what about the boss though?” he then asked.

“Oh, let's not bother the man” The Commander casually replied, “He has got enough on his plate, mostly keeping me in check I reckon.”

“Well, that all checks out” Forrester announced as he hung up the telephone, “Guy in the Co-Op definitely remembers our missing girl at about four o'clock yesterday afternoon.”

“Is he sure?” The Commander asked as he returned to the office and proceeded to sit down behind his desk located next to the window.

“Described as being very tasty looking, couldn't miss her” Forrester explained.

“So, what the hell has happened to her?” Phillips asked.

“That is the big question” The Commander admitted as he opened his bottom desk drawer and took out a few chocolate biscuits from the extensive supply hidden within and promptly proceeded to eat them, crumbs liberally sprinkling all over his desk.

Longton came in at that point with a report in his hand he had just received.

“Right, we have thirty-seven names on our File 28 list” Longton confirmed, “Three are dead, one absconded to Aberdeen without telling us six months ago, two are in prison and we have accounted for all bar two that we can't find.”

“Who are the two?” The Commander asked as he proceeded to eat another biscuit.

“Larry Ordant” Longton read the first missing name from the report.

“Just started a ten stretch in Parkhurst” The Commander instantly recalled, “Besides, our missing girl isn't his type, too old and the wrong gender.”

“Ah...” Longton responded as he duly proceeded to cross him off the list, “That leaves one Michael Swain missing in action.”

“Michael Swain?” The Commander mused before suddenly clicking his fingers as he realised who they were discussing, “You mean Mucky Mickey!”

“Mucky Mickey?” Longton responded.

“Well, that is what he is known as by the Vice Squad” The Commander confirmed.

“No response at his place and apparently his neighbours have not seen him since yesterday lunchtime” Longton informed everyone.

“Hmm...” The Commander thought for a moment when, after another bite of biscuit, he then had an idea, “What time is it?” he then asked.

“Erm, just coming up to three o'clock” Phillips confirmed on checking her watch.

“Graham, grab your coat” The Commander then instructed as he got back to his feet and finished off his last biscuit, “I know exactly where he will be.”

“So, this 'Mucky Mickey' character” Forrester asked as The Commander brought the patrol car to a stop by the side of the road just south of Haychester Bus Garage, “You know him?”

“Mucky Mickey is basically Haychester’s font of all knowledge on anything naughty, kinky or perverse” The Commander explained as they walked down the road, away from the Bus Garage and the main railway line that crosses the south side of the city at that point, “Essentially he is The Obscene Publications Act in human form.”

“Sounds charming...” Forrester responded with a distinct lack of enthusiasm.

“Oh, he is not all that bad compared with some” The Commander reassured his young colleague, “However he is a creature of extremely predictable habit.”

“Hence how you know where to find him?” Forrester ventured as a key fact was beginning to occur to him.

“You see, Mickey has his ear close to the ground as it were” The Commander continued to explain as they turned the corner left into a side road, “and whilst he has some slightly questionable tastes, he has helped us out over the years putting away some quite unpleasant characters.”

“So, how do you know where to find him?” Forrester then asked.

“Simple” The Commander explained, “His tastes are for young ladies in uniform which means he will either be around the Student Nurse Accommodation or here” he then indicated ahead, “The Girls High School Sixth Form at going home time.”

“Naughty boy...” Forrester remarked.

“It’s all right, he just likes to look” The Commander tried to reassure his colleague, “Well, except for that incident with the student nurse last year...”

“Oh, that thing in the phone box with err, what was her name?” Forrester tried to recall, “Ah yes, Randy Mandy, wasn’t it?”

“That’s her” The Commander confirmed, “Made our Mickey a man that day.”

“Is that him?” Forrester then nodded ahead towards a tall man in his late twenties standing nearby.

“Yep, that’s our Mickey” The Commander confirmed, “Come on, I’ll introduce you.”

The two officers quietly stepped over to the man where The Commander then tapped him on the shoulder.

“Afternoon Mickey” The Commander remarked, “Enjoying the view?”

“Oh, hello” Mickey responded, “Nice afternoon for it.”

“Given your hobbies, I won’t ask what...” The Commander wryly remarked, “Come on” he then prompted, “I want a word with you.”

“Lead on...” Mickey reluctantly replied and duly proceeded to follow The Commander down the road with Forrester following closely behind until they reached the patrol car.

“In you get” The Commander then instructed, opening the rear door of the car before getting in alongside him whilst Forrester got in the front.

“Okay Mickey, we have been looking for you” The Commander then declared, “We need to know everywhere that you have been since yesterday afternoon.”

“What’s this about?” Mickey asked, “Here, I helped the Home Office last time out and they said they would take me off the list.”

“Well, as long as you have not been a naughty boy, I will see what I can do” The Commander confirmed.

“All right then, what do you want to know?” Mickey then continued.

“A girl has gone missing, and we are pulling everyone on our list” Forrester explained, “You were the last name we couldn’t find.”

“She went missing sometime after four o’clock yesterday afternoon” The Commander then continued, “Her bag was found in Priory Park this morning and she has vanished into thin air.”

“Why is it always ‘thin’ air?” Mickey mused.

“Now, you have an eye for a pretty young lady” The Commander remarked, “So I reckon if she has been about, you would have noticed her, am I right Mickey?”

“Now that you mention it” Mickey slightly hesitantly replied, “I do have a good memory for a pretty face” he then admitted, “You got a picture?”

“Only this, from her passport” The Commander produced the piece of paper from his uniform tunic pocket and passed it across.

“Oh!” Mickey exclaimed as he instantly recognised the face in the photograph, “That’s Chantelle.”

“The name we have is Sophie” Forrester remarked with a tone of confusion.

“Ah well, Chantelle is her professional name” Mickey explained, “She’s a tom you see.”

“She’s on the game?” The Commander responded with astonishment, “Well, that explains the large number of condoms in her bag.”

“Tools of the trade as it were” Mickey agreed, “She’s not a street prozzie though, she’s a posh bird, one of those expensive escort types.”

“Escort?” Forrester asked.

“You know, rich businessmen or upper-class guys, need a pretty lady on their arm for a formal doo or just the company” Mickey continued to explain, “Probably charges three or four hundred quid an hour just for dinner with her and any, ahem extras afterwards are added to the bill in the morning if you know what I mean?”

“That explains all the expensive stuff, the house, pretty much everything” The Commander concluded, “So how come you know her then?” he then asked Mickey, “A bit out of your league isn’t she?”

“She does modelling work too, that is where I met her a couple of weeks ago” Mickey explained, “We got chatting you see.”

“So where were you last night?” Forrester then asked.

“Night School” Mickey confirmed to a somewhat disbelieving look from The Commander, “Professional Photography Class, it's my new hobby.”

“Really?” The Commander responded.

“Honest Guv” Mickey pleaded, “I swear on my mother's life.”

“All right, if you say so” The Commander agreed, “So, this girl, Chantelle or whatever she is calling herself?”

“I met her a couple of times, through the photography club” Mickey explained, “Last time I saw her was about a week ago.”

“Any idea where she might hang out or run to if she was in trouble?” Forrester asked.

“You could try Glenda at the Blue Parrot” Mickey suggested, “She knows most of the girls in the industry locally.”

“Blimey, is that place still going?” Forrester remarked.

“Gone all upmarket now don't you know” The Commander confirmed, “They got mains electricity and everything” he joked.

“Ah, you are a funny guy, Guv” Mickey remarked.

“Well, I do have a serious side” The Commander then firmly reminded him, “and that means if I find out that you are messing us about or lying to me, I'll give the Vice Squad a bell and suggest they pop around your place for tea, biccies and a relaxing browse through your personal library, is that understood?”

“Message received and understood” Mickey quickly agreed.

“Good boy” The Commander responded, “Now, off you go and don't try and leave town.”

“Yeah, err right” Mickey replied as he got out of the car, “See you...”

“You can count on it” The Commander confirmed as he and Forrester watched Mickey head off.

“So, what do we do now?” Forrester then asked as they got back in the car and The Commander started the engine.

“Let's see if anyone knows what happened to her” The Commander declared, “Sophie, Chantelle or whatever her name is” he then proceeded to drive off into the traffic.

As the patrol car headed off towards the Bus Station and on towards the city centre, the pale coloured Vauxhall Cavalier saloon pulled out from the car park next to the Bus Garage and began to follow again, only pausing briefly with the traffic stopped for the lights to let out the passenger, a tall man in a smart grey suit who proceeded to head off in the direction that Mickey went towards a few moments earlier.

“This girl” Longton showed the enlargement of the passport photograph to a potential witness outside the Co-Op food store in North Street, “You are sure it is her?”

“Hair might have been a bit blonder than that, but it was definitely her, I am sure” the witness confirmed.

“Julie!” Longton then called over to Phillips who in response, came across the street to join them, “I want you take the details and a statement from this nice lady here” he then instructed.

“No problem” Phillips agreed as she extracted her official notebook and a pen whilst Longton moved off to make a call over the radio.

“One Three One from One Eight One, receiving over?” Longton called into his radio.

“Yeah Al, I can hear you” The Commander responded as he was stopped at the pedestrian crossing lights at the top of Market Avenue.

“We have got a potential witness” Longton confirmed, “Nice little old lady recalls seeing our girl coming out of the Co-Op yesterday afternoon at about the right time.”

“Sounds promising” The Commander responded.

“Three things of note” Longton then continued, “She remembers our missing girl had dyed blonde hair, definitely had her handbag with her and boarded a bus towards Midhurst.”

“That would be a 260 then” The Commander recalled, “Is anyone getting a statement from this lady?” he then asked.

“Julie is on it now” Longton confirmed as he looked behind him to see Phillips busily writing down a statement in her official notebook.

“Good work” The Commander complimented, “Get onto the bus company, find out who was driving a northbound number 260 bus at about four yesterday afternoon and get a statement from them.”

“Will do” Longton confirmed, “Where are you?” he then asked.

“I am going to drop young Forrester here in Priory Park” The Commander explained as the lights finally changed to green and he moved off, “Meet me by the gates in ten minutes.”

“Roger that” Longton confirmed.

“When we get there, I want you to take over the witness appeal on site” The Commander explained to Forrester as he turned left into New Park Road, “I need Al's experience with me.”

“Understood” Forrester agreed.

Approximately halfway up New Park Road, The Commander indicated left and then turned into Priory Road, taking the route through the location of the old Roman city walls and then curving left around the outer boundary of Priory Park until reaching the main gate.

Longton was already there having walked the short distance from North Street when The Commander brought the car to a halt.

“I have got Dave on the case with the bus company” Longton confirmed “Hopefully we should be able to track down the driver pretty quick.”

“Excellent” The Commander called, “It finally feels like we are making some progress at last.”

“It's a small step but at least it is something” Longton agreed.

“All right Al, I need you with me” The Commander then instructed, “Graham, keep digging here, there must be some more witnesses, no matter how insignificant.”

“You got it boss” Forrester confirmed before heading off.

“Okay, I'll bite” Longton remarked as he got in the front passenger seat of the patrol car, “Where are we going?”

“The Blue Parrot” The Commander declared as he drove off, back the way he had just come.

“Oh, yuck...” Longton jokingly responded.

“What time was it, officer?” the Bus Station Supervisor asked as he looked through a large black leather-bound notebook with extensive numbers of handwritten entries.

“Our witness says she boarded a number 260 bus towards Midhurst at the top end of North Street at about four o'clock yesterday afternoon” Lieutenant Commander Dave Stride confirmed as he checked his notebook.

“Right” the Supervisor responded as he checked the entries, “Here you go, route 260, journey number three forty-five, vehicle number six eight four, driver five six one nine three.”

“Who's that?” Stride asked.

“Old Barry” the Supervisor confirmed before looking at a clipboard hanging on the wall “and it's your lucky day, he should be pulling in just about now.”

The Supervisor led Stride out of the door to the back of the Bus Station just as a large green and cream painted double decker bus came swinging across the apron and stopped in the bay in front of them just as a dark green single decker bus began to reverse away from the adjacent bay, it's loud diesel engine clattering away with such a volume that they had to wait until it was clear before they could speak.

“Barry!” the Supervisor called as the driver came out of the cab and stepped onto the pavement.

“Yeah?” the elderly bus driver responded.

“The officer here wants to know about a passenger you picked up yesterday afternoon” the Supervisor called.

“Fire away Officer” Barry declared.

“Would have been about four o'clock yesterday afternoon, northbound 260, young woman with blonde hair and a distinctive handbag?”

“Ah yes, I remember her all right” Barry confirmed “Seen her a few times in the last four to six weeks between Haychester and that posh hotel place just south of Midhurst, very tasty lass, if I were twenty years younger...”

“In your dreams Barry!” the Supervisor chuckled.

“So, she went to that hotel place?” Stride asked.

“Actually no” Barry responded, “She got off short of her usual stop yesterday, just north of Lavant.”

“Right, that's very useful, thanks” Stride replied as he made some notes, “Very useful indeed...”

“Behold, Haychester's one and only nightclub, The Blue Parrot” The Commander declared as he brought the car to a stop in front of the converted old manor house building, the tacky neon sign with a giant animated parrot emblazoned across the front.

“Salubrious establishment?” Longton asked as they got out of the car.

“Notorious more like” The Commander explained, “There is a reason why this sleepy old city we swore to serve and protect has its one and only isolated hint of night life located four miles outside the city walls.”

“These are new boots; they are not going to wind up sticking to the floor, are they?” Longton asked as they proceeded towards the door.

“Don't worry, this place doesn't open until seven o'clock tonight” The Commander confirmed, “At the moment it is a sleepy place of calm before the storm.”

Longton and The Commander reached the firmly secured front door of the premises whereupon they knocked loudly.

“Come on, open up, it's...” The Commander began when a window directly above them opened.

“...the fuzz!” called a cheerful female voice.

“Hi Glenda!” The Commander called as he and Longton looked up to see a woman staring down at them through the window.

“Business or pleasure, gentlemen?” Glenda asked.

“Business I am afraid” The Commander confirmed whereupon Glenda's face dropped a bit from the beaming smile she first had.

“All right, round the back, the door is open” Glenda responded, “I'll go and put the kettle on.”

“Cheers” The Commander called back before and Longton headed off around the side of the building.

“She the proprietor?” Longton asked as they reached the back door.

“Yeah, Glenda has been here for years, inherited it when her husband got sent down for armed robbery ten years ago” The Commander explained, “Glenda was the one who shopped him to the Robbery Squad, claimed the reward and refinanced this place in her own name.”

“Very enterprising...” Longton remarked as they headed inside, taking them through the kitchen area which at that time of day was largely empty before passing through the bar where the flashy disco lights were illuminating the worn wooden dance floor.

“Good afternoon officers” Glenda called from over near the stage, “Tea?”

“Always...” The Commander readily agreed as they all sat around a table.

Their host was Glenda West, a modest woman in her mid fifties who kept herself looking good, keeping back the advancing years well and had run Haychester's solitary spot of nightlife for over ten years now.

“Come on officers, you look like you could use a cuppa” Glenda then declared, proceeding to pour the tea from an antique bone China teapot into a matching set of cups and saucers.

“Much obliged” The Commander responded as he helped himself to milk and sugar before making the introductions, “Glenda, this is my colleague Lieutenant Commander Al Longton.”

“Mightily pleased to meet you” Glenda responded, “So what can I do for you gentlemen?”

“Are you still connected with the local working trade?” The Commander asked.

“I look after the girls, make sure they get a decent meal and don't get into any trouble if that is what you mean” Glenda confirmed, “Why? Is one of my girls in trouble?”

“Possibly” The Commander explained as he got a piece of paper out from his inside uniform tunic pocket and produced it, “This girl one of yours?” he then showed her the photo.

“Is this something to do with your handbag case?” Glenda asked as she looked at the photograph thoughtfully.

“That is the photograph on the passport that was among the array of documents that we found in the bag” Longton confirmed, “Name we have is Sophie Grey.”

“However, according to a reasonably reliable source...” The Commander began.

“Mucky Mickey? Reliable?” Longton asked with a palatable sense of concern.

“Mickey?” Glenda responded to which The Commander merely nodded in response, “Oh, he's all right.”

“Well, he claims that she is on the game, goes by the name of Chantelle?” The Commander concluded.

“Ah yes, I have seen her around” Glenda confirmed, “Posh girl, been on the scene about three, maybe four months now.”

“You know her?” Longton asked.

“Only by reputation” Glenda explained, “High class escort, select clientele, four or five hundred quid a night plus the extras are charged on top, no pun intended, if you know what I mean.”

“Well, I do, not sure about you” Longton cheekily looked across at The Commander.

“I know how the other half live, thank you very much” The Commander quickly retorted, “Cheeky sod...”

“So, what has happened to her?” Glenda asked.

“That is what we want to know” The Commander admitted, “All we have is her bag, all her personal documentation and an empty house that looks like it has barely been lived in.”

“Plus, there is the shopping” Longton reminded him.

“The house doesn't surprise me” Glenda remarked, “she will be spending most of her nights in posh hotel rooms, on the job.”

“Good point” The Commander agreed.

“Have you found her little black book though?” Glenda then asked.

“Her what?” Longton responded.

“All working girls, especially the top end of the game ones, always keep detailed records of their regular clients” Glenda explained, “We call it a Little Black Book, but it could be a diary, notebook, these days even a record on one of those computer things.”

“Nothing like that has been found that I am aware of” Longton recalled.

“Shame” Glenda remarked, “I am sure it will contain all sorts of lovely names and addresses drawn from the highest levels of local society.”

“Does make me wonder if one of her clients didn't want anyone finding out that they employed her, ahem, services” The Commander commented.

“Of course, there is also the other issue...” Longton began.

“Ah yes” The Commander agreed, “Assuming it is not an admin cock up, apparently our missing girl actually died when she was still a youngster.”

“All very odd” Glenda remarked, “Mind you, in my experience, girls in the trade tend to have murky backgrounds, clouded in mystery either because they have something they want to hide or to forget.”

“If we can find her little black book, I am willing to bet whoever knows what has happened to her is named in there” The Commander concluded.

“Do you want me to ask around?” Glenda asked, “I have contacts in places even you can't reach Commander.”

“I'll bet...” The Commander remarked.

“You would be surprised” Glenda confirmed with a smile, “So, anything else I can do for you?” she then asked, “We do discounts for men in uniform you know, especially the really good looking ones.”

“That would be you” The Commander remarked to Longton.

“You really are the master of talking yourself down, aren't you?” Longton then commented.

“Force of habit” The Commander then admitted as he finished his tea, “I am the job, nothing much more to tell.”

“Here, let me see your hand” Glenda then took The Commander's left hand and looked at it, palm upwards, “I'll tell you what your future holds.”

“Is this another string on your bow or just a hobby?” The Commander asked with a wry smile.

“A little skill I inherited from my grandmother” Glenda confirmed as she looked carefully at the palms of The Commander’s hands with a thoughtful expression.

“Anything interesting?” The Commander asked, “Pointless question probably” he then admitted.

“There you go again” Longton remarked.

“Your future is clear; you will be awoken by one of two” Glenda then declared to a somewhat confused look from The Commander.

“One of two what?” he then asked.

“No idea dearie” Glenda then admitted, “It is all vague pointers and hints at what may be to come in this game, oh but probably best you avoid standing around on bridges, could be very bad for you.”

“I don’t like heights so that shouldn’t be a problem” The Commander confirmed.

“Has The Commander managed to put his feet in it yet?” Edwards asked as he put his head around the door of the Haychester Control Room.

“Not yet Sir” Judd responded, “The day is still young though...”

“Quite” Edwards agreed, “Any progress?” he then enquired.

“Lieutenant Commander Stride just called in a report” Judd consulted his clipboard with its extensive handwritten notes on it, “Apparently our missing girl did go shopping yesterday afternoon and was seen boarding a northbound number 260 bus a few minutes later.”

“Didn't she work at that posh hotel and restaurant place up near Midhurst?” Edwards asked.

“Apparently so, yes” Judd confirmed, “Except that according to the bus driver, she got off earlier than usual, about halfway there.”

“Have you told The Commander this?” Edwards asked.

“I have been waiting for him to call in” Judd explained, “His radio is off at the moment whilst he is on enquiries.”

“Why?” Edwards looked somewhat puzzled, “Where has he gone?”

“The Blue Parrot” Judd confirmed, trying to suppress a giggle.

“Good grief...” Edwards responded with a bemused look.

“You know what AI” The Commander remarked as he drove them back into the centre of Haychester where the late afternoon peak traffic was building up substantially resulting in slow progress on their journey, “There is something about this whole case that is bothering me.”

“Would that be the fact that she seems to have vanished into thin air or the fact that according to a death certificate she should not exist in the first place?” Longton asked.

“Both” The Commander confirmed, “In fact this whole case stinks to high heaven.”

“You usually say that about pretty much every case you are lead investigating officer on” Longton reminded him.

“You have a point” The Commander agreed as the nose to tail traffic meant they had become bogged down in a tailback trying to cross the Haychester bypass, “Where is Traffic Division when you want them?” he then frustratingly remarked.

“In the canteen?” Longton knowingly suggested, “I would suggest calling them on the radio, but you haven't switched it back on yet” he then politely pointed out.

“Oh...” The Commander took the opportunity of being in stationary traffic to turn the radio back on before calling.

“Control from Whisky Sierra One Three One” he then called.

“Control receiving” Judd's voice came through loud and clear.

“Any updates for me?” The Commander then asked, his expression clearly showing that he hoped not.

“Dave Stride spoke to the bus driver who took on your missing girl yesterday” Judd confirmed, “Apparently she got off earlier than usual, about halfway into her normal journey.”

“Well, I would call that a development” Longton commented to which The Commander nodded in agreement.

“Do we know exactly where she got off?” The Commander then asked.

“One stop short of Lavant, near the gravel pits” Judd confirmed, “Stride is on his way up there now to take a look around.”

“Roger that, thanks” The Commander replied, “Whisky Sierra Three Seven Two from One Three One” he then called, “Dave?”

“Three Seven Two receiving” Stride responded.

“Where are you now?” The Commander asked.

“Just heading up the Midhurst Road, if I can get clear of this traffic” Stride confirmed.

“I am stuck at the Oving traffic lights” The Commander confirmed as the traffic ahead finally started to slowly move on, “We'll tag along if you don't mind?”

“Join the party” Stride confirmed.

“Let's get things moving” The Commander then declared, activating the lights and sirens which had the desired effect of getting most of the traffic ahead of him moving aside as best as they could before he accelerated away at high speed.

“Whoa! That's more like it” Longton remarked as The Commander skilfully drove through the traffic at high speed, not missing a beat.

Using his local knowledge, The Commander was able to use side streets and little used parallel back roads to traverse the north east quarter of Haychester to reach the Northgate Gyratory, essentially a gigantic square roundabout with the city's fire station located in the centre of it before, with an expertly applied handbrake turn, making a sharp left onto the main Midhurst road and heading north out of the city.

“Who taught you how to drive?” Longton asked as he held on to the handle above the passenger side window.

“My old man” The Commander confirmed, “I was proficient in everything from a Transit Van to a Mk 2 Jag by the time I was eleven” he explained.

“Was he a driver too then?” Longton enquired to which The Commander nodded in confirmation.

“The best in the business” The Commander recalled with a smirk.

“What sort of driver was he then?” Longton asked out of curiosity as he adjusted his passenger side rear view mirror and took a quick look at the traffic behind them, “Police?”

“Not exactly...” The Commander admitted, smiling.

“There's Dave” Longton then pointed ahead where another Security Service patrol car could be seen in the distance, parked by the side of the road.

“Got him” The Commander confirmed as he slowed down and pulled into the side of the road, coming to a stop behind the other car where Stride was stood, looking on.

“Blimey, you got here quickly” Stride remarked as Longton and The Commander got out of their car although he was not that surprised as The Commander's reputation as one of the best, fastest and safest drivers in the Service was already become almost the stuff of legend.

“Well, it is such a beautiful day” The Commander remarked as he looked around the semi-rural location they now found themselves in, “Why waste it stuck in traffic?” he then asked.

All three officers stood back as a large green and cream double deck bus on route 260 passed them heading north, not calling at the bus stop they were parked adjacent too as nobody wanted to board or alight there that time.

“So, is this it?” The Commander asked.

“Yes” Stride confirmed, “According to the Bus Driver who I interviewed, this girl has been a regular on the 260 for a few weeks now, usually travelling between the city and her workplace just south of Midhurst, but yesterday she got off here for some reason.

Longton looked around their location, peered over the adjacent hedge and then looked utterly confused.

“But this is the middle of nowhere?” Longton then gestured all around.

“Pretty much” Stride confirmed, “There is a farmhouse about a mile to the east of here, I have already spoken to the farmer there, he didn't see anything, neither did his wife.”

“That leaves the old railway line over there” The Commander indicated a snaking line of trees across the fields over on the west side of the road “and of course...” he then turned to his right, “...that.”

“Ah...” Longton remarked as he looked ahead over the hedge towards the north-west and saw the large excavations and man-made lakes where the gravel pit workings once were.

“Come on...” The Commander indicated before walking a short distance to a farm gate set into the hedgerow on the west side and proceeding through it.

“You don't think she came this way, do you?” Longton asked as he and Stride followed The Commander along a dirt track until they reached another gate where a faded sign indicated the boundary of the old gravel pit works which had been abandoned for many years now, the former pits now filled with water and the whole area gradually returning to nature.

“She got off the bus here for some reason” The Commander reminded them, “This ahem delightful spot is as good a reason as any.”

“These look fresh” Stride then remarked, kneeling down and taking a closer look at some vehicle tyre tracks in the mud near the gate where something had done a turning manoeuvre.

“Could be worth a look at by the Forensics Service” The Commander readily agreed, “Whatever though, at the moment the trail of our missing girl ends hereabouts.”

“What are you thinking?” Longton asked as he watched The Commander climb up on the bottom rung of the gate and look across the scene ahead of him.

“I’m thinking our crack team of accountants is going to have a heart attack when I call in the search teams and divers to check all this lot” The Commander admitted, indicating the old gravel workings.

“How big is this place?” Stride asked.

“Forty or fifty acres probably” The Commander honestly estimated.

“That is a hell of a lot of ground to cover” Longton remarked, “We had best get started.”

“Control from Whisky Sierra One Three One” The Commander then called over his radio.

“Control receiving One Three One, go ahead” Judd responded.

“I need a full search team, including a diving team out here at the old North Lavant gravel works site” The Commander requested, “Tell them to bring lots of portable lights as well, I reckon this one is going to be an all-nighter.”

“Did I hear those dreaded works ‘all-nighter’ by any chance?” Edwards asked as he returned to the Control Room.

“I am afraid so, Sir” Judd confirmed.

“There goes the overtime budget” Edwards then responded, “You know, for a dumped handbag in a hole in a park, this case seems to be getting awfully complicated.”

“The search teams Sir?” Judd then asked.

“Give him what he wants” Edwards agreed, “I am sure The Commander knows what he is doing, I hope...”

As the first vehicles carrying the search teams and their equipment began to arrive on site, The Commander looked around the surrounding countryside with a thoughtful expression.

“That hotel place that our missing girl supposedly worked at” The Commander then asked, “How far away is it from here?”

“Erm, about three or four miles up the road I think” Longton remarked.

“And she always took the bus” The Commander then resumed his thoughtful deliberations, “Yet she has a driving licence.”

“We have been unable to trace any vehicle registered in her name though” Longton remarked, “She could have used a rental or borrowed one from a friend?” he then suggested.

“Unlikely” The Commander responded, “You don’t hire a car for everyday running about and as far as we can tell, she did not seem to have any friends that we can find.”

“That’s true” Longton agreed.

“Come on” The Commander then declared, “Let’s go and visit that hotel, shake a tree or two and see if anything falls out.”

“But our guys have already been there” Longton then pointed out as he and The Commander proceeded back up the track to return to the car.

“Ah, but that was before we found out about her other little business” The Commander pointed out, “I reckon if I subtly drop the fact she was on the game into the conversation, the response we will get will change remarkably.”

“If you say so” Longton replied as they got back in the car and The Commander started the engine.

It only took a few minutes’ drive up towards Midhurst before they reached the turn off for the hotel.

“Blimey, this place is a bit posh, isn't it?” The Commander remarked as he turned off the main road, proceeded through the ornate wrought iron gates and on up the near perfect gravel driveway towards the hotel, located in a sympathetically converted late eighteenth century manor house set in extensive grounds.

“The Restaurant is supposed to have three Michelin Stars” Longton confirmed, “Well, at least that is what my girl keeps telling me, I think she is trying to suggest I take her here one day.”

“So, no sausage rolls and chips in grease then?” The Commander remarked as he parked the car in a space near the main hotel entrance.

“Probably not...” Longton agreed.

“Shame, I was just feeling peckish” The Commander admitted as they got out of the car.

“What about your emergency supply of chocolate and biscuits in the glove compartment?” Longton nodded towards the patrol car interior.

“Ran out this morning” The Commander confirmed to a look of no surprise whatsoever from Longton as they walked up to the front entrance.

The smartly uniformed man at the entrance duly held the door open to allow the two officers to enter.

“Nice place...” Longton then remarked as they both stood in the centre of the reception area and looked all around at the beautifully restored original carved ceiling and the surrounding architecture.

“I bet it is a cleaner’s nightmare with all those high ceilings, nooks and crannies though” The Commander then suggested.

“Can I help you, gentlemen?” the Receptionist called from behind her desk nearby.

“Ah, yes you can” The Commander confirmed as he and Longton duly walked up to the desk and proceeded to produce their warrant cards, “We would like to see your Guvnor, if possible, please.”

“Take a seat gentlemen” the Receptionist indicated the sumptuous chairs nearby before reaching for the telephone on the desk, “I’ll send for him now.”

“Thank you” The Commander replied before he and Longton headed over to the armchairs and sat down.

“Oooh, I could get used to this” Longton admitted as he practically sank into the chair.

“Should get some of these for the office” The Commander replied as he looked at the various magazines neatly laid out on the small table alongside him in gold embossed dark red leather binders, “No Railway Modeller?” he then remarked on seeing that they were all upmarket country living type publications.

“I think this place is probably targeted at a bit more of an upmarket audience than us mere plods” Longton then suggested.

“You are probably right” The Commander reluctantly agreed.

A few minutes passed during which time The Commander casually observed the comings and goings in the hotel, taking in every detail until a slightly apprehensive looking little man, receding hair, late fifties in his estimate and wearing a finely tailored suit and tie appeared from an office door and approached them.

“Officers?” the man asked, prompting Longton and The Commander to stand up, “George Parr, hotel manager” he then announced.

“Lieutenant Commander's Edwards and Longton” The Commander formally introduced themselves.

“What can I do for you gentlemen?” Parr then asked.

“Sophie Grey” The Commander confirmed “I believe she works here?”

“Oh, yes” Parr replied, seemingly slightly surprised, “We had a couple of your officers in this morning asking about her, I told them everything I knew about her.”

“Certain new information has now come to light” The Commander explained, “and as we were passing the door, I thought it would be a good opportunity to pop in and just clarify a few points.”

“Oh, I see” Parr responded.

“What exactly did Ms Grey do here?” Longton asked.

“She was responsible for guest relations, hospitality requirements, particularly for our more exclusive guests” Parr explained.

“Ah, I see” The Commander responded although he could tell through a combination of experience and instinct that Parr was really hoping he did not.

“And she was supposed to be here last night?” Longton then asked.

“She mostly did overnight shifts” Parr confirmed, “Six in the evening until the following morning.”

“And she was due to be here yesterday but was a no show?” The Commander asked, watching Parr very carefully for his most subtle of reactions to the questions.

“Yes, she didn't turn up yesterday which is most unlike her” Parr admitted, “We have only employed her for a few months, but up until now, she has been extremely reliable.”

“Glowing references no doubt?” The Commander suggested to which Parr merely nodded.

“These exclusive clients she was responsible for, we will need a list” The Commander then requested which was when he got the expected poorly hidden look of worry from Parr in response.

“Erm, I am not sure if we can do that...” Parr began.

“Look, Mr Parr” The Commander looked at him with a very serious expression, “We know and quite frankly I am sure you know what Ms Grey really does for a living, don't we?”

“Well...” Parr began but stammered.

“I'll make it simple; you give me a full unedited list of all your guests from the last two weeks, especially anyone Ms Grey will have erm, served shall we say, and I won't let on that you are running a posh upmarket knocking shop on the side, okay?” The Commander stated, smiling menacingly.

Parr shifted slightly uncomfortably on his feet in response before, with a resigned sigh, he nodded in agreement.

“Come with me to the office” Parr duly led the two officers across the lobby towards a discrete door behind the main reception desk.

The reluctance in Parr's stance was obvious as he proceeded to sit down behind his desk and activate his computer.

“I would like it made clear officers, that this information is for your eyes only, not for public distribution” Parr insisted as he proceeded to call up the details on the large computer screen, a lengthy list displayed in bright green script on an otherwise unsophisticated default black background before the mechanical dot matrix type printer began printing.

The Commander looked discreetly around the office as Longton watched the printer output a continuous length of paper with quite a lot of accompanying noise.

When it stopped, Parr swivelled his chair around and then took the printed paper, tearing it off at the base before passing it across to The Commander with obvious reluctance.

“Thank you” The Commander responded, “Your co-operation is duly noted, but be aware, if I find out there are any naughties going on here, I have a dozen hefty broad-shouldered sense of humour failures from the Vice Squad available on speed dial.”

“Uh huh...” Parr responded.

“Do we have a crystal-clear understanding Mr Parr?” The Commander then asked, looking him directly in the eyes.

“As glass...” Parr agreed.

“Good day” The Commander then smiled knowingly before he and Longton left.

As they headed across the reception area towards the door, The Commander discreetly noticed someone sat in a seat nearby pretending to read the paper before carrying on with Longton who was very much smirking.

“That was a man who just had his cage well and truly rattled” he remarked as they reached the patrol car.

“Yes Al” The Commander replied with a look of immense satisfaction, “Yes it was, and did you notice something else?” he then asked as they got in the car.

“He never once asked how she was or if we had found her?” Longton suggested.

“Exactly!” The Commander agreed as he started the car, “Well done Al, we will make a detective out of you yet!”

“Cheers!” Longton responded, slightly bemused.

“Mr Parr is lying to us” The Commander then declared as he reversed the car out of the parking space, “and I want to know why.”

Looking out of his office window, Parr watched as the patrol car headed away down the driveway.

As the car disappeared out of sight, Parr picked up the telephone on his desk and quickly dialled a number.

A few moments later, the call was connected.

“This is Parr, I just got tickled by the fuzz...”

“Whisky Sierra Two Seven Five from One Three One” The Commander called over the radio.

“Two Seven Five receiving” Forrester replied as he stepped away from the mobile control unit vehicle that was now onsite at the old gravel pits.

“I just had fun putting the wind up the toffee-nosed hotel manager where our missing girl worked” The Commander explained, “How's the search?” he then asked.

“Well...” Forrester looked around him at the hive of activity, “Mobile Ops van is on site, the tea urn is just warming up, the Dog Squad are working their way across the grounds and the diving team are just getting their gear on now, nothing yet though.”

“Understood” The Commander replied, “Al and I are on our way back to the office, there is something bugging me that I want to check out, so call me if anything turns up.”

“Will do” Forrester confirmed.

“You know what?” Longton then casually remarked as he watched the countryside go past the window as they headed back towards Haychester, “You are enigmatical.”

“Now now Al” The Commander casually reminded his colleague, “You know it has always been my policy to never be anything, eat anything or catch anything I can't spell.”

“I meant; you are a bit of a mystery” Longton then explained.

“That's better, I can spell that” The Commander responded, his interest piqued, “How so?”

“Everyone says you are a local lad, Haychester born and bred” Longton continued to explain “But yet your accent, attitude, the way you go about the job says to me you are originally from somewhere else.”

“Anywhere in particular?” The Commander asked, slightly concerned where this line of hopefully casual inquiry may be going.

“South London I reckon, southeast even” Longton confirmed “It's the way you speak, the mannerisms, that mindset that will happily shove an uncooperative suspect's head down a pub toilet and pull the chain if it were required, all says 'Made in the hearing range of Bow Bells' to me.”

“Mothers side” The Commander slightly evasively admitted, realising that a ghost of his past was potentially about to creep up and go boo at any moment if he wasn't careful.

“Figured as much” Longton responded with a rather satisfied look.

“Actually, I am a quarter Brummie too” The Commander then admitted, “Why do you ask?”

“Just curious” Longton explained “I like a mystery, me.”

“So I have noticed” The Commander agreed, “Mother from Lewisham, Dad from Bethnal Green originally.”

“Oh, Lewisham” Longton realised “I spent some time there in my college days, student digs and a mad auntie in Sevenoaks.”

“Everyone should have a mad auntie” The Commander remarked, “I haven't got one though.”

“No, you haven't got anyone, have you?” Longton commented.

“Saves me a fortune in Christmas cards every year” The Commander light heartedly confirmed, “What did you study?” he then asked.

“Huh?” Longton responded.

“You said you were in student digs in Lewisham” The Commander then reminded him, “Just wondered what you studied there?”

“Oh, I see” Longton realised, “I did a degree in crime and investigation, it's what got me this job.”

“The only university I went to, was the one of Life” The Commander admitted, “Left school with a D in woodwork and that was about it.”

“Sometimes qualifications are just words on a piece of fancy paper” Longton commented.

“Couldn’t agree more Al” The Commander readily replied.

Whilst The Commander gave the appearance of being cool about Longton’s inquiry, there was something deep inside bothering him and he made a mental note to make a few discreet inquiries of his own when he got the chance later.

Stopping at a junction in the midst of the rolling South Downs countryside, The Commander looked to his left and then to his right with a puzzled expression.

“So, do you want to go the pretty way or the traffic jam way?” The Commander asked.

“The traffic will be nose to tail all around North Gate” Longton summarised, “I suggest we take the pretty way, longer but a better chance of getting there before the Chief starts asking awkward questions as to where we are.”

“Roger that” The Commander agreed and indicated right before turning and heading off down a narrow country lane.

“Whisky Sierra One Three One from Control” came a call over the radio.

The Commander could sense this was probably important so took the opportunity of a layby they were approaching to pull over, stop the engine and then step out of the car before taking the call.

“One Three One receiving, over” The Commander then called.

“Message for you from Forensics” Judd confirmed, “Assuming that the missing woman’s paperwork and records are correct, the blood found in Priory Park is not, repeat not hers.”

“How did they work that out?” The Commander asked.

“Wrong blood group” Judd explained, “Our missing woman is O Negative, the blood was AB Positive, and it had traces of cocaine in it too.”

“So, whoever dumped the bag was probably a drug user” Longton concluded to which The Commander nodded in agreement.

“All right, thanks for that” The Commander then called, “Al and I are heading back into Haychester now so if anything else comes through, let me know.”

“Will do” Judd confirmed, “Control out.”

“An interesting little development” Longton commented.

“Isn’t it just” The Commander agreed as he was about to reach for the driver’s door handle but then paused when he detected something.

“What’s that?” Longton remarked as both he and the Commander could now hear a vehicle with a loud and powerful engine approaching, the noise echoing all around the surrounding countryside.

“Someone has got their foot down” The Commander commented as he opened the driver’s door.

“Look out!” Longton then called whereupon The Commander scrambled out of the way just in time as an open top sports car came haring around the corner, swerved and then passed them at high speed before continuing up the country lane, only narrowly missing them.

“Whoa, we are having him!” The Commander determinedly responded as he quickly got in the car and started the engine, “Light up the roof Al!” he then called before accelerating quickly away in pursuit as Longton activated the sirens and blue lights.

It was a short pursuit though as the sirens and lights had the desired effect, the driver holding his arm up in acknowledgement, slowing down and then pulling over to the side of the road in a farm gateway with the patrol car pulling in behind him.

“See if you can do a registration check on Speedy Gonzales here” The Commander requested as he parked the car and got out, “I am going to have a few words.”

“Just a few?” Longton remarked as he watched The Commander stride purposefully up to the driver’s side of the sports car.

“Good evening, Sir” The Commander formally called, “Is this your vehicle?” he then asked.

The Driver was a young man in his late twenties, well turned out in a tweed sports jacket and matching waistcoat, obviously someone of some class and money judging not only by his appearance but also the nature of his vehicle.

“Officer...” the driver called, “I do apologise, it’s a new car and I haven’t got used to the brakes yet.”

“Really?” The Commander responded, clearly disbelieving.

The driver watched as The Commander paced studiously around the front of the car, looking over every tiny detail carefully with an expert eye.

“Honest Officer” the driver insisted, “It was not my intention to cause any problems or harm” he attempted to reassure The Commander.

“Hmm...” The Commander simply responded, “Licence please” he then requested.

“Yes, certainly, of course” the driver confirmed, opening and reaching into the glove compartment and extracting some documentation before quickly closing the compartment again.

The Commander did catch a glimpse of something of interest inside the compartment but decided not to let on, instead he duly took the licence, a standard paper type, printed predominantly in green with various details type printed onto it, and then examined it carefully.

“You are...” The Commander examined the details, “Richard David Francis?” he then asked.

“Of course, yes” the driver agreed which was when Longton came up to them and The Commander looked over towards him.

“The car is registered to a Richard Francis of Haychester Manor Lodge” Longton confirmed.

“Well, that matches the licence” The Commander agreed.

“Err, that’s Lord Francis actually” the driver then corrected them.

“Oh yes, third son of the Earl of Haychester” The Commander immediately recalled.

“Yes, that’s right” Francis confirmed, “I have always had a good relationship with the Police although I do believe we haven’t actually met?” he then looked at The Commander.

“Lieutenant Commander Sam Edwards, Haychester” The Commander confirmed.

“Oh, I am honoured” Francis patronisingly responded, “The Commander himself?”

“Whatever...” The Commander casually dismissed the Francis’ platitudes, “You already have three points on this licence” he then handed it back to Francis, “Now as long as you drive carefully and get these brakes checked out, we will overlook it for now.”

“Thank you so much” Francis replied, obviously extremely grateful although he could see from The Commander’s expression that he was far from impressed, “I’ll convey my compliments to my father to pass on to the Administrator General the next time they do lunch.”

“You’re welcome...” The Commander responded, still unimpressed, “Drive carefully now” he then instructed before turning smartly on his heels and with Longton, returning to the patrol car.

With a cheeky wave, Francis started the powerful engine of the sports car and drove off.

“Tosser...” Longton remarked, as equally unimpressed as The Commander but having managed to hide it better.

“Now now Al” The Commander reminded him with a wry smile, “That’s Lord Tosser to you!”

“You really enjoy putting the wind up the aristocracy, don’t you?” Longton then remarked as they got back in the car and The Commander started it.

“Yeah...” The Commander admitted with a big smile before driving off.

The narrow and winding maze of small country lanes crisscrossed the whole area of that part of the county and makes it easy to get lost, but The Commander knew the area well and confidently navigated his way back towards the main road that leads to Haychester.

“What’s on your mind?” Longton asked as they had to slow down and pull over to allow a tractor and trailer to pass the other way, the shrub foliage brushing up against his side of the car.

“Tell me Al, am I going mad?” The Commander asked as the tractor and trailer rattled past them.

“You are as sane as anyone else around here” Longton honestly admitted, “Mind you, given the strange nature of this city, that probably isn’t saying much.”

“It’s just that I keep seeing metallic grey Vauxhall Cavalier’s everywhere I go” The Commander explained as he drove on, watching the rear-view mirror carefully, “I mean I know it is a very popular model of car...”

“You mean like the one that has been following us for at least the last three miles?” Longton then asked.

“You noticed it too?” The Commander responded.

“It was there as we left Haychester” Longton agreed, “I am pretty sure I saw one just like it near Priory Park this morning, it was still behind us just before we reached the gravel pits, and it never passed us all the time we were there or when we were dealing with Lord Speedy back there.”

“Hold on Al, let’s try something” The Commander then remarked as he noticeably slowed down.

Longton adjusted the second passenger side rear view mirror to look behind them. In the distance the tractor and trailer that had passed them could just about be seen but then it pulled over and the front of the Cavalier came into view.

“You are not going mad” Longton then confirmed, “Someone is definitely following us.”

“Right then” The Commander determinedly declared as he sped up again, “They want to play games then that is fine by me.”

“They are good, whoever they are” Longton remarked, “Hanging back just far enough to maintain contact without too much risk of being noticed.”

“But I am an old hand at this game” The Commander responded, checking the mirrors carefully once more, “My old man taught me more than just simply how to drive...”

“Oh yes, I remember you said he was a driver by profession?” Longton recalled what The Commander has said a short while earlier.

“Indeed, he was...” The Commander admitted with a knowing smile.

“So, what’s the plan?” Longton looked back over his shoulder and saw that the Cavalier was now out of sight again.

“Get behind them” The Commander explained as he saw an opportunity up ahead and slammed on the brakes, “and that will do very nicely” he then declared, putting the car into reverse and quickly backing up a sloping gravel track into a farmyard before pulling in behind an old piece of rusty and weed entangled farm machinery and stopping the engine.

From the other side of the hedge, they were parked up against, the sound of a car grew closer before going past, the flash of the rear of a pale coloured Vauxhall Cavalier saloon just appearing ahead of them.

“Right, let’s give them a surprise!” The Commander then called as he restarted the engine and despite the slippery conditions, managed to skilfully return to the road and set off in pursuit.

The Cavalier was a short distance ahead and initially, it’s two occupants failed to notice that their quarry was in fact now behind them.

“Now they are probably wondering where we are” Longton commented.

“Behind you...” The Commander then smirked which was when it was clear the occupants of the Cavalier realised that they had been rumbled and immediately accelerated off.

“Here we go!” Longton called, activating the sirens and lights whilst The Commander gave chase through the narrow country lanes.

“Can you see the reg number A1?” The Commander then asked as he concentrated intently on the road ahead and maintaining visual contact with the speeding target.

“Yeah, got it” Longton confirmed as he quickly scribbled down the registration number, “Do you want me to call it in?” he then asked.

“Yes” The Commander confirmed, “Wash it through that new-fangled computer of theirs and see if it goes ping.”

“Whisky Sierra Control from One Eight One” Longton called into his radio but only got scrambled static in response.

“We must be in the dark zone” The Commander remarked, “Radio reception is crap or worse around here.”

“Where the hell is this guy going?” Longton asked as the pursuit continued at high speed.

“Away from us I suspect” The Commander admitted, “Mind you, whoever is driving that motor knows his stuff, pursuit trained if I were a betting man.”

“I’ll try again” Longton remarked as he attempted to use his radio once more, “Whisky Sierra Control from One Eight One, can you hear me?”

The same garbled static and interference laden response was the only result to which Longton reacted by giving up.

“Whoa!” The Commander remarked as up ahead, the car executed a perfect high-speed turning manoeuvre, “That was straight out of the Security Service Advance Pursuit Driving Handbook.”

“How do you know that?” Longton asked as The Commander duly followed with an equally well executed turn of his own.

“I wrote it...” The Commander admitted with a knowing smirk.

“Of course,” Longton remarked, “I should have guessed...”

“Come on fella, turn left” The Commander then called ahead.

“Why do you want him to turn left?” Longton asked, clearly confused.

“Because there is a phone box a short distance after the next left turn” The Commander explained, “Yes!” he then called out as up ahead, the Cavalier turned sharply to the left at a junction, narrowly missing a post van that was coming the other way.

“I smell a plan” Longton commented.

“Yep!” The Commander agreed as he executed a textbook perfect handbrake turn and swung the car perfectly around to the left before continuing the pursuit.

“There it is!” Longton motioned up ahead towards the traditional bright red telephone box visible in the distance where the Cavalier was just passing it.

“Right then” The Commander declared as he slowed on approaching it, “Call this in and get me some back up” he then instructed, “I’ll pick you up on the way back.”

“Roger that!” Longton confirmed as he quickly got out with the patrol car being stationary for only a matter of a second or two before The Commander resumed his pursuit.

“Well, your dad certainly wasn’t a bus driver, was he?” Longton remarked as the patrol car disappeared out of sight before he turned towards the telephone box and opened the door.

Picking up the handset, Longton dialled a familiar number that did not need any coins and was quickly connected.

“Control, it’s Lieutenant Commander Al Longton calling on a civilian land line, access number 151278” he declared.

“Reading you loud and clear Al” Commander Judd confirmed from his supervisor’s seat in the control room back in Haychester, “Erm, why are you on the phone?” he then asked.

“Long story” Longton responded, “The Commander is in pursuit of a silver-grey Vauxhall Cavalier, registration number Charlie One Six Five Echo Lima Tango, currently heading northeast towards the Haychester Manor estate park.”

“I’ll put out an all units” Judd confirmed, nodding to one of the operators sat nearby, “Your Cavalier details are coming up now” he then looked at the green computer screen in front of him but then took in a sharp breath when he saw the message now flashing on the screen, “Oh...”

“I didn’t like the sound of that” Longton remarked.

“You are not wrong” Judd agreed, “That car is flagged, ownership details redacted, level one security clearance required.”

“What?!?” Longton exclaimed.

“We had better get hold of The Commander pronto before he puts his size tens well and truly in it” Judd then declared, “Someone alert the Chief” he then called out.

The Commander was three miles away by now, continuing the pursuit at high speed through the narrow and winding country lanes.

“Whoa!” The Commander quickly and skilfully reacted when a large coach coming around a corner stopped suddenly, forcing him to swerve over to the left, the wheels down the left-hand side throwing up a cloud of dust, mud and grit before regaining the road again.

Speeds reached sixty to seventy miles an hour as they continued, the driver of the Cavalier clearly determined to stay ahead and get away if possible.

“Where the hell are you going?” The Commander then asked as he noticed a sign by the side of the road which marked the point where they had crossed the county border from Sussex into Surrey, meaning he was now technically in another jurisdiction.

Despite being out of his area, there was no way The Commander was going to stop the pursuit and so he continued to follow as closely as possible even with the driver of the Cavalier continuing to use his obvious advanced driving skills to keep ahead.

“Could really use some backup here guys” The Commander remarked over the radio set but there was still no response.

Still, the pursuit continued, the sound of the two cars echoing all around the countryside along with The Commander’s sirens, and it was starting to look like it would never end when the driver of the Cavalier suddenly applied his brakes, stopping in the middle of an extremely narrow single track road, high hedgerows either side making it impossible for the occupants to be able to get out.

“What the...?” The Commander quickly responded, bringing his car to a sharp halt immediately behind the Cavalier and realising that he too was effectively trapped, at least on his side.

Suddenly, another vehicle appeared to his left, a large blue truck fitted with heavy duty protective obstacle bars across the front which rammed the left-hand side of the patrol car at high speed, pushing it over into the woodland shrub on The Commander’s side.

With The Commander’s patrol car now on its side, wedged between trees and the front of the large lorry pushed up against it, the driver quickly got out, looked through the cracked windscreen before giving a thumbs up towards the Cavalier that then proceeded to move forward a short distance to a wider part of the road whereupon the lorry driver got in the back, and it sped away.

“Great...” The Commander remarked as he turned off the engine and released his seatbelt before, with some difficulty, managing to climb up through the car and out of the passenger side window.

As the Cavalier disappeared out of sight, the radio suddenly began to work again.

“One Three One to Control” The Commander attempted to call into his radio, “Anyone out there?” he then asked.

“Control receiving” came a very weak response, “Where the hell are you?”

“I have just been rammed off the road in a country lane about seven miles north of Haychester Downs” The Commander confirmed as he looked around at the scene, “Car is a bit bent; I could use some transport.”

“On the way One Three One” Judd confirmed from the Control Room, “All Units from Control, attention drawn to a silver Vauxhall Cavalier, reported registration number Charlie One Six Five Echo Lima Tango, wanted in connection with a collision and failure to stop, last seen heading in a north westerly direction near Wadhurst.”

There was nothing The Commander could do now except wait to be rescued and so he took a look at the patrol car with a resigned sigh.

“The Garage Sergeant isn’t going to like this...” he then remarked to himself.

“Why the hell am I getting automated telephone calls from a computer in Scotland Yard?” Edwards asked as he came into the Control Room, “Something about a Level One Security Clearance being required?”

“It’s One Three One” Judd began to explain to which Edwards merely rolled his eyes upwards in response, “He was pursuing a silver-grey Vauxhall Cavalier which has now rammed him off the road about six or seven miles north of the county border, he’s okay though, his car is on its side mind.”

“Did you get a make on this mystery Cavalier?” Edwards then asked.

“It came up on the computer as ‘Ownership Details Redacted’ as you can see” Judd indicated the screen in front of him, “I guess my search must have set off an alarm bell somewhere and you got the call.”

“Right...” Edwards regrettably responded, “Another fine mess to sort out I suppose?”

“What the heck happened here?” the Surrey Area Traffic Division officer remarked as he approached the scene and stopped his patrol car just short of where The Commander's car could be seen on its side, the large blue lorry still firmly rammed up against it.

“Hi!” The Commander called.

“Sierra Yankie One Five” the officer then called into his radio as he got out of the patrol car, “Tell the Haychester Control Room, I have found their missing officer, going to need a tow truck though.”

“Understood” came the response over the radio, “What's your location?”

“About three miles west of the old railway line, near Holgate Farm” the officer replied.

“Received Sierra Yankee One Five” the Surrey Area Control Room duly confirmed, “Help is on the way.”

“You okay mate?” the officer then asked.

“Yeah, just my pride hurt really” The Commander confirmed, “Lieutenant Commander Sam Edwards, Haychester” he then formally introduced himself.

“Lieutenant Terry Kinderley, Surrey Traffic Division” the officer confirmed as they shook hands, “So, what happened?” he then asked as he looked at the upturned patrol car.

“Couple of guys in a silver Cavalier that I was pursuing took exception to my presence it seems” The Commander explained, “So it seems they got a friend to ram me off the road with this thing” he then indicated the large blue lorry.

“Shall I shift it?” Kinderley nodded back towards the lorry.

“It's all right, I'll do it” The Commander confirmed as he got up, “I have a Level One advanced licence” he then explained, “Just take a look out the back and make sure I am not going to reverse into anything.”

“Ah, you must be the one they call The Commander then” Kinderley remarked as they went up to the cab door of the lorry.

“In living colour” The Commander confirmed as he opened the cab door and clambered up, then shuffled across to the opposite side and examined the driving position.

“Where did they find this heap of junk?” Kinderley remarked as he looked the front of the vehicle over carefully.

“Probably nicked it from a nearby farm just for the job I expect” The Commander admitted as he managed to get the engine started, “I doubt whether it was roadworthy was top of the list of their priorities at the time.”

“Right, I'll see the back” Kinderley then confirmed before pushing his way through the shrubbery that was brushing up against the side of the lorry and then reaching the back.

Behind the lorry was just a muddy farm track with an old rotten railway wagon body dumped nearby.

“Yeah, you are all clear back here mate!” Kinderley then called forward before stepping back out of the way.

“Come on, you useless pile of junk” The Commander remarked as he struggled to select reverse with the lengthy lever linked to a worn out gearbox.

After several attempts, he finally managed to get reverse gear to engage before letting out the clutch and with much growling from the engine, began to slowly reverse the lorry.

“Whoa, that'll do it!” Kinderley called as the front of the lorry pulled clear of the road and was now safely out of the way whereupon The Commander applied the parking brake and shut off the engine.

“I've driven worse...” The Commander wryly remarked as he got out.

“You should see some of the utter death traps I get to shift over on my turf now and then” Kinderley remarked as he and The Commander returned to the road.

“One of the joys of the Traffic Division I presume?” The Commander asked.

“Oh yes” Kinderley agreed before they both looked across at The Commanders car.

With a creaking and groan, the patrol car, now no longer supported by the lorry, duly fell back onto its wheels with an unceremonious crash.

“Ah, it'll buff out” The Commander remarked with a shrug of his shoulders.

The sun had already set over Haychester, leaving just a warm red glow in the sky to the west when The Commander discreetly entered the first floor via the building's rear staircase and looked around.

The first floor was where the administrative and support functions of the Service had their offices, unlike the front-line officers like The Commander himself, they tended to only operate conventional civilian office hours of nine to five and as a result, the floor was largely deserted.

Visually, the corridor was identical to those on the floors of the block above and below except for the total absence of activity, not even a telephone ringing in the background which always seemed to be a constant feature elsewhere.

The Commander walked briskly yet quietly down the darkened corridor, passing various identical plain wooden doors either side until he reached his intended destination near the north end staircase, a door marked with two red Perspex plaques, marked in white lettering, one with the room number 'C109' and the other declaring the office's purpose, 'Personnel Resources'.

“So much for security...” The Commander remarked to himself as upon trying the door handle, the office turned out to be unlocked and he quickly stepped inside before discreetly closing the door behind him.

Inside the room were a couple of desks, nothing unremarkable, just the usual civilian desk clutter, whilst the rest of the room was dominated by a row of typical four drawer type metal filing cabinets.

Switching on a desk lamp and pointing it towards the filing cabinets, The Commander then proceeded to locate the drawer he required, specifically the one marked 'Active Officers - G to L'.

On trying to open the drawer however, The Commander discovered with a mixture of surprise and relief that it was locked.

“Right then” The Commander then remarked to himself as he pulled out a huge set of keys from his pocket and proceeded to look through them until he found a typical looking key which he then put into the lock at the top corner of the cabinet.

“Hah!” The Commander remarked as the key duly turned in the lock and allowed him to open the third drawer down.

Flicking through the protruding tabs on the top of the files, The Commander soon found the file he was looking for and took it out, taking it over to one of the desks and rotating the lamp back around to provide better light.

The subject of the file was clearly stated across the manilla coloured card cover, beneath the crest of the Service, the name neatly written by hand and reading ALFRED WILLIAM LONGTON - WSX181.

It was a thick file, numerous papers and a couple of official mug shot photographs of Longton, one from his first day at the Academy Induction and another more recent one.

Despite the wealth of information contained in the file, The Commander was only interested in one specific aspect, Longton's education details.

These were to be found on a multiple page yellow form at the back.

“Blimey Al, you were a busy boy” The Commander remarked upon seeing the vast number of qualifications from school, college and university listed with their attendant details, “My education details fit onto a postage stamp...”

Scan reading the details, The Commander soon reached Longton's university education details which was what he was specifically seeking.

“Here we go...” The Commander finally found what he was looking for, “Ah hell...” he then remarked with a resigned sigh as his suspicions were duly confirmed.

Under the heading for university course details was the subject of Longton's criminal case study, the Lewisham Diamond Heist of March 1969.

As The Commander was delving into the past, a very similar idea was occurring to Longton as he was relaxing at home in his flat near Bognor Regis which he shared with his fiancé Frances.

“You know when we moved in together” Longton remarked “Did you see a box marked 'Uni stuff' or something similar?” he asked.

“Probably in the spare room along with the hundred other boxes we will probably never get around to unpacking for a couple of years” Frances confirmed, “Why?”

“Oh, it's probably nothing” Longton then admitted, “Just something in the back of my mind that is bugging me.”

“Work or personal?” Frances asked, intrigued by her fiancé’s remarks.

“Bit of both really” Longton tried to explain “What do you think of The Commander?” he then asked.

“Lonely” Frances replied, “All alone in the world but hides it behind the job, his uniform is like a shell or shield.”

“That's the impression I get too” Longton agreed, “There is something else about him too, I mean don't get me wrong, he is a great guy, an excellent officer, very determined...”

“He is that” Frances agreed, “and I reckon you are the nearest thing he has to a friend to be honest.”

“I always thought he had work acquaintances rather than friends” Longton admitted.

“So, what's on your mind darling?” Frances then asked.

“Something doesn't fit” Longton tried to explain, “His history says one thing but the way he is, the way he works, the way he speaks says something else.”

“Where does your old uni stuff come into this?” Frances then asked.

“That is what I intend to find out” Longton confirmed, “If you will excuse me my love, I will be back in a minute” he then got up.

“Oh, you do love a mystery, don't you love?” Frances commented as Longton disappeared into the spare room.

Longton and his fiancé had only moved into the flat together a few weeks previously and as a result of that and both having busy working lives, they were still mostly living out of boxes with much of their combined personal belongings being stacked in the spare room.

“Oh blimey...” Longton remarked on seeing the huge number of big cardboard boxes in the room.

Fortunately for him, Frances was a very good organiser and so every box was carefully labelled which meant that locating his old university notes was in fact reasonably straightforward.

“Ah, the memories” Longton nostalgically remarked as he opened the correct box and began to rummage through all his old university notes and materials.

Some way down inside the box, Longton found what he was looking for, a neatly presented spiral bound document which was his case study paper and with it, a large

bulging folder of notes, photocopied documents, photographs and vintage newspaper clippings.

Frances looked up from her wedding planning magazine when Longton returned with the folder.

“Mission successful?” she asked as Longton rejoined her on the sofa.

“Indeed, my love” Longton triumphantly confirmed, placing the folder on his lap and opening it.

“So, this is all your old university notes I take it?” Frances asked.

“Just the ones relating to my final case study paper” Longton explained as he rifled through the papers and photos until he finally found the one particular photograph he was looking for, “Ah, there you are.”

“Who is that?” Frances asked as she looked at the photograph in Longton's hand, an old black and white print showing a young boy standing in what appeared to be a subway tunnel of some kind, looking up at an engraved black marble plaque mounted on the wall in front of him.

“That is or rather was a young man by the name of Edward Regent” Longton explained, “His father, Edward Regent senior was the getaway driver for the Lewisham Diamond Heist which occurred on March the seventh, 1969.”

“Was...?” Frances picked up on her fiancé's tone.

“Later that same day, about an hour after this photograph was taken, he was shot in cold blood a short distance from New Scotland Yard and died not long afterwards” Longton explained, “He was just twelve years old and had he survived, he would have been the primary witness in the trial of the gang responsible, instead his father turned Queen's evidence in order to nail his son's executioners and then disappeared.”

“I don't see the connection” Frances admitted.

“Pass me that Haychester Gazette” Longton indicated the local weekly newspaper on the coffee table.

“Here you go” Frances passed him the newspaper.

“Right, where was it?” Longton remarked as he leafed through the pages until he found what he was looking for, “Ah, here it is” he then declared.

“Nice picture” Frances commented on seeing a photograph in the newspaper of The Commander, taken a couple of weeks earlier, showing him standing in Haychester city centre, dressed in full uniform and looking serious.

“What do you think?” Longton then asked as he placed the 1969 view of young Edward Regent alongside the newspaper image of The Commander.

Frances looked very closely, comparing the facial features in the two photographs, helped by the fact both subjects had the same serious expression.

“Well, I will be damned, they are one and the same” she then concluded, “But that's impossible, isn't it? You said Edward Regent died when he was twelve years old.”

“That is what was reported at the time” Longton agreed “but look at the facts.”

“I am all ears, Sherlock” Frances then prompted.

“Edward Regent Senior was the main prosecution witness in the Lewisham Diamond Heist trial” Longton proceeded to explain, “His evidence put some particularly nasty people away but some of his evidence must have come from a secondary source.”

“His son?” Frances suggested.

“That's my theory” Longton agreed, “Chief Superintendent Edwards, our Guvnor was a Detective Inspector in the Robbery Squad at New Scotland Yard at the time, he adopted The Commander, an orphan when he was about thirteen.”

“So, Edward Regent Junior is gunned down by whoever to stop him talking” Frances summarised, “His wounds are near fatal yet in fact he survives, then gives his evidence which his father tells in court.”

“Meanwhile, the young Edward Regent is declared dead to see off the bad guys who may try and finish the job, he goes into witness protection and is essentially reborn as Sam Edwards, adopted son of then Detective Inspector Edwards and the rest, as they say is history” Longton concluded.

“How did you cotton on to this?” Frances then asked.

“All The Commander's mannerisms, his accent, the way he works, absolutely screams South East London born and bred” Longton explained, “He mentioned earlier today that his father was a professional driver and he is exactly the right age.”

“I guess the clincher is these photos” Frances then concluded.

“He hides behind the uniform” Longton remarked, “The real Eddie Regent is inside, locked away but every so often, he reappears, like when he is driving for example.”

“They say he is the best driver in the Service” Frances remarked, “Well, that is what I have heard a few of your colleagues say anyway.”

“You know that saying where they say someone practically wrote the book on a particular subject of skill?” Longton asked, “Well, in his case he actually did write it!”

“So, having blown the dust off a long-buried Security Service secret, what are you going to do?” Frances then asked.

“I don't know” Longton admitted before stifling a yawn, “Sleeping on it sounds like a good idea, I have got an early start in the morning.”

“Anything exciting planned?” Frances enquired.

“With The Commander in charge of the investigation, anything is possible” Longton admitted.

Despite the administration floor being deserted, The Commander still crept out of the office door and closed it slowly and quietly behind him.

“Ahem!” a voice called from the shadows, startling The Commander, “What are you doing?”

“Oh, hello Guv!” The Commander responded as Edwards stepped out of the shadows and looked at him with a puzzled expression.

“Sneaking around the Personnel Office late at night, you are definitely up to something” Edwards pointed out.

“I had to check something” The Commander reluctantly admitted before looking all around to ensure they were alone, “Did you know Al Longton's university case study was the Lewisham Diamond Heist?”

“Of course I do” Edwards admitted, “Why do you think I put you two together on big cases?”

“Well, he is a very good officer” The Commander admitted “and I am concerned that it is only a matter of time before he works out who I really am.”

“You can rely on him to be discreet, I am sure” Edwards reassured him.

“I know” The Commander agreed, “It's just I wanted to make sure, so I don't get a sudden surprise” he explained “You know how I feel about surprises...”

“Yeah, you hate them almost as much as you hate parties and Christmas” Edwards confirmed, “A surprise Christmas party must be your dictionary definition of hell.”

“Oh yeah...” The Commander readily agreed.

“How is your investigation going?” Edwards then asked as they started to walk together down the corridor.

“Stalled is the best description” The Commander admitted, “The search of the old gravel pit site will resume at first light but there is something I want to check out which will require me going out of town for a few hours tomorrow.”

“Is this one of your hunches?” Edwards cautiously asked, “Only, it seems every time you have one, the paperwork on my desk backs up for weeks.”

“It's just, there seems to be multiple interested parties involved, the two comedians in the Cavalier and their friend with the old truck that rammed me off the road for a starter” The Commander explained.

“I saw the wreck when it was carted into the garage half an hour ago” Edwards remarked, “That's another chunk of the budget going into the local Ford dealership's coffers.”

“Yeah, sorry about that” The Commander apologetically admitted'

“Ah, don't worry about it” Edwards reassured him, “As long as you are all right.”

“Whoever they were, they knew how to drive, that is for certain” The Commander admitted, “Then there was the very nervous hotel manager who I put the wind up and finally, there is this whole seemingly crafted persona that our missing girl seems to have assumed and none of it adds up.”

“You really enjoy putting the wind up people, don't you?” Edwards remarked.

“Only those who deserve it” The Commander admitted with a wry smile.

“So, where are you going tomorrow?” Edwards asked.

“London” The Commanded reluctantly confirmed.

“London?” Edwards commented with clear surprise, “Aside from your annual visit to Alexandra Palace for the model rail show, you haven't set foot in central London since...”

“Yes, exactly” The Commander confirmed, “I want to check on something and it requires a certainly amount of subtlety and discretion.”

“Subtlety and discretion?” Edwards scoffed, “Not exactly your specialist subjects.”

“Quite...” The Commander agreed before stifling a yawn.

“You look tired” Edwards commented, “Go home, get some sleep” he then strongly suggested.

“Is that a suggestion or an order?” The Commander asked even though he knew full well what the answer was.

“Take a wild guess” Edwards confirmed.

“Message received and understood” The Commander agreed with a rather weak salute, “I'll see you tomorrow, Guv.”

“What do you reckon?” Stride asked which prompted Forrester to check his watch.

“I think we give it another ten minutes and then knock it on the head for the night” Forrester remarked as he looked around, the fading light meaning the powerful vehicle mounted searchlights were now taking over as the primary source of illumination at the search scene but even with them, conditions below the water for the diving team were increasingly murky.

“Any units from Whisky Sierra Control” came a call over Forrester’s radio, “Reports from a member of the public of a small light-coloured van being driven at a very high speed on the west Wadhurst Road, anyone free to deal?”

“That’s just over there” Stride indicated across the gloomy countryside towards a hedge line in the near distance, behind which was the road in question.

“Might as well” Forrester agreed and reached for his radio set as Stride returned to his patrol car parked nearby, “Control from Two Seven Five” he then called, “Dave is on his way over there now” he confirmed as Stride’s patrol car drove off, its wheels crunching on the loose stone surface of the track before reaching the main road beyond.

Turning right out of the gateway, Stride drove swiftly south before turning right again into the narrower road that had been mentioned in the initial report.

The road ran around the south-east perimeter of the old gravel pit site where the search was taking place, the powerful search lights still clearly visible in the distance over to Stride’s right as he followed the narrow lane.

“Whoa, hang on a minute” Stride then exclaimed as he slowed on seeing something moving in amongst the trees up ahead but by the time he reached the small section of woodland, whoever or whatever it was had gone.

Instead, Stride decided to drive on, slower now and looking left and right to see if anything was amiss.

A bit further on down the road was a gap in the hedge that lined the south side, a gate inset from the edge of the road led into private woodlands and in the failing light, Stride almost missed something there.

“Gotcha...” he then remarked as he braked sharply just beyond the gate and then reversed back up the lane before stopping alongside it.

Taking a torch, Stride leaned across the interior of the car and shone its powerful beam of light which picked up the yellow reflection of a rear car numberplate, the vehicle being seemingly hidden some distance up the rough track that led off into the private woodland.

“Control from Three Seven Two” Stride then called into his radio as he got out of the car, “I think I have got something; forest track off the road, about three quarters of a mile from the main junction.”

“Received Three Seven Two” the Duty Supervisor in the Haychester Control Room confirmed.

“Three Seven Two from Two Seven Five” Forrester then called having heard the call himself, “Dave, we are just about all wrapped up over here, I’ll come and join you.”

“Thanks Graham” Stride confirmed, “I am parked in the road, there seems to be a vehicle possibly abandoned in the woods about a hundred yards or so from the lane, I am going to take a look.”

“Roger that” Forrester responded as he returned to his own patrol car and started the engine, “I’ll be with you in a couple of minutes.”

As Stride approached the gate with his torch shining ahead, he could see that it was partially open, a brief examination of the padlock and chain that was wrapped around the gatepost revealing it to have been deliberately cut, probably with bolt croppers or a similar tool.

Redirecting his torchlight down towards the track, there was evidence that a vehicle had been down there very recently, with tyre tracks in the mud, still back filling with water.

Stride looked back behind him when he heard Forrester approaching in his own patrol car, bringing it to a stop nearby.

“Graham!” Stride called over, “Point your lights down here, will you mate?”

“Roger that” Forrester responded, turning the car so that the headlight beams were directed down the track which saw the back of a yellow van in amongst the shrubs and undergrowth become visible.

“Lovely” Stride remarked, “Right, let’s get a look at you” he then declared, heading forwards.

Forrester watched from his car as Stride approached the vehicle.

“Control from Three Seven Two” Stride called into his radio, “I think I have found that van.”

“Control receiving” Judd confirmed, “What have you got Dave?”

“Old yellow Bedford HA type van” Stride confirmed as he pushed through the bushes, down the side of the vehicle to look in the front where the driver’s door was left open, the keys still in the ignition, “Probably one of those old BT ones I reckon.”

“The rear number plate is missing” Forrester remarked as he walked over, “Oh, hang on a minute” he then called as he stubbed his foot on something in amongst the undergrowth and pointed his torch down, “Here it is” he then declared, picking up the numberplate.

“Probably fell off when they drove down here, I expect” Stride commented.

“Two Seven Five to Control” Forrester called into his radio, “regarding that yellow van, try Echo November Juliet One Five Nine Victor for the registration number” he suggested.

“Stand by” Judd responded, the sound of keys on a keyboard being tapped audible in the background, “Okay gentlemen, you should be looking at a Bedford HA van in yellow, not reported lost or stolen but no tax or MOT since last October, no current keeper registered, the previous owner sent off the V5 to Swansea in November.”

“Well, that fits” Stride agreed as he felt the bonnet, “Still warm, someone has been driving it.”

“Anything in the back?” Forrester then asked as he shone his torch through one of the two small windows set into the twin rear doors of the van.

“Haven't looked yet” Stride admitted, “there is nothing in the front though at first glance.”

“Right then” Forrester declared, putting on a pair of latex gloves before taking hold of the chrome door handle and turning it, “Not locked” he then confirmed before he and Stride opened the doors.

“Holy cow...” Stride exclaimed as he and Forrester looked into the rear of the van where, in among various bits of discarded detritus were clearly the signs of smeared blood stains on the floor.

“Nasty...” Forrester agreed as he reached for his radio “Control from Two Seven Five, over?” he then called.

“Control receiving” Judd responded, “Go ahead Graham”.

“That yellow Bedford van” Forrester then continued, “No sign of the driver, looks like they legged it sharpish but there are significant blood stains in the back so we will need forensics out here and the area taped off and searched.”

“Understood Two Seven Five” Judd confirmed, “Mobilising the cavalry now.”

“What do you reckon?” Stride then asked as they gently closed the van doors again.

“I don't know” Forrester admitted, “But I don't like it...”

“Whisky Sierra Two Seven Five from Whisky Sierra One” a familiar voice called over the radio.

“Two Seven Five receiving” Forrester formally responded, “Good evening, Sir.”

“This blood in the back of that van you have found” Edwards asked from his office back in Haychester, “Do you think it maybe human?” he asked.

“Instinct says yes” Forrester replied, “Of course we will need the good Professor and her bag of tricks to confirm it.”

“She’s on her way” Edwards confirmed, “I am sending the Night Shift team over there to relieve you all as well.”

“What about Longton and The Commander?” Forrester then asked.

“I have sent them both home to get some rest” Edwards confirmed, “As soon as the Night Commander is on site, you all head home and get some sleep too, I suspect tomorrow is going to be even busier than today.”

“Roger that Sir” Forrester agreed.

“Sleep?” Stride jokingly remarked, “What’s that?”

“Ah, stuff it...” The Commander remarked to himself as he slumped in the easy chair with the last rays of sunshine beaming through the front room window as the evening drew in.

It had been a long day, and he was tired, exhausted both mentally and physically, so it came as little surprise when he quickly dozed off, the copy of Railway Modeller magazine sliding off his lap and falling to the floor.

Deep sleep brought the dreams again, although for The Commander, they were more a recurring nightmare as the hidden persona of Eddie Regent emerged from the shadows of Sam Edwards when he was asleep, and no one was around.

Once again in his dream, The Commander found himself standing in the centre of London in early 1969, in Westminster where Broadway intersected with Victoria Street, near St. James’s Park and in the shadow of the then newly built New Scotland Yard building which occupied the triangle of land between the two roads.

As if guided by some unseen force, he found himself walking down Broadway when he was stopped in his tracks by the sound of a car screeching to a halt nearby, the doors opening and footsteps approaching rapidly before gunshots rang out.

He instinctively clasped his abdomen at feeling the apparent impact of the shots but there was no injury, no blood, just the replayed memory of the pain he endured that fateful March afternoon.

Looking down at his feet, there lay the heavily bleeding and unconscious twelve year old Eddie Regent, eyes closed, blood soaking through the school uniform tunic and pooling into the adjacent gutter.

“Come on Eddie, time to get up” The Commander then remarked to his younger self only to then look up when a loud knocking noise began.

The Commander was suddenly awoken by a loud knocking on his front door.

“All right, all right” The Commander responded as he got up and went through into the hallway.

The doorbell sounded followed by knocking again with a definite urgency.

“Oh hell...” The Commander then responded as instinctively he checked himself for any signs of bullet wounds or blood stains as his mind was still partially in the dream he was in and only now returning to the modern-day reality, “This had better be good” he then called as he got up, headed to the front door and then opened it.

“Morning” Longton cheerfully called as opening the door revealed him standing on the doorstep.

“Bloody hell, Al...” The Commander remarked as he looked across the hallway at the grandfather clock, “It's not even six o'clock yet.”

“I thought you ought to know” Longton explained “The body of a female in her mid-twenties was found in the woods near the gravel pits about thirty minutes ago.”

“Ah...” The Commander responded with obvious regret.

“A gamekeeper out on his night patrol found her and called it in” Longton explained as The Commander ushered him inside “and Forrester found an old Bedford van in the woods yesterday evening with blood stains in the back of it, the Professor is examining it now.”

“Why didn't they call me?” The Commander asked.

“They tried...” Longton remarked as he passed the telephone in the hallway and replaced the handset.

“Oh, I wonder what happened there...” The Commander remarked, feigning innocence.

“...and then they called me” Longton confirmed “and here I am.”

“Has the usual circus been mobilised yet?” The Commander asked as he put the kettle on.

“On their way over now” Longton confirmed.

“Good, good” The Commander replied, still somewhat sleepy, “Tea?” he then asked.

“Not for me thanks” Longton responded, “Anyway, I am more of a coffee drinker” he admitted.

“I am unable to function on anything less than six mugs of tea in any given twenty four hour period” The Commander admitted as he put the teabag from the caddy into the mug.

“Speaking as a friend as well as a colleague” Longton then honestly remarked, “You look like hell!”

“Thanks Al, I appreciate it” The Commander mockingly responded, “Can I ask you something completely off the wall?” he then enquired as the kettle came to a boil and he poured out the water into the mug.

“Sure” Longton agreed.

“Have you got a passport?” The Commander then asked.

“Out of all the possible questions, that was not the one I was expecting” Longton replied, “Yes I have, it’s in my desk drawer back at the office” he then confirmed, “Err, why?”

“All will be revealed, I hope” The Commander confirmed as he finished making the tea, tapping the spoon on the rim of the mug before putting it aside.

“Have you slept in your uniform?” Longton then asked.

“Saves on pyjamas” The Commander jokingly admitted, “Why? Do you think I should maybe change?”

“Probably a good idea” Longton strongly agreed.

“Okay” The Commander replied, “Back in a couple of minutes, help yourself to biscuits and mind the cat.”

“Cat?” Longton responded as The Commander disappeared upstairs before looking around which was when he noticed a large and very stern looking tabby cat come in through the back door and then stare at him intently.

“Hi!” Longton remarked to the cat who merely flicked her tail and wandered off towards the living room.

Looking around the kitchen, Longton could see it definitely belonged to a man living on his own, the ready meals in the cupboard, the accumulative pile of washing up and when he opened the fridge, the vast array of unhealthy snacks and dessert based foods inside being of no surprise to him whatsoever.

“Biscuits in the cupboard...” Longton then remarked to himself and opened the kitchen cupboard door above the fridge, “Wow, that is a LOT of biscuits.”

He duly selected a couple of custard creams and closed the cupboard again and then looked around.

As Longton munched on the biscuit, his curiosity got the better of him and he began to take a discreet look around.

One thing in particular that got his attention was sitting on the side table near the back door, it seeming odd to Longton given what he knew about The Commander and it prompted him to pick it up.

The item was a passport, a standard format United Kingdom issue one in a smart dark blue leather cover, the gold impressed crown crest in the centre.

“Ah, yes, I need to bring that with us” The Commander confirmed as he returned to the kitchen.

“Pardon me for asking” Longton looked inside the passport “but why do you have one of these? You never go anywhere.”

“It's just for I.D.” The Commander convincingly explained as Longton passed him the passport and he put it in his uniform tunic pocket, “Shall we?” he then indicated the door.

“By all means” Longton readily agreed.

A few moments later as they walked out to the car, Longton kept thinking about the passport.

“You know, as you have got a passport, you should go on holiday sometime” Longton suggested as they got in the car.

“Any suggestions?” The Commander asked as he wound down the passenger side window whilst Longton drove the car.

“Well, I know flying is out” Longton remarked.

“Yeah” The Commander admitted “Something to do with being personally unable to compute how two hundred tons of metal can just hang in mid-air in complete defiance of the laws of gravity.”

“They well and truly broke the mould when they made you, didn't they?” Longton commented.

“Oh yeah...” The Commander readily agreed.

“Well, if planes are out, what about going on a cruise?” Longton then suggested as he drove towards Haychester, the tall spire of the city cathedral visible in the distance in the early morning mist.

“Ah, I can't do Boats either” The Commander admitted with a hint of embarrassment, “Had a nasty experience on a boat on a family holiday when I was about five.”

“Cross channel ferry?” Longton asked.

“Pedal boat” The Commander replied, obviously slightly embarrassed, “Boating lake in Bognor Regis...”

“Blimey...” Longton responded.

Because of the very early hour, it only took about ten minutes to reach Haychester city centre as the traffic was still quite light, rush hour had yet to commence in earnest and even the city's buses had only just started to roll out of the main garage as they went around the Southgate Gyrotory road system, past the Bus Station and on towards the main Security Service offices.

“So, can I borrow your passport?” The Commander then asked.

“Err, yeah sure” Longton agreed, “What do you want it for?” he asked, his curiosity piqued.

“We are going to test a little theory I have by playing a game of spot the difference” The Commander only vaguely explained.

“Okay...” Longton replied, clearly not having a clue what The Commander was going on about as he proceeded to drive down the side service road towards the rear of the site.

“Ah, that looks familiar” The Commander then nodded towards the vehicle examination area on the right-hand side as they passed it where the silver Vauxhall Cavalier was being unloaded from a flatbed transport truck.

“It was found abandoned about ten miles from where you got knocked over” Longton explained, “Professor Harriman went up there last night and went over it with her armada of fine-tooth combs” he remarked as he turned into the parking area in front of the C-Block building “Not a single fingerprint on it, nothing.”

“Fuel for the fire” The Commander mused as Longton reversed the car into a vacant space and stopped whereupon they got out.

“Huh?” Longton asked.

“Nothing, just thinking” The Commander replied, “Tell me about this body” he then asked.

“Found face down in the woods” Longton confirmed as they approached the automatic sliding doors of the main entrance.

“Whoops!” The Commander exclaimed as they managed to duck inside just before the door slammed shut on them, it’s notoriety for snaring people who passed through them being well known.

“I hate that door” Longton remarked as he looked back at it as it slowly opened again with no one anywhere near it.

“Why do you think I always use the other door?” The Commander remarked, “You know, the one with the good old fashioned door handle on it?”

“I think I might just do that” Longton admitted as they proceeded up the stairs, “Anyway, I think we can safely say the good professor has had a *very* long night what with that van being found as she is now at the body scene, initial report is promised within the hour.”

“Please tell me she died accidentally” The Commander asked.

“Not sure yet but the initial report said possible gunshot wounds to the back” Longton regretfully confirmed.

“Nuts...” The Commander responded as they reached the second floor, “Well, she won’t have done that to herself accidentally I suppose.”

“Very unlikely I am afraid” Longton was forced to agree.

“Ah, if it isn’t Mayhem and Chaos” Edwards called as he appeared from his office door just as the two officers were passing.

“How do you manage to do that Sir?” The Commander turned and asked.

“Sixth sense for when trouble walks past my door?” Edwards suggested.

“Which one of us is chaos?” Longton asked The Commander aside.

“Well, I am probably Mayhem so...” The Commander confirmed to a nod of understanding from Longton.

“Step into my office...” Edwards then held his door open and guided them inside before closing the door firmly behind them.

“I assume you have heard Sir?” The Commander then asked as he and Longton stood in front of the desk as Edwards sat down behind it.

“Professor Harriman just called in a few moments ago” Edwards confirmed, “The body is definitely your missing girl, she was hit in the back with a shotgun, possibly sawn-off and she wasn’t killed where she was found.”

“This just got messy...” The Commander remarked to which Edwards nodded in agreement.

“What is all this about passports?” Longton then asked The Commander.

“Huh?” Edwards responded.

“Oh yes” The Commander then remembered, “It was something I wanted to check” he explained.

“Well, you can do that in a minute” Edwards confirmed, “Meanwhile, what the hell happened with that silver Cavalier you were chasing last night?”

“Another part of the puzzle” The Commander admitted, “That car kept turning up all over Haychester, then when it was following us, we managed to let it slip past us and we went after it.”

“Yeah, I got that bit” Edwards agreed.

“Whoever was driving it was professional; their driving technique was straight out of the Security Service Pursuit Driving Handbook” The Commander continued.

“Which you actually wrote” Longton reminded him.

“Well, I was stuck in hospital at the time and didn’t have anything else to do” The Commander honestly admitted.

“Go on...” Edwards then prompted.

“Whoever they were, they managed to knock me out of the pursuit, literally when an accomplice rammed me off the road using a stolen truck from a farmers barn” The Commander continued, “An old Ford T Series at that, quite a solid old jalopy and no mistake.”

“So why dump the car?” Longton asked, “They must have known we would find it.”

“To give us a dead end” The Commander explained, “As you say, there was not a fingerprint on it, there is no registered owner, no history, all we have is a car that tells us precisely nothing.”

“Well, it must belong to someone” Edwards suggested.

“It is another piece of evidence that backs up a theory I am working on” The Commander confirmed, “There seem to be multiple parties involved in this case, us, whoever is pulling the strings of that smarmy hotel manager I put the wind up yesterday, our two mystery friends who were in the silver Cavalier and the Solent & Wessex Area Drugs Squad.”

“What?!?” Edwards exclaimed.

“One of their undercover guys was sitting in the reception area of that hotel yesterday” The Commander explained, “I didn’t recognise him at first, it only occurred to me just now who he was.”

“I know my opposite number over at Winchester” Edwards slightly reluctantly confirmed, “Perhaps I need to call him?”

“Chief Superintendent Travis?” The Commander asked to which Edwards nodded in confirmation, “He hasn’t left his desk in twenty years; indeed, he can’t go anywhere since he was disqualified from driving for being over the limit after the Solent & Wessex Area annual Christmas booze up last year.”

“Oh, that was him, was it?” Longton recalled.

“Who do you think breathalysed him after I found him having wrapped his car around a lamp post?” The Commander reminded him.

“Oh dear” Longton concluded, “Probably not your biggest fan then?”

“Well, I didn’t get a Christmas card from him, let’s put it that way” The Commander confirmed.

“Argh...” Edwards responded in dismay, “I foresee ruffled brows and office politics rumbling over the hill towards me.”

“That’s why they pay you the big bucks Guv” The Commander remarked with a wry smile.

“I’ve got a mortgage and a wife with very expensive tastes” Edwards reminded them, “Believe me, my paycheck just wafts past my nose every month.”

“Bugger!” The Commander then exclaimed, “Uncle in East Grinstead!”

“No, you’ve lost me again” Longton replied with Edwards expression showing he too was confused as well.

“The only known relative of our now dead girl is from a postcard we found in her flat” The Commander explained, “From her Uncle in East Grinstead.”

“So?” Edwards prompted.

“There was no proper message on it, just the picture of the rolling South Downs on the front and her address on the back and ‘Love from your Uncle’ or something like that” The Commander confirmed.

“That was odd, yes” Longton agreed.

“Al, I need to see your passport” The Commander then requested as he got his own out of his uniform tunic pocket “and I need to see the victim’s one too.”

“I’ll be right back” Longton confirmed and duly left the room.

“Ah, I think I am beginning to see where this is going” Edwards remarked with a slow sense of realisation, “and I think I know where you are going later too.”

“Just going to rattle a cage or two” The Commander confirmed, “Nothing overly undiplomatic I assure you.”

“Hmmm...” Edwards mused as Longton returned.

“Here you go” he then handed The Commander his own passport plus the victims one, still inside a clear plastic evidence bag.

“All right, here we go” The Commander declared as he unwrapped the victim’s passport and placed it on the desk before arranging his own and Longton’s either side, “What do you see?” he then asked the others.

“This is a trick question, right?” Longton asked.

“Three identical passports” Edwards concluded, figuring out he may as well go for the obvious answer.

“Ah, but are they?” The Commander then remarked as he picked up Longton’s passport and opened it, turning to one of the inside pages and then looking carefully at the intricate background artwork that was designed to prevent forgery.

Longton and Edwards watched as The Commander then took the victims passport and proceeded to open it to the same page before examining that one in equal detail.

“I presume you are going to tell us what this is all about at some point?” Edwards then prompted.

“Take a look at the right-hand margin of these two passports and tell me what you see” The Commander then passed them to the others to look at, “Spot the difference” he prompted.

“Hang on” Longton remarked, “The scrollwork is round the other way, you see Guv?” he indicated the difference to Edwards.

“Exactly” The Commander confirmed, “the artwork on this page is different between the two passports, only very subtly though, it simply points the other way.”

“So, this passport is a fake and the forgers made an error?” Longton asked, indicating the victim’s passport.

“Take a look at mine” The Commander then handed him his own one.

“Erm...” Longton began as he flicked through The Commander’s passport to the same page and then began to compare with the other two, “Hang on a minute, yours is the same as the victims.”

“All three passports are genuine” The Commander then explained, “Whereas yours Al, like millions of others was issued in the normal manner from the Passport Office after sending off your interminable irritating form and cheque at the Post Office, mine came from a different office, this being denoted by the subtle difference in the printing which you would only see if you knew exactly what you were looking for.”

“Where else would you get a passport from?” Longton asked, clearly confused.

“The Passport Office is not the only Government agency that has the powers to manufacture and issue passports” The Commander confirmed, “Mine came from that source, a little place called the Documents and Identification Office in a building in London called Thames House.”

“Thames House?” Longton responded, “That’s MI5, isn’t it?” he remarked to which The Commander merely nodded, “Why do you have a passport issued by MI5?” he then asked.

“Erm, I needed one in a hurry, and they owed me a favour” The Commander hurriedly replied, “The thing is, why did our victim have an MI5 issued passport?”

“Don’t MI6 issue passports as well?” Edwards asked as he looked at all three passports carefully again just to make sure.

“They do” the Commander confirmed, “but they have a different printing variation again.”

“The Uncle in East Grinstead” Edwards remarked.

“East Grinstead just happens to be where MI5 have a training and operations facility that they think we don’t know about” The Commander explained, “and an ‘Uncle’ is often used as an innocent looking name for a Controller, i.e. someone who is responsible for being the point of contact for one of their agents in the field.”

“So, she’s a Spook” Longton concluded.

“Congratulations Al, you win a cookie” The Commander replied.

“So, the guys in the silver Cavalier were probably MI5 as well?” Longton asked.

“If the cap fits...” Edwards agreed, “Of course all this means we will have all sorts of people floating all over this case now, so watch your backs.”

“I suggest we keep this potential MI5 angle strictly to ourselves for now” The Commander strongly suggested “and I want everyone keeping a good eye out for anyone else who may be hanging around this case, no matter how innocent they seem.”

“I have the list that we got from the Hotel Manager” Longton confirmed, “I was going to start running the names through the system, see if any of them have previous or is known to us in some way.”

“Good” The Commander agreed, “Somewhere in that list I reckon may be our killer or at the very least someone who knows who it is.”

“So, we have gone from an abandoned handbag in Priory Park to a full-blown murder investigation with bonus MI5 involvement in less than twenty-four hours” Edwards summarised, “That is pretty good going even for you.”

“I am heading to London shortly to rattle the cage of an old friend” The Commander confirmed, “I want to know exactly what has been going on and why this has been happening on our manor and our watch.”

“This is likely to ruffle some feathers you know?” Edwards warned.

“Just another of my specialties” The Commander admitted.

“Don’t I bloody know it...” Edwards then quietly muttered to himself under his breath.

“We had better get to it” The Commander then indicated the door.

“All right, get out of here you two” Edwards agreed, “I’ll be here waiting for the flack to come in.”

“Sir” Longton and The Commander confirmed before collecting up the passports and leaving the office.

Outside in the corridor with the office door now closed, the two officers headed down towards the general investigation office.

“How are you getting to London?” Longton asked.

“There is a train in about thirty minutes” The Commander confirmed as he checked his watch.

“Oh, just one other thing, Eddie” Longton then remarked as he looked up and down the corridor to ensure they were not being overheard.

“Yes?” The Commander instinctively responded only to then realise with a wry smile what Longton had just called him, “Nice one AI, that was the oldest trick in the book, and I walked straight into it.”

“I thought so” Longton confirmed, “We should get together over a drink later, have a chat about things, I think you could use it.”

“You know what, that is actually a very good idea” The Commander readily agreed, “In the meantime, I must head for London, New Scotland Yard beckons” he then confirmed with a slight reluctance.

“Have you been to The Yard before?” Longton asked.

“Just the once” The Commander admitted, “It erm, didn’t go well...”

“Huh?” Longton responded before realising the significance of The Commander’s remark, “Oh yes, I see what you mean...”

“Okay guys, you can move the body now” Professor Harriman called over to the officers on the other side of the tape perimeter, as she got up and removed her gloves.

“Thanks Professor” Stride responded.

“What a waste” Harriman then remarked as she looked down at the dead body on the ground, now covered by a sheet.

“No offence Professor but you look shattered” Forrester remarked as he joined them.

“Twenty-four hours without sleep can do that to you Lieutenant” Harriman admitted, “I am going home to bed, if you want anything forensic wise, see my assistant back at the lab.”

“Will do” Stride confirmed, lifting up the tape barrier to allow her to duck beneath.

“Thank you and goodnight gentlemen” Harriman remarked before heading for her van parked nearby.

“Okay guys!” Forrester called to coroner’s office officials nearby, waiting by their plain black van.

Lieutenant Philips arrived on the scene just as the Coroner’s Office officials were proceeding with their work.

“All done then?” she asked on seeing the scene.

“Yeah” Stride confirmed as Forrester joined them, “Gunshot wound to the back by the looks of it, probably killed instantly.”

“At least you would hope she was” Stride added.

“What’s all this about a blood-stained van?” Philips then asked, “Longton mentioned it when I booked on earlier.”

“Oh that” Forrester recalled, “We found it last night about a mile up the road, keys still in the ignition, engine still warm and with smeared blood stains in the back.”

“So, she was killed somewhere else, loaded in the back of that van you found and then dumped here?” Philips ventured.

“Only a theory so far but it fits the facts” Stride agreed, “The van is back at the Forensics Lab being given a thorough going over so if the blood matches our victim, then we might actually have a lead at last.”

“I have got a feeling about this one” Philips then remarked.

“Oh? How so?” Stride asked.

“Sam Edwards is off to London this morning apparently, pursuing a lead he has uncovered but Longton would not say what it was” Philips then explained.

“London?” Forrester responded, “I wonder what that is all about?”

“Search me” Philips replied, “Anyway, until he gets back, Al Longton is lead officer on the case.”

“Go on, give me some good news” Longton prompted as he stood over the shoulder of Doctor Gorham as he looked through the eyepiece of the powerful microscope.

“The blood from the van is definitely human” Gorham confirmed, “Blood type is correct for your victim, but definite matching will take longer.”

“Odds on?” Longton then prompted.

“The blood type is one of the rarer ones, AB Negative and that was the blood type of your victim, assuming the records are correct, and we still are waiting for the body to arrive to confirm absolutely” Gorham confirmed, “If I were a betting man, I would say your victim’s body was moved in the back of that van.”

“That’s good enough for me” Longton agreed as he made some notes.

“The van is interesting” Gorham then continued, getting off his seat and proceeding across the laboratory and through the double doors that led into the vehicle examination bay next door, “Bog standard Bedford HA panel van, they made thousands of these and like most of them, this is an ex British Telecom one.”

“The shade of yellow beneath all the dirt and rust was a bit of a giveaway” Longton agreed as he and Gorham stood back and looked at the vehicle, now lit by spot lamps as three paper suited forensic examiners were going over it in minute detail.

“Last registered owner was a painter and decorator in Portsmouth” Gorham continued, “Your colleagues from Solent & Wessex Division paid him a visit an hour ago and confirmed that he sold it for scrap last year.”

“Anything inside?” Longton then asked as they walked around the van, maintaining a suitable distance from it so as not to either disturb the examiners or potentially contaminate any evidence.

“Old can of oil, rusty spanner, paint splattered screwdriver, probably used to open paint cans with forty-eight and a half pence in loose change and...” Gorham then picked up a plastic evidence bag and passed it to Longton, “...these.”

“Shotgun cartridges” Longton remarked, “Well, well, well...”

“We’ll try and get some prints off them” Gorham confirmed as he then took the evidence bag back, “but no promises, even if we do find any, we would need someone with a record on our system to match them against.”

“It’s something though” Longton remarked, “What about that Cavalier?”

“Nothing doing” Gorham showed Longton over to the saloon car parked nearby, “This car is so clean, you could eat your dinner off it, not so much as a hair or even a hint of a fingerprint anywhere.”

“Wow...” Longton responded.

“It’s funny, two contrasting vehicles” Gorham continued, “That old heap” he indicated the battered yellow van, “Practically its entire life history almost woven into the fabric of the seat covers and intertwined in among the rust molecules holding hands that is all that is stopping it from falling apart where it is standing, and then you have this” he then looked across to the Cavalier, “meticulously and professionally cleaned, virtually no trace of ever being touched by human hand, I mean we are talking way beyond a showroom condition motor that has had a full valet and polish here.”

“Well, The Commander has just left for London as he has a hunch about who holds the V5 registration documents for this little sparkling clean one owner from new machine” Longton confirmed.

“If he finds them, send them my way” Gorham joked, “My motor could benefit from some attention of that sort of standard!”

The squeal of the brakes, accentuated by the confined space heralded the arrival of the service from Bognor Regis, the elderly British Rail slam door multiple unit type train of eight coaches coming to a halt at the buffer stops of platform eighteen at London's Victoria Station.

The Commander had travelled all the way from Haychester, a journey of some ninety-five minutes, in the first coach and as the train stopped, he stood up, lowered the droplight window in the door and then reached out to use the external handle to open the door.

Some of the regular travellers were already on the platform having opened their doors and alighted before the train had even come to a stop and The Commander merely merged in amongst them as they all proceeded towards the platform exit and the main concourse beyond.

Whilst everyone else showed their tickets at the exit gate off the platforms, The Commander produced his warrant card even though his uniform would probably have been sufficient for the Ticket Inspector to wave him through.

The acoustics of the large roof over the concourse distorted the Tanoy announcements to the point of being utterly indecipherable whilst the large Solari destination displays clicked and clacked as they changed.

Despite not having been there for so many years now, The Commander still knew the way as he walked across the busy station concourse towards the exit where the steps that descend into the sub level ticket hall of the Underground Station were situated.

The Commander chose to walk to his destination that morning however, proceeding around the perimeter of the Bus Station before crossing two sets of traffic lights and then heading down Victoria Street.

It was a walk that he had done once before many years earlier, proceeding along Victoria Street, the buildings either side had changed a bit and the vehicles, with a few exceptions like the classic London Transport Routemaster buses, were more modern, but the nagging feeling in the back of his mind was most definitely the same.

For The Commander, it was just like his reoccurring dream when he reached the junction where Broadway branched off to the left in the shadow of the New Scotland Yard building.

He paused and looked down at the point on the pavement where he had fallen all those years ago before taking a deep breath and continuing on down the road, crossing the street and heading towards the main entrance where the famous three-sided revolving sign stood guard outside as always.

Showing his warrant card to the Metropolitan Division officer on guard duty at the entrance, he was duly allowed in through the door and found himself in the main reception area.

Behind the reception desk, long serving Receptionist Olivia was in the process of training her newly appointed successor Janice.

“Now you have to remember that we are the first point of contact here” Olivia duly instructed, “Absolutely anyone can walk through those doors so...” she then looked up towards the main entrance, “here comes your first visitor.”

“Good morning, Sir, welcome to New Scotland Yard” Janice cheerfully called.

“Morning” The Commander replied as he arrived at the reception desk, “Lieutenant Commander Sam Edwards, Haychester” he then declared, “I was hoping to have a word with the boys from the Drugs Squad?”

“Ah, I believe they have just returned from one of their early morning door knocking exercises” Olivia confirmed.

“It's your lucky day Sir” Janice agreed, “Fourth floor, far end of the corridor on the right, just follow the signs.”

“Thank you” The Commander responded, “The lifts are over there, aren't they?” he pointed ahead.

“Yes Sir” Janice confirmed, “Have you been here before?” she then asked.

“Just the once my dear, just the once” The Commander responded with a knowing smile before turning smartly on his heels and heading towards the lifts.

The Commander looked at the lifts and after a moment of thought, decided to take the stairs instead, passing through the double doors and heading up the stairs, pausing for a moment to look through the glass windows on the street scene below which reminded him of his fear of heights and so he quickly resumed his ascent to the fourth floor.

As he had been instructed by Janice, The Commander passed through the doors on the fourth floor landing and followed the corridor until he reached the door of the Drugs Squad office, marked with a formal lettered sign on the door in the unique New Scotland Yard typeface that was developed specifically for usage in the building.

The Commander politely knocked on the door before opening it.

“Well, well, well, look what the cat dragged in!” a voice called across the office as The Commander entered, the voice being that of Operations Commander Neil Forster

“Neil” The Commander replied as the young tall man approached from the other side of the room and they then shook hands, “Good to see you.”

“What brings you all the way up from that cushy little one-horse town of yours then?” Forster asked as they sat down, “I haven't seen you since that time your local drug dealer wound up having to be fished out of the canal basin.”

“Well, I was in town to see an old friend and as I was err, sort of passing the door” The Commander explained, “I thought I would pop in and see you, I need some guidance.”

“Pick a subject” Forster readily agreed.

“Drugs” The Commander replied.

“Ah, the speciality of the house!” Forster confirmed, “What have you got?”

“Firstly, I have a body” The Commander confirmed, “Young female, shot in the back with possibly a sawn off.”

“That shows a certain sense of style...” Forster remarked.

“Quite” The Commander agreed, “Anyway, she had something in her handbag called...” he then had to fumble through his tunic pockets to find his notebook, “It’s in here somewhere...”

“Is your jacket made from the same material as the Tardis or something?” Forster asked as The Commander turned out his pockets, producing keys, half eaten bars of chocolate, empty biscuit packets and a Swiss Army knife before finally finding his notebook and then shoving the rest of the contents roughly back in again although Forster offered the waste bin for the old biscuit packets which he duly deposited.

“It feels like it sometimes” The Commander admitted before thumbing through the notebook, “Ah, here it is” he then declared, “Dim...” he began to read but struggled to read his own handwriting so instead showed Forster the page in his notebook instead.

“Dimethocaine” Forster confirmed, “Fake cocaine, we have got a tub of the stuff in the safe out the back. What was you dead girl doing with it?”

“My working theory is that she was trying to impress someone who is fond of the real thing without actually taking the real thing” The Commander concluded.

“Sounds like an agency plant of some kind” Forster remarked, “Not one of ours though, we have nothing on down your way at all at the moment.”

“Her i.d. was dubious too” The Commander continued, “In fact her whole life history has ‘Made in Thames House effectively written all over it.’”

“Ah...” Forster responded with an understanding look of realisation.

“Actually, I wanted to ask you if you knew of any drug related activity in the Haychester area us local plod were unaware of” The Commander then explained.

“Like I said, we have got no intelligence of anything major down your way” Forster confirmed, “Which means either there is absolutely nothing happening in your area bar the local street corner selling trade or something so large is happening that our friends over at Thames House are keeping it under a very tight lid.”

“Hoping for the former, expecting the latter” The Commander remarked, “Tell me, what should I be looking for if someone has a major drug operation operating on my manor?” he then asked.

“Hmmm...” Forster mused, “The chances are if there is a big, connected operation we don’t know about, then the actual principals, that is the organisers, the money men will be far removed from the actual goods.”

“That makes sense” The Commander agreed.

“The actual moving and handling of the goods will be down to a local what we call disposable” Forster continued, “Someone who is adept at moving large quantities of seemingly innocent goods without attracting any unwanted attention but at the same time, easily expendable if they should get their collars felt.”

“So, someone like a trader, fence, that sort of thing?” The Commander asked, “Known for petty low-level stuff, handling, etcetera.”

“Sounds about right” Forster agreed, “Got anyone in mind down on your manor?”

“There are a few dodgy characters around who I could pop around to and annoy, yes” The Commander admitted.

“Now, actually finding the drugs, that is the tricky bit as organised gangs are getting very good at hiding stuff, often in plain sight” Forster continued before reaching behind the desk they were sitting at and producing, much to The Commander’s surprise, a large catering size can of baked beans, “Take this for example” he then handed it over.

“That’s a big can of beans” The Commander remarked.

“Indeed, it is” Forster explained, “Part of a consignment that Essex & Suffolk Division Drugs Squad found in a warehouse last week.”

“How many?” The Commander asked as he handed the can back.

“Five thousand cans” Forster confirmed.

“Wow...” The Commander responded.

“To the untrained eye, a perfectly innocent can of beans” Forster continued, “Open it up and look inside and as you would expect, you find beans but dig down inside and you find...” he then produced a couple of evidence photographs of an open can with its contents taken out and displayed, “half a kilo of Columbian pure in a nice well packed plastic bag.”

“Very clever” The Commander agreed, “So, if I find anything like this, would you be interested in taking a look at it?”

“You know the number” Forster agreed, indicating the telephone on the desk, “So, what are you going to do about the dead girl?”

“Oh, I am going to have a word with an old friend who I strongly suspect may well have been her boss...” The Commander cryptically confirmed.

“Okay, how are we doing so far?” Longton asked as he looked over Phillips and Forrester’s shoulders at the green VDU screens.

“There are over a hundred names on this list that the hotel gave us” Phillips confirmed, indicating the pile of paper in among copious notes and files piled high on the desk all around her, “of which we have thus far managed to trace the whereabouts of just over half.”

“Anything interesting come up?” Longton then asked as he looked through some of the handwritten notes.

“A few names have piqued our interest” Forrester confirmed, “Top of the list is one Richard David Francis, third son of the Earl of Haychester no less.”

“Young fellow, overly cheery, drives a convertible sports car like a budget version of Stirling Moss?” Longton tentatively asked.

“That’s the chap” Forrester agreed, “Thirty-two, quite the ladies’ man, has lots of money and likes to throw it about, into fast cars, fast women and just happens to have the top floor penthouse suite at that hotel on permanent rent.”

“Very cosy” Longton remarked.

“Two other names stand out as well” Phillips continued, “Lionel Davidson and Tony Prentis, both have membership cards in our Criminal Intelligence System, Davidson for ABH and possession about ten years ago, Prentis is his long time rent a thug and minder, did a five stretch for headbutting a magistrate at the Old Bailey when he was fifteen and it has been a steady stream of petty convictions for getting into fights, most of which he started ever since.”

“Sounds like a right charmer” Longton commented.

“Last conviction was six years ago” Phillips then added, “Solent & Wessex Division nicked him for glassing a Crystal Palace fan in a pub in Bournemouth, out on licence about a year ago.”

“This guy is a poster child for the National Association of Bald Tattooed Thugs, Goons & Miscellaneous Heavies, isn’t he?” Longton remarked on seeing the official file photograph.

“Not exactly your posh country house hotel frequenting types, are they” Forrester pointed out.

“Indeed they are not, unless they were robbing the place” Longton agreed, “Anything else?” he then asked.

“Lots of one and two day guests as you would expect” Phillips continued, “A couple of politicians during that political conference a few months back, mostly with their ‘Personal Assistants’ in the same room funnily enough, various other also rans and one National Security Service officer.”

“Who?” Longton asked.

“A Lieutenant Commander Keith Owen” Phillips confirmed, double checking her notes carefully, “Specialist Investigations Unit, Solent & Wessex Division, stayed two or three nights at a time on several occasions over the last six months.”

“Business or pleasure I wonder?” Longton pondered.

“No way of telling unfortunately” Forrester commented, “I am willing to bet he put it on the company credit card though!”

“All very interesting but it doesn’t get us any closer to finding our murderer or anything vaguely resembling a motive unfortunately” Longton concluded, “Keep digging though, especially these two goons” he indicated the printed records for Davidson and Prentis, “Let’s see if we can find out where they are and what they have been up to lately, even if they are not involved, they are probably up to something and are well overdue for another spell in our luxurious accommodation downstairs...”

On the third floor of Thames House, the London headquarters of the Secret Service, better known as MI5, one of the section's most experienced specialist officers, Section Chief Richard Crowthorne was at his desk studying a wealth of documents, much of it marked in big bold letters as secret, warnings of Eyes Only and small print with reminders of the effects of The Official Secrets Act and what could happen were it to be devolved or fall into the wrong hands.

Crowthorne looked up as he heard footsteps approaching and saw his colleague and second in command David Collins approach with a puzzled look.

“Good morning, Dave” Crowthorne called as he looked up from his files and took off his reading glasses.

“Morning boss” Collins responded, “Erm, I don't know how to tell you this...”

“We are in the business of secrets and mystery” Crowthorne pointed out, “Go on, spit it out...”

“There is a Security Service officer downstairs asking for you” Collins then explained.

“Anyone I know?” Crowthorne asked as he closed the file in front of him and got up.

“In a manner of speaking” Collins replied to a somewhat cryptic look from Crowthorne, “I think one of your proverbial pet projects has just walked in through the door.”

“Oh...” Crowthorne responded, “Well, I had better not keep him waiting, had I?”

The Commander was stood in the centre of the elaborate main foyer of Thames House, looking all around when the lift bell sounded, and he turned to see Crowthorne emerge from the lift and stride confidently towards him.

“I was wondering when you would appear at my door” Crowthorne remarked with a broad smile before the two men shook hands.

“Hello old friend” The Commander replied, “It's been a while.”

“Ten years at least” Crowthorne confirmed, “I take it this visit is business rather than personal though?”

“I am afraid so” The Commander confirmed with a regretful look.

“In which case, step into my office” Crowthorne responded, guiding The Commander back towards the lift.

As the lift doors closed, The Commander looked across at Crowthorne with a knowing smile.

“I think I know what this is about” Crowthorne admitted, “Was that you who wrecked one of the most sophisticated and expensive security system control panels money can buy in one of our safehouses by shooting at it by any chance?”

“Yeah...” The Commander admitted with a wry smirk as the lift doors opened.

“I thought I recognised the style” Crowthorne then added with a chuckle.

“That system was expensive?” The Commander asked in disbelief with Crowthorne nodding in conversation, “You were done, one bullet from my old revolver knocked the lot out.”

“What can I say?” Crowthorne admitted, “Government equipment supply contract picked up by the lowest possible bidder.”

“Yeah, tell me about it” The Commander agreed.

“Come on, this way, and try not to snoop at anything” Crowthorne then instructed.

“Me? Snoop?” The Commander innocently replied, “Never...”

“Dave” Crowthorne then called ahead to his deputy, “Allow me to introduce to you Haychester’s finest, Lieutenant Commander Sam Edwards, an old friend of the family so to speak.”

“Dave Collins, general gopher and deflector of flack” Collins confirmed, “Pleased to meet you.”

“Like wise” The Commander agreed as they shook hands.

“Dave, make sure we are undisturbed, will you?” Crowthorne then requested.

“Sure boss” Collins confirmed.

“Step into my office” Crowthorne then held open the door before following The Commander inside and then closing the door behind him.

“I’ll come right to the point” The Commander then announced, “Why are you running an operation on my manor?”

“Ah, that...” Crowthorne regretfully responded, “What gave it away?”

“Your agent” The Commander confirmed, “Identity lifted from someone who died when they were an infant, MI5 issued passport...”

“...we really need to stop doing that” Crowthorne muttered to himself regretfully.

“...a background history that may as well have ‘Written in Thames House’ printed all over it” The Commander continued, “fake cocaine to presumably fit in with whoever her target was on this op, the aforementioned security system at her drum, need I go on?”

“Point made” Crowthorne conceded.

“If you are wondering where your agent is by the way, a farmer found her body in some woodland a few hours ago” The Commander then informed him, “Apparently shot in the back, possibly by a shotgun, maybe even a sawn-off no less.”

“What a mess...” Crowthorne despondently responded.

“You can say that again” The Commander quickly agreed, “By the way, are you missing a silver Vauxhall Cavalier by any chance?” he then asked, “Only we got that down at the Haychester garage being taken apart by our best vehicle inspection team with their toolbox of fine-tooth combs.”

“Yeah, that is ours” Crowthorne confirmed.

“So, the two goons who have been driving around Haychester for at least the last couple of days were your lads I presume?” The Commander then asked.

“Indeed” Crowthorne admitted, “Sorry about last night by the way, if I had known it was you pursuing my guys, I would never have authorised the intercept to throw you off their tail.”

“A crumb of comfort I suppose...” The Commander responded, “So, are you going to tell me what the hell is going on?” he then demanded.

“Okay...” Crowthorne reluctantly began, “A few months ago a very large shipment of narcotics arrived on a private yacht which landed in the country in Haychester Harbour.”

“News to me” The Commander replied.

“We got a whisper from our opposite numbers over in the French Intelligence Service” Crowthorne continued to explain, “You see, there are certain sensitivities involved in this case.”

“Let me take a wild guess” The Commander summarised, “By any chance does this involve people with very powerful connections and could be potentially embarrassing for the Government or whoever if this got out?”

“Something like that” Crowthorne admitted, “We know that someone very well connected is bringing in wholesale amounts of Class A narcotics, along with some other illegal goodies using a number of private yachts and possibly a small light aircraft.”

“Our Drugs Squad have had no intelligence about anything going on down my way” The Commander pointed out.

“That is because we have done everything we can to keep a very tight lid on it” Crowthorne confirmed, “We knew very little about how the stuff is coming in, who is handling it, where the money is coming from or going to, all we do know was that one of the key figures is a very prominent person in the Haychester area and that he has a fondness for high class escort girls.”

“So, you sent your girl in to try and hook up with this mystery man” The Commander remarked.

“That was the plan” Crowthorne agreed.

“I presume that her turning up dead was not part of the plan?” The Commander asked to which Crowthorne merely nodded in confirmation, “Why the hell did you not come to me with this?” he then asked.

“Orders from above” Crowthorne confirmed, pointing up at the ceiling.

“Are you aware that the Solent & Wessex Division is sniffing around this case?” The Commander asked, “Only I spotted one of their guys trying and failing not to be noticed in the hotel foyer yesterday evening.”

“I heard on the grapevine that Chief Superintendent Travis was apparently poking around” Crowthorne replied, “Isn’t he the guy you nicked for drunk driving last year?” he then recalled.

“That’s the chap” The Commander confirmed, “Another classic example of someone who has been promoted to their achievable level of incompetency.”

“Quite...” Crowthorne readily agreed.

“You know, for a secret service, you left an awful lot of calling cards” The Commander then commented, “Apart from your guys in the Cavalier, send my thanks to your guy who checked I was okay after ramming me off the road by the way, there was the MI5 issued passport in the handbag of your dead agent, the too perfect CV, the postcard from the Uncle in East Grinstead and to cap it all, she apparently died years earlier but was subsequently born again for your nefarious purposes.”

“Oh dear...” Crowthorne remarked as he sat back in his chair, “You really should have signed on with us, you are too good for the National Security Service.”

“Nah, I like the uniform” The Commander admitted.

“Yes, you hide behind it...” Crowthorne quietly commented to a slight sneer in response from The Commander.

“So, I have a dead body in Haychester morgue” The Commander then remarked, “What do you want me to do with it?” he asked.

“Hold on to it for now” Crowthorne confirmed, “The chances are that the Attorney General's office will request a pause in your investigation whilst this regrettable incident is discussed at the highest level.”

“Tell your two lads to take a break for a couple of days” The Commander requested, “Lie low but stay in the area, it may be useful to have them around in case I run into any bother.”

“Oh, and I am sure that won't happen...” Crowthorne sarcastically replied to another slightly scornful look in reply from the Commander, “Okay, I'll tell my people on the ground to take a back seat for now” he then agreed.

“...and I want copies of all the material you have, names, dates, places, everything” The Commander then formally requested.

“It's not much...” Crowthorne reluctantly replied, “But what we have I will send over by secure courier this afternoon.”

“So, why is MI5 really nosing around this case?” The Commander then asked, leaning forward and facing Crowthorne directly, looking him in the eye.

“I think it is fair to say, this all came from above” Crowthorne pointed upwards again, “Someone is worried that there is the potential for a major scandal if it all got out as it is believed the smuggling ring is being run by some very prominent and well connected individuals.”

“Your instructions being, watch what happens and have a big bucket of whitewash on standby?” The Commander suggested.

“That's pretty much it, yes” Crowthorne confirmed.

“What a pity for the powers that be that I have wandered into all this...” The Commander wryly remarked.

“Absolutely...” Crowthorne agreed with a knowing smile.

“By the way, I heard about your exciting news” The Commander then commented in a change of subject, “When are you due to go before the royal breadknife and become Sir Richard?”

“How the hell did you know about that?” Crowthorne replied with a look of astonishment, “I only just found out myself.”

“As you say, reliable sources...” The Commander evasively answered.

“Sometime in the autumn I think” Crowthorne then confirmed, clearly still not convinced his impending knighthood honour wasn't some sort of elaborate practical joke, “When do you get yours?”

“Very funny...” The Commander replied.

“Well, you already have two George Cross” Crowthorne then pointed out, “How are you, anyway?” he then asked.

“Which me are you asking?” The Commander cryptically replied, “Sam Edwards or Eddie Regent?”

“You are both one and the same” Crowthorne pointed out to which The Commander merely nodded in agreement.

“Sam is merely a shadow of a shadow” The Commander admitted, “A name on some documents, an identity I find I have to hide behind in case someone from my past pops up and decides to finish what they started back in 1969.”

“Wearing the medal ribbon on your uniform for the George Cross you got as Eddie is a nice ironic touch” Crowthorne nodded towards the row of medal ribbons on The Commander's uniform tunic, a dark blue section with a little silver star in the centre, uniquely denoting him as a double recipient of it, once as Eddie and later as Sam.

“Kind of rubs the bad guy's noses in it” The Commander confirmed with a smile, “Also confused the hell out of a couple of medal experts when I attended a call to an antique collectors fair last year too!”

“Speaking of old friends and reliable sources” Crowthorne recalled, “Heard a good one from a contact in Westminster the other day, you remember the Right Horrible Trevor Sharman MP?” he asked.

“That bag of slime?” The Commander dismissively responded.

“Oh, so you do remember him” Crowthorne remarked, “Whispers abound that at the next Cabinet reshuffle, he is pencilled in for the Home Secretary's job.”

“Oh God...” The Commander replied with a look of disbelief, “Ah well, just goes to prove once again that theory about certain people being promoted to their level of incompetence...”

“Indeed...” Crowthorne strongly agreed.

“Any word on when One Three One will be gracing us with his presence?” Edwards asked as he came into the main investigation office.

“He just called actually Sir” Longton confirmed as he hung up the telephone, “He's leaving Victoria on the 10:32 so should be back before lunchtime.”

“You can give him the good news then” Edwards announced, the regret in his voice readily apparent, “The Attorney General has just been on the phone...”

“The Attorney General's office or the big man himself?” Longton asked.

“The big man himself” Edwards confirmed.

“Wow...” Phillips responded, “It's serious then?”

“Not to go outside this room but it has been confirmed that our dead girl was on MI5's books as an agent and that means certain niceties, orders barked into telephones and meetings in walnut lined meeting rooms in classified corners of Westminster before we can continue any further investigation into the case” Edwards duly announced.

“Somehow Sir, I doubt very much that The Commander is going to let something as trivial as a papal bull from the Attorney General get in the way of his investigation” Longton remarked.

“Oh, most likely...” Edwards readily agreed as Phillips then left the office, leaving him and Longton alone whereupon he discreetly closed the door.

“Something else Sir?” Longton then asked, sensing Edwards' hesitancy.

“Do you know who he is?” Edwards then asked, nodding towards The Commander's desk nearby.

“You mean the not so late Eddie Regent?” Longton responded, quickly realising the significance of the conversation.

“The very same” Edwards quietly confirmed, “Obviously you need to keep his real identity under your proverbial hat, however I want you to watch his back.”

“I understand Sir” Longton readily agreed.

“He needs a friend right now” Edwards continued to explain, “As his career ascends whether he likes it or not, someday, Eddie is going to be forced from the shadows into the light and when that happens, he will need help, be it from you or whoever he meets along the way.”

“I worked out who he really was beneath the façade last night” Longton confirmed, “There were too many things about him that fit a southeast London background and not enough for someone who supposedly was born and bred in rural Sussex, I was talking to him yesterday and these little flags kept appearing.”

“Quite” Edwards agreed.

“It was almost like Eddie was inside trying to make contact, saying ‘Hello, I am in here, let me out’ if you see what I mean” Longton continued, “then last night I dug out my old University notes, found the picture of Eddie Regent taken at Victoria Tube Station in 1969 and compared it with a photo of him in last week’s Haychester Gazette, there was no doubt they were one and the same, the whole MI5 issued passport thing this morning was just the icing on the cake.”

“The real person hidden inside has been cooped up for too long” Edwards remarked, “Eddie needs a friendly ear just as much as anyone else.”

“You can count on me Sir” Longton confirmed which was when the telephone on the desk rang and he then leaned across to answer it, “Yeah, he’s here” he then confirmed before handing the handset to Edwards, “It’s for you Sir.”

“Edwards” he confirmed on taking the call whereupon his face dropped as he was re-laid bad news, “Oh God... Really?” he then asked, seeking confirmation of the inevitable.

Longton looked on with a concerned expression, fuelled by the look his superior officer was now displaying, everything from sighing to rolling his eyes upwards.

“Right, thank you!” Edwards then rather tersely concluded before hanging up.

“Bad news Sir?” Longton dared to ask.

“It would seem our favourite Lieutenant Commander has put his foot in it, again” Edwards began to explain.

“Nothing new so far Sir” Longton commented.

“Apparently Solent & Wessex Division had some sort of long-term special operation, off the books going on, over at that hotel you and Eddie stomped into last night” Edwards explained, “A six month long operation, the personal pet project of none other than my opposite number over in Winchester.”

“Not Chief Superintendent Travis?” Longton hesitantly asked.

“The same” Edwards confirmed, “That was the poor officer on his staff who just got the job of being his driver for the day” he then explained, “Travis is on his way over here now to give us all a lecture in his usual inimitable way.”

“Oh, Eddie is going to love this...” Longton remarked.

“Batten down the hatches Al, hell is thundering in our direction as we speak” Edwards warned.

“Understood Sir” Longton agreed before looking across to the clock on the office wall, “I had better get going, The Commander is due back at the station in about fifteen minutes and I need to pick up his new car.”

“Tell him to try to keep it in one piece this time, will you?” Edwards asked as Longton got up and put on his uniform tunic.

“I’ll try Sir” Longton agreed before leaving the office.

Heading outside into the sunshine, there was a brand-new patrol car sitting in The Commander's space, the red paint reflecting the bright conditions with almost a dazzling effect.

“Al!” the Garage Supervisor called across whereupon he tossed over the keys which Longton easily caught, “Not a scratch please” he then called.

“It's not me that you should be telling!” Longton responded with a wry smile as he opened the door and got in the driver’s seat before starting the engine.

As he reversed out of the parking space, he was forced to stop as another red patrol car came the other way and also stopped sharply.

The driver of the other car was seen to wave apologetically and then reverse back out of the way, allowing Longton to manoeuvre out before he then pulled up alongside.

“Sorry to trouble you” the young female officer driving the other car called across, “I am trying to find a parking space” she explained.

“Oh, that space I just came out of is free, just don't tell The Commander” Longton indicated behind him, “That's his space, in fact, this is his new car since he wrecked his old one yesterday.”

“Is that Lieutenant Commander Edwards?” the young officer asked to which Longton nodded in confirmation, “It's just my Guvnor has got me to drive him over here to give him a piece of his mind.”

“He'll have to shout pretty loud” Longton remarked, “He's still on a train at the moment, I am on my way to pick him up.”

“Oh, there goes old thundercloud” the officer then remarked as she saw in her rear view mirror her superior, Chief Superintendent Travis of Solent & Wessex Division pass by.

“That is a seriously determined stride your boss has got” Longton remarked.

“Oh yes....” the young officer agreed, “I am glad I won't be in the room when he goes off, you had better warn your friend.”

“Don't worry, I will” Longton confirmed with a smile before driving off.

The Commander was sat in the front carriage of the train from London Victoria as the two halves of the 1963 built slam door multiple unit rolling stock were being divided at the last stop before Haychester where one part would continue on towards Portsmouth whilst the other part was only a short hop away from Bognor Regis.

He had a distinct sense of foreboding as the sound of whistles heralded the dispatch of the train, he was on towards the next stop, his final destination of Haychester.

“Home sweet home, next stop” The Commander remarked to himself as he finished reading the article in the latest issue of Railway Modeller Magazine that he had picked up at London's Victoria Station just before boarding the train.

Passing through the Sussex countryside, it was another five minutes before the rather tired old train began to slow as it approached the outer parts of Haychester's where The Commander looked out of the window as the Blue Parrot Club set in among the old gravel pit lakes that dominate the outer east side of the city passed by.

The final approach to Haychester's railway station, situated on the southern edge of the city saw the bus garage and the adjacent bus station pass by the north side, passing over two level crossings where the traffic was backed up considerably before slowing to a stop in the platform.

The Commander had already lowered the window in the door and waited until the train had come to a complete stop before leaning out and turning the handle on the outside to open the door and step out onto the platform.

His uniform and familiarity meant that The Commander was waived through by the ticket inspector at the platform exit before he headed out of the south side exit of the station to see Longton waiting by the brand new patrol car, the most recent version of the high performance Ford Sierra saloon of the time.

“Nice wheels” The Commander complimented.

“After you bent your old motor yesterday, the Guvnor pulled some strings with our dedicated army of accountants” Longton explained as he opened the driver's door to allow The Commander to get in, “Thankfully we have a very good relationship with the local Ford dealer” he confirmed as he got in the front passenger seat.”

“In which case let’s see what she can do” The Commander declared as he started the powerful three litre engine and prepared to drive off.

“A few items of news for you” Longton announced as The Commander drove around the Southgate road system, “Blood stains found with the handbag in Priory Park was definitely not from our victim, not least the wrong blood group and traces of all sorts of drugs in it.”

“I have had it confirmed as near as is possible” The Commander responded, “Our dead girl was MI5, sent in to infiltrate a possible group who has been using high up connections to smuggle in drugs, weapons, you name it.”

“The Attorney General has put a hold on the murder investigation, the Chief got the call about half an hour ago” Longton then confirmed.

“No surprise there” The Commander agreed.

“We have spent quite a few hours on the telephones checking out the names on the list we got from the hotel yesterday” Longton continued, “A couple of them have pinged up as interesting but when we tried to dig further, we ran into roadblocks if you know what I mean.”

“Uh-huh...” The Commander knowingly responded.

“A couple of known names to our records though who seem a bit out of place in a posh five-star hotel” Longton added, “Do the names Lionel Davidson and Tony or Anthony Prentis ring any bells?”

“Oh, someone let them out, did they?” The Commander remarked, “You are right, not the sort to be normally seen around a five-star hotel in the heart of the Sussex countryside, a B&B in Bognor Regis maybe, worth following up I reckon even just to see what those two are up to.”

“There was one other name on the list I thought was interesting too” Longton then remarked, “You remember Lord Tossport and his over enthusiastically driven sports car we pulled over yesterday?”

“Oh yes...” The Commander smirked in response.

“His name is on the list” Longton confirmed, “In fact he is quite a regular guest there, got his own dedicated penthouse suite up on the top floor, which is odd considering he only lives thirty minutes’ drive away.”

“Or fifteen minutes given the way he drives” The Commander pointed out as they approached the entrance to the Haychester office site, and he turned off the main road.

“Quite” Longton agreed.

“So does that mean you will be taking up one of your favourite hobbies later?” Longton cheekily asked.

“What? Thoroughly get right up the nose of the nobility and taking them down a peg or two?” The Commander responded, “Absolutely...” he then confirmed, practically relishing the thought.

“Subject to getting the all clear from the Attorney General, Professor Harriman is promising the autopsy results within an hour or so of getting the nod” Longton then added as The Commander drove them down the side access road towards the parking area for their offices in ‘C Block’, “Looks pretty straightforward though.”

“That is usually when things start getting complicated” The Commander warned before braking sharply when he saw that his parking space was already occupied by another Security Service car which saw him look on in frustration and then look back over his shoulder for an alternative, “Anything else?” he then asked as he reversed the car into a vacant space on the other side.

“Yeah, just a little storm warning...” Longton hesitantly confirmed as The Commander parked the car and they got out.

“Huh?” The Commander responded.

“The Guvnor has a guest who has dropped by...” Longton then nodded towards the car parked in The Commander’s space.

“That’s a Solent & Wessex Division motor” The Commander looked at the different emblem on the side of the car, “Ah...” he then realised the significance.

“Yeah...” Longton confirmed before heading off, “I’ll let them know you are on the way.”

“Cheers Al” The Commander replied, taking a moment to take in some fresh air and compile his thoughts.

“Best get this over with then” he then concluded and then turned smartly on his heels and headed for the automatic sliding door which unusually behaved itself for a change, opening before they reached it.

“Oh, I am terribly sorry!” The Commander then profusely apologised as he collided with a young female officer who was leaving the building at the same time he was entering.

“It’s all right” the officer responded, smiling which was when The Commander noticed the Solent & Wessex Division insignia and identity prefix on her uniform tunic.

“I think I have an impending meeting with your boss” The Commander then admitted.

“I got the short straw, I am his driver today” the young woman admitted, “Apparently one of you Haychester guys nicked him for driving under the influence last year and he lost his licence.”

“Yeah, that was me actually” The Commander admitted with a wry smile, “Sorry...”

“Good luck” she then remarked with a glorious smile.

“Thanks” The Commander smiled in response before heading inside.

As the glass sliding door closed behind him, The Commander turned around and watched through the window as the officer got back in her car which was when he became aware of someone standing behind him, looking over his shoulder.

“Oh yes, not interested in women...” Longton sarcastically commented.

“I can window shop” The Commander weakly defended himself before reluctantly turning away and heading up the stairs, “Besides, she is way too good for likes of me.”

“Excuses, excuses...” Longton quietly remarked under his breath as he followed The Commander up the stairs, “Apparently she is Divisional Superintendent Terville’s driver, poor lass” he then confirmed.

“You have been busy” The Commander remarked as they reached the second floor landing, “You’ll be telling me her name next.”

“Err, Tracy something...” Longton recalled.

“Oh...” The Commander thoughtfully replied.

Edward’s office was at the far end of the corridor on that floor, but they could hear the raised voices even from that distance.

“I’ll be out here” Longton sarcastically told him, “Have fun...”

“Thanks...” The Commander replied before knocking on the door.

“Yes?!?” came Edwards voice from inside the office whereupon The Commander entered.

“YOU!” a red-faced senior officer screamed at The Commander.

The Commander was unfazed and merely smiled.

“Chief Superintendent Terville, what brings you to sunny Haychester?” The Commander then politely asked.

Terville was unfit, short in stature with his girth being almost the same as his height, but this did not stop him from figuratively and almost literally throwing his weight

around when something got him annoyed which was, according to his reputation, almost on an hourly basis.

“You incompetent little git!” Terville poked his finger into The Commander’s chest as Edwards looked on from behind his desk, deeply unimpressed with his Solent & Wessex Division opposite number, “Six months, SIX BLOODY MONTHS of work I have put in on that case and you have trampled all over it!”

“If I am not mistaken, this operation of yours was taking place on our jurisdiction without any notification to us whatsoever” The Commander calmly pointed out, “Your jurisdiction begins about fifteen miles that way” he then pointed over in approximately a westerly direction.”

“Shut it!” Terville angrily responded, “I am going to kick your arse out of the Service for this you little bastard!”

“Charming as ever...” The Commander remarked under his breath.

Edwards was about to intervene when Terville had a realisation that merely set him off on another explosive outburst.

“Wait a God dam minute!” Terville poked The Commander in the chest again with his right index finger, “You are the git who pulled me over last year.”

“Always nice to be remembered” The Commander coolly replied.

“You are finished, you hear that, FINISHED!!” Terville went redder in the face than ever.

“OI!” Edwards interjected, finally managing to get a word in whereupon Terville swiftly swivelled around.

“And when I have got rid of him!” Terville pointed behind him to where he thought The Commander was standing but actually missed and pointed to the potted Swiss cheese plant in the corner instead, “I am going to have you thrown out as well.”

“Now you listen to me!” Edwards seized control of the situation, “This is my manor, the Lieutenant Commander here is one of the best officers this service has ever had and if you have any complaint to make, you do it in writing, through the proper channels to his Commanding Officer, i.e. me.”

“I don’t have time for this” Terville protested, “At the very least, demote him to traffic duty” he pointed behind him, managing to indicate the filing cabinet this time whilst The Commander was desperately trying to suppress giggles.

“Actually, we were thinking of promoting him...” Edwards remarked, knowing full well that Terville would not like that one bit.

“WHAT!?” Terville then exclaimed, his face so red now that Edwards was surprised there wasn’t steam coming out of his ears.

“You have a case on my manor or a problem with the conduct with one of my officers” Edwards then clearly stated, “You pick up the telephone, you contact me and do it properly.”

Terville merely grunted in response whilst The Commander, judging from his smile, was thoroughly enjoying watching the confrontation.

“What you DON’T do” Edwards continued, “is come all the way over here, march into my office and start throwing your considerable excessive weight around, slugging off my officers or creating a scene!”

“That’s it!” Terville protested, “I am calling the Administrator General, he will listen, and you will all be sorry” he then turned to leave, “Mark my words, you will regret you ever went against me!”

“Allow me...” The Commander politely remarked as he opened the office door whereupon Terville paused, gave him a hard angry stare but said nothing before storming off, slamming the door shut behind him.

“Well, that’s done it” Edwards remarked with a wry smile, “I’ll have to go ahead and actually promote you now.”

“Oh nuts...” The Commander remarked which was when there was knock on the door.

“Come in!” Edwards called whereupon the door opened and Longton came in.

“Coast is clear” Longton confirmed “But the fire exit door could benefit from some attention, Terville just kicked it open rather hard.”

“I wouldn’t normally say this about a senior officer” The Commander ventured, “but that guy is definitely Upton Park.”

“Huh?” both Edwards and Longton responded, each looking as confused as each other.

“Only two stops short of Barking...” The Commander then explained with a smile.

They were interrupted by the telephone on Edwards desk ringing which he reached over and answered.

“Yes, put it through, thanks” he then called to the main switchboard operator before looking up at Longton and The Commander and mouthing the words ‘Attorney General’ to which The Commander nodded in understanding.

“Any word on that old van?” The Commander quietly asked Longton as they stood back whilst Edwards was in conversation on the telephone.

“Definitely an ex BT rust bucket, sold last year presumably for scrap, no further trace, no registered owner since Swansea received the V5 from its previous owner” Longton confirmed, “but the blood stains in the back are odds on for the dead girl so she was killed somewhere else and transported to where we found here in that motor.”

“I take it the forensics guys are tearing it to pieces?” The Commander asked.

“Indeed, they are” Longton confirmed as Edwards finished the call and hung up.

“Right, that makes it even more of a mess” Edwards declared, “The Attorney General has been in consultation with the powers that be, the situation is apparently ‘under review’ but we should get the green light to resume investigations as soon as certain people have been dragged out of dusty basements and told to actually make a decision.”

“Ah, the wheels of bureaucracy, they turn so slowly...” The Commander remarked, “I had a feeling this was going to happen.”

“So, what happens now?” Longton asked, clearly confused.

“Until the Attorney General's office makes the call and lets me know, absolutely nothing” Edwards explained.

“What about the smuggling?” The Commander then asked, “and the drugs?”

“Well, that is technically a different investigation, and the Attorney General did mention just the death being the subject of the investigation suspension so...” Edwards ventured.

“...I could still do some poking around” The Commander concluded to a discreet nod of agreement from Edwards.

“Won't that just piss off Chief Superintendent Terville even more though?” Longton cautiously asked.

“Yes Al, I believe it would” The Commander confirmed with a knowing smile.

“Oh, what a shame...” Edwards smiled in response.

“So, what now?” Longton then asked.

“Back on patrol I guess?” Edwards suggested.

“Sounds like a good idea” The Commander agreed, “See you later Sir” he then called before leaving the room with Longton not far behind.

“I don't doubt it...” Edwards remarked with a knowing smile once the door was closed.

“You do realise if you start poking around in the wrong places, Terville is going to go off on one again, don't you?” Longton remarked as he and The Commander headed down the corridor.

“I am not worried about Terville” The Commander reassured him, “He is an officious prat who has spent too long getting fat, sat behind a desk.”

“You really do enjoy winding certain people up, don't you?” Longton asked.

“Only the pompous, the over promoted and the aristocracy” The Commander confirmed with a smile as they passed through the fire doors and then headed down the south end stairwell.

“What's the plan then, only I am starving” Longton remarked.

“You go and get something to eat, I am going to get my hair cut” The Commander confirmed as they reached the ground floor.

“Usual place, about an hour?” Longton suggested as they approached the car.

“Sounds good to me” The Commander agreed as he tossed the car keys to Longton who caught them effortlessly.

“I have a theory as to why you want to wind up Terville again” Longton then called after The Commander as he turned to leave, “You just want to see his driver again!”

“Very amusing Al” The Commander responded, “Not a bad idea though...” he then remarked to himself

“You want it in writing?!?” Terville loudly remarked as he stormed into his office and sat down hard in the chair behind his desk that creaked alarmingly in response to his not inconsiderable bulk landing on it, “I'll give it to you in God dam writing!!!”

He took an official form from his desk drawer and began to fill it in furiously.

“I am going to have you crucified you little bastard!” Terville then remarked as he finished filling in the form, signing it with an enthusiastic flourish before looking at the completed document with a satisfied smile.

“Right!” he then remarked to himself with obvious determination as he then got up, practically threw open his door and marched across the corridor to the general office where just the young female officer who was his driver earlier was at her desk.

“Lieutenant Commander Caverner!” he abruptly called.

“Sir?” the officer responded, looking up when her superior arrived, furiously brandishing his piece of paper.

“I want this dispatched by secure internal courier direct to Haychester, right away!”
Terville demanded, thrusting it into her hand.

“I’ll take care of it, Sir” Caverner confirmed with a smile whereupon Terville duly
marched out again, looking thoroughly smug and slamming the door shut behind him.

Caverner turned to the green screen computer terminal on her desk and thought for a
moment before looking at the form she had just received and then inputting some
details from it via the keyboard that clacked loudly with each key stroke.

After pressing the enter key, it took almost a minute for the requested information to
be located, copied to her terminal and displayed.

“Ah, there you are” Caverner then remarked, “Lieutenant Commander Sam Edwards,
nice photo” she commented on the official photograph on the screen, “Queen’s Police
Medal, George Cross, bloody hell...”

Caverner looked around the office to ensure she was still alone before reading on.

“A hundred and thirty-seven accredited arrests, three gunshot wounds and known as
The Commander on account of his natural crisis management skills” she read on.

Looking down at the official complaint form Terville had given her, Caverner thought
for a few moments before picking it up.

“Whoops...” Caverner then remarked as she 'accidentally' dropped the form into the
paper shredder whose blades swiftly obliterated the document in a matter of moments,
“Consider it dispatched Sir” she declared before looking at the photograph of The
Commander on the screen.

“And you owe me a favour, *Commander*” she then remarked.

It was always a strange feeling whenever The Commander found himself in the
barber’s chair having his hair cut, looking in the large mirror on the wall at his own
reflection as Mr Knight meticulously snipped and trimmed around him.

Anyone else looking at The Commander, sat upright in the red leather upholstered
barber’s chair would have just seen a National Security Service officer, some would
have seen Lieutenant Commander Sam Edwards, only The Commander himself could
see Eddie Regent looking back at him in the mirror though.

“Arrested anyone interesting lately then Lieutenant Commander?” Mr Knight the
barber asked as he switched on his electric clippers with their distinctive buzzing
before proceeding to work on the base of his neck.

“Disappointingly, no” The Commander admitted.

“I heard you found a body this morning, up in the woods past the old gravel pits” Mr Knight then remarked to a slightly surprised look from The Commander reflected in the mirror before he smiled, “The great and the good all pass through here Sir” Mr Knight then reminded him, “Not much doesn’t reach my ears you know.”

“Which am I?” The Commander then asked, his curiosity getting the better of him, “the great or the good?”

“Definitely the good with the potential to become the great” Mr Knight honestly concluded as he finished with clippers and took out his scissors and began to tidy up.

“Did you know they are trying to promote me?” The Commander then asked, “Again...”

“Yes, I had heard” Mr Knight confirmed, “and if you ask me, you would be a fool not to take it.”

“Hmm...” The Commander responded thoughtfully, “Maybe.”

“Trust me, you should” Mr Knight reiterated as he finished and brushed off the back of The Commander’s neck before taking a mirror and holding it behind him so that he could see the finished result for himself.

“Very nicely done as always Mr Knight” The Commander then responded before the protecting robe around him was removed and with a foot on the lever, the chair was lowered allowing him to stand up again.

At that point Longton appeared at the top of the stairs.

“Oh, looking good” he then complimented on seeing The Commander with his newly cut hair.

“I wasn’t expecting you for another couple of months if I am honest” Mr Knight remarked as he helped The Commander on with his uniform tunic and then brushed the shoulders off, “Not that I am complaining of course” he then added as received his payment.

“Perhaps he’s met a girl?” Mr Knight’s assistant who was working on the hair of a young boy, sat in the chair alongside remarked.

“Ha, ha!” Longton responded before something occurred to him, “Actually, now I come to think of it...” he then thoughtfully remarked.

“Al...” The Commander warned with a smile.

“Here, as you have been so good” Mr Knight then handed The Commander a sweet, usually reserved for his child customers.

“Thanks” The Commander responded, “See you next time.”

With that, Longton and The Commander left, heading back down the stairs and out into East Street where the patrol car was parked immediately outside.

“Anything to report Al?” The Commander asked as he got in the driving seat.

“Initial report from forensics which is strictly unofficial and does not exist until we get the nod from the Attorney General” Longton handed over a piece of paper as soon as he had sat down in the front passenger seat, “Our missing girl was shot in the back, definitely a shotgun, from the spread pattern quite possibly a sawn off, definitely not killed where she was found, nor was she killed in the old van either, that was just used for transport after death.”

“Well, that doesn’t get us very far” The Commander responded with a clear hint of frustration as he started the car, “Ballistics on shotguns are nigh on impossible and every farmer and his mum around here has got at least one in the back of their Land Rover.”

“There are some fibres in the wound that did not come from her clothing” Longton then continued as The Commander pulled out into the flow of traffic and then turned right into Little London, a very narrow side street, one of many across the city that criss crossed away from the main roads, “It is possible they came from either something she was wrapped in for transport or possibly even from the upholstery of the vehicle itself, Professor Harriman is working on it.”

“Do the words needle and haystack ring any bells?” The Commander then asked.

“Yeah...” Longton admitted, “Anyway, officially we are not supposed to be taking any action on this case until the Guvnor gets the nod from the Attorney General, remember?”

“I remember” The Commander confirmed as they approached Priory Park and he turned right, “That is why we are off to do something different.”

“What did you have in mind?” Longton slightly reluctantly asked.

“This whole case has had the unpleasant stink, metaphorically speaking of drugs surrounding it” The Commander explained, “So I think it is time to go and visit our local friendly dealer in all things dodgy, bent and plain old fashioned nicked, and shake his tree, see what falls out.”

“Oh no, not Marcus McCann?” Longton responded.

“The same” The Commander confidently confirmed as he drove around New Park Road and on past the Haychester Festival Theatre, “Just make sure you keep him down wind at all times though.”

“Gotcha...” Longton confirmed.

As The Commander drove on, heading out towards the north west, they passed through the housing estates that bordered the edge of the city before heading out into the countryside beyond.

“So, how was London?” Longton tentatively asked as they both braced themselves with the up and down movement as they went over a humpback bridge that took the country lane over the long since abandoned route of the old Haychester to Midhurst railway line.

“Busy, crowded, full of memories...” The Commander confirmed, “I had a chat with Commander Forster, the New Scotland Yard Drugs Squad chief whilst I was up there.”

“Sounds interesting” Longton remarked.

“It was indeed” The Commander agreed, “There have absolutely no intelligence relating to any drug dealing in our neighbourhood, which mean either there simply isn’t anything...”

“...or it is so big and complex that our boys at The Yard have been unable to see anything” Longton concluded.

“Exactly” The Commander confirmed, “and MI5 have been given a watching brief to keep any eye on said supposedly non-existent operation due to, and I quote ‘the potential participation of key parties that could cause embarrassment and scandal’ if anything were to become public.”

“In other words, someone is looking for a whitewash job” Longton remarked to which The Commander nodded in agreement, “Well that explains the girl then, circulate in rich connected circles and seeing who is up to what, with who.”

“And here we are, having stumbled right into the middle of it” The Commander continued, “Needless to say, there are those in authority who don’t want us ‘plod’ as they put it, rocking the boat whilst others seem more than happy for us to kick a few backsides and stir the pot.”

“You are loving this, aren’t you?” Longton remarked.

“The opportunity to piss off the aristocracy, the establishment and Divisional Superintendent Travis all rolled into one? Oh yes...” The Commander broadly smiled in reply.

Turning off the country lane they had been following down a rough farm track that was little more than some patches of muddy tarmac and gravel forming two thin strips where wheels run, they soon reached their destination, a group of old farm buildings, typical of the local area with their flint and brick construction and looking aged and neglected.

“So, what are we doing here?” Longton asked as they got out of the car and looked all around.

“This my friend, is the corporate headquarters of one of the most well connected business empires in the area” The Commander explained, “If there is anything dodgy being transported across our manor, Marcus will know about it, indeed I would probably wager he is in fact the one transporting it.”

“Ah, I see” Longton responded.

“Have you ever met Marcus McCann?” The Commander asked as they approached the tall wooden door of the barn, the main building of the complex.

“Only know him by reputation, never had the pleasure of meeting him in the flesh” Longton confirmed.

“Knock, knock, it's the rozzers” The Commander called as he rapped his hand on the rickety old wooden door before they both strolled into the barn and looked all around.

“Ruddy hell, it's an Aladdin's cave in here” Longton remarked as he looked all around the cavernous interior which was stacked from floor to ceiling with boxes of goods, electrical items, canned foods and other consumer goods.

“Indeed” The Commander confirmed, “and a fair bit probably quite warm to the touch if you know what I mean.”

“I do indeed” Longton agreed, “So, where is the business mogul in charge of this empire of iffy goods?”

“That is a very good question” The Commander admitted as he went out of the opposite door into the former farmyard outside where a large pallet, stacked high with large cans of baked beans had caught his attention whereupon he went up to them and put his ear up against the cans whilst he tapped his knuckles against the exterior, listening carefully.

“What's that?” Longton then remarked as they both turned on hearing a loud bang from somewhere nearby.

“That sounds like a shotgun” The Commander admitted which was when Longton instinctively reached for his firearm, “Put that away Al” he then calmly advised, “You won't need it.”

“If you say so...” Longton replied, slightly reluctantly holstering it again before they headed off across the yard towards the open field beyond.

“Ah, there he is!” The Commander then came around the corner and saw a short slightly scruffy looking man in his mid-twenties, wearing an obviously second-hand tweed jacket and with an open unloaded shotgun over his left arm, “It's Haychester's very own captain of industry.”

“Oh crap...” McCann despondently remarked as he saw the two uniformed officers approaching and wisely put the shotgun down just in case they got the wrong idea.

“Hello Marcus!” The Commander greeted him, “How's business?”

“Well, you know Sir” McCann slightly hesitantly replied, “It's the iron and steel business, isn't it? Wife does the ironing, and I do the stealing.”

“I was just taking a look at your impressive stock back there” The Commander commented, “One thing in particular most certainly got my attention.”

“I just buy and sell; I'm a legitimate businessman” McCann tried to defend himself rather feebly.

“Are you going into the catering business?” The Commander then asked, “only you seem to have an awful lot of baked beans in there, big catering sized cans too.”

“Just a little sideline” McCann casually replied, “A man has got to earn a living you know.”

“Clay pigeon shooting” Longton commented on seeing the spring-loaded launcher used for launching by means of a sprung slingshot, the round clay disc targets into the air before picking up the empty shotgun and looking at it with an expert eye.

“Funny” The Commander then remarked as he began to stroll back towards the barn with McCann following closely behind, clearly becoming concerned, “I have a stiff in Haychester morgue right now with a shotgun wound to the back.”

“Oh, come on!” McCann protested, “I just buy and sell stuff” he then defended himself, “Okay, so some of it is a little warm from time to time, you know...”

“Fell off the back of a lorry, honest Guv?” The Commander sarcastically suggested.

“Yeah, something like that” McCann slightly sheepishly agreed.

“Must have been a bloody big lorry...” Longton remarked under his breath as they entered the yard where The Commander deliberately strolled over to the large stack of catering sized baked bean cans.

“So, what's in these then?” The Commander picked up a couple of the big cans and held them up.

“Well, baked beans of course” McCann nervously replied.

“Hmm...” The Commander then mused before picking up a tray of six of the cans and proceeding to head back out towards the field, “Let's see, shall we?”

“What?!?” McCann responded, quickly following The Commander.

“I am sure my colleague here has a can opener” The Commander explained, “Al?” he then called.

“Can opener?” Longton responded before checking his pockets whereupon he found his Swiss Army knife and duly extended the can opening element before handing it across.

“Thanks Al” The Commander responded before placing the can on the clay pigeon launcher and proceeding to wrench it open.

“It's just baked beans” McCann weakly protested as The Commander finished working his way around the rim of the can and then levering it open.

“Tell me Al, what sort of things come in big metal cans?” The Commander asked as he probed the bright orange baked beans inside the can.

“Well, beans for one, obviously” Longton responded.

“Indeed...” The Commander thoughtfully agreed before pulling out a large clear plastic bag containing a white powder that had been hidden in among the beans and holding it up, “but I am willing to bet this isn't custard powder, eh Marcus?”

“I swear to you, I have never seen that before in my life” McCann quickly protested his supposed innocence.

“Well, of course you haven't” The Commander agreed, “unless you have a canning plant stuffed in amongst that vast inventory of yours?”

“Nice...” Longton remarked as he took the bag, wiped it with a tissue and looked at it closely.

“What do you reckon, Al?” The Commander asked his opinion.

“Class A, might as well have Produce of Afghanistan written on it” Longton confirmed, “I reckon there is five or six grands worth here at currently street value.”

“Marcus, as of this moment, you are officially neck deep in the smelly brown stuff my friend” The Commander declared, “So, I appreciate you are but a tiny cog in a very large machine, but I think you had better start talking...”

“Look, I don't know anything...” McCann tried to defend himself as The Commander took back the bag and dropped it back into the bean can.

“Not good enough...” The Commander ominously warned, nodding to Longton who proceeded to pick up the shotgun and load its two chambers with cartridges before closing the stock.

“I was just looking after them, they are just cans of beans!” McCann was clearly getting desperate now.

“What do you say Al?” The Commander casually asked his colleague.

“Pull!” Longton suddenly replied whereupon The Commander pulled the lever on the clay pigeon launcher, sending the bean can and its very valuable contents up into the air.

Longton quickly tracked the flying can as it flew through the air, with the shotgun before firing off both rounds, striking his intended target and obliterating it.

“Good shot Al!” The Commander called as McCann looked on aghast.

“Thanks” Longton replied as he opened the shotgun, ejected the spent cartridge casings and reloaded.

“Feel like talking now Marcus?” The Commander asked as he carefully placed another can on the launcher.

“There are powerful people involved, nasty guys, I can't say anything” McCann tried to protest which in response, saw the Commander discreetly nod towards Longton again.

“Pull!” Longton called again whereupon The Commander pulled the lever, and the next can was catapulted high into the air.

Taking careful aim, Longton promptly and efficiently opened fire once more and the target was destroyed, sending out a fine spray of orange bean sauce, shredded metal and white powder which was caught by the wind and drifted away.

“Third time lucky?” The Commander asked as he selected another can and went to put it on the launcher which was when McCann finally surrendered.

“All right, all right!!” McCann conceded, figuring out that any more losses would probably be even worse in terms of consequences for him than whoever was behind this finding out he had talked to the authorities.

“There, that's better” The Commander complimented McCann, “Now, how about it?”

“My business is buying and selling, moving stuff around but a few months ago I ran into some err cashflow problems on account of the van needing some work to get it taxed and through the MOT you see” McCann began to explain.

“That rust bucket of yours has an MOT?” The Commander looked across the yard in some disbelief towards the tatty white Mk 2 Ford Transit Luton type box van parked nearby, “Did the vehicle inspector have a golden retriever and a white stick?”

“He owed me a favour and I bunged him a few drinks, okay?” McCann admitted, “Anyway, I met this guy at a poker game, and he introduced me to another guy who was looking for discreet transport of some goods, storage and then delivery after a couple of weeks, cash in hand, a big drink and no questions asked.”

“Keep talking...” The Commander urged, still holding the can which he was deliberately hovering near the launcher.

“I get instructions in an envelope through the door, cash included, pick up some crates or pallets at a specific time and place and hold onto them for a while until I am told to make myself scarce for a few hours whilst whoever it is, comes and picks them up” McCann proceeded to explain.

“And that pick up would be...?” The Commander urged McCann to confess.

“Tomorrow morning, seven thirty” McCann reluctantly confirmed, his head bowed at the thought of his potential fate, “I have to make myself scarce by seven, not come back before midday.”

“There, that didn’t hurt, did it?” The Commander remarked.

“Not yet...” McCann mumbled under his breath.

“So, let’s see what else you have, shall we?” The Commander suggested as he and Al escorted McCann back towards the barn.

“Toasters, jug kettles, microwaves, rubber ducks, sandals, fun for the whole family!” Longton remarked as they returned to the interior of the barn and looked all around.

“Marcus...” The Commander asked on opening a metal crate and looking inside, “What the hell is this?” he then held up one of the items from inside the box, with a concerned expression.

“Well, it's not what it looks like” Marcus nervously replied as Longton looked on with surprise.

“Really?” The Commander then commented, “Because this looks awfully like a hand grenade to me.”

“Hand grenade?” Marcus responded, laughing nervously as he came over, “No, these are theatre props, dummies, replicas.”

“Are you absolutely sure about that?” The Commander asked.

“My word is my bond, officer” Marcus tried to defend himself, “I got them off a bloke...”

“...in a pub?” Longton suggested the end of the sentence to which Marcus nodded in confirmation, “I am starting to get the measure of you” he then remarked with a smile.

“Hmm...” The Commander mused as he contemplated the box and its contents, “I’ll do you a deal Marcus, we won’t run the serial numbers of any of your vast inventory under the nose of Commander Jenkins over at the Burglary Squad and in exchange you cooperate with us in nailing your drug smuggling associates.”

“All right...” Marcus quietly relented, his head bowed in resignation.

“What about that lot?” Longton nodded back out to the yard and the pallet of cans, “We just can't leave all that lot sitting there, waiting to enter the market.”

“Good point Al” The Commander agreed, “We need to rustle up some non-hazardous replacements for the morning.”

“Baked beans are non-hazardous?” Marcus remarked which made the two officer's smile.

“Depends upon your point of view” Longton replied as they approached the cans, “At least they are less dangerous to life, not to mention way more legal than what is in these.”

“We will be in touch” The Commander then declared before handing Marcus a small metal object.

“What's this?” Marcus asked, looking down at his hand and seeing the metal pin that he had just received.

“A little souvenir of our visit” The Commander explained, Erm, you may want to start to run by the way” he then suggested.

“Huh?” Marcus responded but then then noticed the grenade in The Commander's hand, missing its pin but with the arming spoon still in place.

“Oh hell!” Marcus exclaimed before running off in the direction of the barn whereupon The Commander tossed the grenade into the centre of the stack of cans before he and Longton briskly walked away in the opposite direction.

They managed to reach the patrol car without anything happening.

“Looks like Marcus was right, it was a dud” The Commander remarked as he opened the driver's side door but then there was an explosion which shook the ground beneath their feet and sent smoke, dust and debris up into the air.

“Then again...” Longton responded as they both watched the dust settle for a few moments before getting back in the car.

“Whisky Sierra One Three One to Control” The Commander then proceeded to call over the radio.

“Control receiving” came the swift response.

“Can you please let the Guvnor know that I have a strong lead on the smuggling gang” The Commander requested, “I also require a message be sent to Operations Commander Neil Forster, Drugs Squad at The Yard, and I need to requisition four dozen catering sized cans of baked beans before six o'clock tomorrow morning.”

“Baked beans?!?” Edwards asked with obvious bemusement, “What on Earth does he want those for? He doesn't even like them, complains they make his chips go soggy.”

“Something to do with some sort of drugs operation apparently” Lieutenant Forrester explained, “and apparently Divisional Commander Forster from Central Drugs Squad is coming down to Haychester tonight in connection with this.”

“I guess we just have to hope Sam knows what he is doing” Edwards remarked, “Because I haven't got a clue!”

“Any word yet from the Attorney General's office Sir?” Forrester then asked.

“I believe they are still mulling it over” Edwards confirmed, “I have been told by some civil servant who is barely out of Primary School to expect a call at about four o'clock.”

“Given standard Civil Service timekeeping, I won't hold my breath Sir” Forrester admitted.

Longton and The Commander were sat in the patrol car, parked near Haychester cathedral in West Street, effectively back on routine patrol.

“Damm it!” The Commander exclaimed as he scrabbled through the glove compartment, “No biscuits!”

“The day you pop your clogs, share prices in McVities and tea bag manufacturers are going to nosedive” Longton sarcastically remarked.

“Biscuits are still in the car I wrecked last night” The Commander realised as he closed the glove compartment again, “I bet the garage guys will have eaten them by now.”

“Tesco's is just over there” Longton suggested, nodding ahead towards East Street, just beyond the medieval market cross.

“Ah, it's all right” The Commander replied, “We can head back to the office soon for a plate of chips and a sausage roll.”

“Never mind, it'll soon be Christmas!” Longton then cheerily declared.

“It's September!” The Commander indignantly pointed out.

“Woolies already got their decorations up” Longton informed him.

“Should be illegal” The Commander somewhat grumpily commented.

“What, putting Christmas decorations up in September or just Christmas altogether?” Longton asked.

“Both” The Commander quickly responded.

“Oh yes, I forgot you don't like Christmas” Longton recalled.

The Commander looked across and mere smiled sarcastically in response.

“What do you call a blind reindeer?” Longton then cheerily asked.

“No idea...” The Commander responded.

“Oh, you’ve heard that one?” Longton replied, seemingly disappointed.

“Huh?” The Commander was clearly confused.

“Blind reindeer” Longton tried to explain the joke, “No eye deer, you see?”

“Oh, right!” The Commander then realised the punchline he had inadvertently walked into, “You are one of those guys who spends Christmas day in a novelty festive jumper knitted by your gran, reading out and laughing at all the Christmas cracker jokes, aren’t you?” he then suggested.

“Actually, the jumper was knitted by my Aunt Ethel but apart from that, you are pretty much spot on” Longton admitted.

“I thought so...” The Commander smiled at having assessed Longton so accurately.

“You can read me like a book” Longton confirmed with a broad smile, “Christmas is a time for being with families and loved ones...” he then tailed off as he realised something.

“It's all right Al, I am not offended or anything, it's just...” The Commander reluctantly started to explain.

“...you don't have anyone” Longton then mournfully concluded.

“Well, there is that...” The Commander openly admitted, “Besides, it's easier if I am just working if I were honest, let everyone else enjoy themselves and I'll keep the place running until they get back” The Commander then admitted.

“There must be something you like about Christmas surely?” Longton asked.

“I will admit, a nice roast dinner with lots of stuffing and gravy, oh and a Yorkshire pud is good though” The Commander confirmed.

“I am willing to bet under all that gravy, there is a distinct lack of vegetables though...” Longton then suggested.

“Surprising as you may find this, I am rather partial to roasted parsnips” The Commander quietly admitted, “Don't tell anyone though, bad for my reputation.”

“Your secret is safe with me” Longton reassuringly confirmed.

“Along with all the rest of them” The Commander wryly remarked.

“Yeah, there is a lot in there” Longton admitted, tapping the side of his head, “I seem to have become the keeper of your secrets.”

“Plenty more where those came from” The Commander wryly admitted.

“I was reading through my Lewisham Diamond Heist notes last night” Longton then remarked “and there was one thing that occurred to me that I wanted to ask you about.”

“Go ahead...” The Commander agreed.

“Eddie Regent, i.e. you, got a posthumous George Cross for what you did that afternoon but you as Sam Edwards also got a George Cross, so does that mean you actually have two?”

“Look at the medal ribbons” The Commander leaned around to show Longton the strip of medal ribbons on the front of his tunic, the George Cross ribbon showing a star indicating a second award of the same medal, “Confused the hell out of some medal experts when I got called to an incident in an antique and collectors fair a few months back.”

“Which means that The Queen...” Longton began to conclude.

“Knows all about my double life, yes” The Commander confirmed with a wry smile, “She is one of only about a half dozen people in the world that know.”

“Wow...” Longton looked ahead down West Street through the windscreen with an expression of amazement.

“If life were simple, things would be awfully dull” The Commander then admitted.

“You know, if you want, you are always welcome to come over to our place for Christmas dinner” Longton then suggested.

“Well, that’s very kind of you” The Commander replied, quite taken by surprise.

“I know you usually volunteer to cover the Christmas Day shift, but the offer is there if you want it” Longton reaffirmed.

“Thanks, I appreciate it” The Commander smiled but all festive thoughts were then interrupted by the radio.

“All units from Control, urgent message” came the ominous call.

“Eyes down for a full house...” The Commander then remarked.

“Large fight in progress, White Horse Public House in South Street” the Control Room Supervisor called, “Anyone free to deal?”

“We’ll take that, it’s only just around the corner” The Commander agreed as he started up the car.

“Whisky Sierra X-Ray One Eight One” Longton called over the radio, “We are just around the corner, show us dealing.”

“Light up the roof A!” The Commander then called whereupon Longton duly activated the blue flashing lights and sirens.

“How are we going to turn around?” Longton asked as he looked over his shoulder and saw that not only was the car pointing in the wrong direction, but they were effectively boxed in by a bus at the rear.

“Not a problem” The Commander confidently confirmed as he accelerated away, weaving past another bus before effortlessly spinning the car right around outside the Post Office with a handbrake turn.

“Sorry!” Longton meekly called to a group of elderly people waiting outside the Post Office for a bus and who looked a bit startled at what was going on.

Quickly moving off in the right direction, the sirens and lights saw to it that the traffic quickly got out of the way, allowing The Commander to effortlessly drive up to the medieval Market Cross and turn sharply right into South Street where two more local buses and a delivery truck pulled off to one side to let him through.

Moments later with a screech from the tyres, they came to a stop outside the White Horse Public House where, as soon as they both got out of the car, it was readily apparent a major fight was in progress.

“Whoa, this looks lively!” Longton remarked as they approached the front door, pausing only when a smashed wooden chair came crashing through one of the front windows and landed next to them.

“Control from One Three One” The Commander then called into his radio as they reached the main entrance, “Send everything we have got down here, we have a full blown good old fashioned mass pub punch up in progress!”

The scene inside was one of complete and utter chaos, numerous people engaged in hand-to-hand fighting, bottles, glasses and anything else that came to hand being thrown about all over the place and the sound of smashing glass filling the air.

“Watch out A!” The Commander then quickly called, forcing Longton to duck as a wine bottle flew through the air towards him, missing his head by a fraction and smashing into the wall behind him.

“Right, you’re nicked for a start!” Longton then responded, grabbing the bottle thrower and restraining him against the wall before putting the cuffs on.

Another of the individuals involved in the fighting tried to attack the Commander as he approached the bar.

“Oh no you don’t” The Commander responded, deflecting an incoming punch and then sending the attacker sprawling to the ground.

Outside, two further patrol cars and a van arrived with reinforcements who quickly entered the premises. This was the cue for some of the fighting to finally subside but not before another drunk tried to attack The Commander, only to find themselves unceremoniously grabbed and then face planted into the pool table.

The public bar at the front was quickly cleared of troublemakers, some were escorted out, others had to be all but carried out through a combination of the effects of fighting and excessive alcohol consumption.

Longton returned to find The Commander at the bar, examining the Landlord who was in a bad way, barely conscious, bleeding and slumped over the beer pumps.

“Going to need an ambulance for this one” The Commander confirmed, “Looks like he copped a telephone across the back of the head” he nodded towards the smashed telephone, which had been ripped off the wall and was now lying in blood stained pieces nearby.

“We have got about a dozen loaded up out there, plus that guy” Longton remarked as they both stepped back to allow two other officers to carry out the unconscious attacker that The Commander had face planted into the pool table to be taken away.

At that moment there was the sound of more shouting and glass breaking from the saloon out the back.

“Seems we have more customers” The Commander remarked, “Come on” he then urged as they made their way through the wreckage toward the rear of the premises.

Sure enough, they found two exhausted drunks, still vainly trying to fight each other in the saloon bar.

“All right fellas, that’s enough I think!” The Commander declared.

“What?” one of the drunks responded with a noticeably drink fuelled slurring.

“Party’s over” Longton confirmed, “Come on” he then declared whereupon he duly escorted the two men out of the saloon.

“I’ll check the toilets for stragglers” The Commander then confirmed whereupon Longton nodded in understanding and continued to escort the two drunks outside.

Two more Security Service vans had arrived by the time Longton exited the premises with his two detainees and they were duly loaded in the back of one of them.

“Control from One Eight One” Longton then called into his radio, “Situation at the White Horse now under control, looks like a pub fight that escalated well out of hand, One Three One is sweeping for stragglers now.”

Inside the pub, The Commander’s feet crunched on the floor that was covered in broken glass as he made his way through to the back where the kitchen and toilets were located, just as Longton headed back inside.

“Sam?” Longton then called across the now apparently empty pub.

“I am out the back!” The Commander called back.

“Right...” Longton then remarked to himself before carefully picking his way through the wreckage until he stopped when he detected something moving behind him.

“ANYONE FOR CRICKET!?!?!?” came a loud cry which caused Longton to quickly turn around.

“Oh hell...” Longton then remarked as he saw a heavily built, ruddy faced and quite clearly very drunk man with a big bushy beard, grinning and holding up a pair of cricket bats, one in each hand.

He managed to duck only just in time as the big man swung the bat in his right hand around, narrowly missing Longton’s head but smashing through the few bottles and glasses that were still standing on the bar.

Quickly scrabbling backwards, Longton tried to get out of the way as the other bat was swung around and violently took out the beer pumps.

“Come on then!” the man then shouted manically.

“Oi!” came a loud call which caused the man to momentarily lower his cricket bats and turn around only to be struck full in the face by The Commander as he punched him, sending the big man crashing into a table and some chairs, flattening and smashing them to pieces.

“Howzat?” The Commander then asked before looking across to Longton and then outstretching his arm to help him back up before they both looked down at the semi-unconscious man lying on the floor.

“Thanks” Longton remarked, “Did you just do a cricket joke?” he then asked.

“Well, you seemed to be on a bit of a sticky wicket so I thought it was the least I could do” The Commander wryly admitted, “Come on, let’s get the future England Test Captain here to his nice warm prisoner van” he then declared.

“Can’t be any worse than the team we have already got” Longton remarked as between them, they managed to haul the semi-conscious big man off the floor and started to drag him towards the exit out into the street.

“Here you go, another one for you” The Commander then called as two other officers helped load the big man into the back of the waiting van, “Be careful with this one, he is rather handy with a cricket bat.”

“Two of them actually” Longton then added with a smile.

Suddenly, their attention was drawn to the upper floor when something was thrown from a window above them, smashing through the pane of glass before hitting the roof of the van with a loud metallic thud.

“Someone is still up there from the looks of it” Longton remarked.

“Come on” The Commander took charge “Let’s go and round them up” he declared as they headed back inside.

They were stopped in their tracks when two loud bangs were heard coming from somewhere above them, gunshots which immediately prompted both officers to draw their firearms in response.

“Al, get out of here and get everyone as far away as possible” The Commander immediately instructed.

“You go up there on your own, you could get killed” Longton ominously warned.

“I have been dead before, after a while, you get kind of used to it” The Commander admitted, “Besides, there is no one who will miss me if I buy it, now get going.”

“Be careful” Longton insisted.

“Aren't I always?” The Commander responded with a wry smile before heading off across the wreckage strewn bar, towards the back of the premises.

“Not usually, no...” Longton remarked before swiftly turning and heading for the exit.

Once outside, he quickly took charge of the situation.

“Okay, I want everyone moving back, right now!” Longton proceeded to order authoritatively, “Everyone to my left I want you back beyond Bejam's, everyone to my right, back to the Market Cross, let's move it people!”

Inside the building, the Commander had found the staircase and cringed slightly when the old wooden steps creaked beneath his feet as he ascended.

At first, there did not appear to be anyone about as he reached the first floor corridor but he knew that someone had just fired two gunshots so at the very least there must be a gunman and potentially a victim up there somewhere.

A door to his right was slightly ajar and carefully opening it, his gun trained directly ahead revealed it to be an office, empty with no signs of recent occupation.

The next door down seemed to be to some sort of cupboard which on trying the handle, appeared to be locked.

It was then that The Commander heard something up ahead, some sort of pained groan coming from the next door along.

“Armed Security Service Officer” The Commander called ahead, reaffirming his grip on his firearm, “Anyone there?”

The groaning of someone obviously in pain was heard again and cautiously, The Commander approached the door from which it seemed to be originating.

Slowly, The Commander pushed open the door and then saw the source of the sounds.

“Mickey?” The Commander then responded, holstering his firearm and kneeling down to attend to him.

“Sam?” Longton's voice called from the stairs, “You okay in there?”

“Yeah!” The Commander called back, “It's Mucky Mickey, he's been shot twice, still alive though, get an ambulance quick!”

“Whisky Sierra One Eight One to Control, urgent message” Longton called into his radio as he headed along the corridor “Ambulance required, first floor of The White Horse public house, one male, late twenties with gunshot wounds.”

“Come on Mickey, hang in there” The Commander reassured him.

Mickey was lying on the floor, two points in his shirt saturated with blood from two gunshot wounds.

“Ambulance is on the way” Longton confirmed as he came into the room, “Good God...” he then remarked on seeing the condition of the victim.

“I don't think God had anything to do with this somehow” The Commander responded which was when Mickey tried to say something but simply could not physically speak.

“You are going to be fine Mickey” The Commander tried to reassure him, “I get shot all the time, after a while you kind of get used to it.”

“Flat, photos, the man...” Mickey struggled to say.

“Okay, I'll take a look” The Commander confirmed, “Let's concentrate on getting you patched up first.”

“Any sign of the shooter?” Longton asked, looking around the room and noticing the large amount of cash, casino chips and playing cards strewn about.

“Not that I have seen” The Commander confirmed but both officers immediately stopped talking when they heard a creak in the corridor outside the room.

“Stay here with Mickey” The Commander quietly mouthed as he got up and once more drew his firearm before proceeding back out into the corridor.

An initial look around showed nothing and no one there until The Commander realised that the door of the supposedly locked cupboard, he had passed moments earlier now appeared to be open.

“Whisky Sierra One Three One, anyone see anybody leave the building in the last two minutes?” The Commander then cautiously asked over his radio.

“That's a negative, we are all behind the cordons” came the confirmation from an officer outside, “No one has gone in or out except you and Al.”

Suddenly, a noise from behind caused The Commander to quickly swivel around whereupon he saw a figure near the window.

Instinctively, he reacted by ducking off to his right, out of the way as a gunshot was fired towards him, narrowly missing him and instead shattering the wood of the doorframe next to him.

The shooter did not wait around to find out if his shot had found its intended target, instead he smashed open the window with the butt of his gun and jumped out.

“Stay with Mickey” The Commander called as he raced past the door and then climbed out of the window onto a metal fire escape outside.

“Silly sod is going to get himself killed one day” Longton remarked, “Again...”

“Huh?” Mickey weakly responded.

“Eh?” Longton replied, “Oh, forget it, long story...”

Outside, The Commander reached the bottom of the fire escape ladder just in time to see a figure heading away from him, a gun clearly visible in his hand.

“Oi!” he called after him but that only made the mystery gunman run faster and so he had no alternative other than to give chase.

There were screams and cries when the gunman reached the end of the alleyway and emerged out into South Street, a hundred yards or so south of the White Horse, speeding across the road before barging through the crowds and then disappearing through the ornate medieval Canon's Gate which leads towards the grounds of the cathedral.

“That’s him!” The Commander called to his colleagues nearby and with him leading, they rushed up to the gateway and along Canon Lane.

The gunman had a healthy lead ahead of The Commander as he sprinted down Canon Lane, towards the Cathedral which was where he then turned off suddenly and disappeared.

“Where the hell is he?” The Commander then asked as he came to a stop and looked all around, being joined a few moments later by other officers.

“He can’t have gone far” Forrester remarked as they all looked around them.

“Graham, get someone around to West Street and block off every exit off the Cathedral grounds” The Commander then ordered, “You two” he then indicated to a couple of other officers, go that way and search the Cathedral itself, get anyone who shouldn’t be in there out and to safety.”

“Got it!” the two officers readily agreed and headed off.

“Dave” he called to Lieutenant Commander Stride “you and me, we will check the Bishops Palace Gardens” The Commander then declared, “Come on...”

“All units from Control” the authoritative voice of Edwards called over everyone’s radio “Specialist Armed Response not available, repeat, not available, they are stuck in traffic on the other side of Worthing.”

“Great...” The Commander responded as he checked his old revolver on reaching the ornate carved stonework of the gatehouse that leads into the grounds of the Bishops Palace Gardens.

“The helicopter has been scrambled and should be here in fifteen minutes” Edwards then informed everyone.

“We have a helicopter?” The Commander asked.

“We do now” Stride confirmed.

“Still no use to us though, this will be over ten minutes before they get here” The Commander then concluded, “Come on, let's do this” he then urged before he and Stride duly passed through the gateway and into the ornate walled gardens.

“One Three One from Two Seven Five” came a call over the radio causing The Commander to pause in the shadow of a large tree and answer it.

“Receiving” he then replied, continuing to maintain a thorough look around him.

“Longton just confirmed that the victim is on his way to St. Richard's in an ambulance now” Forrester reported, “It looks like he will be okay.”

“That's something to be grateful for I suppose” The Commander agreed.

“The Cathedral is now evacuated” Forrester then added, “We have moved everyone back as far as the Public Library in Tower Street.”

“Roger that” The Commander confirmed, “Dave, you hear that?” he called across.

“Yes” Stride confirmed, “That means if our shooter is anywhere, he is in here most likely.”

“One Three One” The Commander then called into his radio “Is anyone covering the back gate out of the Gardens?” he then asked.

“Roger, One Three One” came the response from one of half a dozen officers now guarding the small rear exit from the Bishops Palace Gardens, “No one has come this way at all.”

“Well, unless he fancies breaking into the Bishops Palace itself or vaulting over the Roman walls, he's trapped in here” The Commander then concluded, “Stay by the gate, I'll see if I can flush him out.”

“Roger that” Stride confirmed as The Commander then cautiously headed off across the ornate and carefully tended ornamental gardens.

Stride stepped back to the medieval stone gateway and with his firearm drawn, looked all around as The Commander disappeared out of sight among the rose shrubs.

Suddenly, someone appeared from the shadows of the pillars and struck Stride across the back of his head, sending him to the ground.

The yelp that Stride called out as he was struck caused The Commander to suddenly stop and turn around.

“Dammit!” he then exclaimed, proceeding to hurry back to the main gateway where he found Stride semi-conscious on the ground, his firearm and personal radio missing.

“Control from One Three One, urgent message!” The Commander called over his radio as he checked Stride's condition, “Ambulance required, main gatehouse of the Bishops Palace Gardens, Dave is down.”

The sound of sirens echoing throughout the city intensified as The Commander then headed off towards the main Cathedral grounds itself where he could see an old wooden door was moving, indicating someone had passed through it, just moments before.

In the Control Room, Edwards was just putting his uniform tunic on as the operators continued to monitor developments.

“Keep this channel open” he then indicated his personal radio set, “I am going down there”.

“Yes Sir” the Control Room Supervisor confirmed before Edwards duly left.

“One Three One from Zero One” Edwards then urgently called as he headed down the corridor, through the door and down the main staircase, “Situation report please?”

“In the cloisters somewhere!” came the rushed response from The Commander, “Could use some back up in case he tries to escape out onto West Street.”

“I am on my way over” Edwards then confirmed as he got in the front passenger seat of the patrol car that was waiting for him outside with the engine running, “Burn rubber!” he then called across to Phillips who was in the driving seat.

The medieval architecture of the Cathedral and its ancillary buildings provided plenty of opportunities to hide out of sight, and so The Commander was moving forwards cautiously. The sound of sirens and commotion were filtering in from outside, echoing ethereally around the ancient walls.

“Come out, come out, wherever you are...” The Commander quietly mused, “I promise I won’t hurt you, much...”

A click from the far end of the cloisters caused The Commander to turn and look behind him but then quickly duck out of the way as a gunshot screamed through the air and struck the stonework nearby.

“The bishop isn’t going to like that...” he then remarked to himself on seeing the clean chip in the column, the dust still hanging in the shafts of light coming through the ornate medieval carved stone windows.

Approaching the end of the cloisters, The Commander looked ahead, through into where it entered the main part of the cathedral itself, a vast stone building, much of which dated back as far as the eleventh century, all be it with numerous extensive rebuilds, extensions and restorations in the intervening centuries.

A figure could be seen running off down the centre aisle of the vast cathedral interior, towards the main entrance at the west end.

“Stop!” The Commander called after them, “There is nowhere left to run!” his voice echoed all around.

“One Three One...” came a call over The Commander’s radio but he instantly responded by turning off the volume before resuming his pursuit, the footsteps from his hard soled service issue safety boots echoing loudly all around as he ran across the hard stone floor.

Reaching the main west entrance, The Commander looked outside with the exterior wall of the cloisters off to his left, the Bishops Palace wall ahead and the bell tower and West Street to his right.

“Dammit...” The Commander responded before looking back inside the Cathedral and then noticing a draft coming from somewhere to his right. Pulling back a curtain that was billowing slightly revealed an old door set into the side wall which when cautiously pushed open, revealed stone steps leading down.

“One Three One to anyone listening” The Commander called over his radio, “I think our man has headed into the underground levels, going off air...”

With that, The Commander duly proceeded down the steps into the dimly lit subterranean levels beneath the Cathedral.

The bottom of the steps brought him to a passageway, dusty, little used, some old signs leaning against a wall and a few leaves that had blown in many years ago but with dust on the ground clearly very recently disturbed which told him he was now heading in the right direction.

There was little light down there, a couple of dusty cobweb covered old low wattage light bulbs at equidistant points was all the illumination available but, as his eyes got accustomed to the dark, The Commander managed to navigate his way to the end where there was a stone chamber with two doors leading off it, both firmly locked and a rusty steel rung ladder leading upwards.

Particles of dust were gently falling from above, indicating someone or something had gone up there and disturbed the years of detritus which meant The Commander was now facing a climb upwards.

Holstering his weapon, he reluctantly grabbed the first rung and began to climb.

One thing The Commander was never happy about though was heights and as he reached about ten feet off the floor, he became somewhat nervous and was therefore relieved when he found that there was another accessway in front of him which he eagerly climbed through.

“One Three One, can you hear me?” came a faint call over The Commander’s radio as he had now reached somewhere with a modest bit of reception.

“Not now...” The Commander whispered as he looked down through a crack in the floorboards he was kneeling on and could see where he was, “Ah, the gift shop” he then remarked to himself before looking around and seeing a stone spiral staircase ahead which he then moved towards.

Drawing his firearm once again, The Commander proceeded cautiously up the winding stone staircase, higher and higher up inside the medieval structure, every so often passing a small slit in the stonework that looked out onto West Street outside, the wind whistling in through the open gaps.

The gift shop and the views over West Street confirmed The Commander’s suspicions that he was now climbing up the inside of the bell tower, which was located separately to the main Cathedral building, a fact confirmed beyond all doubt when he reached the top level where the huge bronze bells were mounted.

Walking around the bell pit, The Commander noticed that the ladder access to the roof was open and climbing cautiously upwards, it brought him onto the roof where the wind was blowing strongly across it, whistling around the castle like crenellations and the towers at each corner.

Suddenly, someone appeared from behind him and struck The Commander across the back of the head, sending him crashing onto the copper roofing, his firearm clattering away from him.

“Ha!” the gunman then remarked, “One nil to me copper!” he then laughed as The Commander struggled to roll over onto his back, only turning just in time to see the gunman depart, slamming the small wooden door shut behind him.

“Oh, give me a break...” The Commander then responded as he managed to get back onto his feet, retrieved his firearm and went over to the door, trying the old wrought iron handle which was when he heard something click and then a small thin metallic object fall to the floor on the other side.

It took a moment for The Commander to realise what it was that he had heard before he quickly retreated across the roof.

The air was punched by the sound of an explosion, a grenade having been rigged on the inside of the door to drop its pin and arm when The Commander tried the handle from the outside.

As the explosion echoed across the city, Edwards arrived, getting out of the car before it had barely even stopped.

“What the hell was that?” Edwards then asked, “and where the hell is One Three One?”

“On the roof of the bell tower Sir” an officer confirmed, pointing upwards towards the top of the tall structure from where a cloud of dust and debris was raining gently down.

“He’s where?!?” Edwards responded, looking upwards before taking the officer’s radio, “One Three One, Sam, are you all right up there?”

“All things considered...” The Commander responded as he dusted off his uniform tunic, “No, not really...”

“What was that bang just now?” Edwards then asked.

“The suspect rigged the door onto the roof of the bell tower before legging it” The Commander explained as he went over to the shattered remnants of the doorway, now completely blocked off with fallen masonry and the pieces of the door and its frame.

“What the hell did he rig it with?” Edwards asked.

“A grenade I think” The Commander confirmed, “You remember I told you about Marcus and his case of 'theatre prop' grenades?”

“Yeah, I remember” Edwards agreed, “All units in the area of the Cathedral, I want the bell tower searched from top to bottom and get the Fire Brigade down here, we have to figure some way of getting Sam back on the ground.”

“That would be appreciated” The Commander called, “I really don't do heights.”

Within moments of Edwards issuing his orders, a team of specialist armed officers were moving into the bell tower and, despite its numerous passageways and chambers, soon had the place comprehensively searched.

“Search team, you got anything?” Edwards called over the radio as he looked up at the bell tower.

“Nobody home” came the response, “Hell of a mess on the top floor though, we have got debris blocking the exit onto the roof, the steps are gone, this is going to need a hell of a lot of digging through to get out there.”

“Great...” The Commander despondently replied.

“Fire Brigade is here” an officer called across to Edwards as two fire appliances came around the corner by the medieval Market Cross into West Street and then came to halt nearby.

“One Three One, how are you with ladders?” Edwards asked.

“Oh hell, no!” The Commander was heard to respond as Edwards looked towards the Fire Chief.

“Is that The Commander up there?” the Fire Chief asked to which Edwards smiled in response, “How come he always seems to get into these sort of scrapes?”

“Just lucky I guess?” Edwards remarked.

“I heard that...” The Commander responded over the radio.

“What's the S.P. with the access?” the Fire Chief then asked.

“Damaged and blocked by a grenade” Edwards confirmed.

“Subtle...” the Fire Chief remarked.

“Watch your backs though, there may be an armed suspect on the loose somewhere around here” Edwards then warned.

“Are you kidding me?” The Commander remarked to himself in response to hearing that over his radio, “He's long gone.”

“Tim, Dave” the Fire Chief called to a couple of his men, “Get up there and see if we can get any of the wreckage shifted.”

“Yes Guv” the two fire fighters confirmed before heading towards the bell tower.

“What about getting the Coast Guard helicopter to winch him off?” the Fire Chief then pondered.

“The Commander?” Longton remarked as he joined them “In a helicopter?”

“Too close to the Cathedral for clearance anyway” Edwards then confirmed.

“Right then, time to break out the bouncy castle...” the Fire Chief then declared before heading back to the fire appliance nearby.

Up on the bell tower roof, The Commander fumbled through the pockets of his uniform tunic, turning out old wrappers, a couple of receipts, some bullets and various bits of detritus until he found half a chocolate bar.

“Ah, that's more like it” The Commander remarked to himself as he shoved the rest of the stuff that he had turned out from his pockets back in and then proceeded to eat the chocolate.

“One Three One from One Eight One” Longton's voice came over the radio, “How are you doing up there, old buddy?”

“I would say I was enjoying the view, but I am in fact keeping as far away as possible from the edge as I can” The Commander confirmed.

“Well, the Fire Brigade are working on a plan to get you down” Longton confirmed as he looked behind him at a team of fire fighters who were in the process of setting up some equipment on the cathedral lawns.

“Am I going to like it?” The Commander asked.

“Probably not” Longton replied.

“Well, they had better hurry” The Commander confirmed as he shoved the empty wrapper in his uniform tunic pocket, “I just ran out of chocolate...”

“This just escalated to a crisis then...” Edwards wryly remarked to Longton, “I'll put a call into the United Nations Security Council.”

“Everyone is a bloody comedian today...” The Commander was heard to say over the radio.

“How is the gunshot victim?” Edwards then asked, having to raise his voice as a large generator was started up nearby by the fire officers.

“Mucky Mickey?” Longton responded, “Should be renamed Lucky Mickey I reckon, took two shots to the chest, managed to miss anything vital so apart from blood loss, he is going to be okay.”

“Only took two shots? I got that beat...” The Commander casually remarked.

“I have got the White Horse sealed off, no one is to go in or out until the forensic guys have arrived” Longton then confirmed, “Mind you, it is a hell of a mess, I haven't seen a bar brawl make that much mess since my university days.”

“Okay, we are ready” the Fire Chief called as he rejoined them which caused Longton to look across at what the fire brigade team had set up.

“You have got to be joking” Longton then remarked.

“You got any better ideas?” Edwards asked with all sincerity.

“Err, no Sir” Longton admitted.

“One Three One” Edwards then called into his radio, “How are you with bouncy castles?”

“What the blazes is he talking about?” The Commander remarked to himself before realising the implications and reluctantly shuffling across the roof to the parapet and momentarily peering over, “Oh...”

“It's quite simple, all you have to do is jump and let gravity do the rest” Edwards confirmed, “Nothing simpler than that, surely?”

“It depends upon your point of view...” The Commander quietly remarked to himself.

“The Bishop of Haychester is down here you know” Longton then remarked, “He said he can say a prayer for your soul if that will help?”

“Well, that's very kind of him” The Commander replied, “Unfortunately my soul and I parted company many years ago so he may be a bit late.”

“Come on down, you can do this” Edwards reiterated.

“Did I ever mention that I have a serious issue with heights?” The Commander reminded him over the radio.

“Once or twice...” Edwards admitted with a definite tone of frustration, “Here, you talk to him” he then handed Longton the radio, “I give up...”

“Thanks boss” Longton remarked as Edwards walked off which was when a thought occurred to him, “One Three One, go to private channel five.”

“Okay...” The Commander agreed, although he had no idea why as he changed the channel settings on his radio, Longton doing the same back on the ground.

“Eddie, you with me mate?” Longton then called once he had moved away from the centre of the ongoing activity to ensure he was not overheard.

“Yeah Al, I am here” The Commander confirmed.

“Okay, it's just you and me on this line” Longton explained “So, let's talk this through and get you down here in one piece.”

“I'm not happy about this, you know?” The Commander remarked.

“I know” Longton agreed, “But we can't get to you, the only way off the roof is blocked with debris so that doesn't leave us with many options.”

The Commander momentarily looked over the parapet at the scene below and then ducked back again.

“I need convincing” The Commander then admitted.

“All right then, try this” Longton paused for a moment to gather his thoughts before continuing, “You are Eddie Regent, you are a survivor, you have been declared dead at least once if not twice, you are decent honest hard working guy, braver than you realise, tough as nails, a first class honours degree graduate of the University of Life, you can do this.”

“And if this goes wrong?” The Commander asked.

“Then we scoop you up, throw you in the back of an ambulance and the NHS spends a couple of weeks bolting you back together again” Longton admitted, “It wouldn't be the first time, let's be honest.”

“Oh God...” The Commander responded before taking a deep breath and then reluctantly getting up on his feet, “Alright, what do I have to do?” he then asked, resigning himself to the inevitable and only conclusion he could reach.

“It's quite simple really” Longton confirmed, “Just perch on the ledge, then push yourself off, gravity will do the rest.”

“Gravity...” The Commander remarked to himself as he took another deep breath and shuffled over to the edge of the roof, between two of the stone battlement style sections.

“You know what they say about gravity, it gets you down!” Longton responded, still attempting to inject a little light heartedness into the situation.

“Actually, that's quite a good one” The Commander complimented before looking out and down at the scene below, “How the hell do I keep winding up in situations like this?” he then asked himself, “Sod it, let's do this!”

Everyone on the ground looked up with gasps as The Commander launched himself off the edge of the bell tower roof, seemingly falling to the ground as if in slow motion before he landed on the huge inflatable crash mat cushion with a large flump.

As soon as he had landed, Longton, Edwards, the Fire Chief and a paramedic rushed to the crash mat where they found a somewhat bewildered looking Commander sat in the middle of it as the air escaped and it deflated.

“All things considered; I thought that went pretty well” Longton remarked as he helped The Commander to his feet.

“I still seem to be breathing” The Commander admitted “That is always a good start.”

“Are you okay Sir?” the Paramedic inquired.

“Nothing that can’t be cured with the careful application of hot sweet tea, several packets of chocolate digestives and a not insignificant quantity of chocolate cake” The Commander confirmed with a wry smile.

“I timed that descent at three point two seconds” Longton remarked.

“I saw my whole life flash before me” The Commander admitted as he accompanied Longton back towards the patrol car parked nearby, “I was stumped for what to think about the other three point one seconds though.”

“Ah, the legendary Sam Edwards wit” Edwards remarked as he rejoined them, having thanked the fire brigade officers for their efforts, “You are all right.”

“Really?” The Commander joked, “I thought I was half left?”

“Huh?” Longton responded.

“Sorry, Brummie humour” The Commander explained, “Mothers side.”

“For any other officer I would order them to get checked over in hospital and then take a few days off” Edwards remarked “but in your case I suspect I would be wasting my breath.”

“I’m fine Guv” The Commander confirmed, “Nothing that can’t be sorted through the careful application of freshly brewed tea, two packets of chocolate biscuits and a quart of Lucozade.”

“In which case, you two likely lads can have the good news” Edwards then informed them, “The Attorney General’s office just called, you can resume the murder investigation at your leisure.”

“Great” The Commander responded, “First stop is the pub...”

“Just fancy a drink...” Longton joked.

“Very funny Al” The Commander replied “Unfortunately, I very much doubt there is anything left still drinkable after that little soiree...”

“Hello there...” Professor Harriman remarked to herself as, having shone a torch around underneath the wrecked table in the centre of the room, it's beam glinted off something small, cylindrical and metallic.

Looking in her bag, she found the long thin tweezers and then carefully used them to reach the object, grab it and pull it out.

“Anyone here?” came a call from downstairs.

“Up here!” Harriman called out whereupon she heard the footsteps of hard soled safety boots coming up the stairs as she dropped the object, a spent ammunition shell casing into a clear plastic evidence bag.

“Afternoon Professor” Longton called as he appeared at the doorway with The Commander just behind him.

“Ah, there you are” Harriman responded, “I heard there was some excitement?”

“That depends on your point of view...” The Commander ruefully commented, still feeling a bit sore and achy.

“Yeah, a point of view about a hundred feet up in the sky in this case” Longton added.

“Don't remind me...” The Commander commented.

“Huh?” Harriman responded, unaware of exactly what had transpired a short while earlier.

“It's a long story...” The Commander duly dismissed the subject of conversation, “What have you got for us?” he then asked.

“Your shooter, what was he using?” Harriman asked.

“Semi-automatic handgun, possibly a Berretta, nine millimetre I reckon” The Commander concluded.

“Well. that fits” Harriman agreed as she held up the evidence bag for the two officers to see, “I have got a nine-millimetre shell casing here and I expect there should be a couple more around here somewhere.”

“How come you know all about different types of firearms, yet you insist on using that antique revolver and can't shoot straight for toffee?” Longton asked out of curiosity.

“What can I say Al?” The Commander wryly admitted “I am an enigma; you said it yourself.”

“You can say that again...” Harriman agreed.

“What a mess...” The Commander remarked as he and Longton looked around the room that had been comprehensively wrecked, although not as bad as the public bar area downstairs.

“Playing cards, lots of cash, someone was having fun” Harriman concluded, “until someone crashed the party with a gun and started shooting that is.”

“Poker game by the looks of it” Longton commented “Naughty...”

“Shame really, whoever was sat here was on a potential king high flush” The Commander remarked as he looked at some of the cards.

“You play poker?” Longton asked.

“I have been known to dabble...” The Commander admitted.

“So, a bunch of people are having a potentially illegal game of poker, someone starts a huge bar fight downstairs, heads up here and uses the noise and chaos downstairs as cover for their attack in here” Longton surmised.

“It wasn't a robbery though” The Commander nodded towards the money scattered about, “There's cash everywhere, big notes too.”

“Was Mickey targeted or was he just unlucky enough to be the one in here that copped it?” Longton then asked.

“He was the target I reckon” Harriman remarked as she found another shell casing and carefully added it to the evidence bag, “If this was a general shooting, I would expect a lot more rounds to have been fired, all around the room, also a lot more blood and bodies of course.”

“What do you think?” Longton asked, seeing the look of deep thought that The Commander was expressing.

“I think Mickey knows something he hasn't told us” The Commander concluded “and someone wants him silenced before he tells us what it is.”

“I'll get on to the hospital, get Mickey moved to the secure section and get a guard put on him twenty-four seven” Longton confirmed before stepping out into the corridor to make the call on his radio.

“Better make it two” The Commander suggested.

“How many shots were fired?” Harriman asked as she shone a light under a collapsed chair.

“Three it sounded like” The Commander confirmed.

“That fits” Harriman agreed as she extracted another spent bullet casing and added it to the evidence bag, “I got three casings here.”

“Was this shooting done by someone sat at the table playing, or did somebody come in?” The Commander asked.

“Instinct says this was a visitor” Harriman commented, “The way the room has been wrecked, where the shell casings were lying, someone came in through the door, probably stood just about where you are now, quickly found their target and opened fire.”

“Everyone else in the room promptly panicked and legged it” The Commander added, “and with the massive punch up happening downstairs, there was plenty of cover for the other participants to melt away into the crowd.”

“A punch up that the gunman probably instigated themselves to provide cover” Longton added as he returned to the room, “Mickey is being secured as we speak” he then confirmed.

“Good, we need to talk to him” The Commander replied, “I want to know what it is he knows that he hasn't told me and was worth someone laying on this little show to try and keep him quiet.”

“What about the dead girl?” Longton asked.

“Come on Al, do you really think her death, and this are not connected?” The Commander asked.

“Well, given the normally sleepy nature of this city, no, they are connected” Longton agreed.

“I take it we have a green light from the Attorney General's office then?” Harriman asked.

“Yes, we can resume our investigations” The Commander confirmed.

“If MI5 are involved in this mess, we can expect problems from above, interference, that sort of thing” Longton warned.

“Yes, I agree” The Commander confirmed, “Fortunately I have a friend in high places who should be able to deflect any political flak that may head our way.”

“In which case, as soon as I finish up here, I'll get back to the office and start the paperwork on the deceased” Harriman confirmed.

“Thanks Professor” The Commander responded before he and Longton left the room and headed back downstairs to the badly wrecked public bar area.

“What a mess...” Longton commented as they both stood there and surveyed the scene of devastation.

“You know what Al, if our gunman started what must have been the largest pub punch up in Haychester's history to cover his tracks” The Commander mused, “I don't think he reckoned on us turning up so quickly.”

“We were at the front door in less than a minute from getting the call” Longton agreed.

“Who called it in?” The Commander then asked, “Someone dialled 999 pretty sharpish.”

“Perhaps they used the phone behind the bar?” Longton suggested.

“That’s a non-runner I am afraid” Harriman called as she joined them, “the phone behind the bar was the first victim of the fight, imbedded in the back of the landlord's skull in fact” she motioned towards the blood splattered and wrecked remains of the telephone lying on the floor nearby.

“Might be worth looking into” The Commander suggested.

“I'll get someone around to the Telephone Exchange and get them trawling through their records” Longton confirmed.

“Good idea” The Commander agreed, “and we shall pay Mickey a visit later too but first, food.”

“Why is it, you are always thinking with your stomach?” Longton asked as he and The Commander stepped outside and ducked under the perimeter tape.

“First order of business, survival” The Commander explained, “Come on, let's see if Macari's have got any chocolate gâteaux left, I'm buying.”

“Oh well, in that case, lead on...” Longton readily agreed.

“Steve, for gawd's sake, at least try and make an effort!” Glenda West called across to her bar manager who was only making a lacklustre effort of sweeping the wooden parquet dance floor of the Blue Parrot, “Dear oh dear...”

“Well, if we got a proper cleaner here, then maybe I could actually just manage the bar like you pay me to, love” Steve responded, smiling meekly.

“Oh, you are a right one, aren't you” Glenda remarked as she took a sip from the glass of wine on her table as she was working on the account books.

It was then that she heard the sound of a car of some kind approaching the club at what appeared to be a considerable speed.

“What the hell is that all about?” Glenda then remarked to herself, getting up and going over to the main door, her step increasing in speed when the vehicle was heard to come to a halt outside and moments later, the beginning of heavy knocking on the door with clear urgency began.

“Hello?!?” came an urgent call from outside with more urgent knocking.

“All right, I am coming!” Glenda called as she approached the door and then opened it to find one of the local taxi drivers outside, his black cab with the engine still running just behind him, “Oh, hello Alan, where's the fire?” she asked.

“Hello Glenda, I have got one of your girls in the cab” Alan explained, “She is in a hell of a state.”

“Steve!” Glenda called behind her back inside, “Drop that broom and give us a hand!”

Steve quickly rushed to the door and together with Glenda and the taxi driver, went over to the cab and opened the rear door, revealing a badly injured young woman laid across the back seat.

“Christ, it's Sara” Glenda exclaimed as together they picked her up and proceeded to carry her inside.

“Got a call about half an hour ago” the taxi driver explained, “Went to that phone box on the Fittleworth road and found her there, someone has done a right number on her.”

“She should be in casualty” Steve remarked as they laid her on a couch.

“She didn't want to go” the taxi driver confirmed, “Insisted that I brought her here.”

“Steve, get me the first aid kit” Glenda ordered, “This is going to take some considerable patching up.”

“When I found her, she was screaming and sobbing, borderline hysterical” the taxi driver confirmed as Steve returned with the first aid kit.

“Someone has given her a right going over” Glenda confirmed as she began to tend to the numerous injuries, cuts and bruises that the young girl had on her face, arms and legs, “What happened love?”

The girl's response was garbled, incoherent, the fear in her eyes so obvious.

“Gentlemen, will you leave us for a few moments, this is ladies talk” Glenda then instructed whereupon the two men nodded in understanding and left them, heading for the bar over on the other side of the room.

Glenda waited until they were away before returning to Sara and continuing to treat her wounds.

“Come on love, tell your Aunty Glenda all about it” she then coaxed.

“Punter, booked me and this other girl for a party” Sara began to explain, “There was some sort of big meeting, lots of drugs, then this other girl hid something in the room before, well you know.”

“I know” Glenda confirmed.

“Four of them there were, gave us both a right royal screwing” Sara confirmed, “then when they finished it got nasty, there was some sort of argument, then one of the men grabbed the other girl, dragged her into another room and there was a loud bang.”

“Ah...” Glenda responded as the realisation began to sink in.

“Then this posh guy comes back to me, says it will be all right and invites me up to his suite for a drink” Sara continued “only it was more of an order than an invite.”

“I see...” Glenda was already sensing where this was going.

“So, we go up to his suite, have a few drinks, then...” Sara tailed off.

“Down to business?” Glenda asked, knowingly.

“Yeah” Sara sheepishly admitted, “I was quite impressed he was still able to do it after what they did to us earlier.”

“Well, it happens....” Glenda agreed.

“Anyway, he was quite gentle as it turned out, practically a gentleman” Sara continued, “Then this thug turns up, bursts in through the door and starts arguing with the guy over money or something.”

“So where did you go?” Glenda asked.

“I skittled out and hid in the bathroom” Sara confirmed “but I heard the argument, there was lots of shouting about money, the cops and some deal that is going down, then I tried to escape...”

“Ah...” Glenda realised, “They caught you?”

“That big thug with the fists did” Sara confirmed, “Dragged me down the fire escape stairs, locked me in the boot of the car and took me to some gravel pit somewhere where he and another thug beat the crap out of me.”

“You poor love...” Glenda sympathised.

“I passed out” Sara continued, “Then I woke up in a phone box in the middle of nowhere, still no idea how many hours or days I have been out for, I called Alan and got him to come and get me and bring me here.”

“We need to go to the Old Bill about this” Glenda insisted.

“No, I can’t” Sara tried to protest.

“It’s all right dear” Glenda reassured her, “Nothing official, just a chat with a friend, off the record.”

“Can I get some rest first?” Sara weakly asked.

“Absolutely” Glenda agreed, “I’ll get you fixed up and then find you somewhere to kip down for a bit, a bite to eat and a fresh cup of tea” she confirmed, “You leave the awkward stuff to me.”

“Thanks...” Sara replied, managing a weak smile amid her ongoing discomfort.

“Boys!” Glenda then called across towards the bar whereupon Alan and Steve came over, “Open up the spare room upstairs and get the kettle on.”

“You got it” Steve confirmed.

Glenda reached across the table towards the cordless telephone handset and picked it up, paused for a moment as she recalled the number she wanted it and then dialled it.

After a few moments of ringing, the call was answered.

“Hello, I would like to leave a message for The Commander, number one three one please” Glenda formally announced, “Tell him his Auntie Glenda needs to see him, any time after nine o’clock and to come in the back way.”

“One extra-large slice of chocolate gateaux coming up!” the server confirmed as she placed a slice of the cake onto a proper porcelain plate before handing it across to The Commander.

“Ah, proper food!” The Commander remarked with a smile.

“Your diet never ceases to amaze and astound me” Longton remarked as he opted for the far healthier salad roll instead.

“I hear one of your guys had to jump off the cathedral earlier?” the server then remarked before looking directly at The Commander who was smiling sheepishly, “It was you, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah...” The Commander slightly hesitantly confirmed.

“I should have guessed...” the server remarked with a wry smile.

Having paid for their food and drinks, the two officers headed down the back to one of the tables at the far end where it was quieter.

“Right Al” The Commander then began having already started on the gateaux, “I reckon the next stop on our whirlwind tour of Haychester's tourist attractions is St. Richards Hospital.”

“Uh huh...” Longton agreed.

“Let's see what Mickey has to say about all this” The Commander then explained, “If he is able to talk that is.”

“Well, when I saw him off in the ambulance earlier whilst you were running around the cathedral getting shot at” Longton responded, “he had lost a fair amount of blood, but he was conscious and apparently the bullets didn't hit anything absolutely vital so, fingers crossed he should be okay.”

“That's something I suppose” The Commander admitted as he wolfed down the final bit of cake with a smile.

“Good grief, gone in less than two minutes” Longton remarked as he looked at The Commander's empty plate, “That's a record even for you.”

“Getting shot at makes you hungry” The Commander admitted, raising his teacup with a smile, “Believe me, I have experienced it enough!”

“Oh, I can believe it...” Longton agreed as he finished off his salad roll, “So, what do you reckon?”

“I should have asked for two slices...” The Commander wryly replied.

“Err, I meant about the case” Longton then corrected him.

“Oh, that” The Commander replied, “Drugs, guns, girls and poker” he summarised “all served up with a liberal dose of enlightened self-interest and people of interest lurking in the background.”

“That reminds me” Longton recalled, “Commander Forster from the Drugs Squad rang, he and his team will be here early in the morning and our local business mogul Marcus has received his delivery of baked beans courtesy of the Service's dedicated crack catering section.”

“There you see, the Service has many different talents” The Commander confirmed as he finished his tea, “We can deliver justice just as fast as we can deliver a can of beans and a bacon butty.”

“I'll drink to that” Longton agreed as he too finished his tea, “Come on mate, we got work to do.”

“Aye” The Commander agreed.

“Come back soon!” the cafe manager called as the two officers departed.

“You can count on it, cheers!” The Commander called.

As they exited into North Street, they both turned smartly to the left but then promptly stopped in their tracks.

“Oh hell...” Longton remarked as they looked ahead where a scruffy man with long hair and a torn overcoat was singing wildly, out of tune and wavering about all over the place.

“God is coming to get us all!!” the man called, gesticulating wildly, “The aliens are among us.”

“Right...” The Commander responded and reached for the radio, “Control from One Three One” he then called.

“Control receiving, go ahead One Three One” Commander Judd responded.

“I have got a nutter in North Street...” The Commander began to call but then stopped when Longton waved at him, “What?” he then asked.

“You are supposed to say, ‘person with a suspected mental health issue’ according to the new guidelines” Longton reminded him.

“Oh, right” The Commander responded before returning to his radio, “Yeah, sorry about that” he then called, “Correction on that last message, I have got a nutter with a suspected mental health issue in North Street, going to need some transport.”

“Oh dear...” Longton remarked.

“Understood One Three One” Judd confirmed as alongside him in the Control Room, Edwards looked on with a sense of resigned acceptance, “The van is on the way.”

“I had better cancel One Three One’s place on that political correctness course I suppose” Edwards wryly remarked, “I have the strangest feeling that sending him on it would be a waste of time...”

“All right matey, that’s enough for today” The Commander then called as he and Longton approached the man.

“Behold! The heathens’ approach, messengers from Beelzebub himself!!!” the man shouted out, gesticulating wildly.

“Oh, this guy is whacked right out of his skull” Longton commented.

“Your name Sir?” The Commander then asked.

“Baron Moondust!!” the man responded with a huge grin of sheer lunacy and a bow.

“You are under arrest” Longton then formally warned the man.

“What?” the man responded before turning to The Commander, “Hey, what is this dude talking about man?”

“He means, you’re nicked” The Commander explained.

“You have the right to remain silent...” Longton then continued but, yet again the man appeared confused.

“He means, kindly shut your cake hole” The Commander then explained again.

“Relax man...” the man retorted, “You want some drugs? You need to mellow...”

“Probably a silly question, but do you have anything on you that you shouldn’t have?” The Commander asked.

The man merely replied with a goofy smirk.

“I think that is a big yes...” Longton remarked.

“Arms up fella” The Commander then instructed which the man promptly did but still waving his hands manically in the air as his pockets were searched.

“Anything interesting?” Longton asked.

“Dear oh dear oh dear...” The Commander sarcastically remarked as he took his hands out of the pockets, holding up what he had found in them, several small clear plastic bags, some containing colourful pills of some kind, a couple with some green herbal based material and two containing a distinctive white powder.

“Allow me” Longton declared, producing a plastic evidence bag from his tunic pocket, and holding it open whereupon The Commander dropped the various items into it before resuming his search whereupon he found a tatty brown leather wallet.

“Let’s find out who you really are, shall we?” The Commander then suggested as he began to search the wallet carefully, “Ah, here we go” he then declared, “Peter James Loomis, 12B Arndale Road, Winchester.”

“Bit of a long way from home, aren’t you?” Longton remarked.

“I like it here, the drugs are exquisite” Loomis explained, “Just a shame about you lot, always spoiling things.”

“Yeah, sorry about that” The Commander sarcastically replied with absolutely no sympathy whatsoever as he extracted a piece of paper from the wallet that he looked at with extreme interest.

“You got something there?” Longton asked.

“What’s this?” The Commander then showed Loomis the piece of paper and specifically what was handwritten on it.

“That?” Loomis casually replied, “that is what us grown-ups call a telephone number, my main man with the goodies.”

“Al, that car phone number that called in the pub fight earlier” The Commander then asked, “It wasn’t this by any chance, was it?” he then showed the piece of paper to Longton who took it and then got out his official notebook to compare it with his notes.

“Well, I will be damned, it’s the same” Longton confirmed, showing The Commander the piece of paper and the page in his notebook.

“Well, my friend” The Commander then remarked to Loomis who was still grinning wildly, “It looks like you have just become what we call in the trade, a person of interest.”

“Does that mean I get a free cup of tea or something?” Loomis asked as Longton handcuffed him behind his back.

“We will even throw in breakfast” The Commander confirmed as the siren approaching heralded the arrival of the prisoner van, “Smile, your taxi is here...”

“You remember that battered old yellow van?” Phillips asked across the office.

“The one with the blood stains in the back of it?” Forrester asked as he came into the room and sat down, looking exhausted.

“That’s the one” Phillips confirmed as she hung up the telephone, “The number plates are genuine, so is the van but they don’t match up.”

“Huh?” Forrester responded.

“The reason why the number plates fell off so easily is because they were bodged on, they belong to a genuinely scrapped identical model of van that was crushed six months ago” Phillips explained, “the chassis number stamped into the rusted remains of the frame in fact belongs to a different vehicle, registration number Lima Victor Tango Seven Eight Two Whisky according to the DVLA records at Swansea.”

“Have you run that number through the magic box of tricks yet?” Forrester then asked.

“It’s life history from the day it left the factory to the moment we found it last night should be coming through the fax machine any moment now” Phillips swivelled her

chair around towards the fax machine in the corner of the office which at that exact moment emitted a beep and began to print a message.

“How do you do that?” Forrester asked.

“Women’s intuition” Phillips responded, “Anyone seen The Commander by the way?” she then asked as she went over to the fax machine and picked up the piece of paper as the transmission finished printing.

“He and Al are down in the Custody Suite booking in some drugged-up loony they have dragged in off the street” Forrester explained.

“He has certainly had a busy day” Phillips remarked, “As for this dodgy old van, it looks like it last changed hands via a dealer just outside Haychester, Daves’s Marvellous Motors on the Daventry Lane Industrial Estate.”

“I know that place” Forrester recalled, “They sold my old man an iffy Cortina a few years back, reckoned it was three different cars welded together.”

“Did I miss something?” The Commander asked as he came into the office and looked around.

“That old yellow van, it’s bent, and I am not referring to the bodywork” Forrester explained, passing The Commander a copy of the report.

“Ah, Dave’s Moody Motors” The Commander remarked, “Why am I not surprised?”

“Wonky rust buckets with dodgy histories at dubious prices” Phillips confirmed.

“As much as I enjoy giving that slimy used car salesman a hard time on a regular basis for inflicting his bent and clocked death traps on the good citizens of this city” The Commander remarked, “regrettably I have another urgent appointment elsewhere.”

“In which case, I’ll go and find Dave Stride and see if I can get acquainted with this bastion of the local motor industry” Phillips declared as she got up and grabbed her uniform tunic.

“What happened to that loony you brought in?” Forrester then asked.

“He is not fit to be interviewed until the Force Medical Officer has checked him over and he has come down from whatever planet he is currently orbiting” The Commander explained, “so I shall head over to the hospital and go and rattle Mucky Mickey’s cage, see what falls out.”

“Oh, that will be fun” Forrester remarked.

“I doubt that” The Commander replied as he opened the bottom drawer in his desk and took out a carrier bag, “If you find anything at Dave’s Dubious Motors, let me know.”

“Will do” Phillips confirmed before The Commander duly left the office.

Longton was waiting for The Commander in the patrol car, parked outside when he returned, getting in the driver’s seat and then passing the plastic carrier bag across to him.

“Stick these in the glove compartment would you Al?” The Commander requested as he started the car.

“Ah, reinforcements” Al remarked as he opened the bag and took out the three packets of biscuits he found inside and duly stowed them as requested.

“Right, let’s go and see Mickey” The Commander then announced as he proceeded to drive off.

“Well, this is a pretty mess, isn't it?” Edwards remarked to himself as he returned to his office, switching on the desk lamp and proceeding over to the cabinet on the wall and then proceeding to pour himself a drink.

“Indeed, it is” came a voice of someone sitting in the corner in the darkness.

“I wondered how long it would be before you would pop up and plunder my drinks cabinet” Edwards commented as he turned around and the source of the voice leaned forward into the light, drink in hand and revealing it to be Richard Crowthorne.

“You know, this is a pretty decent brandy” Crowthorne remarked as he finished his drink, savouring the taste.

“I only keep the good stuff handy for special visitors” Edwards confirmed as he sat behind his desk and Crowthorne moved his chair forward, “Another?” he then proffered the bottle.

“Well, if you are offering...” Crowthorne willingly offered his glass over.

“So, what brings you down here to see us Sussex country bumpkins out here in the sticks?” Edwards asked as he poured Crowthorne his fresh drink.

“Oh, I thought I would pop down and see what my favourite Godson was plonking his size tens into” Crowthorne explained, “You see, there are some political sensitivities in play and, well I am sure I can trust that young man to use his usual tact and diplomacy.”

“In other words, you have been given a missive from above that someone connected is to be protected but hope that Eddie didn’t get the memo?” Edwards ventured.

“Something like that...” Crowthorne agreed with a knowing smirk, “Has the name Richard David Francis come up by any chance?”

“The third son of the Earl of Haychester?” Edwards responded, somewhat surprised, “Not that I am aware of, why? Has he been a naughty boy?” he then asked.

“You could say that” Crowthorne confirmed, “Like I said, there are certain political sensitivities here, we know he is up to all sorts of naughties, but no law enforcement agency is allowed to touch him, orders from above, you understand.”

“Because if they did, then presumably all sorts of dirty linen would suddenly find itself being very publicly displayed?” Edwards asked.

“Exactly” Crowthorne agreed, “Which is why I do hope our Eddie is suitably pissing off the aristocracy at every opportunity.”

“You don’t have to worry about that, he does that practically as a hobby anyway” Edwards remarked, “Don’t worry, if there is dirt anywhere in this mess, he will find it.”

“That is what I was hoping...” Crowthorne smirked, “You see, he has a wife in a posh pad in the Home Counties, and her uncle just happens to be the Lord Chief Justice...”

“Oh God, Lord Hinksey?” Edwards remarked to which Crowthorne merely nodded, “Well that explains a few things...”

“Yes, it does rather, doesn’t it?” Crowthorne agreed, “We couldn’t possibly have his son in law being publicly named as being involved in anything illegal or sordid now, can we?”

“That would be a crying shame” Edwards sarcastically replied with a smirk, “So, I’ll encourage Eddie to keep digging, shall I?”

“Absolutely” Crowthorne confirmed, “Speaking of which, how is he?”

“Well, so far this week, he has crashed his car, been shot at twice and been forced to jump of a cathedral roof so all in all, pretty normal week for him really” Edwards mused.

“Oh, that was him jumping off the bell tower earlier?” Crowthorne responded, “I should have recognised the trademark dramatics.”

“Two slices of chocolate cake and a large cup of freshly brewed tea later, he was fine” Edwards confirmed, “I do wish sometimes he realised he does have something to live for and stop willingly throwing himself into these potentially fatal scrapes all the time.”

“Being shot and declared dead at least once kind of does that to a man” Crowthorne reminded him, “After that, you can become stuck in a sort of rut where you decide risk is just one of life’s little inconveniences.”

“He got a haircut yesterday” Edwards then remarked to a look of mild surprise from Crowthorne.

“Don’t tell me there is a girl involved?” Crowthorne then asked, “I don’t believe in miracles, you know.”

“I remember” Edwards raised his glass in recognition, “I wouldn't worry about it, Eddie doesn't let anyone into his life, I reckon he worries that if he did, they would wind up dead or something, besides, anyone he did get involved with would need to be vetted and background checked up to the eyeballs and back again.”

“Do you know how much paperwork that generates across my desk?” Crowthorne ominously warned.

“Probably just as well then” Edwards responded, “Heaven forbid you might have to do some work...” he mocked.

“Heaven forbid...” Crowthorne agreed with a knowing smile.

“There is one thing you can do for me though” Edwards then tentatively suggested.

“For you, anything” Crowthorne replied, “What’s on your mind?”

“Are your two lads who were shadowing this case still in town by any chance?” Edwards asked.

“Tucked up in a rather nice little B&B a few miles down the road” Crowthorne duly confirmed.

“I don’t suppose they fancy earning a bit of overtime, do they?” Edwards then enquired.

“Even spies have bills to pay” Crowthorne admitted, “What can they do for you?”

“Watch Eddie’s back” Edwards ominously requested, “The names of a couple of rather unsavoury characters have cropped up already and if he does poke around in the wrong place, I am concerned he may get targeted.”

“Message received and understood” Crowthorne agreed, “Don’t worry, I’ll get my lads to keep an eye on him.”

“By the way, do you want your car back?” Edwards then asked, “It’s been fully valeted by our Forensic Service, no extra charge.”

“Probably a good idea” Crowthorne confirmed, “the Whitehall bean counters will start awkward questions about misuse and misplacing of resources otherwise!”

“Mickey, Mickey, Mickey...” The Commander called as he came into the single bed ward in the secure section of St. Richards Hospital, “You have been lying to us.”

Mickey was flat on his back on the hospital bed, heavily bandaged across his chest and sedated which meant all he could manage was raise his hand in acknowledgement.

“So...” The Commander continued as he sat down in the chair alongside the bed, “Assuming you weren't the one with the rather decent hand that I found on the floor about an hour ago, who shot you, and why?”

“I...” Mickey began to reply but his weakness meant he was unable to complete his sentence.

“Ah...” The Commander responded.

“Photos...” Mickey then managed to say, “My place, club...”

“Right...” The Commander nodded in understanding, “Your place, something to do with your new photography hobby?” he then asked to which Mickey nodded in confirmation.

“Roger that” The Commander confirmed as he got up, “You rest, I'll be in touch.”

As The Commander left the room, he met Longton in the corridor.

“How is the patient?” Longton asked as The Commander gently closed the door.

“Full of holes and drugged up to the eyeballs” The Commander confirmed, “Apparently this may be connected to some photos or something in his place.”

“As they say back on your old manor, time to give his drum a spin?” Longton suggested.

“Absolutely” The Commander confirmed.

“Before we go though, the preliminary results of the examination of our dead girl are in and they wanted to have a word” Longton informed him.

“Well, seeing as we are already in the building, let's go” The Commander agreed before following Longton down the corridor, following the signs.

“This place is a ruddy rabbit warren” Longton remarked as they headed down various corridors and stairs until they found themselves back at the front entrance where The Commander immediately espied the cafe.

“Could murder a cuppa...” The Commander remarked.

“Honestly...” Longton mused as they went past the cafe and down another corridor which was when they found a sign for the mortuary, “Now we are getting somewhere.”

“Blimey, that was quick” Professor Harriman remarked as the two officers arrived in the mortuary department, “I only called your office five minutes ago.”

“We were in the neighbourhood” The Commander explained, “What have you got for us?” he then asked.

“Preliminary report on your body” Harriman confirmed, “death was instantaneous following the impact of a shotgun wound to the back, she did not die where she was found and was probably wrapped up in some kind of woollen blanket before being moved and dumped.”

“Was she clothed when she was shot?” Longton asked.

“An excellent question” Harriman responded, “She was either naked from the waist up or possibly wearing a backless dress as there are no fibres from clothing in the wounds, I would wager the former rather than the latter.”

“Anything else?” The Commander asked.

“Traces of barbiturates under her fingernails and some residue on her skin” Harriman continued “but nothing in her blood stream except a small amount of alcohol which probably came from a few glasses of wine.”

“Drugs again” Longton remarked to which The Commander nodded.

“Do you want to talk about stomach contents?” Harriman then enthusiastically asked.

“I’ve just eaten...” The Commander responded.

“You’ve always just eaten” Longton pointed out.

“Ah well, it will have to wait until tomorrow morning for the toxicology and other test results to come through anyway” Harriman confirmed, “Apparently there is some Whitehall minion who wants a copy of the report too by the way, apparently some sort of fact-finding mission it would appear?”

“Just give them the watered-down version, let's not get them too much to think about, shall we?” The Commander wisely suggested, “Certainly let’s make sure they don't find out any facts at the very least.”

“No problem, Sir” Harriman readily agreed, “I’ll make sure all the juicy stuff remains in the version I will have on your desk in the morning.”

“Thanks” The Commander confirmed.

“Here we are” Stride declared as he brought the patrol car to a stop by the side of the road amid a sprawling industrial estate, “The premises of the esteemed Dave's Dodgy Motors.”

“Wow...” Phillips sarcastically remarked, clearly unimpressed as she got out of the car and surveyed the second-hand car lot before her, a row of various vehicles of several different models and colour, the classic large orange number stickers stating the price on the windscreens and some tatty old bunting, probably left over from some royal event many years earlier, fluttering above in the breeze.

“So, how do you want to play this?” Stride asked as he joined her on the pavement.

“I'll go and find the proprietor of this salubrious establishment” Phillips confirmed, “You have a snoop around.”

“You got it” Stride readily agreed before the two officers headed off in different directions.

Phillips strolled through the car lot, heading directly towards the office, situated in a portacabin type building on the far side, also decorated with tatty looking bunting.

She was not a traffic officer by any means but even to her inexperienced eye, Phillips could tell that some of the cars on offer here were of questionable condition if not origin.

“Hello?” Phillips then called as she reached the office, knocking on the door and looking inside.

The office appeared to be unoccupied, it did however look lived in with its typical atmosphere of stale nicotine, oil stain fingerprints, cracked mugs of cold half consumed coffee, one of those large wall planners with lots of coloured dot stickers on it, well-thumbed car trade directories on the cluttered desk and the obligatory girly calendar featuring a buxom topless young woman, smiling and posing with a set of strategically placed adjustable spanners for no readily apparent reason.

“If you know how to use them, I would be very surprised” Phillips remarked towards the girl on the calendar.

“Ah, customers!” came the sound of a man who came into the office at that point, rubbing his oil-stained hands with some blue paper towel that was having little effect on the mess.

The man's enthusiasm at the prospect of a potential customer however soon changed to disappointment when Phillips turned around and he saw the uniform.

“Ah...” he then remarked.

“Dave Smith?” Phillips asked.

“Err yes, that's me” Smith confirmed, “Can I interest you in a deal on one of my lovely cars on sale today? I'll do you a discount?”

“What do you have in small vans?” Phillips asked.

Outside, Stride was making his way around the back of the car lot, the area away from the public where he found an overflowing skip of old bits of car amid a pile of bent and rusting panels and bumpers.

Stride began to rummage around in amongst the discarded debris when his keen eye spotted something yellow protruding from behind a pile of old headlights.

“Come on, let's have a look at you” he then called, tugging at the object until it came out and revealed itself to be an old, bent and battered but still legible number plate.

“Ah ha!” Stride then declared with a sense of great achievement before reaching for his radio.

Back in the office, Phillips was consulting her notebook as Smith sat down behind his desk.

“We are interested in two Bedford HA vans in fact, Mr Smith” Phillips began to explain, “One a possible scrap yard write off, registration number ENJ 159V and the other, a still taxed and licensed example, registration number LVT 782W.”

“I mostly just do cars my dear” Smith tried to explain, “I do get a few commercial vehicles through from time to time but there is little profit in those since they dumped all those thousands of old ex British Telecom vans on the market a few years back.”

“Could you at least check your records pleased, Sir?” Phillips responded, “We would appreciate your co-operation.”

“Certainly, my dear” Smith agreed, all be it ever so slightly reluctantly before turning to his battered old metal four drawer filing cabinet and opening one of the drawers, “What were those registration numbers again?” he then asked.

“ENJ 159V and LVT 782W” Phillips confirmed.

“Right...” Smith duly proceeded to thumb through his files, “This may take a while, my files aren't exactly what you call organised, it's the secretary's day off...” he tried to explain.

“Uh huh...” Phillips responded, not giving away the fact she could clearly see that Smith was just making up excuses.

“Ah, here we go” Smith then declared, “Vans, ENJ 159V, a Bedford HA in yellow, seventy-two thousand, one hundred and eleven miles on the clock, eight months MOT, six months tax, sold last December to a cash buyer, a Mr Ian Grover.”

“Have you got an address for this Mr Grover?” Phillips asked as she took down some notes.

“Collberry Cottage, High Street, East Ashington” Smith confirmed.

“And the other van?” Phillips then asked again, “LVT 782W?”

“Err no, never heard of that one love” Smith clearly denied.

“Really Sir?” Stride remarked as he came into the office, holding up the number plate he had found clearly reading LVT 782W and then placing it on the desk in front of Smith, “because I just found this in your scrap bin out the back.”

“Ah...” Smith sat down behind his desk with a despondent look.

“Would you care to change your reply?” Phillips strongly suggested.

Smith drew in a sharp intake of breath before reluctantly nodding in agreement.

“I don't like anything about this” The Commander remarked as he parked the car outside the block of flats.

“The whole case does have a certain pungent whiff to it” Longton agreed as they got out of the car, “Guns, drugs, prostitutes, MI5 agents, murder, fun for the whole family...”

“Mickey's gaff is on the first floor, number one hundred and three” The Commander then confirmed as they entered the building through the communal entrance door and then started up the stairs.

Reaching the first-floor landing, they quickly found the front door of Mickey's flat whereupon Longton quickly sized it up.

“Hold on there, my over enthusiastic friend” The Commander then halted Longton just as he was about to kick the door in.

“How are we going to get in then?” Longton then asked.

“Easy...” The Commander responded as he reached up to the top of the door frame, “Use the key” he then confirmed as he produced a Yale key from its hiding place before inserting it in the lock and turning it, “Mickey always keeps a key handy to stop the Vice Squad wrecking the door every time they fancy popping around for a browse through his personal library” he then explained as he duly opened the door.

“Do we need a warrant for this?” Longton then asked.

“Probably” The Commander agreed as he proceeded inside.

“Do we have one?” Longton inquired.

“Huh, what do you think?” The Commander scoffed in response.

“That's what I thought...” Longton then remarked as he duly followed The Commander inside.

“Say what you like about our Mickey, he does keep a very tidy drum” The Commander remarked as they both looked around the immaculately tidy flat.

“You could learn a few lessons” Longton suggested, “No disrespect intended, but your place is a tad chaotic.”

“Point taken” The Commander admitted as they went through to the lounge, “Oh, wow...”

“Now, that's impressive” Longton agreed as they saw the vast number of bookshelves lining the room, filled with erotic literature and neatly bound volumes of pornographic publications, all neatly presented and indexed by subject, year and title.

“Even the National Library isn't this well organised” The Commander agreed.

“I don't think this is the sort of publications you would find in the National Library though” Longton remarked to which The Commander duly nodded.

Both of them walked around the room, looking carefully at every detail but being careful not to touch anything until Longton looked down at an open magazine on the coffee table and skewed his head to try and make out the images on display on the open pages.

“Is that even physically possible?” Longton asked out of curiosity.

“How the hell should I know?” The Commander responded with a wry smirk as his radio began to sound.

“One Three One from Three Seven Two” came Stride's voice over the radio, “Free to speak?”

“Give me a moment Dave” The Commander responded, “Keep looking around Al but don't touch anything that could be evidence” he advised.

“Got it” Longton agreed before The Commander headed out of the apartment, back out into the corridor.

“Okay Dave, talk to me, what have you got?” The Commander then asked.

“We are at Dave's Dodgy Motors” Stride explained, “The proprietor of this establishment confirmed he handled the Bedford van with the legitimate number but denied all knowledge of the other one that our dumped vehicle actually was.”

“No surprises so far...” The Commander agreed.

“Of course it is rather an odd denial” Stride then continued, “seeing as I just found the numberplate from that very vehicle, dumped in his skip out the back” he confirmed, “needless to say, he's suddenly gone all quiet on us.”

“Oh, I wonder why?” The Commander sarcastically responded, “Right, you tell him that if he doesn't start talking, remind him that I have the direct dial number for the local road vehicle inspectorate office and I will be more than happy to send them round to turn over the place and have every single vehicle in his stock plus every one he has bought and sold for the last ten years, minutely examined with an armada of fine tooth combs.”

“Did you get all that?” Stride asked Smith who merely responded with a resigned nod, “Good...”

“Let me know if he comes up with anything useful” The Commander then asked.

“Will do” Stride confirmed as Phillips turned to a fresh blank page in her official notebook and stood, poised to take Smith's statement.

“Cheers, One Three One out” The Commander confirmed before heading back inside the flat again where initially, he could not see Longton anywhere.

“Al?” The Commander called out.

“In here!” came a slightly muffled call from behind a curtain.

“Huh?” The Commander responded before crossing the living room and then pulling back the curtain to reveal a door.

“I've found our Mickey's photo lab” Longton explained as The Commander joined him in the room which, as per the rest of the apartment, was diligently laid out and organised with a darkroom photograph developing setup on one side and neatly presented shelves of photograph albums across the other.

“Wow...” The Commander remarked as he looked around.

“Looks like Mickey does all his own developing” Longton commented.

“Considering his favourite subject, I doubt his snaps are the sort you can go and get developed at Boots somehow” The Commander pointed out.

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“Good point” Longton agreed, “Actually I reckon Mickey has got some serious talent here, this is really good work” he then indicated some of the glossy prints which were set out, clearly waiting to be filed into an album.

“This is from his photography club I presume?” The Commander suggested.

“Seems to have been taken in some sort of studio setting” Longton agreed, “in fact, here you go” he then passed another photograph across.

“Ah, there we are” The Commander responded, taking the large glossy photograph which showed a group of people, posing in a group, all of them with professional cameras hanging around their necks and with two young women, the photographic models for the shoot, dressed only in lingerie that left virtually nothing to the imagination.

“And there is this as well” Longton then passed across another photograph, showing another group of people, all gathered around a table, looking at the camera, cards and cash on the table.

“I wonder if that is Mickey's poker group?” The Commander asked.

“There is another here” Longton then picked up another group photograph before pausing and then looking closer, “Hang about, isn't that...?” he then asked, passing across the photograph.

“Well, well, well” The Commander responded, “If it isn't Lord Tossopot, our very own Mister Speedy himself, playing poker no less.”

“Hello...” Longton then continued, “It looks like our Mickey may have been playing detective?”

“Surveillance photographs” The Commander remarked, “Makes a change from near naked young women I suppose.”

“These seem to have come on the end of the last film he took” Longton confirmed, “There is another two reels of film here with the same date on them that he hasn't developed yet.”

“Right, here is what we are going to do” The Commander declared, “Let's bag up these photos here, get those reels developed and see what is on them.”

“Roger that” Longton confirmed as he took an evidence bag out of his uniform tunic pocket and proceeded to start putting the pictures and films into it.

“Tomorrow morning, we get to work and identify every single person in those pictures, the girls included” The Commander then remarked.

“Oh, hang on...” Longton then remarked as on shifting some photographs, he found some from another photoshoot which showed another young woman, posing in various stages of undress amid a ruined old castle like building.

“Bingo!” The Commander responded, “That's our dead MI5 girl.”

“Those old ruins look familiar, somewhere local I would wager” Longton then commented.

“Mickey has a lot more talking to do I reckon” The Commander then concluded, “Either way, I think it would be a good idea to track down the local poker circle and deal myself in for a little chat.”

“You play poker?” Longton asked, somewhat surprised.

“One of my hidden talents if you know what I mean Al...” The Commander confirmed with a knowing smile.

The Main Control Room in Haychester was reasonably quiet when Superintendent Edwards put his head around the door and looked around.

“That's it, I have had enough, I am going home” he then declared, “If anything happens between now and when I have finished having a decent night's kip tell that mad Lieutenant Commander adopted son of mine, he is in charge.”

“Oh, he'll love that Sir” Judd responded with a knowing smile.

“He had better get used to it” Edwards remarked with a smirk, “I just had a call from the Administrator General...”

“Oh, they're not going to...” Judd began to reply, “Are they...?”

“Yeah...” Edwards confirmed, “Don't tell him though, I want to see the look on his face when I tell him, good night.”

“Good night, Sir” Judd called as Edwards left.

A few minutes later, his briefcase in his hand and his long uniform overcoat draped over his arm, Edwards approached his car parked out the front of the main entrance when he looked up to see a white Ford Transit van and a blue Vauxhall Cavalier approaching quite rapidly, bouncing over the speed humps in the driveway until they came to a screeching halt alongside him.

“Evening squire!” the man in the front passenger seat of the Cavalier called out of the side window “Op's Commander Neil Forster, Drugs Squad.”

“Ah, I heard you guys were coming down to see us” Edwards confirmed.

“Is Lieutenant Commander Edwards about Sir?” Forster then asked.

“Oh, he is probably on the manor somewhere, annoying someone I expect, he usually is” Edwards confirmed, “He will probably be back in soon as he gets hungry which is usually about ten minutes after the biscuit supply in his glove compartment runs out.”

“His reputation precedes him” Forster agreed.

“Oh, there is some drugged up hippy type he dragged in off the streets an hour or so ago” Edwards then recalled, “Apparently he has some information on a possible local pusher.”

“That’ll do for a starter” Forster responded, “Where can we park Sir?”

“Down the side there, canteen is through on the left and custody area is out the back” Edwards confirmed, “I think that takes care of the essentials.”

“Thank you, Sir,” Forster replied, “All right Derek, you heard the man, let’s roll” he then called to his driver whereupon they duly moved off.

“And at that point...” Edwards then remarked to himself as he opened his car and tossed his briefcase across onto the front passenger seat before collapsing into the driver’s seat, “...is me done for the night.”

“One Three One from Control” The Commander’s radio called out as he and Longton returned to the patrol car.

“Oh, here we go” The Commander remarked, tossing the car keys to Longton, “Do the honours Al whilst I take this” he then instructed.

“Gotcha” Longton agreed, effortlessly catching the keys and unlocking the car and then proceeding to put the evidence bags in the boot.

“One Three One receiving” The Commander then responded into his radio.

“Three messages for you” Judd confirmed from the Main Control Room, “Firstly, Ops Commander Forster and his team from the New Scotland Yard Drugs Squad have arrived and are descending on the canteen, secondly, the Chief has gone home and says you are in charge until the morning and thirdly, we have received a message from a Mrs Glenda West of the Blue Parrot, ask if you can pop in as soon as possible, make sure you use the back door.”

“All received and understood” The Commander responded as he got in the car and started the engine as Longton got in the passenger seat alongside him, “Al, I have to make a house call on the way, perhaps you can drop me off on the way to the office.”

“Yeah sure” Longton agreed as they drove off, “On whom are you calling?” he then asked.

“Glenda over at the Blue Parrot” The Commander confirmed, “She wants to see me on the QT rather urgently.”

“Oh...” Longton responded.

It was a quiet evening across Haychester which meant that the journey was swift and soon The Commander was slowing down near the lakes of the former gravel pits and then parked up in a layby.

“Right, this is my stop” The Commander then declared.

“Here?” Longton looked all around outside the car into the darkness, “The middle of nowhere?”

“I know a short cut” The Commander then explained as he got out of the car whereupon Longton switched places and preceded to take the wheel.

“Are you sure you want to go in there alone?” Longton asked, his concern obvious.

“I’ll be fine Al” The Commander, “Anyway, I am used to being alone in the world, remember?”

“Oh, they broke the mould when they made you, didn't they?” Longton then remarked.

“I do hope so” The Commander responded, “Surely the world has suffered enough putting up with just one of me around?”

“Dear oh dear...” Longton then remarked, “I’ll get these films developed and have a chat with the Drugs Squad boys whilst you are busy.”

“Cheers Al, I’ll see you later” The Commander confirmed, closing the driver’s door before watching Longton drive off into the night.

As soon as the taillights were out of sight, The Commander turned on his heels and began to walk down a long dark path that led around the lakes that were formerly some of the many gravel pits in the area.

In the distance, the lights of the Blue Parrot Club shone out in the dark, providing just enough illumination for The Commander to negotiate his way towards it.

Several minutes later, The Commander reached the club, keeping away from the main public entrance and heading around the back, approaching the staff entrance where, beneath the limited illumination of the single lamp above the door he knocked.

A few moments later the door was opened by Steve, the barman.

“Oh, hello” Steve responded, “They are upstairs, you had better come up the back way” he explained “They are expecting you.”

“Lead on” The Commander agreed, his curiosity suitably piqued as he then followed Steve through the busy kitchen area then via a stock room stacked high with boxes of ingredients and cases of alcohol before heading up a small set of stairs to the top floor.

“Ah, thank you for coming my dear” Glenda called as Steve showed The Commander in,

“Evening Glenda” The Commander called as he crossed the room, “I believe you requested the pleasure of my company?” he then asked.

“I wish it were a pleasure” Glenda responded with obvious regret, “Come through, there is someone here you need to talk to.”

“Lead on” The Commander agreed and duly followed Glenda through a curtained doorway into a side room.

“This is Sara” Glenda explained as she escorted The Commander over to the couch where she was resting, “She is in the trade of course, however...”

“Bloody hell!” The Commander remarked on seeing the state of the young woman, “Are you all right?” he asked.

“I think I might have to take a few days off...” Sara ruefully remarked as she tried to sit up straight.

“You should be in a hospital” The Commander then strongly recommended.

“I can't...” Sara began to protest but Glenda intervened and calmed her down.

“It's all right my dear” Glenda reassured her, “He's a friend.”

“I think I understand, in which case...” The Commander proceeded to take a pen and write down a telephone number on a piece of paper, call this number anytime, it's a highly useful GP I have on call, friendly service and no questions asked” he handed the paper to Glenda, “You can trust him, he looks after me and that means he had to sign the Official Secrets Act.”

“Now, that is very highly recommended” Glenda remarked, “Thank you, I'll go and call him now.”

“Just tell him Eddie has given you his recommendation” The Commander then called after her as Glenda went off to make a call.

“Will do!” Glenda willingly replied before leaving the room.

“All right, I believe you have something to tell me?” The Commander then asked Sara, giving her a reassuring smile that helped settle her.

“It's about that girl that got killed, Claudette?” Sara began to which The Commander merely nodded in confirmation, “That was her professional name, she is actually called Sophie which I think was far better.”

“What can you tell me about her?” The Commander then calmly asked, “and what happened?”

“Posh bird” Sara confirmed, “Real high class and she charged the prices to match, her clients were definitely top drawer, plenty of cash to splash about and then some.”

“That fits with what we know so far” The Commander agreed.

“She held some sort of position as an entertainments coordinator at that posh hotel up Midhurst way” Sara continued, “Basically the hotels on call escort girl for their rich and well to do clients.”

“So, I was right, that hotel is basically a posh knocking shop...” The Commander concluded.

“Only for the most exclusive of their guests” Sara explained, “Anyway, this guy who practically owns the top floor suite, is having a business meeting, hires Sophie to provide the ahem entertainment, which consisted of a massive amount of food, booze plus a couple of girls, Sophie called me in to make up the numbers as it were.”

“Go on...” The Commander gently prompted as Glenda returned and nodded silently in confirmation to him.

“I met Sophie in the reception area at about half five and we were taken by that creepy hotel manager up to the top floor suite where this poncy posh guy, Richard something I think his name is, nice bloke, loaded I reckon as that was his personal suite there but the sort of guy whose eyes were always following you around the room” Sara continued.

“I do believe he and I have met” The Commander responded, “I pulled him over for driving like a maniac the other night.”

“Sounds like the same guy” Sara agreed, “Apparently into fast cars and fast women, lots of them.”

“The cars or the women?” The Commander asked.

“Both, I heard” Glenda confirmed.

“Actually he was kind of nice, made sure we both had a drink of very nice champagne and then showed us through to a small side room where he asked us to wait until the rest of his guests arrived” Sara continued, “Well I was fine with that but Sophie starts talking nonsense about how she needed to do something before everyone arrives, I tried to stop her but she insisted.”

“What was it she was trying to do?” The Commander asked as Glenda passed them both fresh mugs of tea, “Three sugars?”

“As always” Glenda quietly confirmed.

“She had some sort of electronic thing in her handbag, looked like the innards of a pocket calculator” Sara continued, “then she snuck out of the room and came back a couple of minutes later without it.”

“Interesting...” The Commander mused for a moment.

“I am guessing you know something more about the mysterious Sophie that we don't?” Glenda suggested.

“Let's just say, she has quite an interesting life story” The Commander vaguely explained.

“A few minutes later the guests show up, some sort of business meeting” Sara continued, “Eight or nine men arrived, we could hear them being welcomed into the suite at the door.”

“What was the general mood?” The Commander then asked.

“Lots of friendly conversation I reckon” Sara confirmed, “Sounded all fairly friendly but business like.”

“I wonder what they were meeting about?” The Commander wondered.

“Oh, I can tell you that” Sara responded, “They have got some sort of import and distribution business, their lips got looser as the drink began to flow later, drugs and guns from what I overheard, some sort of deal with an Irishman was also mentioned.”

“The plot thickens...” The Commander remarked with obvious regret, “Go on” he then prompted.

“After about twenty minutes, which is when I presume they had their business meeting, the posh bloke comes back and escorts us through to the main room to meet the men.”

“Impressions?” The Commander then prompted.

“Bit of a mix, a few were posh like our host, well appointed, smartly dressed, a couple of others were a bit scruffier, cheap suits and poorly fastened tie types, then there were the thugs...” Sara tailed off.

“Ah...” The Commander responded.

“A couple of ham-fisted brick shit houses, knuckles dragging across the floor, the only word they knew was ugh and they couldn't spell it” Sara confirmed.

“I know the type” The Commander readily agreed.

“Well, it was all fairly jovial, the drink flowed and, well, you know...” Sara continued “Business is business...”

“Uh huh...” The Commander agreed.

“Later, a few of the guys left with one of the grunting thugs but then things got a bit nasty” Sara continued, “A couple of the men began to argue, I don't know whether it was the drink or the adrenalin talking but they went to another room, and we could hear quite a heated argument, the posh guy stayed with us.”

“Very gentlemanly” The Commander remarked.

“And then a couple more left I think which was when the posh guy left us alone and went back out to the main room” Sara confirmed “but Sophie insisted on heading out to see what was going on, right nosy cow that one, it was what got her killed.”

“Ah...” The Commander responded.

“They must have known she was a snooper of some kind because there was another big argument a few moments after she left me and then...” Sara tailed off.

“I think I can guess the rest” The Commander confirmed, “she was shot in the back, probably died instantly judging by the mess she was in when we found her.”

“Yeah...” Sara mournfully agreed.

“Who shot her?” The Commander then asked.

“Had to be one of the thugs, probably the Irish sounding one with the serious attitude problem” Sara remarked.

“So, what happened to you?” The Commander was almost afraid to ask.

“I hid in the bathroom” Sara confirmed, “I could hear more raised voices, doors slamming and at least one person storming out in a hell of a temper, then after about ten minutes, it went very quiet until the posh guy came back into the room and encouraged me out, saying it would be all right.”

“I am going to guess it wasn't though?” The Commander ventured.

“He said he would get me out but then the Irish thug appears and grabs me by the hair and thumps me in the stomach” Sara continued, “He then argues with the posh guy, and I tried to escape but he caught me and smacked me over the head, the next thing I know I am waking up in the middle of some woods somewhere.”

“You are lucky to be alive” Glenda responded.

“This thug with the Irish accent” The Commander then gently ventured, “Would you recognise him again if you saw him?”

“Oh yes...” Sara determinedly confirmed, “But I would not want to be in the same room as him without some serious backup, preferably a half dozen heavy lads with baseball bats.”

“I am sure that can be arranged” The Commander agreed with a knowing smile.

“Glenda, I need a place to stay, they will know where I live” Sara begged her.

“Can she stay here?” The Commander asked, “She is my star witness.”

“She can stay as long as she wants” Glenda confirmed, “She will be safe here.”

“Right” The Commander then declared, “The good Doctor should be here soon to make sure you are patched up” he then reassured Sara, “You get some rest, I will send my friend Al over with the Identikit in the morning.”

“Thanks” Sara remarked, clearly tired and in need of rest whereupon he and Glenda left her alone.

“Look after her” The Commander instructed Glenda, “She should be safe here, I will make sure nobody except us and Al know where she is.”

“Not a problem my dear” Glenda confirmed, “I can always have my Bar Manager take care of any unwanted visitors should they decide to drop by.”

“I had best get back to the office” The Commander then checked his watch, “I have some drug smugglers to annoy in the morning...”

“Be careful” Glenda called after him as she picked up his empty teacup and looked into it.

“That would be a first...” The Commander wryly responded before noticing the interest that Glenda was taking in the bottom of the cup.

“Interesting...” she then remarked.

“Huh?” The Commander responded, somewhat bemused.

“Oh, just checking your fortune in the tea leaves my dear” Glenda explained, “One of two...”

“Right...” The Commander replied, still bemused, “I’ll call later once the Doctor has been.”

“Peter Francis Loomis” Drugs Squad commanding officer Neil Forster read from the arrest report, “Quite a colourful report I must say, it has been a long time since I read a detainee as having been arrested for being, and I quote, ‘a couple of sandwiches short of a picnic’ in an official report.”

“The Commander is not known for standing on ceremony” Longton remarked as he came into the custody area.

“The Commander?” Forster asked.

“Our semi-official nickname for Lieutenant Commander Sam Edwards” Longton explained, “It’s err, a long story.”

“Well, looks like he pulled in a right one here” Forster then remarked as he returned to reading the report, “If this Loomis character consumed all this lot that was found on him, he would be seeing pink elephants for a month.”

“We also found a telephone number on him” Longton confirmed “Seems to be a car phone number, the same one that called in a 999 call on a massive pub brawl where a firearm was discharged earlier this afternoon” he then explained.

“Have you managed to trace it?” Forster then asked.

“The registered name and address is phony unfortunately” Longton confirmed, “The guy at British Telecom reckons whoever it is, they probably have an unlicensed set imported from either continental Europe or the States”

“That figures, we have encountered a fair bit of that in the course of our investigations recently” Forster agreed, “If they do become more popular, we are going to have problems in the future, the days of putting a tap on the local phone box will be over for good.”

“Evening gentlemen” The Commander called as he came into the room, “What’s this about phone boxes?” he then asked.

“We were just remarking about how we are starting to encounter more examples of unregistered mobile car phones in recent months” Forster explained.

“In this city?” The Commander responded with some surprise, “I am amazed they would even work, I struggle to get a decent signal on BBC 2...”

“You watch BBC2?” Longton asked with a slightly surprised look.

“Yeah, Star Trek, every Thursday at six” The Commander confirmed, “The only reason why I learned to program the VCR if I am honest.”

“How did you do that?” Longton asked.

“I read the instructions for a change” The Commander then admitted.

“Oh...” Longton responded.

“Can I have a word with you Al, on the QT?” The Commander then asked, “Would you excuse us?” he then asked Forster.

“Of course, I’ll take a look at your Mr Loomis for you” Forster confirmed.

“Thanks” The Commander confirmed before escorting Longton into a nearby interview room and discreetly closing the door behind him.

“I get the sense something is coming thundering over the proverbial hill towards me” Longton remarked.

“How did you know that?” The Commander asked.

“Years of experience” Longton confirmed, “I know you...”

“Okay then” The Commander responded, “Glenda at the Blue Parrot has a young woman by the name of Sara tucked up in her apartment over the club” he then explained, “A, and I quote 'Big Irish accented rent a thug' gave her a right going over after she witnessed our dead girl getting shot, she is our star witness.”

“Bloody hell...” Longton remarked.

“Needless to say she has no intention of making any *official* statement so for the time being I have agreed to her being placed in Glenda's safe hands for the time being” The Commander continued “Only her, her bar manager, me and a friendly GP and now you know about this and that is the way I want to keep it.”

“Understood” Longton agreed, “Do you want me to do anything?”

“Head over there in the morning, discreetly” The Commander instructed, “Get a statement on tape if you can, check how she is but go easy on her, she has had the proverbial literally and psychologically kicked out of her.”

“No problem” Longton confirmed.

“It seems that our dead girl may have been shot after a big meeting and then some err entertainment in the top floor suite of that hotel where she worked” The Commander continued, “She described a posh bloke who I reckon is that speedy ponce Lord Francis, it's his suite so tomorrow I want to head over there and interview him and then give the whole place a very thorough spin.”

“What is all this about?” Longton asked.

“Oh, who knows” The Commander responded, “Drugs, money, guns, stolen goods, cattle rustling, who can say.”

“Lots of loose ends not going anywhere it seems to me” Longton then concluded.

“Come on” The Commander then encouraged “Let's give Commander Forster the full SP before we get some rest, busy day tomorrow.”

“Does that mean you might actually sleep?” Longton then suggested.

“Don't be silly” The Commander scoffed in response, “I haven't had a decent night's sleep since I was twelve...”

“That's what I thought...” Longton then remarked to himself as The Commander left the room and he then followed.

“All okay?” Forster asked as Longton and The Commander rejoined him.

“Yeah, just taking care of some paperwork” The Commander responded.

“Well, we just got the official word from your custody sergeant” Forster then looked at a piece of paper he had just received, “Your druggie guy is fit to be detained but according to the duty medical officer, not fit to be interviewed.”

“Not that surprising” The Commander admitted.

“Apparently he is so far off the planet on whatever he has been smoking, it will be well into tomorrow morning before he returns from orbit” Forster then confirmed.

“Well, we have the car phone number, I suppose that is something” The Commander confirmed.

“Unfortunately, unlike the average corner of the street telephone box, we can't run a tap on a car phone, the technology doesn't exist yet” Forster remarked, “I am sure someone is working on it though.”

“Come on up to the office” The Commander then prompted, “We'll get the kettle on.”

“Sounds like a good idea” Forster agreed whereupon he and Longton duly followed The Commander out of the room and up the stairs.

“Al, get the kettle on” The Commander then called as they entered the office which, due to the lateness of the hour, was empty, just a desk lamp that had been left on being the only signs of any life there.

“Don't need to anymore, we have gone up in the world and got a coffee machine, remember?” Longton reminded him.

“That's all very well and good but that new-fangled gadget doesn't know how to make tea, does it?” The Commander pointed out as he sat down behind his desk and pulled open the drawer, taking out one of the packs of biscuits and offering it around.

“Not a coffee man then?” Forster asked, taking a biscuit with a nod of thanks.

“Can't stand the stuff” The Commander confirmed as he munched on a biscuit, sending crumbs down the front of his tunic and onto his desk.

“So, what's the S.P. on this bean can drop?” Forster asked as Longton handed him a mug of fresh coffee which he gratefully accepted.

“Marcus McCann who is our local wheeler dealer in dodgy goods and bent gear has been replenished with a fresh pallet of bean cans, minus the extra special ingredient of

course” The Commander confirmed, “He has been told to make himself scarce by about six a.m. which is when we assume the pickup is happening.”

“How far away is his gaff?” Forster then asked.

“About twenty minutes’ drive outside the city, nice little rural backwater” Longton confirmed as he finished his coffee.

“In which case may I suggest that we all get a few hours’ sleep and meet back here about four o’clock?” Forster suggested.

“We’ll do the briefing for your lads and anyone I can borrow off our night shift with a view to wagons roll by half four” The Commander added.

“Sounds like a plan” Forster agreed.

“Err, where is your team by the way?” The Commander then inquired.

“Probably in the pub, not sure which one though” Forster remarked, “They were recommended the White Horse but its apparently closed as it needs some redecoration after some incident this after, so I am told.”

“Ah yes, that...” The Commander modestly recalled.

“Don’t tell me, more of your handywork?” Forster then asked.

“Started out as a bar room brawl, ended up being an attempted assassination of one of my witnesses” The Commander then admitted.

“Does this sort of mayhem and chaos often happen around here?” Forster inquired.

“Only when he is on the case” Longton cheekily indicated the Commander who merely sneered in response, “Chaos seems to know where he is most of the time I have found.”

“Thanks Al...” The Commander retorted with another sneering look.

An owl hooted from the nearby trees as The Commander emerged from the office building and approached his patrol car. As he got the keys out of his pocket, he noticed something moving off to his left in the shadows.

In the distance was the silver Vauxhall Cavalier that had now been established as a MI5 vehicle and two men in smart suits standing either side of it.

“Evening...” The Commander called with a knowing smile to which the two men nodded in response before he got in his patrol car and started the engine before driving off into the night.

“Evening love” Frances called as Longton came in through the front door “Or rather, morning...” she then added, glancing at the clock in the hallway with a knowing smile.

“Sorry love” Longton replied as they hugged and kissed, “A certain Lieutenant Commander is on a one-man crusade to eradicate crime in the city I reckon.”

“Ah...” Frances responded before leading Longton through to the lounge as he draped his uniform tunic over the back of the sofa before sitting down together, “What was all that over at the cathedral earlier?” she then asked.

“What?” Longton responded, “Oh, that...” he then recalled, “Nothing, just The Commander jumping off the bell tower roof as a nutter with a gun who had just shot our star witness whilst he was in the middle of a game of poker had just blown up the exit onto the roof with a grenade.”

“Just a normal day then...” Frances concluded with a smile, “Did you ask him about the whole Lewisham thing?”

“Called him Eddie when we were alone and he responded” Longton confirmed, “Now I am the official keeper of his secrets along with the Guvnor, a couple of guys at MI5 and apparently, Her Majesty the Queen.”

“Huh?” Frances responded with a stunned look.

“He has two George Cross medals” Longton explained, “One received in each life, the Queen had to be told apparently.”

“And The Commander told you this?” Frances asked.

“I think he was quite relieved that at last he could actually be Eddie and talk about things for a change rather than sharing his dreams with ghosts” Longton continued, “We were doing great until we got the call to the big fight live at the White Horse and all hell breaking loose.”

“Your Guvnor must have a huge dent in his desk from where he keeps banging his head in frustration with you two on the loose” Frances remarked with a wry smile.

“Actually, it gets worse than that” Longton then admitted, “Edwards went home earlier and decided to leave The Commander in charge for the night so...”

“Run for cover any crooks within a fifty mile radius...” Frances then concluded.

“Anyway, next up is a drugs raid for which the briefing is back at the office in what...” Longton looked at his watch “just over three hours.”

“Ah well, sleep is overrated...” Frances resigned herself.

“Funny, that is just what The Commander says about it” Longton remarked,
“Anyway, I am excused as I have to go to the lab at the crack of dawn and pick up
some photos which they are doing a rush job on developing.”

“You get all the cushy jobs, don’t you?” Frances then remarked with a reassuring hug.

“Yeah...” Longton agreed, “I do, don't I?”

The Commander was most definitely not getting any sleep, instead he had decided on
sustenance instead which saw him park up near the all-night cafe out on the
Haychester bypass where, despite the early hour of the morning, there was still brisk
trade for its proprietor from truck and taxi drivers.

“Morning Glen” The Commander called as he approached the counter.

“The usual, Lieutenant Commander?” Glen asked.

“The usual, thanks” The Commander confirmed, “Not sure whether it is a very early
breakfast or a very late supper mind.”

“In your case, I suspect there is not really much difference” Glen pointed out as he
poured out a mug of tea and then passed it across, “Doris, bacon toastie with plenty of
ketchup” he then called back.

“Coming up love!” came the response from the kitchen area out the back.

“Blimey, only two sugars?” Glen then remarked as he watched The Commander
stirring his tea.

“Just thought I would try and cut down a bit” The Commander admitted before taking
his first sip of tea, “Ah, that's better” he then remarked.

“Here you go” Glen then passed him the toasted bacon sandwich wrapped in a white
paper bag.

“Ah, bless you” The Commander as he handed over a five pound note, “Keep the
change” he then instructed.

“Cheers” Glen responded.

“Anytime” The Commander gratefully replied before returning to his patrol car and
relaxing in the driver’s seat whereupon he opened the bag and looked upon the
sandwich with relish.

“Now that is what I call proper food” The Commander then remarked to himself as he
picked the sandwich up and took a bite, “Yum...” he then remarked.

As he ate his sandwich, it started to rain, the drops beginning to patter down on the roof and windows of the patrol car which led him to start thinking about his previous life.

The wounds from that fateful afternoon many years ago had long since healed but when he was alone, The Commander could somehow still feel them, a sober reminder of a day that changed his life forever.

With his sandwich finished and the tea mostly consumed, The Commander looked at his own reflection in the side window and smiled.

“Come on Eddie” he then remarked towards his reflection, “Tea break is over, back to work.”

“Hello again Marcus” The Commander announced as he walked in through the door where McCann was sat behind a desk amidst piles of boxes, discarded empty drink cans and old takeaway meal packaging.

“Oh, it's you...” McCann despondently replied.

“Where were you at about four o'clock yesterday afternoon?” The Commander asked.

“If this is about that pub punch up...” McCann began to reply.

“It is...” The Commander confirmed with one of his trademark hard stares as he approached the desk.

“...I was nowhere near the place” McCann protested, “I have got a cast iron alibi” he then started to fumble through the disorganised mess of paperwork on the desk, “Here it is!”

“What's this?” The Commander asked as he took the badly crumpled piece of paper and looked at it quizzically.

“That there is a Get Out of Jail Free card” McCann explained, “Two of your lads were delivering a pallet load of beans to replace the ones you blew up yesterday, that's the receipt.”

“All right then” The Commander agreed, handing the piece of paper back, “I presume your little poker circle was what got gate crashed by a trigger-happy goon who just happened to have a live hand grenade handy.”

“Yeah, that was the lads” McCann admitted, “I don't know who the goon was though...”

“Presumably, you know Mickey then?” The Commander then asked.

“Yeah...” McCann confirmed “Is he okay?”

“He is a very very lucky boy” The Commander remarked, “Missed anything vital fortunately.”

“So, what is the plan?” McCann asked.

“You make yourself scarce whilst my friends from the Drugs Squad set up and await the arrival of your associates” The Commander explained.

“Right...” McCann reluctantly agreed as he got up out of his chair.

“...and when we are finished, you and I are going to have another little chat” The Commander ominously warned.

“Great...” McCann remarked, his lack of enthusiasm at the prospect and its potential consequences readily obvious, “try not to break anything, this is valuable stock I have here, my livelihood you know?”

“Okay...” The Commander agreed, “Now, sling your hook” he then instructed with a wave of his hand.

McCann merely shrugged his shoulders in response before leaving.

The Commander pushed open the slats of the venetian blind and watched as McCann shuffled off, across the yard and got in a battered old pale blue Vauxhall Chevette before driving away out of sight.

“Mike Delta November One Zero One from Whisky Sierra Three One Three One” The Commander called into his radio.

“Forster here” the Drugs Squad Chief replied.

“We’re in” The Commander confirmed, “Park around the back, the kettle is on, tatty portacabin over on the east side of the yard.”

“Roger that” Forster responded, “Be there in a minute.”

As The Commander waited, he looked around the interior of the cluttered room, casually examining the labels on some of the many boxes that were stacked up all around.

“Water damaged umbrellas?” The Commander remarked with a somewhat bemused look at what he had read on one of the boxes but the sound of vehicles approaching saw him return to the window and look out to see a dark blue Ford Sierra saloon car and a white Transit van arriving.

As soon as the vehicles stopped, Forster and his deputy emerged from the car whilst several of his specialist team disembarked from the van carrying cases of equipment.

“In here” The Commander called, holding open the door for Forster and his team.

“Good grief!” Forster remarked as he led his team inside and saw the interior of the portacabin for the first time, the clutter and disorganised nature of its contents dominated by the yellow nicotine staining on the walls and ceiling where its usual occupant had smoked heavily for many years.

“Yeah, it's a bit of a dump, isn't it?” The Commander readily agreed.

“Reminds me of my student digs back in my university days” Forster remarked as he looked around which was when the rest of his team came into the room.

“Where do you want us, Guv?” one of the officers called.

“Usual set up Mike” Forster confirmed, “Let's have eyes all around the perimeter and put the car and the van down the lane out of sight so that we can see anyone approaching.”

“You got it boss...” the officer confirmed whereupon the team dispersed.

The Commander checked his watch before grabbing a seat and moving it to the window that looked across the yard towards the barn.

“Here, try these” Forster passed The Commander a pair of binoculars.

“Ah, ta...” The Commander responded and duly focused them out of the window, although the limited light outside meant that all he could really see was shadows.

“Echo One to all units” Forster called over his radio as he sat down alongside The Commander at the window “Situation report please.”

“Echo Two in position, north side of the barn” came the first response.

“Echo Four, in the lane, got a good view in all directions” the next response confirmed, “If anything approaches, we should see it from some way off.”

“Echo Three, in position in the attic of the barn” the final two officers confirmed, “As long as they don't come up here, we should be okay.”

“Okay. where is the package?” Forster then asked.

“Pallet over on the right near that derelict Morris Minor” The Commander indicated over the other side of the yard before passing Forster the binoculars, “The cans with the drugs in where 'accidentally' destroyed yesterday so those are the replacement ones we have supplied without the extra special ingredient.”

“They are going to be well pissed when they find out they have paid millions to import a pile of beans” Forster remarked with a smirk.

“Mind you, if this works, they will never find out as I shall be slamming a cell door shut on them instead” The Commander pointed out.

“Good point” Forster agreed.

“All units from Echo Four” came a quiet call over the radio “Looks like we have got a grey Luton type box van coming up the lane.”

“How many inside?” Forster asked.

“Wait one” the observer responded as he duly refocused the view through his night vision binoculars, “Driver and two passengers in the front cab, no way of telling if anyone else is in the back.”

“Roger Echo Four” Forster replied, “Give me regular reports please.”

“Show time...” The Commander remarked to which Forster nodded in agreement.

“Echo Four” the radio called again, “Target vehicle is approaching the gate.”

“You got an i.d. on that van?” The Commander asked.

“Biege or ivory Sherpa Luton van, Lima November Juliet One Seven Five Victor” the officer watching the vehicle approaching then reported, “Definitely heading your way.”

“All units standby” Forster then quietly called, “Here they come” he confirmed as the van entered the premises and came around the barn “Nobody moves until they have the goods in their hands, and I give the word.”

“Step into my parlour, said the spider to the fly...” The Commander remarked as the van slowly approached, the beams of its headlights illuminating the cluttered yard.

They all watched as the van came to a stop and then three men emerged, all dressed in black and proceeded to the rear of the vehicle where the sound of a roller shutter door being thrown up and open was heard before they approached the pallet of cans nearby.

“All units be aware, it looks like we have three on the plot and a driver still in the vehicle” Forster then advised over the radio.

“Here we go...” The Commander remarked as two of the men began loading the cans into the back of their van whilst the third one stood in the shadows, looking on.

“All units from Echo One...” Forster then called over the radio before taking a deep breath, “GO! GO! GO!”

“Why do I never get to say that?” The Commander marked as he and Forster quickly headed to the door.

As soon as they exited the building, there was the sound of revving engines and tyres scrunching on loose rubble as the Drugs Squad Vehicles raced in, officers appearing from all around and swiftly approaching the suspects and their vehicle.

“It's the law!” one of the men quickly called out, dropping the can he was carrying, “Leg it!”

The suspects quickly scattered in different directions, attempting to dodge the approaching officers whilst their driver hurriedly tried to drive off, his efforts being swiftly thwarted as a quick thinking member of the Drugs Squad stopped his car across the front of the van, cutting him off whereupon, moments later, he was quickly wrestled from the cab of the van and restrained face down on the ground.

Two of the other men were equally swiftly rounded up and restrained as well.

“Hotel Yankee Two” The Commander called into his radio to the marked van stationed a short distance from the scene, “The party is in full swing, come and join in” he then instructed.

“Roger that” Phillips replied and duly set off.

“Guv! We've got a runner!” one officer called out across the yard, indicating an individual fleeing from the scene.

“Oh no you don't...” The Commander called, promptly giving chase with Forster following.

Despite appearing to be of considerable stature and build, the escaping individual was swift on his feet, quickly disappearing out of sight around the back of the barn with The Commander and Forster following at a distance, struggling to keep up.

Around the back of the barn, The Commander stopped and, squinting into the darkness, looking all around as he was joined by Forster.

“Where the hell did he go?” Forster asked.

“No idea” The Commander admitted, “He couldn't half shift, but he must be around here somewhere.”

“Split up?” Forster then suggested.

“Good idea” The Commander readily agreed as he drew his firearm from its holster, “You go down there, I'll check over here.”

“Roger...” Forster confirmed before they both moved off in opposite directions.

The area that The Commander was searching in minimal light was semi-derelict, strewn with rubble, debris, old rusty scaffolding and bits of long since abandoned and decaying farm machinery.

He proceeded carefully through the debris, still squinting to see properly in the poor light when something moving made a small metallic clink sound off to his left and he swung around.

“Come out, come out, wherever you are...” The Commander quietly remarked, “I don't bite, honest...”

Suddenly out of the shadows, a large figure appeared, striking The Commander down with a heavy blow, knocking his firearm out of his hand which skittled off out of reach and causing him to fall to the ground.

The Commander grimaced in pain as he rolled over onto his back to see a huge man dressed in black including a full-face balaclava mask standing over him, holding a large piece of timber, ready to strike down upon him.

“You have no idea what or who you are dealing with copper!” the man then declared in a strong Irish accented voice.

“Oi!” came a shout accompanied by a warning shot fired into the air as Forster and several other officers approached from some distance away.

“Next time copper, you are a dead man!” the man then ominously warned “Be seeing you!” he then added before disappearing off into the darkness.

“That was odd...” The Commander remarked to himself as he tried to get up but struggled as Forster arrived.

“Go on, get after him!” Forster then called to the other officers who swiftly headed off in the general direction of where the man had made off in.

“Oh, ouch...” The Commander remarked as he managed to sit up on the ground.

“Are you ok mate?” Forster asked.

“I think so” The Commander confirmed, “Apparently I am officially a dead man, I get that a lot oddly enough.”

“Just words” Forster reacted as he then helped The Commander to his feet and passed him his firearm which he then checked and holstered.

“How are we doing?” The Commander then asked as he and Forster started back towards the main part of the scene where Phillips and two other uniformed officers were putting three prisoners, now fully restrained with their hands cuffed behind their backs, into the rear of the van.

“Two loaders and the driver nicked, minnows really, little more than foot soldiers” Forster confirmed “Laughing boy back there was probably the top man on the job.”

“And he's got away...” The Commander regretfully confirmed.

“Planned” Forster responded, “Not your fault, he had an escape plan already in place, probably a fast car parked somewhere too, he knew there was a chance we were waiting for him.”

“Are you saying we have a leak somewhere?” The Commander asked, his concern obvious.

“Not necessarily” Forster replied as he helped The Commander into the front passenger seat of his car, “These gangs are so well organised these days, they have intelligence gathering capabilities and connections that would put MI5 to shame.”

“A big brute with an Irish accent...” The Commander then recalled Sara's statement from the previous evening at The Blue Parrot.

“What, the guy that whacked you and got away?” Forster asked as he got in the driver's seat and started the car.

“Yeah...” The Commander confirmed, “He matches the description of someone who was described to me by my star witness last night.”

“Well, there can't be that many heavily built Irish accented thugs around these parts, surely?” Forster commented.

“Exactly” The Commander readily agreed but they were then interrupted by the radio.

“Whisky Sierra One Three One from Three Seven Two, receiving over?” Lieutenant Commander Stride called.

“One Three One receiving” The Commander replied, “Go ahead Dave.”

“We are about a mile away from the action on Westleigh Lane” Stride confirmed, “The suspect has long gone, fresh tyre tracks in the lay-by here, looks like he left in hurry in a fast car.”

“That figures...” The Commander slightly despondently agreed.

“Something else you should see here though” Stride then continued, turning to look at a vehicle, partially in the hedge, lights still on but with engine now turned off after Lieutenant Forrester had reached in through the shattered driver's side window and turned the keys in the ignition.

“Hold there” The Commander confirmed, “We are rolling to you now.”

“This is your manor my friend” Forster pointed out as he drove off, “You'll have to navigate for me.”

“No problem” The Commander agreed, “Turn left at the end of the lane up ahead and watch out for the potholes” he then instructed.

Following The Commander's directions and then homing in on the blue flashing lights of the patrol car parked up ahead, they soon arrived on the scene where Stride was waiting to meet them.

“Got a bit of a mess here I am afraid” Stride confirmed as Forster and The Commander got out of the car and walked over.

“What have you got?” The Commander then asked.

“Battered blue Vauxhall Chevette, engine still running when we found it, seems to have rolled into the hedge” Stride confirmed.

“Driver is in the front seat” Forrester added as he joined them.

“Uh oh...” The Commander remarked as he approached the rear of the car, protruding from the hedge and skewed over at an angle, “I don't suppose the driver was a huge Irish guy by any chance?” he then asked, more out of hope and expectation.

“Err, no” Stride confirmed.

“Quite the opposite actually” Forrester added as Forster and The Commander made their way through the undergrowth towards the driver's side window.

“Yuck...” Forster grimaced in response at the sight that greeted him which the far more squeamish Commander merely glanced at.

“Bugger...” The Commander responded.

“Would this be your snout by any chance?” Forster asked, already sensing where this was going.

“Yeah, what's left of him” The Commander grimly confirmed.

“Looks like someone gave him a quick but very thorough going over with a bit of four by two” Forster remarked as he examined the battered and bloodied body slumped across the front seats, amid shattered glass and splattered blood.

“Our swift big Irish friend you reckon?” The Commander asked, choosing not to look and taking a couple of steps back.

“Evens money I would say” Forster agreed, “The mouth gagging is a nice ironic touch.”

“What's he been gagged with?” The Commander asked.

“Grass...” Forster confirmed, “Someone knew he had talked...”

“That shows a certain sense of style...” The Commander remarked as he then reluctantly reached for his radio, “Control from One Three One” he then called.

“Control receiving, go ahead One Three One” the response quickly came from the Night Shift Control Room Supervisor back in Haychester.

“Got a body here” The Commander then declared, “Westleigh Lane, about half a mile from the Drugs Raid operation site, one very dead male in a car” he then explained, “Better wake up the usual cavalry and summon the duty forensics team.”

“How’s your overtime budget?” Forster casually asked.

“Shot to pieces” The Commander confirmed with a wry smile, “That however is a problem for our crack team of accountants, I just file the expenses forms.”

“Take a tip from top” Forster then suggested, “Get promoted, appoint a deputy and then give them all the paperwork to deal with.”

“You know what, that is actually not a bad idea” The Commander agreed with a smirk but then swiftly followed by a deep yawn.

“When was the last time you got some sleep?” Forster then asked with obvious concern.

“March 1969” The Commander responded to a rather confused look from Forster, “Err, long story...”

It was seven in the morning when Longton strode in through the main reception doors where he found The Commander waiting for him.

“Good morning!” he enthusiastically called as he approached, carrying a large manilla envelope under his right arm.

“Well, it's morning at any rate...” The Commander agreed, stifling a yawn.

“How did it go?” Longton asked as he and The Commander headed off down the main corridor that ran the entire length of the site.

“Three also rans nicked and binned” The Commander confirmed, “The big guy got away though, but not before battering Marcus to death in his Vauxhall Chevette.”

“Ouch...” Longton responded.

“The three we nicked are currently in the detention suite screaming for their solicitors” The Commander continued, “They are only minnows though, bag men but Commander Forster is going to have a go at them anyway, you never know, someone might squeak.”

“Given the fate of the last two people to talk to us, one in intensive care and the other one dead” Longton pointed out, “I doubt they will risk saying much.”

“That's what I reckon too” The Commander agreed, “Anyway, whole team briefing in twenty minutes” he then confirmed, “What have you got there?” he indicated the large envelope under Longton's arm.

“Fresh from the lab, Mickey's undeveloped film, lots of nice big glossy prints” Longton confirmed, “I'll give them to Lieutenant Phillips to assess with the ones we have already got from his flat.”

“Stuff it...” The Commander then declared “If I am going to give this briefing, I'm going to need more tea.”

“More?” Longton asked as they reached the end of the long central corridor and exited out into the daylight, a short distance from their own building, “How many have you had so far this morning?”

“Only three...” The Commander confirmed.

“The amount of tea with all that caffeine you drink plus all that grease and biscuits you eat; I am amazed your heart still works” Longton remarked.

“Nobody would be bothered if it didn't, least of all me” The Commander honestly replied.

“I would” Longton then wryly commented as they managed to navigate the infamous automatic sliding door without injury, “I've called dibs on your parking space...”

“I'll leave it to you in my will” The Commander confirmed, managing a smile, “Come on” he then encouraged as he started up the stairs, “Let's get the kettle on and get this briefing over with, it's going to be another busy day.”

“Doors to kick in and people to annoy?” Longton suggested.

“You know me so well Al” The Commander replied.

On reaching the second floor, they both proceeded from the stairs, down the corridor to the main office where several other officers were already present.

“Here you go” Longton called to Phillips, “Some more of Mickey's photographic efforts to add to the collection.”

“Ah great, thanks” Phillis responded, taking the envelope and returning to her desk in order to start examining the contents.

The Commander went over to the far wall where a display had been created of numerous photographs, documents and materials relating to the overall investigation.

“Oooh, good blow ups” The Commander remarked on seeing two photographs in particular, one being a group photograph of the Photographic Society members with one of their young female models, the other being the poker circle.

“Here you go mate” Longton then handed The Commander a fresh mug of tea.

“Oh, ta!” The Commander gratefully accepted the drink “Just what the doctor ordered.”

“When was the last time you voluntarily went to a doctor?” Longton then asked.

“Gawd knows!” The Commander admitted with a shrug of his shoulders.

“That reminds me” Lieutenant Forrester recalled, “Personnel have sent another message to you regarding your Annual Medical, or rather, lack of it...” he handed the note to The Commander.

“Ah, that...” he responded as he gave the message a cursory glance before unceremoniously shoving it in his pocket, “Let's get this started, shall we?” he then declared whereupon everyone in the room gathered around.

“Who wants to start?” Longton asked around the room.

“I'll call dibs for that” Forrester confirmed, “Coroner's report on our dead girl” he indicated a file in his hand, “Cause of death confirmed as shotgun wound to the back, probably from a sawn-off and at close range, death was pretty much instantaneous.”

“I have a possible witness and location of death now” The Commander interjected, “But more of that later...”

“Intriguing...” Phillips remarked.

“The van found in the woods definitely was used to move the body” Forrester continued, “Blood and tissue samples all match up, the fibres in the victims wounds and under her fingernails come from at least two sources, one is from the old decorating sheet which we found in the van, the other from an as yet unknown source which is more than likely from where she was killed.”

“Good, good, good...” The Commander remarked, “Hopefully we can move forward on this later today, meanwhile, how is Mickey?” he then asked.

“Still under secure guard in St. Richard's” Stride confirmed, “He's out of danger and ready to talk.”

“I'll put him on my list of people I need to irritate today then” The Commander remarked “What about our dodgy second-hand car dealer?”

“We had to let him go unfortunately” Phillips confirmed, “Other than some dodgy paperwork and a bent numberplate, we haven't got anything solid to hold him with.”

“Not the end of the world” The Commander commented, “Having him out in general circulation may even be of help, so let's keep an eye on him and see who comes wandering in.”

“The shooting of Mickey at the White Horse” Forrester then continued, “Ballistics lab reckon we are looking for a 9mm semi-automatic hand pistol, maybe a Berretta or similar.”

“Right...” The Commander confirmed as he made some notes, “What about Mickey's photographic work?” he then asked.

“Behold” Phillips declared, walking over to the display board, “This guy has some serious talent with a camera.”

“Well, everyone should have a hobby” The Commander remarked.

“I have broken down what we have into three general headings” Phillips then continued, “You have your glamour model shoot photos, mostly young women posing whilst wearing well, not a lot really.”

“Uh huh...” The Commander agreed.

“Second group is general snaps, nature photographs” Phillips moved onto the next batch, “Got a good one of a couple of Peregrine Falcons here plus these group photos which I have had blown up.”

“So, we have the photography club here and the poker circle in this one” The Commander concluded.

“Looks like it” Longton agreed.

“Group three is this lot to which we can add these new additions” Phillips then pinned some of the newly acquired photos up, “It looks like Mickey was taking up another hobby as some sort of private investigator.”

“Hang on a minute...” The Commander then remarked as he looked closely at one photograph in particular, “That big guy in this photo, I wonder if he has an Irish accent?”

“If photos could talk” Forrester remarked, “Unfortunately...”

“...they can't” The Commander regretfully agreed as he continued to study the photograph very carefully, “The build is the same, big, muscular and stocky” he commented, “I want a name on this guy.”

“I have an idea on that” Phillips thoughtfully replied, “If as you say this guy is a thug with an Irish accent, it is just possible that he may be on the books somewhere, if not us then the likes of Special Branch or the Anti-Terrorist boys may be worth a call.”

“I like your thinking” The Commander readily agreed, “Call them, show them the photo and see if anything rings any bells.”

“Will do” Phillips confirmed as she made some notes.

“Now then” The Commander returned to the blown-up group photos, “Who do we know in these two pictures?” he then asked.

“Mickey and the late Marcus McCann we all know” Phillips pointed out the two men on the photographic club group image, “The girl in the centre wearing little more than eyeshadow and a smile may be a local as I am sure she has been hauled in for soliciting recently.”

“That fits” Longton agreed.

“There is our dodgy used car salesman, Dave Smith” Forrester pointed out, “Who is the poncy guy over on the right though, smiling like a Cheshire cat?”

“Well, well, well...” The Commander exclaimed, “If it isn’t Lord Speedy Gonzales Francis” he then declared, recognising the man despite him being rather squashed into the edge of the frame.

“As in the third son of the Earl Haychester?” Phillips asked.

“The same” The Commander confirmed, “I pulled him over for driving like a prat the other evening.”

“He has quite the reputation you know” Stride pointed out, “Father-in-law is the Lord Chief Justice, known for his extensive collection of vintage and modern fast cars, likes to splash the cash about and quite the ladies’ man according to rumours.”

“I thought he was married?” The Commander asked, clearly not understanding the significance.

“Oh, the wife is safely tucked away in their posh apartment in Richmond” Squires confirmed, “His penchant for a different girl every night and a different car every day is well known in certain circles.”

“And he is protected” Phillips added, “His connections means he is considered untouchable.”

“No such thing in my book” The Commander grimly responded.

“This is going to be interesting...” Longton quietly commented.

“Absolutely...” The Commander readily agreed with a knowing smirk,

“Now...” Phillips then continued, “A couple of these guys are local businessmen, we don’t know about that guy on the right with the hat or the big guy standing behind him though.”

“That’s Lionel Davidson, and behind him is his knuckle dragging bag man and muscle” The Commander confirmed on closer examination of the photograph, “Name of Tony Prentis, look them up, they have membership cards in our extensive library of the great and the good of the criminal fraternity.”

“Seems they are in the poker circle but not the photographic club” Longton then compared the two images.

“Yeah” The Commander agreed, “What else have we got?” he then asked.

“Err, a lovely photo of a peregrine falcon in flight” Phillips continued as she moved on, “Nothing to do with the case, just a very nice photo I thought” she then remarked.

“Mickey took that?” Longton asked, with a sense of astonishment.

“Yep” Phillips confirmed, “Then there is this lot fresh from the lab” she then indicated the newly delivered photos on the desk, “Was this Mickey training to be some sort of Private Eye or something?” he then asked.

“I see what you mean” The Commander remarked as he came over and looked at the photographs on the desk, “These look very much like the product of a stake out and surveillance job.”

“Did you say you were looking for a big Irish thug?” Longton then asked, picking up one of the surveillance type photos and passing it across.

“That’s looks like him” The Commander agreed with a smile, “I want a name on this guy, run it by everyone you can think of, he must have a card somewhere in the system.”

“Leave it with me” Phillips confirmed.

“Where were these photos taken do you think?” Longton then asked as he looked at the surveillance images which showed several men in an unknown location.

“No idea” The Commander was forced to admit, “Looks like these were taken either late evening or early morning judging by the poor lighting.”

“There are definitely two different locations though” Phillips then commented, “This batch of photos seem to be somewhere like a field or on a hill of some kind, this other batch looks a bit like a mooring or harbour somewhere.”

“Oh great, boats...” The Commander despondently remarked.

“Ah yes, you don’t have any sea legs, do you?” Longton recalled.

“That’s putting it mildly” The Commander admitted, “Marcus mentioned that he was the transport, the man with the van for a group who were importing dodgy gear of various types, mentioned that it comes in by boat.”

“This Lord Francis guy strikes me as just the sort to own a yacht or three” Forrester suggested.

“This is Haychester, the Sussex and Solent Riveria, practically everyone with a bit of cash between Littlehampton and Weymouth has a boat or yacht of some kind” The Commander pointed out, “The coastal area around here is like Howards Way on steroids.”

“You have a point” Longton conceded.

“It may be worth checking out though” The Commander then continued, “Try the smaller harbours, the ones that handle private yachts with few if any checks of who is sailing in or out.”

“I can do that” Stride confirmed, “I know the Harbour Master down at Dell Quay, if he doesn’t know anything then nobody does.”

“Let’s try and find out as many of these people’s names as we can” The Commander then declared, “Then track them down and find out where they have been, what they have been doing and with whom.”

“I got a possible lead on the poker group” Forrester then called, “Apparently it is a legit club, they meet in rooms at hotels, bars, that sort of thing two or three times a week, officially no cash games but, well, you know...”

“Yeah, I get the picture” The Commander agreed “We were only playing for matchsticks, honest Guv!” he mocked.

“If what I have heard is correct, they are due to have a group meeting tonight in the function room at the Ship Hotel” Forrester confirmed.

“Got a time on that?” The Commander asked.

“About seven thirty onwards” Forrester checked his notes.

“I’ll pop by and say hello then” The Commander confirmed.

“I know this is going to sound crazy” Phillips then remarked as she looked closer at the surveillance type photographs, “but this location, it couldn’t be Priory Park, could it?”

“Let me see that?” Longton prompted whereupon Phillips passed him a couple of the photographs and a magnifying glass before proceeding to take a look for himself, “You know what, you might be right.”

“Really?” The Commander responded.

“Yeah, look at this” Longton then showed him the photographs, “I reckon that is on top of the castle bailey mound over in the far corner.”

“So where would Mickey have been when he took these?” The Commander then asked as he proceeded to his desk and scrambled about in amongst the paperwork that was strewn over it until he found what he was looking for, a map of Priory Park itself.

“The old Roman city wall would be my best bet” Longton confirmed, “Mickey has a good quality long distance zoom lens and I reckon the skills to know how to use it.”

“At this rate we will have to put Mickey on the payroll” The Commander remarked.

“You have to admit, it is a good location for a meet at night” Forrester pointed out, “secluded location, poor lighting, the park is closed and supposedly locked and with Haychester’s night life, or rather, lack of it, nobody around to stick their noses in.”

“Hmm...” The Commander thought for a few moments, “Okay, here is what we are going to do” he then declared.

The others looked on with anticipation as The Commander paused for a few moments to compose his thoughts.

“Right, Al, you go and check on that matter we discussed earlier” The Commander then began to which Longton duly nodded in understanding, “Forrester, if you check up on the ports and harbours, see if we can find this boat, Phillips, you work on finding as many names for these people as we can and see who has records or is otherwise of interest, particularly concentrating on this guy” he then indicated the large man in one of the photographs.

“What should we do if we run into him?” Stride asked.

“Duck...” The Commander wryly responded, “This guy is a thump first and ask questions later type, hired muscle would be my guess but I reckon he must be on somebody’s files somewhere so let’s get a name for him and see what floats to the surface.”

“What about that Lord Francis guy?” Forrester then remarked, “We can’t go pissing off the aristocracy, can we?”

“You can’t” The Commander confirmed, “but I can...” he then smirked knowingly.

“Oh yes, you don’t do subtle, do you?” Longton recalled.

“Al, when you are finished with that other matter, I want you to meet me at that hotel where Lord Francis has his suite” The Commander then instructed, “We are going to have a nice cosy chat with him and if I feel the urge, give his drum a thorough spin.”

“I can feel the complaints from the Attorney General’s office rumbling over the hills as we speak” Longton then remarked, “The boss is going to be fielding some angry phone calls.”

“That’s his problem” The Commander responded, “My problem is finding out just what the hell is going on and who killed both the girl and poor old Marcus last night.”

“This is more than just a dead body and a discarded handbag, isn’t it?” Phillips suggested.

“Oh, way more than that” The Commander agreed.

At that point there was a knock at the door.

“Come in!” The Commander called.

“Sorry I am late” Forster called as he came in.

“No problem” The Commander confirmed, “Everyone who is not already acquainted, this is Ops Commander Neil Forster of the New Scotland Yard Drugs Squad.”

“Hi” Forster called.

“Got anything for us?” The Commander asked, more out of hope than expectation.

“The guys we arrested in the middle of the night know nothing” Forster confirmed, “Once we got them talking when their surprisingly expensive solicitors turned up, they all gave us the same well rehearsed patter, just hired for a transport job, cash in hand, no names, no pack drill.”

“Any of them got any form?” Forrester asked.

“Two are new to us as far as we can tell, one has form for taking and driving away and a bit of handling, petty stuff really” Forster confirmed, “The van was nicked from a builders’ merchants in Carshalton two days ago and fitted with false plates that should be on a little old lady’s Datsun Cherry in Stockport.”

“There is your criminal mastermind, right there...” The Commander joked.

“Sorry, the Datsun Cherry, the little old lady, her budgerigar and her cat all have rock solid alibi’s” Forster confirmed, “We checked!”

“Drat...” The Commander jokingly responded.

“Yeah, looks like the main man on the pickup job was the big Irish accented guy who got away” Forster continued.

“Lamping the life out of poor old Marcus on the way” Longton then added.

“Okay” The Commander then returned to the display boards, “Al and I will handle Lord Wally here” he indicated Francis, “If someone could liaise with the Control Room and have eyes kept on our dodgy used car salesman, see if anyone of interest wanders into his orbit and let’s chase up these two” he then indicated the photographs of Prentis and Davidson, “Even if they are not connected with this, they are bound to be up to something naughty.”

“Oh, if there is dirt on them, we’ll find it” Forrester confirmed.

“Right” The Commander then looked at his watch, realised it was wrong and then looked up at the clock on the wall instead, “I think that, unless anything urgent comes up, we all meet back here about lunchtime?” he then suggested.

“Works for me” Phillips agreed with the others confirming their agreement.

“Now, I am almost afraid to ask but has anyone seen the Guvnor?” The Commander then asked.

Superintendent Edwards had in fact just arrived and proceeded directly to his office where he duly took off his uniform overcoat, hung it up and then sat behind his desk.

Experience taught him that whenever The Commander was working on a case, it was always a good idea to take a deep breath before looking at the messages on his desk.

“All right” he then remarked to himself, closing his eyes before opening them and looking down at the desk.

There were three messages on his desk, the first one was procedural and innocuous, the second one was a routine overnight report, the third however almost had Edwards wanting to head butt his desk in disbelief but instead he decided to roll his eyes upwards instead.

“Never a dull moment...” Edwards remarked to himself as he got up and headed for the door just as Longton and The Commander were passing, “Ah, there you are!” he then called, stopping them in their tracks.

“How does he do that?” Longton asked.

“He's the Guvnor, it's in the job description Al” The Commander explained.

“I just read this” Edwards then brandished the report in his hand, “You have *another* body in the morgue?”

“Ah yes, that...” The Commander responded.

“Yes...” Edwards continued, “That...” he confirmed, “I mean, seriously, another body?”

“Well, someone seems to have found out that the now late Marcus McCann had talked to us and whilst making their rapid exit from the scene, took the opportunity to express their feelings” The Commander explained, “with a big bit of four by two as it happens...”

“And a wadge of grass stuffed in his mouth, don't forget that little added detail” Longton remarked.

“Oh, very charming” Edwards responded, “Do you at least have a suspect for Mr McCann’s untimely demise?”

“A suspect? Yes” The Commander confirmed, “A name for him, no, not yet.”

“I presume your usual efficiency means you are working on it?” Edwards then asked.

“As we speak, questions are being spoken into telephones and photographs are being scrunched up in the fax machine” The Commander responded, “I let others do the technical stuff after what happened the last time and that itty bitty accident we had.”

“Itty bitty accident?” Longton scoffed in response, “The fax machine caught fire and very nearly took the office with it!”

“Must have been mice chewing the electrics...” The Commander innocently protested.

“If you encounter any form of technology, do me a huge favour and just don’t touch it” Edwards then advised, “Get that young technical Jedi, Fuller in, okay?”

“Got it boss” The Commander immediately agreed.

“Right, well unless you have any further surprises for me, I’ll let you two get on with it” Edwards then declared, “A little less chaos and mayhem for at least the next twenty-four hours would be appreciated though.”

“I’ll see what I can do” The Commander confirmed before with a polite nod of acknowledgement, he and Longton headed off down the corridor.

“I give it an hour...” Edwards remarked knowingly.

“Hello, Special Branch?” Phillips called over the telephone, “Commander Heathfield please, its Lieutenant Julie Phillips, Haychester”.

She tapped her pen idly on her desk as she waited to be connected.

“Julie!” came the call from the other end a few moments later, “How is my favourite niece?” asked her uncle, Section Commander Paul Heathfield of the secretive Special Branch Division based out of New Scotland Yard.”

“I am good thanks Uncle” Philips confirmed, “Look, I am sorry to call you so early in the morning...” she then apologised.

“Oh, not a problem” Heathfield quickly reassured her, “We had an early morning rush job on anyway, one of the Queen’s corgis was taken ill in the night, cue frantic phone calls trying to sort out an emergency vet and associated security detail at short notice.”

“I wanted to ask you a favour, work related I am afraid” Phillips then explained.

“Go for it” Heathfield quickly agreed.

“When you are not mobilising half the Service in the middle of the night to transport one of the Queen’s corgis to the vets, do you still deal in matters relating to Northern Ireland and its numerous problems?” she then asked.

“Well, internally inside Northern Ireland is more the Anti-Terrorist Branch and MI5’s territory” Heathfield explained, “but anyone operating or even just circulating in UK territory outside the emerald isle does come under our remit.”

“That is exactly what I was hoping” Phillips responded, “We got a suspect over here wanted in connection with at least one murder, maybe two.”

“In sleepy little Haychester?” Heathfield responded, “Oh hang on, this isn’t one of The Commander’s little investigations, is it?”

“You’ve heard of The Commander?” Phillips replied, somewhat surprised.

“Everyone here at the Yard has heard of The Commander” Heathfield explained, “Let’s just say his reputation precedes him and he is well known, and thought of for that matter although if I were you, I probably wouldn’t tell him that.”

“Gotcha” Phillips agreed, “Anyway, our suspect is a huge muscular thug with a broad Irish accent, definitely from the kneecap first, ask questions later school of diplomacy, probably hired muscle and very good at what he does which made me wonder if he may have been on the books of the IRA or some other Irish group at some point.”

“Sounds like the sort of thug for hire we ought to have a file on somewhere” Heathfield agreed, “Have you got any details?”

“Not much” Phillips admitted, “a fairly generic description and a possible photograph of him.”

“Fax over what you have, and I will get my lads to take a look at it” Heathfield then confirmed, “I am sure he has a card here somewhere.”

“Thanks Uncle” Phillips called, “I owe you one!

“I am willing to bet few people turn up at this place so early in the morning” Longton remarked as The Commander brought the patrol car to a stop outside the Blue Parrot Club.

“It should be all right” The Commander confirmed, “Glenda will have chucked the last stragglers out before sunrise I would have thought, they are probably sitting in the bus shelter down the road, freezing to death, waiting for the first bus back to Haychester.”

“Right then” Longton then declared as he opened the door.

“Actually, I’ll come in with you” The Commander then confirmed as he stopped the car and got out himself, “Glenda does make a decent cuppa.”

“Round the back?” Longton then indicated down the side of the building.

“Yeah, down there and turn right” The Commander agreed before following Longton.

“Morning boys!” Glenda called from an upstairs window, “The door is open, come on up!”

“This Sara” Longton asked as he and The Commander entered the building and headed for the back stairs, “She is a prostitute?”

“She is indeed” The Commander confirmed, “However, just because she puts food on the table by way of the oldest profession there is, that does not give some ugly thug the licence to beat the crap out of her.”

“I wholeheartedly agree” Longton responded as they were met at the top of the stairs by Brenda.

“How is she?” The Commander asked as they were shown into the room.

“Still resting” Glenda confirmed, “Your friendly Doc gave her some TLC and some sedatives.”

“We may have to wait for that statement then” The Commander concluded.

“The Doctor reckons she may well have some cracked ribs” Glenda then mentioned, “Whoever that thug was that hit her, he did a right number on her, poor lass...”

“Did she say anything else before the Doctor sedated her?” Longton asked.

“Only that the guy who thumped her was a big bastard with an Irish accent” Glenda confirmed.

“I think we may have a suspect that fits the frame” The Commander remarked, “I met someone who just happens to match that description in the early hours of this morning.”

“I thought you were looking a bit rough around the edges” Glenda remarked.

“He usually looks like that, doesn't he?” Longton remarked.

“You may have a point there” Glenda admitted, “You are not exactly known for your sartorial elegance” she pointed out.

“I refer you both to my rule about never being or catching anything I cannot spell”
The Commander retorted.

“You’ll have to smarten yourself up a bit when they finally promote you, you know”
Longton then pointed out.

“Over my dead body...” The Commander quickly responded.

“That’s already happened, hasn’t it?” Longton remarked.

“Oh yes...” The Commander agreed with a shrug of the shoulders.

“Huh?” Glenda asked, clearly confused.

“Long story...” Longton confirmed.

“Just out of interest, do the names Marcus McCann, Lord Richard Francis or Dave Smith ring any bells?” The Commander then asked.

“If you mean Dodgy Dave Smith, the second-hand car dealer, then I have heard of him most definitely” Glenda confirmed, “Comes in here sometimes, usually winds up getting drunk and getting into a fight with someone he sold one of his dodgy death traps to and then gets thrown out.”

“Sounds about right” Longton agreed.

“Now, that Lord guy” Glenda then recalled, “He is well known amongst the local female population, a big reputation as a ladies’ man, different girl, sometimes more than one in his bed every night so they say, got a huge collection of classic and modern sports cars, oh and Dodgy Dave is the chief mechanic for his vast collection.”

“Didn’t Dodge Dave say he didn’t know Francis when Phillips and Stride interviewed him last night?” The Commander asked Al.

“He did indeed” Longton confirmed, “The lying little toe rag...”

“How many cars has this Lord Francis guy got then?” The Commander then asked.

“Oh, about fifty or sixty I think” Glenda recalled.

“I wouldn’t want to be stuck behind him in the Post Office queue when he was renewing the tax disks on all that lot” The Commander then remarked.

“Quite” Longton agreed.

“All right, let’s leave it there for now” The Commander then declared, “We’ll come back when Sara is back with us. Are you all right for protection against any uninvited guests?” he then asked.

“My bar manager and a couple of the lads are downstairs, and I have my husband’s old shotgun tucked away just in case” Glenda confirmed with a smile.

“Please tell me you have a licence for that” The Commander then remarked.

“Of course!” Glenda responded, “I run a tight legal establishment here I will have you know!”

“Oh, I know” The Commander agreed, “Until later then...”

“Hello?” Forrester called out after knocking on the door and stepping inside the Harbour Master’s office at Dell Quay, approximately four miles to the south of Haychester City.

“Ahoy there!” came the call from the back of the office whereupon a man emerged from the lavatory, dressed in a typically nautical uniform with Harbour Master emblazoned on his lapels.

“Morning Frank” Forrester then greeted him, “How’s business?”

“We’re keeping afloat” Frank responded with a laugh, “Sorry, nautical humour.”

“Very good” Forrester agreed, “This is going to sound a bit daft, and you can blame The Commander for this, but I am looking for a boat.”

“Well, I can safely say you have come to the right place” Frank responded, “We got hundreds of them, from tiny little coracles right up to massive gin palace yachts.”

“What we are looking for is any vessel that may be either owned by or have some connection to a Lord Richard Francis” Forrester then explained.

“Huh, that tosser!” Frank responded with obvious distaste.

“I’ll take that as a yes...” Forrester remarked.

“If they ever put ‘Flash Git’ in a visual dictionary, they could use his picture as the prime example” Frank confirmed, “All mouth, money and flash cars that man, if he can’t drive it, screw it or sell it, he isn’t interested.”

“Yeah, I don’t think The Commander is too impressed with him either” Forrester remarked, “and he has only met him the once.”

“Let me guess, got pulled over for driving like a twat?” Frank suggested.

“Got it in one” Forrester confirmed.

“That doesn’t surprise me” Frank then continued, “If he is not bouncing up and down with whoever is that day’s girl he has conned into his bed, then he is driving one of his souped-up motors around like a maniac.”

“Any boats feature in Lord Francis repertoire?” Forrester then asked.

“Well, he has got one of those posh Sunseeker like cruisers, you know, the ones that appear in the titles of Howard’s Way and are built down in Dorset” Frank confirmed, “and he has friends who have yachts that sail in all the time from the south of France or wherever they have been off galivanting.”

“I don’t suppose any of those vessels are around at the moment by any chance?” Forrester ventured.

“Hang on, I’ll check the logs” Frank returned to his desk and opened one of several large black leather bound books on his desk, flicked through the pages and then ran his fingers down the selected page, “Here you go, the Motor Vessel Narcissus is his boat, left for the south of France, well so his captain said two days ago, hasn’t come back yet, at least not here anyway.”

“Any other boats that he may use that are in the area?” Forrester asked as he made some notes.

“There are a couple worth checking on” Frank continued, “One is a sailing yacht called the Nostromo.”

“What? As in the ship in Alien?” Forrester remarked.

“Yep!” Frank confirmed, “That often sails out of here with loads of toffs and girls on board for fun and frolics in international waters.”

“How the other half live, eh?” Forrester commented.

“I haven’t seen that one for several weeks though” Frank checked his records to back up his own memory, “The other one to watch out for is a Belfast registered yacht called the Amber Marie, obviously that one gets watched by the Coastguard a bit as they worry it may be smuggling arms and the like into Northern Ireland.”

“Very interesting” Forrester finished writing his notes, “Do you think you could let us know if any of these appear around here Frank?”

“No problem” Frank eagerly confirmed.

“Cheers, appreciate it” Forester responded.

“Julie!” Stride called across the office, “Special Branch for you on Line Three!”

“Oh!” Phillips quickly responded, dropping her sandwich on the desk and reaching across to the telephone to take the call, “Hello?” she then called.

“It's your favourite uncle” Heathfield called, “I've got something for you.”

“Oooh, do tell” Phillips responded as she grabbed a pen.

“That Irish guy you are looking for” Heathfield consulted his notes, “Your hunch he may have been muscle for the IRA was spot on” he confirmed, “His name is Patrick O'Connor, thirty five years old, well known as a heavy, specialising in breaking legs mostly, skipped Northern Ireland after a bit of a tiff with a rival IRA Brigade Commander about six months ago, last seen on a ferry heading towards England which was where we lost track of him.”

“Looks like he may have gone freelance then” Phillips remarked.

“So it would seem, even thugs have bills to pay” Heathfield agreed, “I am sending through everything we have got on this guy now.”

“Got it” Phillips confirmed as she looked across towards the fax machine just as it began to print out the transmission that Heathfield was sending.

“I have put a call into MI5 and our Northern Ireland office to see if they have anything more on this charming gentleman” Heathfield then continued, “If anything comes up, I'll make sure it gets sent on to you.”

“Cheers, appreciate it” Phillips responded.

“Just one thing” Heathfield ominously warned, “This guy is dangerous with a capital D, he breaks legs, kneecaps people and is suspected of being involved in bomb making on the side.”

“Busy boy...” Phillips remarked.

“Everyone has to have a hobby I suppose” Heathfield agreed.

“Yeah, I just wish it was something a bit more innocent like knitting...” Phillips remarked.

“Let's go and annoy the aristocracy, shall we?” The Commander suggested as he drove off.

“I know full well you will enjoy that!” Longton remarked.

“Now, whatever gives you that idea?” The Commander replied with a knowing smirk.

“Experience?” Longton wittily suggested.

“Whisky Sierra One Three One from Two Four One, are you receiving, over?” Phillips called over the radio.

“Get that, will you?” The Commander asked, nodding towards the radio as he drove northwards, away from the centre of Haychester.

“This is The Commander's personal assistant; how may I address your call?” Longton called.

“Oh, hi Al!” Phillips responded, “Is he listening?”

“Yeah, I am here” The Commander called across in confirmation, “What have you got for me?”

“I called in a favour of my uncle” Phillips began to explain, “He's a senior officer in Special Branch.”

“Useful to know” Longton remarked to which The Commander nodded in agreement.

“He ran the photo and what few details we have on our big brutish suspect with the Irish accent and we got a match” Phillips confirmed, “Patrick Shaun O'Connor, thirty five years old, born in Belfast, last seen boarding a Irish Sea ferry bound for the UK six months ago after his IRA Brigade Commander suggested he lie low out of Ireland for a while after a rather nasty incident in a pub involving a sawn-off shotgun and some poor sod's kneecaps.”

“Sounds like our man” The Commander remarked.

“When he skipped Ireland, Special Branch lost tabs on him but suspected he would probably offer his talents on the private market to pass the time and pay the bills” Phillips continued, “Needless to say they are very keen to have a chat with him if we collar him.”

“I would be more than happy to oblige, if we ever find him” The Commander agreed.

“Special Branch are sending down everything they have including pictures” Phillips continued.

“As soon as you get them, I want them circulated with a warning that this guy is not to be approached” The Commander then instructed, “at least not without armed backup and a couple of large angry Alsatians.”

“No problem” Phillips confirmed, “Two Four One, out.”

“An uncle in Special Branch huh?” Longton remarked.

“It's always good to have friends in high places” The Commander confirmed.

“Maybe you will run into this guy at the poker circle this evening?” Longton then suggested.

“I sincerely hope not” The Commander responded, “It will ruin my concentration.”

“You play poker?” Longton asked.

“Not for a while” The Commander admitted, “More Eddie's speciality if you know what I mean.”

“You any good?” Longton found himself having to ask to satisfy his curiosity.

“Had my first big win with a full house, Queens full of aces when I was nine” The Commander recalled, “Back room of the Dog & Duck in Lewisham, four way heads up with me, my dad and a couple of guys called Ronnie and Reggie...”

“Oh...” Longton responded before something occurred to him, “Hang on, *the* Ronnie and Reggie?” he then asked.

“Uh huh...” The Commander confirmed, “I only joined in the game for fun, did so well that they insisted on paying out.”

“Blimey, now that is friends in high places” Longton remarked, “or low, depending upon your point of view.”

“Quite...” The Commander agreed, “Mind you, most of the people I grew up with as a kid are either in jail or six feet under...”

“Ah...” Longton replied.

“I heard a good little quote the other day which I thought summed me up perfectly” The Commander remarked, “Those quiet nights when I can't sleep, well I don't sleep much anyway, when Eddie wakes up and dares to step out from behind the shadow I cast in front of him.”

“What's that?” Longton asked.

“I share my dreams with ghosts...” The Commander then recalled, “Apt, huh?”

“Very” Longton agreed, “You know, I am here if you ever want to talk, you know?”

“Thanks Al” The Commander replied, “I appreciate it.”

“So, what's the plan?” Longton then asked as they approached the turn off for the hotel.

“I intend to get right up the nose of Lord Wally or whatever his name is and give his luxury suite a thorough going over” The Commander confirmed, “and when I have finished with that toffee nosed ponce, I am going to turn my attention to that snivelling little dweeb of a hotel manager.”

“You really hate it when people lie to you, don't you?” Longton asked.

“Oh yes” The Commander determinedly responded as they headed up the immaculate gravel drive and approached the hotel building itself.

“Do we have such a thing as a warrant?” Longton then inquired, even though he knew full well it was a pointless question.

“Now why bother with such niceties when I can simply declare probable cause?” The Commander asked as he pulled up to the parking area around the side of the hotel entrance and stopped the car.

“How are you going to determine that?” Longton was almost afraid to ask as they both got out of the car.

“Easy, the hotel manager was acting all shifty when we last met and as for that Lord guy, he is most definitely bent” The Commander explained, “In my book, and my nose that is most definitely probable cause.”

“Oh, hello...” Longton remarked as they walked around towards the front entrance and noticed a shiny high performance Lamborghini sports car parked nearby, “Now that has GOT to belong to Lord Francis.”

“Hmm...” The Commander looked at the sleek sports car with little enthusiasm, “Give me an old Ford or a nice 2.8 Litre MkII Jag any day.”

“Never had you down as a Jag man” Longton remarked as they headed towards the main doors into the hotel.

“I learnt to drive in one” The Commander fondly recalled, “When I was seven...”

“You are just full of surprises!” Longton responded.

As they entered the foyer of the hotel, the Receptionist looked up at the approaching officers, let out a discrete little sigh and then smiled as best she could.

“Good morning, how can I help you?” she asked in that gleeful manner that seems to be inherent in nearly all of her chosen profession.

“We want to see Lord Richard Francis please” The Commander directly replied, “I take it from the ponce mobile parked outside that he is in?”

“He is one of our guests, yes Sir” the Receptionist confirmed, “but we are under strict instructions that he is not to be disturbed.”

“Shame” The Commander responded dismissively, “We'll just head on up and see him, okay?”

“Well, no it isn't okay officer” the Receptionist tried to protest, “He is...”

“...not to be disturbed, yes I get it” The Commander responded, “I tell you what, whilst you are busy not disturbing him, dig out that feeble man, the Manager out from whatever rock he is hiding under as when I have finished upstairs, I have a whole fresh consignment of good old fashioned police harassment ready for him too!”

“Yes officer...” the Receptionist confirmed as The Commander stormed off towards the stairs with a meekly smiling Longton following not far behind.

“You enjoyed that, didn't you?” Longton remarked as he and The Commander headed up the stairs.

“It's called job satisfaction Al!” The Commander confirmed with a smile.

“In some official manual somewhere, it is probably called police intimidation...” Longton remarked.

“I was never much for reading” The Commander admitted, “as the pile of unattended paperwork littering my desk will probably testify.”

“So, where do we find this Lord's luxury suite then?” Longton asked as they continued up the stairs.

“Top floor” The Commander confirmed, “Just be thankful this isn't one of those twenty-five story mega hotels that they are throwing up these days.”

“Ah, this place is much posher than those cheap and cheerful pseudo knocking shops” Longton confirmed, “My brother is a manager at one of the big ones in London, the stories he could tell you would make you blush!”

They soon reached the top floor and left the stairwell, exiting into the ornately decorated landing where, as they arrived, a smartly dressed young woman emerged from a door, smiled at the two officers as they passed each other before she entered the lift, the doors closing behind her.

“Another of Lord Francis' many lady friends you reckon?” The Commander remarked.

“Probably” Longton agreed, “This Francis guy seems to collect girls the same way my old man collected stamps.”

“Everyone should have a hobby” The Commander remarked as they approached the double doors that marked the main entrance into the luxury suite.

Just as The Commander was about to knock however, the door opened, and Francis appeared.

“Oh!” Francis exclaimed with surprise, clearly trying to depart in a hurry as he was still putting on his tweed sports jacket as he appeared, “An Inspector calls!”

“Lieutenant Commander actually” The Commander wryly corrected him, “I want a word with you Sir, well several actually.”

“And I wish I could spare the time, but I must dash off” Francis confirmed as he brushed past the two officers.

“This is a murder enquiry Sir” The Commander called as he and Longton set off after Francis who was striding up the corridor at quite a pace.

“And I would love to help, naturally” Francis coolly responded, “But I have had a busy night...”

“Yeah, we saw her...” Longton quietly commented.

“...and there is so much more I have to do” Francis continued, “I am sure you understand?”

“You do know I could just nick you for obstructing the course of justice?” The Commander then stated.

“I have a considerable number of prominent friends, legal connections, friends in high places” Francis gleefully pointed out “and I have always had the simple policy of never talking, formally of course, to the authorities without the correct legal representation present” he then declared as he pressed the button for the lift and the doors opened.

“I don't care if you have the Attorney General in your Filofax” The Commander tersely responded.

“As a matter of fact, yes I do” Francis responded, with a gleeful smile, “If you would excuse me gentlemen” he then called as the lift doors suddenly closed, leaving the two officers standing on the landing.

“Cheeky git!” The Commander retorted, “Come on” he then urged, heading for the stairs with Longton following quickly behind.

The stairwell echoed with the clattering of two pairs of heavy-duty safety boots as Longton and The Commander raced down the stairs as fast as possible in an attempt to keep up with Francis as he descended in the lift.

Francis won the race but only just as he emerged from the lift in the ground floor lobby and was heading across the reception area with a confident stride just as Longton and The Commander reached the bottom of the stairs and came around the corner.

“Oi!” The Commander called across the hotel foyer, “I haven't finished with you yet!”

“Sorry, can't stop, people to see” Francis called back gleefully as he reached the door, “You could speak to my solicitor instead” he then suggested as he headed out of the

door with a confident stride, “Lovely chap, should be considering how much he charges.”

“Why don't we talk to your father-in-law?” The Commander then suggested as he and Longton stood outside the door, giving up on going after him as Francis reached his car and opened the door.

“I like you” Francis remarked as he got in the car and shut the door, “You are a funny guy.”

“You know, you are kind of funny” Longton then remarked in agreement.

“Thanks Al...” The Commander replied with a rather sarcastic tone.

“Well, its's been a pleasure as always gentlemen” Francis then called as he turned the key in the ignition, which was when the headlights dimmed, and the engine barely turned over.

In a split second, The Commander realised what was possibly wrong and grabbed Longton by the arm.

“MOVE!” The Commander called, forcing Longton ahead of him back through the hotel room doors a split second before the car exploded in a huge fireball, the blast throwing Longton and The Commander into the hotel lobby as the windows were blown in and people screamed.

Burning debris was sent in all directions and as the sound of the explosion died down, it was swiftly replaced with the tinkling of broken glass and the hotel's fire alarm sounding.

With the sound of the explosion still ringing in his ears, The Commander picked himself up off the floor, bits of dust and debris falling off his uniform tunic before he looked across at a very dusty Longton who was already sitting up.

“You okay Al?” The Commander called across.

Longton coughed a bit and then made a thumbs up in confirmation.

“All units from Whisky X-Ray” The Commander's radio called, “Any units free to deal with reports of a car on fire, Wadhurst Manor Hotel, Wadhurst?”

“Control from One Three One” The Commander responded, “Longton and I are already on the scene as it happens” he confirmed as, with Longton's help, he got back to his feet and went over to the wrecked remains of the main doors and looked outside, “Not so much as on fire as blown to pieces, one victim in the vehicle and a hell of a mess.”

“Do you require assistance One Three One?” The Control Room Supervisor then asked.

“Fire brigade, paramedics, and if anyone knows of a good glazier, the hotel needs a load of new windows” The Commander confirmed.

“Whisky X-Ray One Three One from Zero One” Edwards then called over the radio, “What the hell happened?” he asked.

“It looks like someone put a bomb in Lord Francis' Lamborghini” The Commander explained.

“I don't suppose by any chance this was his fuel pump being leaky, was it?” Longton suggested.

“No Al, this was your typical car bomb I reckon” The Commander confirmed.

“One Three One” Edwards then called over the radio, “Can you confirm casualties?”

“Loads of cuts and bruises, some shock and one casualty” The Commander confirmed, “The driver, Lord Francis, probably didn't feel a thing.”

“Jesus Christ!!” Edwards was heard to exclaim.

“I thought he was called Richard?” Longton quietly remarked.

Crowthorne looked up from his desk as he heard footsteps in the corridor outside his office, swift in nature and echoing on the hard marble flooring, coming ever closer.

“Here comes trouble...” he remarked, his years of experience telling him there was a problem approaching which was when the footsteps stopped immediately outside his door.

“Come in!” Crowthorne called with a knowing smile before the visitor had even had a chance to knock on the door.

“Boss?” Collins called as he came into the room, ominously baring a red card file which he handed over.

“Go on, give me the bad news” Crowthorne called as he tentatively took the file.

“A car bomb exploded about five minutes ago outside a hotel in Wadhurst, about ten miles north of Haychester” Collins explained, “One victim confirmed, the driver, a certain Lord Richard Francis.”

“Oh hell...” Crowthorne responded as he opened the file and looked at the initial top-secret report contained within, “Do I really need to ask who the Security Service officer on site dealing with the incident is?”

“No, not really” Collins confirmed, “In fact he and his colleague were already on the scene when the bomb exploded.”

“Are they all right?” Crowthorne asked, understandable concerned.

“According to the radio traffic intercepts G Section have been listening too, yes” Collins responded, “The Director General has already been alerted due to the sensitive nature of the victim.”

“If it hasn't already, get a full D Notice press blackout on the whole thing right away” Crowthorne then ordered as he pushed his chair back and got up.

“Already done boss” Collins confirmed.

“Good” Crowthorne, “I am going down there, have a car for me outside the back door in ten minutes.”

“Oh God, my head...” The Commander remarked as he brushed off the dust and debris that was all in his hair and on his uniform tunic.

“Here comes the cavalry” Longton nodded up towards the hotel driveway entrance as the sirens got closer and the first emergency service vehicles, two Security Service cars leading two fire service appliances and three ambulances came through the gates.

“The Guvnor’s going to have a fit when he hears about this” The Commander then remarked as he stood up and approached the arriving vehicles.

“Not you again!” the Fire Chief joked as he emerged from the leading fire appliance and saw The Commander standing there.

“I seem to have a habit of attracting chaos wherever I go” The Commander admitted as he gestured towards the smouldering wreckage nearby.

“We don’t do frequent customer discounts you know?” the Fire Chief then pointed out.

“I’ll live with the disappointment” The Commander smiled in response, “Anyway, this mess is all yours.”

“Roger that” the Fire Chief agreed before duly deploying his officers and equipment to tackle the various pockets of still burning debris spread all about.

“Well, that will never pass its MOT again” Surrey Traffic Division Lieutenant Kindersley remarked as he got out of his patrol car and surveyed the wreckage.

“Welcome to the party” The Commander responded, “Bit off your patch, isn’t it?”

“I was not far away when I heard the call so as we didn’t have anything on, I thought I would come and lend a hand” Kinderley explained, “What was it?” he then indicated the wreckage, now being doused down by the fire officers.

“Erm, one of those Italian sports car type things” The Commander confirmed.

“Lamborghini” Longton confirmed.

“Ouch” Kinderley responded, “I bet the owner is none too pleased.”

“He was in it when it went bang” The Commander remarked.

“Nasty...” Kinderley commented, “Anyway, what can I do to help?” he then asked.

“Can you sort out some road blocks in each direction, keep access for our people in and out but and try and keep the traffic moving?” The Commander then asked.

“Not a problem” Kinderley readily agreed, returning to his car before driving away with a friendly wave.

“Christ!” Forrester remarked as he joined them, “Who was in the car?”

“My prime suspect!” The Commander regretfully confirmed, “Somebody got to him before we did.”

“Any injuries?” Stride asked as he too joined them.

“Shock, cuts, bruises, bit of damaged pride I suspect but nothing serious” Longton confirmed, “Well, except for...” he then pointed towards the smouldering wreckage nearby.

“There is one silver lining in this cloud however” The Commander then realised as he looked back towards the frontage of the hotel where numerous windows were cracked or shattered completely, “We can search the late Lord Francis’s suite and not worry about such niceties as a warrant!”

“I would'nt be at all surprised if an armada of very expensive lawyers have already been scrambled” Longton pointed out.

“They can’t get here that fast” The Commander responded before turning to Forrester and Stride, “You two secure the scene as soon as the fire brigade have finished, I want full forensics and the bomb squad here as soon as possible, also check that everyone in the hotel, staff and guests are accounted for, nobody is to leave until they have given their details, a statement and been checked for any background we need to be aware of.”

“Got it” Stride confirmed, “We should have another dozen or so guys here within the next ten to fifteen minutes.”

“Lovely” The Commander responded, “Right Al, let’s go and see what the late Lord Francis has in his suite, shall we?”

“The manager won’t like this you know” Longton pointed out as they approached the shattered remains of the main entrance doors and headed inside.

“Given what has happened in the last fifteen minutes, I think he has got slightly bigger things to worry about, don’t you?” The Commander pointed out.

Parr, the hotel manager was near the reception desk, looking around with a dejected expression whilst the receptionists were busy trying to do a check of everyone on their register to ensure all were well.

“Mr Parr” The Commander called, “Keys please” he then formally requested.

“What?” Parr responded, clearly confused.

“To the late Lord Francis’s suite” The Commander then insisted, “Or do you want me to just kick the door in instead?” he then suggested.

“You can’t do that without a warrant!” Parr then tried to protest.

“Mr Parr, let me be brutally honest with you” The Commander then stepped closer and made sure he had his full and complete attention, “Someone just detonated a car bomb right outside your front door, killing a very prominent member of the aristocracy who just happens to be probably your best guest on the books, that brings in to effect the terms and conditions of a lovely little bit of legislation called the Prevention of Terrorism Act 1984 which is a veritable menu of offences and powers, which if you choose to obstruct any investigation under the powers of said act will result in you having a very bad day which will most likely culminate with a rather unpleasant conversation with the lads from Special Branch.”

“All right, all right...” Parr relented and reached over the back of the dust covered reception desk, retrieving a set of keys that he then somewhat reluctantly handed over.

“See, that didn’t hurt, did it?” The Commander remarked as he took the keys and smiled, “Come on Al, let’s go” he then called whereupon he and Longton headed for the lifts.

“Has the Guvnor heard about this yet do you think?” Longton asked as they ascended in the lift.

“Well, he hasn’t been on the radio yet and it has been twenty minutes since the big kaboom so I would wager either he is stuck in a really boring meeting that cannot be interrupted or else he is already on his way over here right now” The Commander concluded.

“This is going to be a circus you know?” Longton then pointed out.

“Aye” The Commander agreed, “I’ll take a fiver on ‘What the hell is going on?’ as he first words as soon as he arrives.”

“Oh, I was going to bet on something along the lines of issuing a ‘D-Notice’ on the whole sorry mess” Longton commented as the lift reached the top floor and the doors opened.

“I think it is safe to say that the ‘powers that be’ will want this whole sorry mess discreetly swept under the nearest carpet to avoid any potential ‘embarrassment’ to the establishment” The Commander remarked as they walked down the corridor once more.

“Going to have to be a bloody big carpet to hide this lot under” Longton commented as they reached the door to the suite.

“Not to mention a bloody big broom...” The Commander readily agreed as he looked through the keys that he had been given, “Now, if I were a key to a villain’s lair, which one would I be?”

“Try the big one” Longton suggested.

“Okay...” The Commander remarked as he duly inserted the largest of the keys in the lock and then successfully turned it, “Well done Al, you win a cookie.”

“Just the one?” Longton remarked, “You have got like half of Tesco’s biscuit aisle in your kitchen cupboard.”

“I get hungry...” The Commander coolly explained as he opened the door, and they went inside.

“You are always hungry” Longton pointed out to an admitting nod from The Commander.

“One Three One from Two Seven Five” Forrester called over the radio.

“Yeah Graham, what have you got?” The Commander responded.

“Building confirmed safe, everyone is out and accounted for” Forrester then confirmed, “Bomb Squad, the Chief and various other hangers on are on their way over now.”

“Roger that” The Commander responded, “Keep the onlookers and rubber necks away from the site and let me know when the Chief and anyone else I need to know about gets here.”

“Will do” Forrester confirmed.

“Blimey, this is a bit posh, isn’t it?” Longton remarked as he and The Commander then proceeded to look around the vast luxury suite.

“I dread to think what the nightly rate is on this place” The Commander agreed, “Well outside our pay grade that is for certain.”

The suite consisted of several interconnected rooms spread across almost the entire top floor of the building, large reception rooms with luxurious leather sofas, the finest furnishings and fittings, exquisite artwork on the walls, many lit by large ornate chandelier style light fittings.

“Wow, that is a BIG bed!” The Commander remarked as they entered the master bedroom, dominated by a huge super king size four poster bed.

“I bet you get a decent night’s kip in those sheets” Longton commented, “Along with a few other activities I would wager” he then added but The Commander was not listening fully as something had caught his eye above and behind them.

“Al, come here” The Commander called whereupon Longton came and joined him in looking up at the ceiling, “What’s that?” he then pointed at something located high up in the corner where the ceiling met the top of the wall.

“That, is a picture rail” Al confirmed.

“No, not that” The Commander responded and repointed to what he was trying to identify, “That...”

“Oh...” Longton responded and looked again, “I’m not sure, a camera lens perhaps?”

“That is exactly what I was thinking” The Commander agreed before noticing something else, “and there is another one hidden over there” he then pointed towards the opposite corner of the room.

“And two more over here” Longton indicated further hidden cameras located around the room, “This place is wired for vision and probably sound too.”

“I wonder what Lord Francis was recording?” The Commander then pondered as he looked all around.

“Well, considering most of the cameras seem to be pointing towards the bed” Longton pointed out, “I somehow doubt he was documenting his tax returns.”

“Ah...” The Commander then responded, realising the significance.

“The wiring seems to run over there and then goes through that wall” Longton pointed up and ahead.

“Let’s see where it leads” The Commander duly followed him as they went back through the suite until they found a point where all the wires merged into a single point and then disappeared.

“Something not right here” Longton looked all around a bookcase that covered one wall.

“Hang on, I have seen this trick before” The Commander remarked as he started looking all around the bookcase until he found something and with a click, released it before pulling out the bookcase, revealing it to be a hidden door to another room.

“Open sesame...” Longton remarked with an impressed look.

“After you” The Commander then showed Longton through before following him inside.

“Good grief, more video equipment than the BBC in here” Longton exclaimed as they looked all around the hidden room which had a bank of television screens across one wall with video editing equipment desks whilst on the opposite wall were hundreds of tapes, all carefully labelled and indexed.

“Whilst I am capable of programming my VCR at home to record The Bill” The Commander remarked, “I think we ought to get our technical genius, err what is his name?”

“Simon Fuller” Longton confirmed.

“That's the chap” The Commander agreed, “I think this is most definitely his area of expertise.”

“Three Nine Five from One Eight One” Longton then called into his radio.

“Erm, Three Nine Five receiving” Fuller responded from his office back in Haychester.

“Lieutenant Commander Edwards and I request the pleasure of your company and your bag of tricks in the luxury top floor suite of the Wadhurst Manor Hotel” Longton explained, “We have a lot of technical gubbins here that needs your expert eye we reckon.”

“Err right” Fuller confirmed, “I'll just requisitions some transport and be right up.”

“Cheers” Longton replied, “Report to Forrester when you get here as we have quite a circus building up here.”

“Will do” Fuller confirmed, already standing up with his toolkit in his hand and heading for the door, “Three Nine Five out.”

“Interesting, this tape has yesterday's date on it” Longton remarked as he carefully looked at the video cassette sat on the desk, “There is a name on it, Juliet Reeves-Forbes.”

“Presumably the young lady we saw leaving when we first arrived?” The Commander suggested.

“Makes sense” Longton agreed, “I am guessing that Lord Francis liked to keep a record of his err, activities.”

“Hmm...” The Commander responded with a certain sense of disapproval.

“One Three One from Two Seven Five” came Forrester's voice over the radio.

“Go ahead” The Commander responded as he stepped out of the secret room and back into the main part of the suite.

“There is a gentleman by the name of Mr Crowthorne here to see you” Forrester explained, “He is from a certain Government agency, if you know what I mean?”

“I do indeed” The Commander readily agreed, “Send him up” he then instructed, “Any word on the Bomb Squad yet?” he then asked.

“They arrived a couple of minutes ago” Forrester confirmed, “They are just setting up their gear as we speak.”

“As soon as they find out anything, I want to know” The Commander then requested.

“Will do” Forrester agreed, “Two Seven Five, out.”

“Take a look at this” Longton called from the adjacent room whereupon The Commander duly came out of the bedroom and joined him.

“What have you got?” he then asked as he saw Longton kneeling down and examining the floor carefully.

“It's this section of carpet” Longton explained, “To me it looks and smells brand new, hardly been walked on.”

“You may have something there” The Commander agreed.

“Well, having spent my hard-earned overtime furnishing my fiancé and I's little love nest” Longton explained, “I am well versed in the smell of brand new carpet.”

“It's the same colour as the fibres that forensics found on the body of our dead girl” The Commander then remarked, “Shot here and then the carpet rapidly replaced to try and erase the scene of the crime?”

“If the dome fits...” Longton agreed, “Of course that means that hotel manager probably knew what happened to the original carpet and arranged its replacement, and that makes him an accessory.”

“In which case I think we will drag that snivelling git down to the nick for a nice long chat later” The Commander remarked.

Both men looked up when there was a knock at the door.

“Get that will you Al?” The Commander requested.

“Yes, sure” Longton confirmed before heading across the suite to the main door and opening it to find a tall smartly dressed gentleman standing there.

“Ah, good morning” the gentleman declared, proffering his official identification which he handed over, “Richard Crowthorne, MI5, Section Delta.”

“Your credentials are impeccable Sir” Longton remarked on examining Crowthorne's identification before handing it back to him.

“I should hope so” Crowthorne replied with a smile, “Our technical boffins who create all this stuff cost an absolute fortune” he explained, “Is Sam Edwards here?” he then asked.

“He is indeed” Longton confirmed, “Come inside.”

“Thank you” Crowthorne politely replied as he duly followed Longton inside.

“That was quick, you old rascal” The Commander remarked with a smile as Longton and Crowthorne joined him in the dining room.

“Well, you know me” Crowthorne admitted as he strolled over to the balcony and looked outside, “I like to be on the ball.”

“This is Lieutenant Commander Al Longton by the way” The Commander introduced Crowthorne to his colleague, “He's erm, family if you know what I mean.”

“Ah, a fellow keeper of secrets?” Crowthorne remarked in realisation, “As honorary chairman of the Eddie Regent Appreciation Society, welcome to the club” he then shook Longton's hand warmly.

“Any insight you can offer into this situation would be appreciated” The Commander remarked.

“Well...” Crowthorne remarked as he looked down at the scene outside the front of the hotel where the fire service was finishing dowsing down the wreckage, pieces of which were distributed over a large area, “I know I hoped that you bring your trademark lack of subtlety to proceedings but, Jesus!”

“Yeah...” The Commander agreed, “Having our most prominent suspect blown into little pieces, nearly taking us with him wasn't exactly part of the plan.”

“It may not have been part of your plan, but I strongly suspect it is part of someone else's” Crowthorne pointed out, “I gather there is some big Irish accented thug on the plot?”

“Potentially hired thug with possible IRA connections” The Commander confirmed, “A big kneecapping brute by the name of Patrick O'Connor.”

“That fits” Crowthorne agreed, “This car bomb has 'Made in Londonderry' written all over it.”

“That’s a point” Longton remarked, “How did you know the car was going to explode?” he then asked.

“When Lord Francis turned the key, the electrics bottomed out” The Commander explained, “Lights went down and the ignition failed, the power was being sucked out by the device powering up to detonate, combine that with the fact we may have an experienced IRA guy on the manor, and I quickly put two and two together.”

“Gone are the days when bombs were made from simple parts, home brewed explosive, a wind-up alarm clock from Woolworths and a nine-volt battery” Crowthorne agreed.

“Well, if the establishment were worried about Lord Francis causing any embarrassment through his illicit activities, this should cover it up nicely” The Commander then remarked, “It can be spun easily as him being targeted simply because of who his father-in-law is.”

“As opposed to a falling out among thieves or smugglers” Longton added, “Or indeed any of probably hundreds of enraged husbands and boyfriends of the hundreds of women he seems to have screwed pretty much twenty-four seven.”

“Any proof of this?” Crowthorne asked out of curiosity.

“Come with me...” The Commander beckoned with a wave of his finger before leading Crowthorne around to the secret door and into the video room.

“Holy crap!” Crowthorne exclaimed on seeing the sophisticated set up inside, “This guy certainly has a better surveillance budget than us!”

“Cameras all over the suite” Longton confirmed, “particularly extensive coverage of the master bedroom and then there is the meticulously indexed library” he then turned around and gestured towards the multiple shelves of video cassettes.

“Hmm...” Crowthorne mused, “Home videos, very tasty...”

“I have got our technical wizard on his way up here right now to take a look at this setup” The Commander then confirmed, “I know I am a bit of a technophobe...”

“Ha ha!” Longton responded, The Commander momentarily glared, and he quickly subsided again.

“...but it looks like he seems to have two categories of videos here” The Commander indicated the shelves, “Meetings seems to be one category and hanky panky the other.”

“Hanky panky?” Crowthorne, “Does anyone still use such a quaint old phrase anymore?”

“Yeah, me!” The Commander responded, “You know how I feel about the mucky stuff?”

“We have *definitely* got to get him a girlfriend” Longton quietly remarked aside to Crowthorne.

“Indeed...” he agreed, “Any suggestions?”

“Well...” Longton began thoughtfully.

“All right, that’s enough of that” The Commander relented, “Let’s get back to this sordid mess, shall we?”

“For one thing, I think the existence of this extensive archive should be kept strictly between ourselves” Crowthorne wisely suggested.

“I wholeheartedly agree” The Commander replied with Longton nodding too.

“The potential scandal if this were to get into the popular press would be a serious mess” Crowthorne remarked, “I have already got the D.G. to issue a D-Notice on the whole thing, which means as far as anyone outside of these premises is concerned, what just happened was nothing more than a tragic accident.”

“Oh, does this mean I get to seriously annoy the crime reporter from the local rag?” The Commander gleefully asked.

“Albert Gold from The Whingers Weekly?” Longton responded, referring to the local Haychester Gazette’s nickname.

“The same” The Commander confirmed, “I am hoping that my last warning to him is still ringing in his ears.”

“Which one was that?” Crowthorne asked.

“The one where if he crossed me again, I was going to shove his typewriter so far up his jacks, every time he opened his mouth to speak, he will think his mother was a tickertape machine” The Commander explained.

“Colourful and imaginative as always...” Crowthorne remarked with a smile.

Downstairs in the damaged hotel foyer, a very nervous looking George Parr, the Hotel Manager was surveying the scene as numerous Security Service officers and specialist crews were securing the area and subjecting the debris to a very thorough examination.

He was waiting for the right moment which occurred when Chief Superintendent Edwards arrived through the wrecked main door with Fuller following close behind.

“Forrester, Stride” Edwards called as he approached them, “What’s the S.P. on this mess?”

“Bomb Squad have confirmed an explosive device, probably connected to the ignition of the car which detonated on the turn of the key” Forrester confirmed, “One victim and a myriad of minor cuts and bruises.”

“Blimey...” Edwards responded, “Who was the victim?” he then asked.

“A Lord Richard David Francis” Stride checked his notes.

“Oh hell...” Edwards exclaimed.

“And there is a man from MI5 upstairs in the late Lord Francis’s suite on the top floor” Forrester added, “Along with Sam and Al.”

“You had best get up there, young man” Edwards remarked to Fuller, “Get your hands on the technical stuff before The Commander breaks anything.”

“Yes Sir” Fuller confirmed as he duly headed off towards the stairs.

“Tell them I will be up in a minute...” Edwards then called after him but tailed off as he noticed something amiss.

Stride looked around when Edwards emitted a shrill whistle and then pointed directly at Parr who was attempting to slip out of a side door unnoticed.

“All right, where do you think you are going sunshine?” Stride asked as he leapt across and grabbed the Manager.

“I, err, that, erm...” Parr began to weakly protest whereupon Edwards duly looked on with a serious expression as he could read the man like a book.

“Nick him” he then called.

“Come on” Stride then remarked as he put the handcuffs on, “I think it is time to have a chat down the nick...” he then led Parr away towards the exit.

“Right...” Edwards determinedly remarked before heading for the stairs.

So determined and swift was his stride that he managed to catch up with Fuller at the top of the stairs.

“Here, let me help you with that” Edwards remarked to Fuller, taking one of the cases off his hands.

“Thanks Sir” Fuller responded, “Erm, I think it is down here?” he then pointed down the corridor before they headed down there.

“Be prepared young man” Edwards then warned as they approached the door, “You are about to enter the Security Service equivalent of The Twilight Zone.”

“Err, sir?” Fuller responded with an obvious sense of confusion.

“You’ll see” Edwards confirmed as he opened the door to the suite and showed him inside.

“Good afternoon, Sir” Longton called as he met them.

“Lieutenant Commander” Edwards responded, “Where are the dynamic duo?”

“Huh?” Longton responded before realising, “Oh yes, Mr Crowthorne and The Commander are in the secret video room” he then showed them the way.

“Right” Edwards responded, duly following him before realising what he had said, “Hang on a minute, secret video room?” he then asked.

“Yes Sir” Fuller confirmed, “It seems the now late Lord Francis liked to record all his meetings and his err, other activities on tape.”

“I see what you mean” Fuller remarked as he looked all around with his technologically experienced eyes, “This place is well and truly wired.”

“This hole is getting deeper by the minute...” Edwards remarked to himself as they reach the door to the secret room where Crowthorne and The Commander were waiting for them.

“Welcome to the fun factory” The Commander remarked.

“Longton, go and help out downstairs” Edwards called aside.

“Err, right Sir” Longton agreed and duly departed.

“I think the less people involved with the details of this sorry mess the better” Edwards explained, “All right then young man, let's see what you can do” he then called to Fuller.

“Okay, let's see what we have got” Fuller declared as he took the seat, opened his briefcase and took out his tools before starting to work on the equipment.

“And why am I not surprised to find you here” Edwards then remarked to Crowthorne.

“Small matter of a high-profile member of the aristocracy getting blown to bits and leaving a potentially stinky scandal in his wake?” Crowthorne suggested.

“How stinky?” Edwards was almost afraid to ask.

“Well, if I were a betting man...” The Commander began.

“...which you are” Crowthorne politely pointed out.

“...my money is on the late Lord Francis being the financial lynch pin in whatever dirty dealings has been going on” The Commander explained his hypothesis, “be it drugs, dodgy goods, financial fraud, weapons, who knows?”

“Lord Francis has a myriad of interconnected business interests and bank accounts both here and abroad” Crowthorne confirmed, “Perfect set up for a lot of laundry if you know what I mean?”

“So, this could wind up being a Fraud Squad job then?” Edwards tentatively ventured.

“Oh, I think it would be a wise idea to leave the calculator and abacus boys out of this one” Crowthorne strongly suggested.

“In case of scandal?” The Commander asked.

“Exactly” Crowthorne ominously confirmed.

“Why can’t you have a case that is nice and simple for a change?” Edwards asked The Commander.

“What can I say, Guv?” The Commander responded with a wry smile, “Trouble seems to know where I am most of the time.”

“We have a large file on you back at the office that backs that up” Crowthorne agreed with a smirk.

“Oh, by the way” Edwards then remembered, “that snivelling little git of a manager, err Parr?”

“Yes, that’s him” The Commander confirmed.

“I caught him trying to sneak out when he thought we weren’t looking” Edwards confirmed, “I thought he looked decidedly shifty, so I had him nicked.”

“You nicked someone for looking shifty?” Crowthorne asked.

“Yeah, I am picking up bad habits from him” Edwards indicated The Commander, “Anyway, he is on his way back to Haychester in a company van, I think he may have a lot to talk about with the right encouragement.”

“He is in it up to his neck, I know it” The Commander agreed, “He certainly must know about this little setup for a starter.”

“At the very least he would be aware of it” Edwards agreed.

“Let’s see what our technical genius has come up with” The Commander then suggested, leading the other two back to the video room where Fuller was busy checking the equipment and a number of leather-bound journals and logs.

“All right Lieutenant Fuller” Edwards declared as he came into the room, “What have you got?”

“Well, what can we say?” Fuller remarked with quite a bemused look, “a top of the range surveillance system, I mean serious cash here, four, maybe even five figures spent on this lot.”

“I figured this wasn't the sort of stuff you find in Rumblelows somehow” The Commander admitted.

“Full coverage throughout the entire suite, except the toilet you will be glad to hear” Fuller continued, “and detailed indexed logs of everything he has recorded, meetings, screwings, the works.”

“I wish we had this kind of budget” Edwards remarked.

“Seconded” Crowthorne agreed.

“Ah, give it a few years, there will be cameras on every street corner they reckon” Fuller proclaimed.

“You hear that?” The Commander pointed up in the air, “That's the sound of George Orwell spinning in his grave...”

“Do you think anyone other than Francis was aware they were being recorded for prosperity on candid camera?” The Commander asked.

“Probably not” Fuller admitted.

“Lots of lovely potential blackmail material” Crowthorne pointed out, “I am willing to bet the husbands and boyfriends of some of his conquests would not be too pleased.”

“Nor any business contacts recorded” Edwards added, “Clothed or otherwise.”

“According to these logs” Fuller flicked through one of the large black leather bound ledgers with their meticulously hand written entries, “There are over a hundred meetings recorded here from the last two years alone, plus the four hundred plus different women, oh and three men he bedded which includes several known high class escort girls, numerous young married women, pretty much the entire housekeeping staff of the hotel, two brides to be on the night before their wedding and his last conquest yesterday evening was our esteemed local Member of Parliament's sixteen year old granddaughter.”

“That would probably be the young lass Al and I saw leaving when we first arrived” The Commander concluded.

“When did you say the girl was killed?” Fuller then asked.

“Erm, Saturday” The Commander recalled, “Mid to late evening most likely.”

“Here we are” Fuller checked the ledger, “Tape number M0986-20-03, should be over there.”

“Got it” Edwards confirmed on checking the shelves and then locating the correct cassette with its index code clearly marked in a strip of blue embossed Dymo tape, “Here, you can watch that.”

“Who gets to watch all the smutty stuff though?” Fuller asked, “It will have to be checked.”

“Get someone in from the Vice Squad I think” The Commander remarked, “We’ll just check the meetings, see if any known faces make an appearance as I would be willing to bet that at least some of the names in the ledger are probably phony.”

“I’ll go and get the van...” Fuller confirmed

“Perhaps you should watch some of this stuff?” Crowthorne suggested to The Commander, “You might learn something?”

“I’ll pass thanks” The Commander responded with a wry smile before leaving the room.

At that point, Longton returned with Professor Harriman.

“Our forensics genius is here” Longton called out as they came in through the main door.

“Ah!” The Commander responded, “Professor, first impressions, this bit of brand-new carpet over here” he then pointed down towards the floor.

“Hmmm...” Harriman remarked as she knelt down and took a look, “Definitely recently replaced but the fabric is the same, the colour too” she then got back up, “I will have to do the usual lab tests of course but I reckon, if you have any witness statements to back it up, this is your murder site.”

“Exactly the words I wanted to hear” The Commander responded.

“Usually the words you want to hear are the canteen has got the chips on” Longton wryly remarked.

“Actually, that is a good point” The Commander then agreed.

“Why are you always thinking with your stomach?” Edwards asked.

“Most important order of business, survival” The Commander duly explained, “So, here is the plan.”

“Oooh, a plan” Crowthorne responded, “I do love a plan.”

“Al, get back to the Blue Parrot and see if our star witness has recovered consciousness” The Commander then instructed, “I want her statement on tape and paper as soon as possible.”

“No problem” Longton agreed and duly departed.

“Professor, I want this entire suite given a thorough going over” The Commander continued, “If there is so much as a microbe of evidence, I want it found and bagged.”

“I’ll scramble the whole team up here pronto” Harriman confirmed.

“I’ll take care of the political flak” Crowthorne remarked, “and keep the press out of it, the Director General has already approved as many D-Notices as necessary.”

“We are going to need them” Edwards agreed.

“Lieutenant Fuller can take charge of the technical stuff...” The Commander then confirmed but then recalled something that Sara had said the previous evening, “Hang on just a minute...” he then remarked, heading through into the main bedroom whereupon he looked all around before proceeding to look underneath the bedside table.

“What are you looking for?” Edwards asked with obvious curiosity.

“Nothing under there” The Commander then cryptically confirmed before heading around to the other side of the bed and checking under the other bedside table, “Ah ha!” he then triumphantly declared before beckoning Fuller over, “Simon, what do you make of this?”

“Oh, very nice” Fuller remarked as he took a look at a device that was attached to the underside of the bedside table, “That looks like a RSU, Model 12, either a Mark Two or Mark Three.”

“In English, please” The Commander requested.

“One of Mr. Crowthorne's toys I believe” Fuller then confirmed, “You remember that device you showed me that was found in the victims handbag?” he then asked.

“Uh huh” The Commander confirmed even though he still did not really understand it.

“This is basically the same thing” Fuller explained, “Only a slightly different model but it does basically the same job.”

“Which is...?” The Commander prompted, still none the wiser.

“A very sophisticated listening device” Fuller confirmed, “One of MI5's I believe?” he then looked across at Crowthorne who stepped forward and looked at the device for himself.

“Yep, that's one of ours” Crowthorne confirmed, “There is a file somewhere back at the office I expect with my signature on it signing it out of the stores I would suspect.”

“So, this records conversations I presume?” The Commander then asked as Fuller carefully removed the device and passed it to Crowthorne.

“Indeed it does” Fuller confirmed “All it does it sit there unbeknownst and send to a recording device located elsewhere everything that is said within its earshot.”

“So, where is the recording device?” Edwards asked.

“That is a very good question” Crowthorne admitted, “It should be in here, somewhere...” he looked all around.

“Right, in which case, as soon as the forensics guys are finished, I want this place ripped apart and searched from bow to stern” The Commander requested.

“If the bad guys suspected the dead girl was MI5” Edwards suggested, “It is not inconceivable they may have sought out the recording device for themselves.”

“It may not have even occurred to them that their sex mad genial host was operating his own sophisticated surveillance operation” The Commander then suggested.

“I'll have the meetings tapes analysed, and transcripts written up by the close of play all being well” Fuller confirmed, “I'll start with this one though as that seems the most important one.”

“The less people that know about this the better” The Commander recommended “so if you find anything juicy, keep it just within the team.”

“Roger that” Fuller agreed and then left them to set about his task.

“Okay Professor, the scene is all yours” The Commander then declared, “I am heading back to the office to piss off that idiot manager.”

“..and I'll head back to London to piss off the politicians” Crowthorne declared, “Good day gentlemen” he then called before leaving.

“If you want my opinion, this whole mess stinks to high heaven” Edwards remarked as he and The Commander headed back out of the suite towards the corridor.

“Well, if you want to take over the case...” The Commander sarcastically suggested.

“Oh no, this sorry mess is all yours” Edwards quickly responded as he pressed the button for the lift, “Anyway, a nice juicy case will do wonders for your promotion

chances if you just let us actually promote you, you are long overdue, and the top brass have your name on a post-it note up at New Scotland Yard.”

“Which name?” The Commander asked as he and Edwards got in the lift and the doors closed, “Sam or Eddie?”

“Lieutenant Commander Longton” Crowthorne called as he approached across the car park.

“Sir” Longton responded, pausing as he was just about to get into the patrol car.

“Oh, call me Mr. Crowthorne” he dismissed the formality with a smile, “I wanted a word with you before you leave.”

“Certainly” Longton agreed.

“I wanted to talk to you about our mutual friend Eddie” Crowthorne explained, looking around and ensuring that they were not being overheard.

“I seem to have become the keeper of his secrets” Longton remarked.

“Welcome to the club, we should get a badge made up!” Crowthorne gleefully replied, “I’ve known Eddie since he was a small boy you know?” he then explained, “He’s been through hell so many times, London Transport almost considered starting up a bus route through there.”

“I think I am the nearest thing he has to a friend” Longton admitted, “He keeps putting himself in harms way all the time though, like he thinks it doesn’t matter if he dies as there will be nobody left behind who would miss him.”

“How wrong he is” Crowthorne responded, “What’s this I hear about a woman getting his attention?”

“You heard about that?” Longton responded.

“In my job, young man, I hear everything” Crowthorne confirmed with a knowing smile.

“Oh, it was the Lieutenant from Solent & Wessex who had drawn the short straw and was Chief Superintendent Travis’s driver when he came over to Haychester to have one of his usual volcanic rants” Longton recalled, “Erm, Tracy err something...”

“Ah, I think I have met her twin sister” Crowthorne recalled, “She’s a driver in the VIP Protection Squad.”

“Well, whoever she is, The Commander’s head definitely turned when they bumped into each other, literally” Longton confirmed.

“Which ironically means they will probably never meet ever again” Crowthorne then remarked, “Ah well, never mind” he then sighed, “A pleasure to meet you Al” he then called, producing a card, “My contact details should our mutual friend have any problems.”

“Thanks Mr Crowthorne” Longton responded, “Don't worry, I'll keep an eye on him.”

“Appreciate it” Crowthorne agreed with a tug of the forelock, “Good day...”

As Crowthorne departed up the driveway to his waiting car, The Commander came strolling over to the patrol car.

“So, what were you two having a cosy chat about?” The Commander asked.

“You?” Longton admitted.

“Yeesh, what a boring subject” The Commander sarcastically replied as he got in the driving seat with Longton joining him alongside and started the car.

“One of two...” Longton then remarked to himself.

“What?” The Commander asked as he looked over his left shoulder whilst reversing the car.

“Eh?” Longton responded, “Oh, it's nothing” he then dismissed his casual thoughts, “So, where to?” he then asked.

“Back to the office to see what the situation is in light of this explosive development” he nodded ahead through the windscreen at the scene of the explosion earlier, now taped off and a scene of much activity as a team of forensic experts in their white paper overalls went about their work.

“Who gets the joyous task of informing the deceased's parents?” Longton asked as they departed, being let through the cordon by the officers at the gates where the press was already gathering in significant numbers.

“Oh, that lovely job falls to the Guvnor” The Commander confirmed, “He get to meet the Earl of Haychester himself.”

“Have you ever met the Earl?” Longton asked.

“Bumped into him a few times” The Commander admitted, “Nice guy, pity about the wailing banshee of a wife, Lady Haychester, and the word Lady is doing some pretty heavy lifting there.”

“I am surprised the Guvnor didn't get you to do the death-o-gram yourself” Longton commented.

“It's a job that calls for tact and diplomacy” The Commander explained, “Something that apparently I don't have in any great quantity.”

“That’s an understatement...” Longton quietly agreed.

“I’ll drop you off at the Blue Parrot on the way” The Commander then confirmed, “I want chapter and verse from our star witness.”

“I’ll see what I can do” Longton duly confirmed as nearby, Crowthorne’s helicopter duly took off and flew over them before turning towards London.

“Now there is a man with connections” The Commander remarked, “Did he give you his card?” he then asked.

“He did indeed” Longton confirmed.

“Keep it safe” The Commander then advised, “Richard Crowthorne is a very useful person to know, especially if you get into a sticky situation.”

“I’ll remember that” Longton responded.

“Ah hell...” Edwards remarked as he stepped out of the hotel entrance and made his way towards his car where Stride was finishing off taking the last of the details from the guests and staff.

“Are you all right Guv?” Stride asked on seeing the despondent look that Edwards was showing as he shuffled towards the car.

“My old Guvnor once told me that difficult tasks were the privilege of rank” Edwards admitted, “I have to go up to Haychester Manor and inform one of the largest landowners in the area, a member of the House of Lords no less, that his wayward womanising corrupt third son has just been blown to pieces in his Lamborghini by a car bomb.”

“What about all the other naughties that he has been up to?” Stride asked.

“Oh, I think I will skip the lurid details for now” Edwards remarked, “The chances are it will be splashed across the red top tabloids by the weekend anyway, D-Notices aren’t as watertight as some people in the corridors of power believe.”

“There is going to be hell to pay before this is over Sir” Stride ominously warned.

“You may be right” Edwards agreed, “Get me a car and a female officer, this calls for a bit of soft talking and diplomacy.”

“Right away Sir” Stride confirmed.

“Well, here we are again” The Commander declared as he parked the car outside the Blue Parrot club.

“I’ll see what I can get” Longton confirmed as he got out of the car.

“Here” The Commander opened the glove compartment and took out a tape recorder that he then passed to Longton, “Get whatever she has to say on tape and then ensure you make copies and ensure she is safely secured.”

“Roger that” Longton duly confirmed.

“I’ll be back at the office, scratching my head, drinking tea in vast quantities and trying to work out what the hell this is all about” The Commander then admitted.

“What? No biscuits?” Longton jokingly remarked.

“Oh, of course there will be biscuits” The Commander confirmed, taking a biscuit from the packet that was in the glove compartment and enthusiastically consumed it, “I thought that was read?”

“You’re a right character, aren’t you?” Longton commented with a laugh.

“My mother said they broke the mould when they made me” The Commander agreed, “I do hope she was right, the world has suffered enough with one of me around.”

“I’ll see you later” Longton responded, closing the door before watching as The Commander drove off, heading back towards the main road.

Once out of sight, Longton duly headed inside.

“Ah, there you are dear” Glenda called as Longton walked into the club, “Our girl is awake and eager to talk” she then confirmed.

“Glad to hear it” Longton responded.

“Come on up” Glenda then led the way upstairs, “She is just having a late breakfast, can I get you anything?” she then asked.

“Strong black coffee would be great” Longton confirmed, “It’s been a hell of a morning already.”

“I heard about something going bang earlier” Glenda remarked, “Some poor sod got his car blown up with him in it apparently?”

“Lord Francis no less” Longton replied, “Blown to little pieces in his Lamborghini.”

“Good riddance to that lecherous piece of crap” Glenda commented, “If you are looking for suspects, try pretty much every jealous husband and boyfriend of the hundreds of women he has bedded over the years.”

“That could be a pretty long list” Longton admitted.

“Here she is” Glenda confirmed as they went through a door where Sara was sitting at a table with the bar manager, “This is Mr Longton, Sara” she then called, “He want to hear the whole story.”

“I am all ears my dear” Longton declared, taking a seat at the table and starting the tape recorder.

“Chips, and a sausage roll, be generous please Donna” The Commander requested of the Canteen Manager behind the hot food counter.

“The usual then?” Donna remarked as she took the next clean porcelain plate off the stack and began to load it up from the stainless-steel trays under the hot lamps.

“The usual” The Commander admitted with a wry smile when he was joined by Phillips.

“Found you” Phillips declared as she joined The Commander at the counter just as his food was handed over to him, “I have got some news for you.”

“I am all ears” The Commander responded, nodding across the canteen to a vacant table nearby.

“Forster and his Drugs Squad boys have managed to get some sense out of Loomis at last” Phillips confirmed as they both sat down at the table, “He has given up the name of his dealer and Forster has already set up a surveillance on his place.”

“A name?” The Commander asked between mouthfuls of chips.

“Ian Frederick Cooper” Phillips confirmed, passing across a yellow card, “Here is his details that we have on the records, form for dealing, taking and driving away and in the distant past, firearms offences.”

“Naughty boy” The Commander commented, “Ah, he lives in Bognor” he then read from the card, “Should have guessed really.”

“You don’t like Bognor?” Phillips asked.

“I nearly drowned in the boating lake in Hotham Park when I was six” The Commander explained, “Fell overboard from a pedal boat which unfortunately was when I also discovered I can’t swim.”

“Oh dear...” Phillips sympathetically responded.

“Haven’t been on a boat since” The Commander then confirmed.

“Speaking of boats” Phillips searched through the various notes and files she had brought with her, “We got a lead on a boat that is registered in Lord Francis’s name, the Motor Vessel Narcissus, a Sunseeker type power boat stroke floating gin palace” she then passed across a couple of photos, “These came from our friends in the Coastguard who have been taking an interest in this and another motor yacht, the Amber Legend as both have been seen off their registered routes by Fisheries Patrol Vessels lurking off the coast of Ireland on a number of occasions.”

“Another Irish connection...” The Commander mused as he finished off his sausage roll, sending pastry crumbs down the front of his uniform tunic that he then casually brushed off with little regard to his appearance.

“Now, this is strictly off the record” Phillips then tentatively ventured “but there is a whisper that SO13 are sniffing around the case as well.”

“SO13?” The Commander responded with a raised eyebrow as he ate the last of his chips, “New Scotland Yard Anti-Terrorist Branch?”

“The same” Phillips confirmed, “Needless to say they deny any interest in any of this, but you know how secret squirrel they get, especially if they get wind of anything involving gun running and the Irish Sea.”

“I do indeed” The Commander agreed, “This case has the stink of dirty money running through it, a lot of it” he then remarked, “Well connected if not fully public member of the aristocracy, able to move large sums of money around without attracting attention, shadowy contacts and friends in low places, ocean going private boats, explosives, drugs, corruption, nervous people in the corridors of power in Whitehall...”

“Fun for the whole family” Phillips agreed.

“How are we doing on identifying anyone in the photographs?” The Commander then asked as they both got up and headed for the exit from the cafeteria.

“In the case of the photography club, most are local businessmen, farmers, ordinary folk” Phillips confirmed as they walked down the central corridor, “The Poker Club photo is pretty much the same, although Lord Francis does appear in one picture in the background, I think he was trying to stay out of the picture and he accidentally appeared just in the frame.”

“Probably didn’t want anyone finding out about his gambling habit, along with his other vices” The Commander agreed.

“The surveillance type photos that Mickey took however are far more interesting” Phillips continued, “In particular, this one” she took one of the photos out of the file and passed it to The Commander, “Lord Francis, a large metal briefcase, our big brutish Irish friend, two others we have not been able to identify as their faces are in the shadows and finally, holding some kind of holdall, our old friend Davidson and his minder stroke rent-a-thug Prentis.”

“Ah, those two again” The Commander commented, “They must be staying in the area somewhere” he then remarked, “They weren’t on the guest list of the hotel though, we went through the register with a fine-tooth comb not long after the bomb went off.”

“They ain’t daft” Phillips pointed out, “If they were involved in any way in the dealings that led to the MI5 girl being killed in Lord Francis’ suite, they wouldn’t want to hang around there.”

“It may be worth a discrete trawl of the other local hotels and guesthouses, see if anyone matching the descriptions of any of our principals here are or have been staying with them in the last couple of weeks” The Commander suggested as he and Phillips dodged around the C-Block building’s infamous wayward automatic sliding door.

“Well, they have got to be around somewhere” Phillips agreed as they headed up the stairs.

“Any word from Lieutenant Fuller on the tapes yet?” The Commander then asked as they reached the second-floor landing and passed through the fire doors into the corridor.

“I think he is still spooling through the tapes” Phillips recalled, “The main tape of interest, the one where the meeting took place when the MI5 girl was shot, is being transcribed as we speak.”

“Excellent” The Commander responded.

“Oh, I nearly forgot” Phillips recalled as they entered the office, “The Bomb Squad have just called, definitely your classic car bomb, simple but effective and they should be able to trace the explosive used in a day or so.”

“Has anyone gone through the inventory at Marcus’s place?” The Commander then asked, “I know most of that gear was probably a little warm if not downright moody but given he had a case of live hand grenades in amongst his gear, I am wondering what else he had stowed away in that barn of his?”

“Well, glossing over the fact half of the domestic electrical goods were definitely nicked at some point in their lives” Phillips consulted her notes again, “Nothing that really flashes up any red flags other than the crate of grenades you discovered.”

“I reckon someone accidentally left that behind at some point” The Commander remarked.

“Huh?” Phillips responded.

“Oh, nothing” The Commander then dismissed the thought, at least on the outside, “Just some random occurrence running through my head” he then explained.

“You think there is a lot more to this, don’t you?” Phillips then asked.

“Oh yes...” The Commander agreed, “I have just got this feeling we are only scratching the surface of what all this caper is really about.”

“So, Sara” Longton reassuringly confirmed as he finished writing his notes, “Is there anything else you want to tell me before we finish?”

“There was mention of something about a Russian guy, sounded liked something Russian thing they go on about on the telly, Kalashnikova?” Sara tried to recall, “Lives at a number 47?”.

“Erm...” Longton thought for a few moments, “Kalashnikov?” he then asked, with a serious look of concern.

“Yeah, that Russian guy” Sara agreed.

“Kalashnikov AK47?” Longton then asked as he helped light the cigarette that Sara had just taken out.

Sara inhaled deeply on the freshly lit cigarette before tilting her head away to exhale.

“That's him” Sara confirmed.

“Right...” Longton responded, sitting back before adding this latest piece of information onto the witness statement, “Erm, I am almost afraid to ask but is there anything else we need to know?” he then asked.

“Nah, just that Russian guy they mentioned” Sara agreed.

“Erm, Kalashnikov AK47 isn't a Russian guy” Longton then explained as he filled in the final details, “it's a Russian made weapon, an automatic machine gun very popular with terrorist organisations across the world.”

“Oh...” Sara responded in realisation.

“Sounds like the modern day version of the triangle trade” Glenda remarked as she brought them both some fresh coffee that was gratefully received.

“Huh?” Longton responded, none the wiser.

“Benefits of studying history at University” Glenda then explained, “Three commodities in a triangle of trading, in this case you have the big three of cash, guns and drugs.”

“With Lord Francis presumably providing the money laundering services, taking his percentage which funded his lavish lifestyle of posh hotel suites, fast cars and a seemingly never ending queue of young women willing to jump into his bed” Longton concluded.

“Nice work if you can get it as my old mother used to say” Sara remarked.

“All right, I think that will just about do it” Longton then declared as he turned off the tape recorder and put it in his jacket pocket, “If you would just sign here and here” he then indicated on the witness statement, rotating the document towards Sara and offering her his pen with which she duly signed the statement.

“Thanks” Sara responded as she finished her signature with a flourish.

“Okay” Longton then stood up, “I am happy to let you stay here for the time being if you so wish and Glenda is willing to put you up until this all blows over.”

“No problem love” Glenda confirmed.

As Longton tucked the witness statement into his inside uniform tunic pocket, he glanced out of the window which overlooked the front entrance of the building where he noticed a vehicle pulling up outside.

“Are you expecting any deliveries Glenda?” Longton casually asked as he watched the vehicle, a Ford Transit van come to a stop.

“No, not until later this afternoon” Glenda confirmed, joining Longton at the window and looking down at the van as two men emerged from the cab and looked around, “Definitely none of our regular delivery guys” she then remarked.

“Whisky X-Ray from One Eight One” Longton then called into his radio.

“Control receiving” the duty supervisor responded, “Go ahead Al...”

“Can you do me a registration check please” Longton then requested, turning his head slightly to get a better look at the van's numberplate, “A blue Ford Transit, registration number Alpha Two Three One Tango Charlie Delta.”

“Will do” the duty supervisor confirmed.

“They could just be lost?” Glenda suggested although deep down she knew different.

“Oh hell...” Longton then responded as the two men standing by their van looked up and saw them whereupon they were seen to take semi-automatic firearms out from under their jackets and head towards the building entrance with urgency.

“Steve!!!!” Glenda shouted across towards the stairs, “Phasers on stun, we got company!!”

“Control from One Eight One, urgent message” Longton called into his radio, “Two armed men entering the Blue Parrot club, need urgent assistance!”

“Come on” Glenda then called to Sara, taking the now terrified young woman by the hand “I've got a place for you to hide.”

At that point, Steve the Bar Manager appeared at the top of the stairs, a shotgun in his hand.

“Glenda, get Sara to safety and stay down” Longton ordered, drawing his own firearm from its holster and checking it, “Steve, consider yourself deputised” he then called before leading him back down the stairs again.

“All units from Control, Priority One” came the call over every officer’s radio across the entire Haychester area, “Officer needs assistance, armed men on the premises, Blue Parrot Club.”

“Christ!!” The Commander exclaimed whereupon he, Phillips and the two other officers in the Investigation Room dropped everything they were doing and rushed out of the room.

On the ground floor of the Blue Parrot, the two gunmen were walking slowly across the deserted dance floor towards the bar, looking all around the vast room for any signs of life when suddenly they heard a voice calling out over the personal address sound system.

“Sorry gentlemen” Longton's voice echoed all around, “The bar is closed until six.”

The men immediately reacted by looking all around before opening fire on where they believed the voice had come from, smashing glasses and bottles across the back of the bar.

“All breakages must be paid for” Longton then called over the public address system again.

The two men realised they had not hit anyone and began to look a little unsettled which was when Longton, watching from the shadows saw his opportunity.

“Come on” Longton whispered to Steve, go around the side but try not to shoot anyone, leave it to the professionals.”

“Does that mean you are going to drive a Ford Granada through a plate glass window for no readily apparent reason?” Steve asked.

“I leave that sort of thing to The Commander” Longton confirmed, “Come on, let's nick some bad guys.”

“We just want the girl” one of the gunmen then shouted out, “Nobody else needs get hurt.”

“An alternative suggestion” Longton called as he appeared behind them, firearm aimed firmly at the two men, “Place the guns down on the floor, nice and easy and we can all go home in time for tea.

“The odds are not in your favour officer” one of the gunmen coolly replied, “Two against one...”

“Let's even the odds, shall we?” Steve then called, cocking his shotgun as he appeared from the opposite side of the room and approached.

From outside, the sounds of approaching sirens could be heard coming through the open door.

“The cavalry is on its way gentlemen” Longton then declared, “Time to rethink those odds.”

“No thanks copper!” the other gunman defiantly responded, which was the cue for both men to rapidly spin around, firing which saw Longton duck down behind a low wall whilst Steve equally swiftly retreated back out of the room.

By the time the rapid gunfire stopped and Longton cautiously looked up over the low wall, the two gunmen had already run off, leaving a trail of devastation in their wake.

Rapidly approaching the club were two patrol cars, racing up the long private road that led to the Blue Parrot.

“What the...?” The Commander, driving the leading patrol car exclaimed as, just as he arrived on the scene, he saw the two gunmen pile into the van and accelerate quickly away, forcing him to swerve so hard that the car swung right around, stopping abruptly amid a cloud of dust and gravel stones thrown up just as Longton emerged from the club.

“Al!” The Commander shouted, “Get in!”

Longton raced to the front passenger door and quickly got in, barely managing to get the door closed before The Commander drove off at high speed in pursuit of the escaping vehicle.

“Two Nine Five from One Three One” The Commander then called over the radio to Forrester who was driving the other patrol car, “Stay here and secure the scene, make sure everyone is all right, we'll go after these two comedians.”

“Roger that” Forrester responded.

“These guys mean business” Longton confirmed.

“Anyone hurt?” The Commander asked as they reached the end of the lane where it meets the main road into Haychester just moments after the van had reached the same point.

“Only Glenda’s insurance company’s heart I would wager” Longton confirmed, “They were after the girl.”

“Hold on” The Commander then called as he was forced to swerve around a couple of cars that had sensibly pulled over as best as they could on hearing the sirens of the patrol car coming up rapidly behind them, having already been cut up by the speeding van that only narrowly missed colliding with them, “You had better give Control a running commentary” he then requested, which left him to concentrate on the high speed driving.

“One Eight One to all units” Longton called over the radio, “In pursuit of a blue Ford Transit van, registration number Alpha Two Three One Tango Charlie Delta, at least two male occupants, armed and dangerous, currently heading north on the old airfield road, heading straight for the railway line level crossing.

“Let’s hope the down London Victoria train is late as usual” The Commander then remarked as in the distance they could see the blue van fly across the open level crossing where, fortunately the barriers were still up.

“Oh hell...” Longton then remarked as they approached the crossing themselves which was the point where the initial pre-warning yellow light lit, indicating the barriers were about to close.

“Hold on to your hats!” The Commander called as he planted his foot on the accelerator fully down and just as the yellow light changed to flashing reds and the barriers just started to make their descent, they reached the crossing, proceeding so fast over it that the patrol car became momentarily airborne before landing perfectly on the other side.

“Whoa!” Longton exclaimed, looking over his shoulder back at the crossing where he could see the barriers were now almost fully down and two other Security Service cars were now trapped on the other side, “Eat your heart out, Dukes of Hazzard!”

The jump across the crossing had resulted in some loss of momentum but The Commander’s skilful driving, working his way back up through the gears with seemingly effortless ease meant he was soon back on the pursuit and catching up with the target vehicle.

“If they lose it at this speed, they will be passengers on the way to an accident” The Commander ominously commented.

“If they turn left, it’s back towards the City, if they turn right, we are in open country and the old airfield” Longton remarked as up ahead, the van was approaching a junction.

It was by some small miracle that the van did not collide with anything other than a road sign as it swerved sharply to the right before momentarily disappearing out of sight.

“Right it is...” The Commander then remarked to himself as he reached the junction and without hesitation, executed a sharp handbrake turn before resuming the pursuit.

“Heading east now along Old Airfield Way” Longton called over the radio, “Speed in excess of seventy, that is seven zero miles per hour” he then confirmed, “Could really use some backup out here.”

“Roger One Eight One, three units are in the area but at least two to three minutes minimum away” the duty control room supervisor responded, “No helicopter available though, apparently it’s broken.”

“Oh, now there is a surprise...” The Commander sarcastically commented as he concentrated intently on the target vehicle ahead on which he was gaining rapidly on the dead straight road they were now travelling on.

The Commander was about thirty yards behind the van by now and gradually closing whilst the two cars that had been trapped at the level crossing trailed far behind in the distance.

“Al, you had better rustle up a meat wagon” The Commander suggested, “At the rate these guys are going, they will soon become embedded in the surrounding countryside.”

“Target vehicle still traveling east, speed now sixty-five, that is six five miles per hour” Longton continued the commentary, “Have an ambulance and fire rescue services alerted as we reckon this one is going to end up in a heap.”

“Oh, here we go” The Commander then remarked as ahead of them, the van was approaching a combined sharp turn and junction, “Left or right you reckon?”

“Right” Longton replied, “The old airfield, open ground, multiple exits” he then explained his reasoning.

“Whoa! Almost neither!” The Commander exclaimed as the van very nearly carried on straight ahead into the hedge but just in time, swerved sharply right, smashing the passenger side of the vehicle against the hedge before heading off again through the gate and onto the old airfield.

“Target vehicle now on open ground, the old airfield” Longton confirmed over the radio as The Commander effortlessly swung the car round to the right with inch perfect accuracy and then continued the pursuit.

Ahead of them, the driver of the van made a pretty decent run of it, running side to side across the whole width of the old World War Two concrete runway in an attempt to throw off his pursuers.

Any other officer in pursuit would probably have meant them getting away with it, but with The Commander onto them, they stood little chance of getting away, no matter what they tried.

“By the way, whilst you we busy getting shot at” The Commander then remarked, not taking his eyes off the target vehicle whatsoever, “The van comes through as in trade, and you will never guess through whose grubby hands it has passed recently.”

“Not Dodgy Dave Smith by any chance?” Longton asked to which The Commander nodded in confirmation.

“Oh, hang on” The Commander then called as ahead, the van splashed through a puddle that actually, turned out to be far deeper than it looked and with a crunch, the rear offside tyre was instantly shredded by unseen submerged debris and disintegrated.

The Commander quickly swerved out of harm’s way and braked to a halt as the van became uncontrollable, lurching and veering until it clipped a pile of old bricks at high speed, spun around and then flipped over onto its side.

“Target vehicle has crashed on the old airfield!” Longton then called over the radio as he got out of the car and gave chase to one of the men who had managed to clamber out of the wreckage but, thanks to his injuries, quickly gave himself up.

The Commander went over to the van and looked down through the hole where the passenger side window was and then smiled on seeing and recognising the driver slumped in the corner of the cab, alive, conscious but trapped by the disfigured steering column on his legs.

“Well, well, well...” The Commander remarked, “If it isn't Dodgy Dave himself, trapped in one of his own moody motors no less...”

“Ha ha!” Smith tersely responded, “Very funny, you...”

“Now, now...” The Commander sarcastically replied.

“Get me out of here, will you?” Smith then asked, a definite sense of panic in his voice, “This thing might blow up!”

“That only happens in movies Dave” The Commander responded.

“Mind you” Longton remarked as he returned with his handcuffed prisoner, “It is one of his dodgy motors, so all bets are off I reckon.”

“Good point Al” The Commander agreed as sirens heralding the arrival of backup grew noticeably closer.

“What do you want to do with this one?” Longton then indicated the suspect he still had a firm hold of.

“Your mug rings bells, my friend but I can’t quite put a name to the face” The Commander informed him, “Al, lets search him” he then suggested.

“What about Dodgy Dave?” Longton asked.

“Ah, he isn’t going anywhere” The Commander casually dismissed him, “We’ll need a couple of hefty lads and a crowbar to get him out.”

“Up against the car” Longton then instructed, “I am sure you are familiar with this sort of thing...”

“Okay, what have we got here?” The Commander remarked as he started going through the suspect’s pockets. “Oooh, lots of cash here” he then commented as he retrieved a large quantity of banknotes, many of them bundled into tight rolls.

“Here you go” Longton then proffered an open plastic evidence bag into which The Commander duly dropped the cash.

“Wallet, check that out will you Al?” he then passed it across.

“Got a driving licence here, cards, bit of cash, usual wallet litter” Longton went through the leather wallet methodically, “Name of Ian George Sylvester.”

“I thought your face rang a bell” The Commander then remarked to Sylvester who merely sneered in response, “Petty theft back in your youth then you went up a league to drug dealing, speaking of which...” he then retrieved a number of small plastic bags containing what was clearly some form of illegal narcotics from the other pocket, “Your product I presume?”

“Dear oh dear oh dear...” Longton remarked as he duly took the wrapped drugs and put them into another evidence bag.

“And finally, one semi-automatic firearm” The Commander found Sylvester’s gun in an inside pocket and checked it carefully, “empty as it turns out, and one spare clip.”

“Beretta, nine millimetre, very nice” Longton commented as he duly took the gun and ammunition and bagged them up as well.

“OI!” Dave shouted from the cab of the van, “What about me?”

“Oh yes” The Commander remarked, “I almost forgot.”

At that point, two Security Service vehicles, an ambulance and a fire service appliance arrived on the scene.

“This is becoming a bit of a habit!” The Fire Chief remarked with a smile as he got out of the fire appliance and saw The Commander there, “What have you got for me this time?” he then asked.

“Got one trapped in the van” The Commander nodded towards the overturned vehicle nearby, “He’s all right I think, just trapped under the steering column.”

“We’ll have him out in a jiffy” The Fire Chief confirmed, “Come on lads” he then called to his men.

“Right, you may consider yourself nicked” The Commander then informed Sylvester, “Dangerous driving, firearm offences, possession with intent to supply and I reckon that will just do for starters.”

“I got connections, I’ll be out before you have even started the paperwork” Sylvester defiantly responded.

“Yeah, whatever...” The Commander casually dismissed, “Take him away” he then requested whereupon the prisoner was duly taken to another car and put in the back before being driven away.

“What do you want done with this one?” The Fire Chief then called over as his men were nearly finished cutting Smith out of the wreckage.

“He’s nicked too” The Commander confirmed as the last cut was made and the steering column duly wrenched out of the way.

“You are meddling in business that is way above your pay grade” Smith ominously warned.

“Spare me the usual unpleasantries” The Commander quickly quipped back as Smith was quickly checked by one of the Ambulance medics who nodded that he was okay whereupon the handcuffs went on, “You are in a whole world of trouble, I’d think about that whilst you are enjoying the hospitality of our cell block if I were you” he then strongly suggested.

“Pah!” Smith responded before being taken away to a separate car and duly being put in the back.

“So, now what?” Longton asked as he and The Commander stood by their car and watched as the two cars carrying the prisoners duly departed.

The Commander initially did not respond, his attention was now somewhere else, listening intently and looking around for the source of a sound that had just started.

“Al, you hear that?” he then asked, looking all around.

“Hear what?” Longton also listened around but he heard nothing that he could detect.

“I can hear a telephone ringing” The Commander then explained, looking around and then realising that the faint noise was coming from the direction of the overturned van.

“You must be going mad” Longton responded, “We are in the middle of nowhere!”

The Commander looked all around the cab of the wrecked van before climbing in through the hole where the windscreen once was and began to poke around in the debris.

“Oh, hang on...” Longton then remarked as he realised, he could now hear the ringing of a telephone too.

“Well, here is Dodgy Dave’s missing gun” The Commander called as he pulled out a battered gun from in amongst the wreckage and passed it out, “and...” he then lifted up a large box with a handset on it which was ringing loudly.

“Interesting, very interesting” Longton remarked as he recognised a portable telephone unit.

“Better answer it I suppose” The Commander then suggested as he picked up the handset and put it to the side of his head, “Hello?” he then called.

Longton looked on as The Commander listened to the call.

“No, I think you will have to take your business elsewhere, sorry” The Commander informed the called, “Thanks for calling” he then hung up.

“Who was that?” Longton asked.

“Seemed not too keen to give their name” The Commander confirmed, “Just asked if he could purchase a quantity of heroin.”

“So Dodgy Dave’s friend is definitely our local resident drug dealer” Longton concluded.

“Hang on a minute, I got an idea” The Commander then remarked as he reached for his radio, “Control from One Three One, receiving?” he then called.

“Coming through loud and clear One Three One” Judd responded from the Control Room back in Haychester.

“Have you got the telephone number we found on Loomis by any chance?” The Commander asked.

“Err, yes” Judd confirmed as he checked his paperwork on the desk in front of him, “Got it.”

“Dial it, will you please?” The Commander then requested.

“One moment” Judd responded as he picked up the telephone handset on the desk and began to dial the number.

A few moments later, the mobile phone unit began to ring, and The Commander duly answered it.

“Hello” The Commander called, “Yes, it’s me” he then confirmed, “Cheers Peter.”

“Well, that’s the car phone found” Longton remarked, “Now what?”

“Let’s see what’s in the back of the van” The Commander suggested whereupon he and Longton went around to the rear of the vehicle where the access into the back was by means of a roller shutter door which was well and truly locked.

“Someone who knows how to pick locks would be a useful addition to the team” Longton commented as he looked at the padlock that was on the shutter doors.

“Unfortunately, I suspect they are in short supply” The Commander admitted as he too looked at the lock with some consideration.

“There is another elephant in the room that we need to address” Longton then commented, “How did...”

“...the guys find out that our star witness was holed up at the Blue Parrot?” The Commander then completed the sentence whereupon Longton nodded in agreement, “Yes, I was wondering about that as well” he then admitted.

“Who knew?” Longton then tried to recall, “You, me, the Guvnor, Glenda and her bar manager Steve.”

“We have a leak somewhere” The Commander reluctantly agreed, “Now, let's take care of this little problem” he then remarked, pulling his six-shot revolver from its holster before shooting the lock off.

“That did the trick” Longton remarked as he kicked off the now destroyed lock before, with The Commander's help, pulled the roller shutter door open to reveal the interior.

“Oh...” The Commander remarked as opening up the back of van revealed loads of wooden crates, all on their sides with some of them broken and opened by the crash, showing that most of them were empty, however there were a couple with some contents of concern.

“She did mention AK47's...” Longton remarked.

“Come again?” The Commander responded as he climbed inside the van.

“In Sara's witness statement, she mentioned the men who were meeting talked about Kalashnikov's, AK47's” Longton explained.

“Ah...” The Commander remarked, taking out his handkerchief and reaching in among the broken wooden crates, he pulled out an automatic firearm, still in its manufacturer’s wrappings, “That would be one of these if I am not mistaken.”

“How many of them are there?” Longton asked as he too clambered inside the van.

“Looks like two in this crate, including this one” The Commander indicated the one in his hand “and there looks like a couple of handguns in this other crate.”

“The rest seem empty” Longton then added as he looked through the rest of the broken and crushed wooden crates which contained only empty packaging materials, “So, where are they?”

“I dread to think...” The Commander admitted, “All right, another job for the forensics department I reckon.”

“Control from One Eight One” Longton then called into his radio as he and The Commander clambered back out of the van, “Inform the good Professor that we have yet another job for her, and we'll need a recovery truck to get this van back on its wheels.”

“Eddie should be doing this...” Edwards remarked to himself as he pulled up outside the ornate front entrance of Haychester Manor, “Hang on a minute, what am I saying? He has the diplomatic subtlety of a brick through a window.”

As he stopped the engine, the butler appeared at the doorway and moved smartly down the stone steps to open Edwards' car door for him.

“Chief Superintendent James Edwards, Haychester office, National Security Service” he then declared, showing the butler his identification.

“Yes Sir” the Butler responded in that plummy voice that all butlers seem to have as a standard feature, “Lord Haychester has been notified of your arrival and is waiting for you in the library” he then informed him.

“Thank you” Edwards responded and duly followed the Butler up the steps and in through the door.

It was with a steady and formal pace that the Butler escorted Edwards through the ornate manor house that had been the stately home of the Earl's of Haychester back to the fifteenth century, paintings hanging on the walls depicting many ancestors of the family in among other artworks showing the surrounding estate and the house itself across time.

“Here we are Sir” the Butler then called, opening a door and showing him inside, “Sir, Divisional Commander James Edwards to see you” he then called.

“Thank you, Jerome, I'll call you when I need you” a very formal voice called over whereupon the tall regal figure of Alfred, Earl of Haychester appeared and strode across the room.

“Very good Sir” the Butler confirmed before discreetly leaving, closing the door behind him.

“Divisional Commander James Edwards Sir” he then formally called.

“A pleasure to make your acquaintance Divisional Commander” The Earl called, shaking Edwards hand warmly, “I just wish it was under more fortunate circumstances.”

“You have heard?” Edwards asked, not entirely certain exactly what is that the Earl knew had happened.

“That my youngest son, that foolish man is dead?” the Earl asked with clear regret.

“I am afraid so Sir” Edwards confirmed, “On behalf of the Service, I offer my sincerest condolences for your loss.”

“Thank you, Divisional Commander, most kind” the Earl replied, showing Edwards to a seat nearby and then joining him alongside, “Sadly, I have to say that the untimely demise of my youngest son is not entirely surprising” he then openly admitted.

“We do have reason to believe that foul play was involved in his death” Edwards then advised, “An explosive device is suspected to have been planted on his car that then detonated when he started the ignition.”

“I have been briefed on some of the details already” the Earl confirmed, “I have friends in the Home Office from my time as an advisor there some years ago, word spreads fast, especially when it is bad news.”

“I figured as much Sir” Edwards agreed.

“Was anyone else hurt in the explosion?” the Earl then inquired, clearly concerned.

“Two of my officers were on the scene when it happened, they got a bit battered and bruised I think” Edwards confirmed.

“Please convey my regards to the two officers, I hope they are all right” the Earl affirmed.

“More pride damaged than body” Edwards agreed, “Mind you, The Commander has had pretty much everything thrown or shot at him over the years, so this was just another of his nine lives ticked off the list.”

“Ah, The Commander, that would be that young Lieutenant Commander Edwards, your adopted son I believe?” the Earl recalled.

“Yes, that's him” Edwards confirmed, “Good officer, very dedicated, he is in charge of the overall case.”

“I wish him the best of luck” the Earl remarked, “He is going to need it I would wager.”

“You said that your son's death was not entirely surprising” Edwards then remarked thoughtfully, “What did you mean by that?”

“Aside from his devotion to fast cars, fast women and I have long suspected an interest in the consumption of excessive alcohol and illegal drugs” the Earl began to explain, “he was getting in deep with bad company.”

“Really?” Edwards responded.

“I had our family accountant do a discrete look through my son's finances” the Earl continued to explain, “There were large sums of money, hidden sources, some serious laundry taking place across multiple accounts, I dread to think what it is he had been buying or selling.”

“I thought he collected classic cars?” Edwards then asked.

“All those legitimate hobbies of his, well those that were mostly legitimate, I can't be absolutely sure his err, bedroom antics were fully by the book as it were, were funded through financial sources that were carefully vetted and audited” the Earl confirmed, “It is the darker, hidden accounts that have been of concern, so much so that the Fraud Squad, the Inland Revenue and a rather worried gentleman from the Treasury have been sniffing around.”

“Ah...” Edwards responded with a somewhat despondent look, “I see...”

“Dirty money Chief Superintendent, and the people for whom it is their life blood, that is who is responsible for the death of my son” the Earl sadly responded.

“I have been informed by the powers that be that due to the political sensitivity of the circumstances, this is to be treated as an unfortunate accident” Edwards then went on to explain, “Now, I am not happy about that either, and given the overly inquisitive nature of the press, even with a D-Notice slapped on them, I would not be in the least bit surprised if the truth, or at least a version of it did make it into the public domain.”

“Oh, I do hope so” the Earl responded, “There are a few political no-necks embroiled in this mess, err no names you understand, that I would be more than happy to see publicly taken down a peg or two as it were.”

“MI5 have already been told that they should only be watching from a distance and not to interfere” Edwards confirmed, “Unfortunately, my officer in charge of the case doesn't really do diplomacy or subtlety” he then admitted.

“Sounds like a very useful young man to have in charge” the Earl commented, “You should promote him” he then suggested.

“Believe me Sir, we have tried...” Edwards remarked.

“More customers for you Alec” The Commander called as he walked into the reception area of the custody suite where the Duty Custody Officer was as ever behind his desk, pen and paperwork at the ready.

“What have you got for me?” the Custody Officer then asked, clicking his pen on.

“Come on, you first” The Commander indicated Smith who was duly lifted off his seat by two officers and brought to the desk, hobbling on his heavily bandaged leg.

“Name?” the Custody Officer formally requested.

“David Winston Smith” he duly confirmed with a distinct lack of enthusiasm.

“Date of birth?” the Custody Officer then asked as he began filling in the details on the custody form.

“Fourteenth of May, ninety fifty-nine” Smith duly confirmed.

“Address?” was the next question.

“Apartment 14, Fitzleet House, Queensway, Bognor Regis” Smith replied.

“Occupation?”

“Second hand car dealer and mechanic” Smith replied to which The Commander only just managed to suppress a snigger.

“Circumstances of arrest?” the Custody Officer then looked across at The Commander who stepped forward.

“He was the driver of a vehicle that made a swift getaway following a shooting incident at the Blue Parrot Club” The Commander explained, “After a pursuit, the vehicle crashed on waste ground which was when Mr Smith here and that chap” he indicated Sylvester sitting nearby “were arrested. Upon searching them and their vehicle, a significant quantity of controlled substances, cash and several firearms were recovered” he then nodded towards the evidence bags piled up nearby.

“Mr Smith” the Custody Officer then formally called, “You are being detained pending investigation into possible offences you are believed to have possibly committed, during which time you have the right to consult with a solicitor either appointed by you or supplied by us on your behalf” he declared, “do you have anything to say?” he then asked.

“Just give me my phone call...” Smith quietly demanded.

“Sir?” the Custody Officer looked towards The Commander who shook his head in response.

“Under Section fourteen of the regulations, we have the right to withdraw the right to a telephone call if we feel that it could be used to obstruct the ongoing investigation” the Custody Officer then informed Smith who responded merely with a resigned look.

“We wouldn't want any evidence to mysteriously disappear before we find it, you see?” The Commander explained, “It would be most inconvenient.”

“Oh, and we wouldn't want that, would we?” Smith sarcastically responded, “I want my solicitor!” he then demanded.

“Just note on the form the details and then sign it” the Custody Officer then requested, turning the paper to face Smith and passing him a pen.

“I'll be out of here before you know it” Smith then declared as he signed the form before the Custody Officer made sure he got the pen back, “You'll see!”

“Cell number two please Francis” the Custody Officer called to one of the officers on duty who duly proceeded to take Smith away.

“Right!” the Custody Officer then called, setting out a fresh form on the desk, “Next customer please?”

“Get your hands off of me!” Sylvester demanded as he was being brought to the desk.

“Ah, Iain Sylvester, an old regular” the Custody Officer called, “Haven't seen you in here for quite a while, missing us, were you?” he then asked.

“You think you are a comedian, don't you?” Sylvester responded.

“Only on the weekends” the Custody Officer confirmed, “Right, no need to ask you for your name or date of birth as we know it already, off by heart” he then declared as he filled in the form, “Still living in that squalid flat in Littlehampton?” he then asked.

“I've upgraded, gone up in the world” Sylvester responded, “One twenty-three, Franklin Gardens, Bognor Regis.”

“Occupation?” the Custody Officer then asked, “Only, drug dealer doesn't really belong on the form, you see?”

“Respectable businessman” Sylvester then defiantly declared.

“Oh, that's a good one!” The Commander responded, bursting out laughing.

“I am!” Sylvester protested.

“Yeah, whatever...” The Commander dismissed this claim completely out of hand.

“Circumstances of arrest?” the Custody Officer asked The Commander once again.

“Same as Smith” The Commander duly confirmed, “To be detained pending enquiries and no phone calls.”

“Very well” the Custody Officer duly declared, “Do you wish to have a solicitor appointed?” he then asked.

“Nah... I’ve done nothing wrong; this is a fit up, I have no need to defend myself, I am a free man!!” Sylvester loudly declared, holding his arms aloft as if he had won a tournament.

“Francis, cell number four for this gentleman if you would?” the Custody Officer then called whereupon Sylvester was also escorted away.

“Cheers Alec” The Commander then called, “If anyone of them suddenly feel like talking then let me know straightaway, otherwise, let them stew for a few hours.”

“No problem” the Custody Officer readily agreed as he finished the paperwork for the records which was when Longton came into the room.

“All tucked up safe and sound?” Longton asked as he joined The Commander.

“Yeah, we’ll let them sweat for a few hours” The Commander confirmed, “did you get anything on Smith or Sylvester?” he then asked.

“Hot off the press” Longton confirmed, producing a file and handing it over, “Dodgy Dave is well known to us, moody motors, probable dodgy accounting and an old conviction for irregularities over a shotgun licence about ten years ago but nothing in this league.”

“Yeah, this is way out of his normal sphere of petty wrong doings” The Commander agreed, “What about Sylvester?”

“Far more interesting” Longton handed over the other file which The Commander duly opened and examined carefully, “A long list of convictions for petty theft and handling dating back to when he learned to walk, a classic career criminal.”

“Got some convictions for possession here, one firearms offence, air rifle when he was fourteen” The Commander read from the file, “then he moved up a league or two to dealing until he got sent away for a five stretch when he was twenty-one, let out after three for, and try not to laugh, good behaviour!”

“Yeah, right...” Longton responded.

“Seems he moved away from the area when he was released” The Commander then continued to read, “So, why the hell did he come back here and try and make it in the big-league villainy game?” he then wondered.

“Money would be my first guess, lots of it” Longton suggested.

“Well, someone has been bank rolling a large operation on our manor right under our noses and we would not have known anything about it if it weren’t for that handbag turning up in Priory Park” The Commander remarked.

“This must be a huge operation, lots of people involved” Longton commented.

“And very little trust between them” The Commander added, “Look at what has happened to anyone who has been seen to be talking to us, Mickey got shot at the poker club, Marcus bought it last night, they have tried to get Sara, the MI5 girl got hers the other night and now their money man has been blown to bits.”

“I am uncomfortable about the possible Irish connection” Longton remarked as they headed back to the office by way of the back staircase, “Drugs, cash, weapons, an unholy but inextricably linked trio if ever there was.”

“I think some answers may be found in Mickey’s photographic efforts” The Commander agreed, “If we can identify everyone in those photos, especially the surveillance ones he took then we may be able to join the dots.”

“The working theory I have” The Commander summarised, “is that a well organised group are bringing in drugs, large wholesale quantities, selling it to the UK market, using the profits from that to purchase and smuggle in weapons which are then traded on, probably at another vast profit to a well-financed customer.”

“Using local talent to do the donkey work for a pittance of a percentage” Longton concluded, “Easily disposable if anything goes pear shaped, they get sent down for possession or whatever whilst the masterminds and the big buyers at the top of the tree get away with it.”

“Which is probably why Dave Smith and Sylvester had some of the weapons in the back of their van” The Commander remarked, “They helped themselves to some of the goods as a little personal bonus.”

“Our big Irish friend isn’t going to like that if he finds out those two have been dipping their fingers in the till as it were” Longton pointed out.

“Quite” The Commander agreed, “This is way bigger than some playboy millionaire making some dirty money on the side to fund his collection of fast cars and fancy women, I fear we have only scratched the surface so far.”

“We need to talk to Mickey again I think” Longton then suggested, “Perhaps this afternoon?”

“Good idea” The Commander agreed as they went through the doors into the second floor corridor, “and we should get Sara to a safe location and under armed guard too.”

“There is still the question of how they found out” Longton pointed out with obvious concern.

“I have a theory about that” The Commander replied, “I need Mr Fuller’s talents though, I suspect that we may have been bugged.”

“Here...” Longton stopped outside the door to the Investigation Office as a worrying thought occurred to him, “You don’t think we have an IRA cell on the manor, do you?”

“Erm, I don’t think so” The Commander gave the possibility some careful thought before responding, “Cell’s like that keep it strictly within the ‘family’ as it were, dedicated fully paid up Irish men and women, outsiders would never be used.”

“Well, at least that is something” Fuller responded.

“Yeah, I was on duty on detachment in Brighton on the night when the Grand Hotel went boom” The Commander recalled, “That is not something you ever forget I can tell you.”

“I was on Annual Leave if I remember” Longton recalled, “Got recalled at some ungodly hour of the morning and had to drive down from my parents place in Cumbria as fast as I could.”

“So, our big Irish friend with the thump first, ask questions later attitude is probably over here to supervise a shopping expedition for weapons and supplies rather than just taking a sabbatical away from the emerald isle because he upset someone” The Commander concluded.

“It makes sense, a reasonable reason deliberately put around to explain why he has decided to wander off” Longton agreed, “That way it avoids attracting any unwanted attention as to his real motives.”

“A shame for him then that we have potentially figured out what he may be up to then” The Commander then remarked, “Come on, let’s see how the others are getting on” he then declared, opening the office door and then following Longton inside.

“Ah, Sam!” Phillips called as soon as The Commander came into the room, “Report fresh off the printer from the Bomb Squad.”

“That was quick” The Commander responded as he took the paper from Phillips and looked at it.

“Textbook explosive device, all the trademarks of the provisional IRA” Phillips summarised the report, “Two pounds of high explosive, armed by a timer that was then set to detonate on the car being started.”

“Hence the big bang...” The Commander grimly concluded, “Except...”

“...nobody has claimed responsibility” Longton pointed out.

“Very good, Al” The Commander agreed, picking up the packet of biscuits off his desk and offering them to him, “You win a cookie.”

“Oh, thanks...” Longton responded, taking a biscuit from the packet and proceeding to eat it with much enthusiasm.

“There was no coded warning either” Phillips added, “The one thing about IRA attacks is that they almost always ring us or the BBC or local radio up first, give a code word and tell us roughly where the bomb is going to be.”

“So, how about this for a theory?” The Commander then suggested before he thoughtfully crunched another biscuit, “What if someone planted that bomb to throw us off the scent?” he asked, “We know that there is smuggled arms, cash, drugs and a known IRA hard man involved in this mess but it’s not an IRA cell, outsiders, non-Irish would most definitely not be involved.”

“This report that my Uncle in Special Branch forwarded to me” Phillips indicated the file on her desk, “Patrick O’Connor, the IRA hard man who is reported to have left Ireland under a cloud so gets sent to go and cool his heels for a while, I reckon its 100% pure codswallop.”

“Your Uncle lied?” Longton asked.

“No, I think someone else did though, maybe an agent in the IRA has been feeding Special Branch a load of old blarney” Phillips concluded, “That would put his presence this side of the Irish Sea way down the list of priorities for SO13 to deal with which means O’Connor can go about his business, shopping for weapons and explosives without attracting any unwanted attention.”

“Is it possible that someone decided to blow the whole case wide open as it were” Longton remarked, “Plant a classic IRA style bomb and take out the money man, leaving us chasing non-existent terrorists whilst the deals continue on, everyone getting their money, guns and drugs.”

“Of course, Lord Francis being the son in law of the Attorney General means that he would be seen by the press as a legitimate IRA target so there would not be any questions asked there” The Commander added, “Meanwhile, somewhere on our manor, these people are up to no good” he then indicated the display of photographs on the wall, “How’s Mickey?” he then asked.

“He should be able to talk to us now” Phillips confirmed.

“Assuming someone doesn't tell the bad guys where he is and tries to kill him as well” Longton pointed out.

“Indeed” The Commander grimly agreed, “We have a leak somewhere, they knew where to find our star witness yet only us three and the Chief knew where she was, other than Glenda and her Bar Manager.”

“I have just had a horrible thought...” Longton remarked, “Come with me” he then prompted, leading the way out of the office and down the corridor with Phillips and The Commander following closely behind.

As they were heading down the corridor, they met Fuller coming the other way, carrying two big boxes of evidence with which he was struggling.

“Just the man!” Longton then called, taking the boxes off him and putting them down to one side, “We need your services, bring your box of tricks” he then prompted.

“Me?” Fuller responded with some understandable confusion before following the others until they reached Chief Superintendent Edwards' office whereupon Longton knocked on the door before going inside.

“Okay, why are we in the Guvnor's office?” The Commander asked as he looked all around.

“Bear with me” Longton responded, “Simon” he then turned to Fuller, “You remember that listening device we found in Lord Francis' suite earlier?”

“You mean this one?” Fuller asked, producing the evidence bag from his uniform tunic pocket.

“That's the one” Longton agreed, “If you were to plant one in this room, where would you put it?” he then asked.

“Erm, let's have a look...” Fuller duly took out a screwdriver from his pocket and scanned his eyes around the room as everyone else stood back and gave him some space to work.

“Where is the Guvnor?” Phillips asked as Fuller cleared some space on the desk and then climbed up to have a look at the light fittings in the ceiling.

“Giving the Earl of Haychester the bad news about his son” The Commander confirmed.

“Let's have a look in here...” Fuller then remarked to himself as he proceeded to lever off the light fitting from the ceiling, sending parts of it, along with quite a bit of dust and part of an adjacent ceiling panel crashing to the floor.

“Building Services are going to go nuts when they see this...” The Commander quietly remarked.

“Err...” Phillips looked out into the corridor and noticed someone approaching.

“Nothing in there” Fuller then remarked before moving along to the adjacent light fitting and then proceeded to start wrenching it off the ceiling, “Ah...” he then declared, “Gotcha!”

“You got something?” The Commander asked, looking up.

“Here you go” Fuller confirmed as he yanked out something from inside the light fitting, sending more dust and debris raining down all over the place.

“Erm...” Phillips tried to indicate the imminent arrival of a problem, but her warning came too late.

“What the hell is going on?” Edwards demanded to know as he came in to find Fuller standing on his desk, debris all around and two big holes in the ceiling.

“Bugs...” The Commander explained.

“As they used to say in the war Sir, walls have ears” Fuller showed off the listening device he had found before climbing down off the desk and passing it to Edwards, “Well, ceiling in this case” he then admitted.

“You mean...” Edwards began, taking in the reality of this revelation, “...someone has been listening in on every conversation that has taken place in this office since it was put in?”

“That is pretty much it in a nutshell, yes Sir” Fuller confirmed.

“Jesus wept...” The Commander exclaimed.

“Who put it there, and how?” Edwards then asked as he went behind his desk, brushed off the dust and debris from the seat and then sat down with a grim expression.

“May I?” Fuller asked for the device back whereupon Edwards duly handed it over, allowing him to take a good look at it, “Well, it isn't either a MI5 or MI6 issued one, wrong manufacturing prefix code, so whoever is responsible isn't any of our agencies.”

“How does it work?” Longton asked.

“Oh, fairly straightforward, a highly sensitive microphone wired into a circuit board with a long-life power source and transmitter which in this case, links through to the telephone network via a receiver somewhere within two miles of here” Fuller casually summarised.

“How the hell do you know about these things?” The Commander asked.

“Oh, this particular model of surveillance module?” Fuller held up the device, “I designed it, well the initial version of this at any rate.”

“Right” Edwards declared as he removed the broken debris from the light fitting from his desk and chucked it into the bin, “Lieutenant Fuller, I want this entire building searched from the basement to the roof for any more of these devices, and then I want the rest of the site checked as well.”

“Yes Sir” Fuller confirmed, “I can use a scanner to search for any more devices so hopefully the fixtures and fittings will be safe unless there is something really well hidden and I have to get Charlie the crowbar out of the toolbox.”

“Try and leave at least some of the building in the condition you found it?” Edwards then strongly advised, surveying the wreckage across his office, “As it is I am going to have Geoff from Building Services giving me grief for this mess.”

“Yes Sir” Fuller confirmed before leaving the office.

“Everyone else, you can go” Edwards then called, “Not you Sam, I want a word in your shell like.”

“Yes Sir” The Commander responded, “Al, Julie, keep working on the photos, find out everything there is to know about them and get Sara and Mickey moved to secure accommodation.”

“Right away” Longton confirmed, “We had better be careful what we say and where until Simon has finished his sweep though.”

“Get him to check my motor as well, just in case” The Commander then suggested.

“Will do” Longton agreed before he and Phillips left, whereupon The Commander closed the office door and then turned smartly on his heels to face his superior officer.

“Well, isn't this a bloody shambles?” Edwards wryly remarked as he picked up a file off his desk and blew the dust and debris off it.

“It does seem to have become a bit of a mess” The Commander admitted, “And I am not just talking about the dreadful state of your office either” he then remarked, looking around.

“You know what Eddie?” Edwards joked, “For once, my desk looks worse than yours!”

“Oh, give me half an hour and I am sure I can emulate this mess” The Commander remarked, “So, how was the Earl?” he then asked.

“Not exactly surprised by his son's death” Edwards confirmed as he took a bottle of Scotch out of the desk drawer and a couple of glasses into which he proceeded to pour them both a drink.

“Thanks” The Commander responded, taking the drink, “Was he aware of his son's erm, hobbies?”

“You mean the smuggling, money laundering and excessive womanising?” Edwards asked to which The Commander nodded in confirmation, “Yeah, he was aware all right, so much so that he had a private investigation into his son's accounts undertaken which makes for interesting reading.”

“That would be the sort of interesting reading that needs to stay just between us two I presume?” The Commander then ventured as he finished his drink.

“Uh huh...” Edwards confirmed, “Another?” he then proffered the decanter.

“Erm, better not” The Commander responded, placing his empty glass down on the desk, “Thanks anyway.”

“His legitimate interests were all accounted for through accounts that were clean as a whistle” Edwards explained, handing over a file for The Commander's inspection, “All the 'T's crossed and 'I's dotted, and a very happy taxman fully paid to the penny.”

“And his illegitimate interests?” The Commander then asked, sensing where this was going.

“All over the place” Edwards confirmed, producing another file, “Large cash sums being washed through numerous accounts in the UK, Ireland and offshore in pretty much every tax haven on the list.”

“Bloody hell, this is a damn sight more than just trousering some loose change...” The Commander looked through some of the figures being quoted in the files.

“It gets better” Edwards then continued with a slight hesitation, “Some of the funds that have been washed through these various accounts have connections to financial sources that the Fraud Squad have linked to terrorist groups, Columbian drug lords, arms dealers in Northern Africa and for a bonus, many of these funds have gone through UK Government held bonds and accounts.”

No wonder someone has leaned on MI5 to monitor Lord Francis and try and keep a lid on all this” The Commander concluded, “which brings me on to...”

“The bomb?” Edwards suggested.

“Yeah...” The Commander confirmed, “The Bomb Squad report confirms it as a textbook Irish Republican car bomb which may as well had 'Made in Derry' written all over it” he explained, “except there is no way this is an IRA cell at work, too many outsiders involved, this is a finance and shopping expedition for them, or rather their heavy who is on the plot.”

“No warning, no code word either” Edwards agreed, “Someone wants us to start chasing the IRA for this when they may very well have had nothing to do with it.”

“Exactly” The Commander responded, “Then there are the listening devices, high tec gear that most definitely isn't the sort of stuff you buy from Woolies.”

“Someone in the Government wants this whole affair dead and buried” Edwards ominously warned, “My worry is that in the process of trying to keep a lid on it, you might get caught in the crossfire.”

“Already have been, at least twice” The Commander reminded him, “I don't like this Guv, I don't like this at all.”

“Be careful” Edwards then insisted, “I know your methods are kick in the door first and ask questions later, but I suggest you at least pause and think before putting your size tens into anything.”

“Message received and understood Guv” The Commander readily agreed.

“So, these guys are the poker club regulars” Phillips summarised as she went over the displayed photographs on the wall, “We've got names for all these ones and as far as I can tell, they are all legit apart from Dodgy Dave who is safely tucked up over in the Custody Suite screaming for his solicitor.”

“And these dudes?” Stride asked as he looked over the other group of photographs showing the photographic club.

“Again, all mostly legit, couple of unidentified ones but if they are of interest, mostly small fry” Phillips explained.

“How are we doing?” The Commander asked as he returned, looking slightly flustered after his off the record conversation with Edwards a few minutes earlier.

“Just going over the photos again” Longton confirmed, “Any word on securing our two-star witnesses?” he then asked.

“I am having Mickey and Sara moved to secure accommodation ASAP” The Commander confirmed, “In the meantime, until Lieutenant Fuller has swept the building for any eavesdropping devices, nobody is to discuss anything sensitive out loud” he then warned, “Walls have ears...”

“Right...” Stride remarked, looking around the room slightly nervously.

“Any word from our guests?” The Commander then asked.

“Spacey space sprockets, a.k.a. Loomis the hippy loon finally returned from whatever orbit he was floating around in” Phillips confirmed, “Other than the number of his dealer who we now know was Sylvester, he knows nothing.”

“He is so out of his skull; a brass band could march past him playing the hallelujah chorus and he wouldn't notice” Longton commented.

“In which case, bail him and cut him loose” The Commander instructed.

“Roger that” Longton confirmed, picking up the telephone and pressing the number required, “Custody Suite?” he then called as soon as he was answered, “Yeah, Loomis the hippy, when he has finished his dinner, get him to sign the appropriate paperwork and let him go.”

“As for Sylvester and Dodgy Dave” Phillips then continued, “They aren't talking at all, even Sylvester has screamed for a lawyer now.”

“That means he is getting worried” The Commander remarked, “When he was dragged in, it was all bravado, I don't need a lawyer, etcetera, etcetera, now as time slips by, he is getting nervous, and I like that.”

“I bet you do” Longton remarked.

“We have enough to hold him for another twenty-four hours” The Commander then concluded, “So, let's see how a night in the cells and then giving his place a thorough going over in the morning loosens his tongue.”

“Oh, this came through for you” Phillips passed The Commander a message “Tonight, from about half six...” she then confirmed, not wanting to say too much out loud just in case.

“Right...” The Commander responded as he read the message before carefully folding it up and placing it in his pocket, “Thanks.”

“Something I should know about” Longton quietly asked The Commander aside.

“Just a little game of cards” The Commander confirmed, “Which is appropriate as I reckon everyone in this case, not just on the bad guys side, is either bluffing or just out and out lying.”

“Richard, get in here” Francis Porter, the MI5 Section Chief called to Crowthorne, indicating the direction of his office down the corridor before heading off again.

“Yes Sir...” Crowthorne responded with a slight reluctance.

“That sounds like trouble to me” Collins remarked, looking up from his desk nearby.

“When isn't it around here lately?” Crowthorne admitted as he pushed his chair back and got up, “Watch the shop, I have a feeling this won't take long.”

“Direct and to the point?” Collins asked, sensing the way this was going.

“Precisely” Crowthorne confirmed with a rather pessimistic look.

“Oh dear...” Collins remarked to himself as Crowthorne left the office.

The Section Chief's office was located at the far end of the same corridor, a dimly lit but ornately marble lined affair, far more opulent than was really necessary but reflective of its 1930's construction.

Crowthorne's hard soled shoes made a distinctive sound as he walked along the corridor and approached the double doors before politely knocking whereupon a voice was heard, calling him inside and he duly opened the door and proceeded inside.

“Close the door” Porter then ominously instructed before reaching for the glass decanter on the side and two glasses, “Drink?” he then offered. “You'll need it.”

“Err, yes thank you Sir” Crowthorne agreed, “I guess I need to sit down for this too?” he then asked as he took the drink and nodded his thanks.

“Let's put it this way” Porter proceeded to explain, “The death of Lord Francis has resulted in shockwaves through certain sections of the Establishment and as a result, the full force of bureaucratic ass covering is now rolling over the hills in this direction like a crowd of angry villagers waving their pitch forks.”

“Ah...” Crowthorne responded with realisation, “I figured it would cause some ripples...”

“More like a ruddy great tidal wave” Porter confirmed, “That snivelling little rat, Sir Robert Walmer is making noises...”

“Oh God...” Crowthorne responded despondently, “The infamous Secretary of State for Bullshit” he then remarked, “What are these 'noises' he is making?”

“He is worried about potential Government dirty laundry being washed in public” Porter explained, “There has been insinuations made that the late Lord Francis was involved in a money laundering and smuggling organisation which included drugs, guns and explosives, the latter hardware and the cash to pay for it possibly linked to Irish Republican terrorism and at least some of it was laundered through Government accounts.”

“Whoops...” Crowthorne responded, “Well, that explains why someone asked us to keep an eye on him then.”

“Indeed” Porter agreed, “Unfortunately...”

“Our girl got herself killed in the process” Crowthorne confirmed, “Even bigger whoops...”

“...and now the local plod is all over the case like a cheap suit!” Porter then summarised.

“The Haychester boys aren't the only ones sniffing around either” Crowthorne then pointed out to Porter's worried look in response, “Chief Superintendent Travis from Solent & Wessex Division has been following Lord Francis too, he had a man in the foyer which the lead Haychester officer on the case spotted straight away.”

“Christ!” Porter responded, “So much for a discrete little observation job!”

“Chief Superintendent Travis thought he was onto the big one with the case, something to revive his somewhat flagging career” Crowthorne then went on to explain, “Unfortunately, when he discovered that in the space of a few minutes, the Haychester officers uncovered more than he had in over six months and pretty much blew him out of the frame, he went straight over to Haychester and went ballistic whereupon Chief Superintendent Edwards sent him packing with a gigantic flea in his ear.”

“Good for him” Porter responded, “This erm...” he then consulted his reports on the desk “Lieutenant Commander Sam Edwards, related?” he then asked.

“Adopted son” Crowthorne explained, “Erm, complicated story...”

“Hang on, not...?” Porter then began to piece together some distant memories.

“Yeah, that one” Crowthorne duly confirmed, “In fact, I am his Godfather would you believe?”

“In this line of work, I’ll believe most things these days” Porter admitted, “Anyway, I gather Sam Edwards, err The Commander they seem to all call him, is lead officer on the case?”

“Yes” Crowthorne confirmed, “He is good, very good” he then reassured Porter, “If there is dirt, he will find it.”

“I am starting to like the fellow all ready, and I haven’t even met him” Porter remarked, “just one thing though, I presume he is capable of looking after himself?” he then cautiously asked.

“He’s been declared dead at least twice and is still going” Crowthorne reassured Porter, “Why do you ask?” he then inquired, sensing his superiors concern.

“There is the distinct possibility that someone is stirring the pot on this matter” Porter explained, “Rumours of a third party involved, setting things up to make it look like strife between the members of the gang, a setup job and Security Service officers who get too close to the truth could find themselves a target as well.”

“I have a couple of my lads ‘resting’ in the Haychester area who could keep an eye on things” Crowthorne confirmed, “Indeed that has already been suggested when Chief Superintendent Edwards and I had a discreet chat the other evening.”

“Do it” Porter agreed, “The Commander may our best hope to expose what is going on so let’s make sure he is fully backed up” he then instructed.

“Understood Sir” Crowthorne readily agreed, “But what if he uncovers something embarrassing to members of the establishment in the process?” he then asked with understandable concern.

“Oh, that would be such a shame, wouldn’t it?” Porter sarcastically replied with a wry smile, “Anyway, just to mark your card, it looks like the powers that be, or at least the most nervous looking parts thereof may be on the verge of calling an interdepartmental pow wow tomorrow so, if you need any excuses or dirt ready, I’d get them warmed up and good to go.”

“I’ll see what I can do Sir” Crowthorne confirmed.

“Come on Mickey, time to go” Longton called as he came into the single bed ward in the secure section of St. Richard’s Hospital.

“Where are we going?” Mickey asked, sitting up.

“Safe house” Longton then explained, “and you will have some company too, we have another star witness.”

“Oh, I hope it isn’t that light fingered Marcus” Mickey remarked as he gingerly shifted forward and lowered his legs off the bed onto the floor.

“Err no...” Longton confirmed, “Someone did him in last night.”

“Oh hell...” Mickey responded, “Look, I know he was a bit of a ferret, always dipping his fingers in the till and flogging hooky gear but he didn’t deserve to die.”

“On that we can agree Mickey” Longton confirmed as he helped him to his feet, “It seems someone thought he had spoken to us, which he had as a matter of fact and decided to terminate his contract” he then explained, “Smashed his skull in and then shoved grass in his mouth as an afterthought.”

“I guess I was lucky to just be shot at then” Mickey sarcastically remarked.

“Come on” Longton then called, “Let’s get moving” he then declared.

“Erm, aren’t they still looking for me?” Mickey then asked, pausing and looking extremely hesitant at going any further.

“Oh, entirely probable” Longton confirmed, “but don’t panic, we have a plan.”

“Oh, deep joy, a plan...” Mickey dismissively remarked as he then followed Longton out of the room where two armed officers were waiting to provide escort, “These guys part of the plan?” he then asked as they duly proceeded to follow closely behind.

“In a way, yes” Longton evasively replied as they headed down the corridor before descending down the back stairs to the ground floor.

Waiting for them at the rear entrance of the hospital wing was The Commander, a further pair of armed officers and Sara who had just been brought over from the Blue Parrot Club.

“Hello Mickey!” Sara called as they met up, “Haven’t seen you in a while.”

“You look like you have been in the wars” Mickey remarked on seeing Sara’s injuries, “Don’t tell me you are mixed up in this mess as well?” he then asked.

“Right slap bang in the middle” Sara admitted, “I guess we are both the two star witness then?” she concluded.

“So it would seem” Mickey agreed, “So, what’s the plan guys?”

“Al, take Vic and Bob here” The Commander indicated the two specialist armed officers, “You are in the Ambulance.”

“Roger that” Longton confirmed, “I presume you require us to make lots of noise and really go mad with the blue flashing lights?” he then asked.

“Absolutely!” The Commander duly confirmed before noticing the understandably confused look on Mickey and Sara’s faces.

“Erm, aren’t we supposed to be not attracting attention?” Sara then asked.

“Indeed” The Commander confirmed, “Follow me, your carriage awaits...”

“Ladies first” Mickey duly let Sara go on ahead of him and they then followed The Commander down through a side exit into the goods loading bay where a traditional black taxi cab was waiting.

“Here we are” The Commander declared, opening the back door of the taxi and allowing Mickey and Sara to get in, “Have a seat and enjoy the ride” he then called before closing the door and then getting into the driver’s seat and starting the engine.

“Where to Guv?” he then called over his left shoulder in the traditional manner of a London black cab driver.

“Drive me off this picture!” Mickey jokingly called to a big smile in response from The Commander who duly got the movie reference, “Home sounds like a winner” he then suggested.

“Right then” The Commander responded, lowering the flag on the meter, “Here we go!”

Outside the hospital, the ambulance and two Security Service motorcycle escorts sped out of the main entrance in a deliberately attention seeking spectacle, heading off up the main road, away from the site and towards the outskirts of the city.

As they headed off, The Commander discreetly drove the taxi cab out of a rear entrance and on through the leafy suburbs of north Haychester, by contrast not attracting any attention whatsoever.

“Mickey, I need a favour” The Commander then requested as he drove down the long wide avenues of large houses and quiet cul-de-sacs that dominated that part of the city.

“Shoot” Mickey responded, “Actually that was...”

“...a very unfortunate choice of words?” Sara suggested.

“Err, yeah...” Mickey then agreed.

“With my aim, you would not have much to worry about” The Commander reassured him somewhat.

“What do you need?” Mickey then asked.

“Your poker club” The Commander then proceeded to explain, “The one you were attending when you were so rudely interrupted the other afternoon.”

“Ah yes, that...” Mickey ruefully recalled.

“How would they react if I showed up on the door this evening and asked to be dealt in?” The Commander then asked.

“What?” Mickey responded, “Actually join them at the table and play?” he then asked.

“Yep!” The Commander confirmed.

“Erm, they may be a bit surprised” Mickey remarked, “but I think if you mentioned I sent you and I make a discreet phone call before you arrive, then it should be okay” he confirmed.

“Thanks, I would appreciate it” The Commander responded.

“Erm, I don’t want to worry anyone” Sara then remarked as she glanced nervously over her shoulder, looking out of the rear window, “but I think we are being followed.”

“Silver Cavalier about two cars back?” The Commander asked as he checked the rear-view mirror.

“Yeah, that’s the one” Sara confirmed.

“Relax, they are part of the family” The Commander reassured them both, “In fact they are probably more concerned with something happening to me than you!”

“Well, that is very reassuring...” Mickey mumbled with a distinctive lack of confidence.

Over on the other side of the city, the convoy with the Ambulance was heading in completely the opposite direction with Longton leading in a patrol car.

“Okay everyone, this is where we go our separate ways” he then called over the radio whereupon the ambulance turned off into a private estate whilst Longton and the motorcycle escorts peeled off and away.

A few moments later, the driver of the ambulance brought it to a stop in the courtyard of an apartment complex and the security gates closed quietly behind it.

This was the point at which two men appeared from the shadows, automatic firearms slung over their shoulders and approached the rear of the ambulance.

Suddenly, lights came on, shouting broke out and the rear doors of the ambulance burst open with half a dozen specialist firearms officers emerging whom, along with a dozen more who appeared from all around in the blink of an eye, surrounded the two men, weapons drawn and aimed directly at them from all angles.

Wisely, the two men stood down, placing their weapons on the ground and putting their hands up as Longton approached them with a big smile.

“Sorry lads, wrong guess...” he then declared as they were quickly restrained, searched and handcuffed. “Better luck next time.”

As the two men were bundled away to a waiting prisoner van, Longton reached for his radio.

“One Three One from One Eight One” he called, “The trap has been sprung, the mice are in the box, you are all clear.”

“All right, let's get you two settled in” The Commander announced as he showed Mickey and Sara into the country cottage located miles out in the countryside.

“Late seventeenth century, very nice” Mickey remarked as he looked all around the interior of the cottage.

“You know, for a guy who, on the outside just seems to be only interested in women in a state of undress and mucky mags, you seem to possess remarkable intelligence and knowledge about so many things” The Commander commented.

“Oh, our Mickey is a very clever boy, aren't you?” Sara remarked as she gingerly walked through the room towards the kitchen.

“Been doing the Open University” Mickey then explained, “Trying to better myself seeing as I spent more time at school studying the girls in my class than studying what I was supposed to be studying.”

“Well, that makes sense...” The Commander remarked.

“Come on” Mickey called to Sara, “You need rest, go on up and get some sleep.”

“Go on” The Commander agreed, “We've got your statement on tape.”

“See you later” Sara then thankfully responded, before heading up the stairs.

“They played a right number on that poor girl, didn't they?” Mickey then remarked as he sat down on the sofa and then let out a sigh of relief.

“Yeah...” The Commander agreed, “She is lucky to be alive still, better than poor Sophie or Claudette.”

“Not to mention Marcus and Francis” Mickey reminded him, “Okay, Marcus was a glorified tea leaf and fence who was probably going to get whacked by someone at some point and with Francis out of the picture, there might be a chance that us single guys in the area might finally find a girl he hasn't had in his bed...”

“Yeah, we have seen his erm, archive...” The Commander admitted.

“I'm sorry?” Mickey asked.

“Did you ever visit Lord Francis suite at the hotel?” The Commander then asked.

“Never had the pleasure” Mickey confirmed.

“Well, it appears he had the entire place wired for sound and video” The Commander explained, “Lots and lots of tapes of his trysts with it seems virtually every young woman in the county plus his meetings with all sorts of dodgy characters.”

“Some of them not so dodgy I would wager” Mickey ventured as The Commander passed him a drink, “Rumours that he has the ear of people in the corridors of power, even the Security Service it is said.”

“Can't say I am entirely surprised” The Commander reluctantly admitted, “The speed with which the Attorney General was on the phone before the explosion debris had even finished settling was a bit of a dead giveaway.”

“I am willing to bet in among the archives, some of the great and the good have been recorded enjoying the hospitality with someone who is not their wives and girlfriends...” Mickey then ventured.

“Blackmail material” The Commander agreed, “Could be interesting...”

“I suppose you want to talk about my photographic efforts?” Mickey then ventured, “I presume you got my films processed?”

“We did indeed” The Commander confirmed, “Nice photo of the peregrine falcon in flight by the way, we were very impressed.”

“Oh, thanks” Mickey replied, “I was wondering how that would turn out, never got a chance to develop it on account of erm, other unexpected events.”

“What about the meeting surveillance?” The Commander then asked with a very serious look on his face.

“Ah...” Mickey responded, sitting down and rolling the glass in his hands with some noticeable nervousness, “That does require some explaining” he then admitted.

“I am all ears” The Commander duly prompted.

“I had heard that there were some dodgy goings on occurring” Mickey began to explain, “Marcus came to me a few days ago when I was in the pub, drunk as a skunk

and began to babble on about some deal he was involved with which he was afraid was going to turn sour.”

“Given his line in fencing warm goods, that is not all that surprising” The Commander pointed out.

“Normally I would agree” Mickey nodded, “However, he was splashing a lot of cash around, twenties and fifties, someone had clearly just paid him a huge wedge of reddie for goods or services rendered, he certainly did not win it playing poker as he was hopeless, he was also in pretty severe debt to some unsavoury people in the private loans business as a result.”

“Loan sharks...” The Commander concluded to which Mickey nodded in agreement.

“He didn’t say it openly, but it was obvious” Mickey confirmed, “I have known Marcus for many years, he used to bring me stuff from the continent when he was over there, you know, Duty Free booze, cigs...”

“...mucky mags?” The Commander suggested knowingly.

“Well, yeah...” Mickey then admitted, “So anyway, I could see he was in trouble so I wondered if there was anything I could do to help, so after the Photography Club meeting on Saturday night, I am on my way home when I see Marcus getting out of that tatty old van of his up near the North Walls underpass, I could see he was delivering something so I thought I would see where he went.”

“He went to Priory Park, didn’t he?” The Commander asked.

“Yeah...” Mickey confirmed, “He met some guys there and there seemed to be some sort of exchange take place, I tried to photograph it, but I have no idea how it came out.”

“You can see individuals meeting but the light is lousy, so faces are unrecognisable unfortunately” The Commander remarked, “Nice try though...”

“Wrong type film in the camera” Mickey explained, “I had film for brightly lit studio work, the last few frames were unused, I didn’t have the right film or equipment for nocturnal shots.”

“Do you know what Marcus was carrying and or exchanging?” The Commander then asked.

“No idea, sorry” Mickey admitted with a regrettable shake of the head, “Whatever it was, it was in a metal box, about three feet long and a foot wide and deep?”

“Ah...” The Commander responded as he recognised the description but choose to say nothing more about it, “Tell me, do the names Lionel Davidson or Tony Prentis mean anything to you?”

“Thug and his minder” Mickey replied, “Marcus invited them to a poker night last week, reasonable enough players, didn’t cause any bother but have got twenty-four carat villain written right through them like a stick of rock.”

“That sounds about right” The Commander agreed.

“I don't know what their involvement was” Mickey admitted “but then I know their reputation, what they get into.”

“I don't suppose you know where they are currently holed up, do you?” The Commander asked.

“I think they were in a B&B somewhere, but they left town a couple of days ago” Mickey confirmed, “Sorry.”

“I guess it was too much to hope that they were still about” The Commander admitted, “I expect they will resurface somewhere doing something naughty at some point.”

“No doubt...” Mickey agreed.

“Can I play a bit of a flyer, Mickey?” The Commander then asked after pondering for a moment, “Do you know how the late Ms Grey’s handbag found its way into a trench in Priory Park in the early hours of Monday morning?”

Mickey let out a sigh in response before nodding in agreement.

“She left it behind on Friday evening when she was at the photographic club” Mickey explained, “I got the gist from what she was saying about what she was really into and I heard a whisper that something might have happened to her but I couldn’t say anything so I thought if I dropped it somewhere then you guys would latch onto the fact something was wrong.”

“Oh Mickey, Mickey, Mickey...” The Commander responded, “Why didn’t you just come to me and tell me what was going on?” he then asked.

“Because I was terrified of what would happen if whoever was behind all this found out I had talked” Mickey admitted.

“Fair enough...” The Commander agreed, “Fair enough.”

“Oh, here is the number you need for the Poker Club” Mickey then scribbled on a piece of paper and handed it across.

“Right, thanks” The Commander responded, “I'll give them a call when I get back to the office.”

“So, what do I do now?” Mickey then asked.

“Sit back, relax, keep an eye on Sara and watch some telly” The Commander suggested.

“Oh!” Mickey looked at the television listing in the paper on the coffee table, “Dogtanien and the Three Muskehounds is on!”

“Thanks Mickey...” The Commander responded, “I am going to have that theme tune stuck in my head for the rest of the night now...”

“Get in there and shut up!” Longton loudly called as he and three other officers wrestled the prisoner into the cell before quickly slamming shut the door before he could get back and try and escape again.

“Blimey Al, where do you find them?” the Custody Supervising Officer asked as they recovered from the wrestling match they just had.

“Must be my magnetic personality Alec” Al admitted, “Shall we start the paperwork?” he then suggested.

“Step into my office” the Custody Supervisor led the way ahead to his desk, “So, who do we have in the bin?” he then asked, clicking his pen on as he sat down.

“The slightly calmer one carried this i.d. on him” Longton produced a green provisional driving licence, “Says he is a Martin Grant of fourteen Claris Close, Wandsworth.”

“Says he is?” the Custody Supervisor responded.

“Already checked out” Longton confirmed, “A Martin Grant of that address reported his wallet was stolen whilst in the Oxford Street branch of John Lewis two weeks ago.”

“Ah...” the Custody Supervisor remarked in realisation, “and his friend, the charmer?” he then asked, referencing the violent one they had just locked up.

“Another mystery face with moody i.d.” Longton confirmed as he checked his notebook, “The stolen driving licence routine again, this time one that was nicked in a Wimpy Bar in Reading, last week.”

“Right, then I shall mark these two gentlemen as 'anon' on their cards” the Custody Supervisor remarked as he filled in the details, “So, what have they done?”

“Tried to intercept our two star witnesses” Longton explained, “Someone sent them to the wrong address though” he then confirmed with a knowing smile.

“Oh dear, what a shame, never mind...” the Custody Supervisor responded in kind, “Charges?”

“Affray, possession of firearms, assault, etcetera, etcetera...” Longton then summarised.

“Gotcha...” the Custody Supervisor agreed as he filled in the details, “Have they said anything since their arrest?” he asked.

“Just the usual vulgarities whilst demanding their briefs” Longton confirmed.

“How are our guests?” The Commander asked as he walked into the Custody Area.

“None too happy” Longton responded at which point one of the detained men began to shout and bang the door of his cell, “That’s one of them now.”

“OI!” The Commander shouted back, “SHUT IT!”

At that exact moment the man in the cell fell in silent in response.

“How the hell do you do that?” Longton asked.

“Natural talent” The Commander modestly admitted, “Any names on them?”

“Moody stolen i.d.'s, nothing concrete and the faces aren't known to us” Longton confirmed.

“That figures” The Commander reluctantly agreed, “Hired thugs probably, cash in hand and no questions asked, we won't get anything out of them, less so when their 'No Comment' lawyers arrive.”

“So, what now?” Longton then asked.

“Tea and a telephone call” The Commander confirmed, beckoning Longton with a waved finger, “Thanks Alec” he then called.

“That quite simply is not the case” Edwards called down the telephone in his office, “I can't just let people out because someone thinks they have been unfairly detained over a 'little mix up', there are procedures of law to consider, you know?”

At that moment, he noticed Longton and The Commander passing by the office door whereupon he quickly covered the mouthpiece of the handset and called out to them.

“Batman and Robin, get in here!” Edwards shouted before returning to the call.

“Uh-oh...” The Commander and Longton responded in unison before turning around and proceeding into Edwards' office where he held his hand up to stop them from speaking, nodding at the telephone.

“I don't care what the echoes in and around the corridors of power are” Edwards then stated over the telephone, “The fact remains that we have detainees who were caught

in the possession of live fire arms and were intent on using them to, at the very least we are looking at perverting the course of justice.”

“Here we go...” Longton remarked to The Commander who nodded in agreement.

“Right!!” Edwards remarked before slamming the telephone down and then looking out of the window with an angry glare before returning to the two officers, “Politicians!!!” he then declared.

“Ah...” The Commander responded, “I try to keep them at arm’s length and down wind as a rule.”

“Unless you are nicking them...” Longton quietly remarked which saw The Commander give him a momentary scornful look.

“Very wise” Edwards agreed, “It seems that someone wants us to release our prisoners without charge, apparently not in the public interest.”

“Bollocks!” The Commander immediately responded.

“That’s what I like about you” Al remarked, “You just cut through all the debate and the detail and just say what you think!”

“You don’t get anywhere in life by pussy footing around and being polite all the time” The Commander pointed out, “Sometimes you need to step up, kick in some doors, be direct and abrupt otherwise the right information will never sink into the right people.”

“It does explain why almost everyone we have put in the bin so far has been asking for their very expensive lawyers rather than settling for the local Legal Aid freebie guy” Longton remarked.

“This whole thing stinks to high heaven” Edwards agreed, “What is the latest on the detainees?” he then asked.

“Assuming some smarmy bent brief doesn’t get them sprung” The Commander summarised, we have got two anonymous thugs downstairs now, Dodgy Dave is due in court later tomorrow on various charges, the Drugs Squad are handling the minions we picked up at Marcus’ place early this morning and that leaves us with our local friendly drug pusher Sylvester who, by the way, is the only one who has declined legal reputation which seats him in either the stupid or the over confident section, I am not sure which.”

“We are going to let him stew overnight, interview him tomorrow morning and if he still keeps schtum then we go for a search warrant on his place and tear it apart” Longton confirmed.

“Sounds like fun” Edwards agreed.

“If there is anything else Sir?” The Commander tentatively asked.

“Probably” Edwards admitted, “but it’s late, I am tired as I suspect you two are and I think it is time to go home and come back refreshed in the morning.”

“What could possibly happen tomorrow to top today’s excitement?” Longton asked.

“I would hardly call today’s events exciting” The Commander pointed out, “Mind you that probably depends on your point of view...”

“You two, home, now” Edwards then ordered.

“Just one thing left to do” The Commander confirmed, “I have to go and play some poker...”

“Huh?” Edwards responded.

“I have found out where Mickey’s Poker Club is playing this evening and thought it would be worth dropping by for a chat.”

“All right” Edwards cautiously replied, “but be careful, you may run into someone who doesn’t like you.”

“Occupational hazard Guv” The Commander dismissed his concerns.

“Goodnight gentlemen” Edwards then declared.

“Good evening gentlemen” The Commander coolly announced as he entered the smoke-filled room where several gentlemen from all walks of life were sat around a large table, playing poker, significant quantities of plastic coloured poker chips in front of many of them and a large 'pot' of chips in the centre beneath the solitary source of light, a large ceiling mounted lamp.

“Err, this isn't what you think officer” one of the men began to innocently protest, “We were...”

“...just about to deal me in” The Commander finished the sentence, smiling and taking a vacant seat at the table.

“Err, right...” the Dealer in charge of the table responded, clearly confused, “This isn't some sort of raid, is it?”

“A raid, just me?” The Commander scoffed, “I know our budget is tight but even that would be quite a stretch.”

“With respect officer, your reputation does precede you” one of the other players pointed out.

“Fair enough” The Commander agreed as the dealer duly dealt out each player two cards from the deck in his hand, “I was hoping to have a little chat about what happened yesterday afternoon with poor old Mickey” he explained as he discreetly checked the hand he had been dealt.

“Is he going to be all right?” another of the players asked as the game continued.

“Yeah, he'll be okay, probably wind up dining out and impressing the ladies with his scar for months” The Commander confirmed, “I'll raise” he then declared, putting several poker chips from his stack into the 'pot' in the centre of the table.

“This is unofficial, right?” the player to his left nervously asked as the three community cards were dealt face up onto the table by the dealer.

“An officer of the National Security Service playing poker?” The Commander remarked as he put some more chips into the pot, “that is about as unofficial as it gets.”

“Call” the man to The Commander's right responded, matching the bet whereupon the next player duly folded whilst the last to speak also called.

“Three players” the Dealer confirmed, “Turn card” he then called, dealing the fourth community card onto the table.

“I'll call” The Commander then declared, checking his two cards once again to be certain.

“Fold” the man to his left duly threw in his two cards back to the Dealer.

“Okay officer, I'll call” the man sat opposite agreed with a tap of his fingers on the table.

“Two players, showdown Gentlemen” the Dealer declared whereupon The Commander moved his cards into the centre of the table and turned them over to face upwards to reveal a King and Jack of Hearts which with the community cards on the table gave him full house of three Kings and two Jack's.”

“Nicely played” the other man then conceded, revealing that he only had two pairs of tens and Jack's.

“So, now that I have settled in here” The Commander then asked, “Perhaps someone would like to talk about poor old Mickey's unfortunate incident?”

“It was nothing to do with us” one of the men around the table confirmed, “We were just having our usual poker game when all hell broke loose downstairs and amid the confusion this guy just kicked the door in, pointed a gun straight at Mickey and shot him.”

“That was the point at which we very quickly scarpered” another of the players confirmed, “the punch up was still in full swing downstairs so getting out was reasonably easy.”

“Someone deliberately started that fight to cover the gunman coming up the stairs for Mickey I reckon” a third player remarked.

“That's fits” The Commander agreed, “Raise you twenty” he then declared as the next hand got under way.

“I'll see some of that, call” the player to The Commander's right agreed.

The other players duly called or passed as they saw fit until all had declared, and the dealer duly dealt out the three community cards face up onto the table.

“I think I will pass on this one” The Commander then remarked, throwing his two cards in this time whereupon the other players continued, either passing themselves or checking to remain in the hand.

He watched as the hand played out with just one player left at the end to take the pot with all the others having passed before continuing.

“What about Lord Francis?” The Commander asked as the cards were dealt for the next hand.

“Ah, Richard” the player to The Commander's left recalled, “Pity about his car going bang, he was a good poker player, actually no he wasn't but he didn't mind losing” he then explained with a broad smile.

“Yeah, always had lots of cash to throw around it seemed” another player agreed, “He must have had some serious side hustles besides the classic cars.”

“Just a pity that his car was so shoddily maintained that it blew him up, or at least that is what I read this morning” one of the other players remarked.

“You believed that load of claptrap Nigel?” the first player retorted, “I know Dodgy Dave is a bit of a fly by night mechanic but...”

“Whoa!” The Commander responded, “Dodgy Dave as in the iffy motors guy?” he then asked to which he received a number of confirming nods, “How is that toad mixed up with Lord Francis?” he then asked.

“That vast collection of classic cars Lord Francis has, or rather had I suppose” the first player replied, “He was the guy's Chief Mechanic.”

“Well, well, well...” The Commander remarked as he raised the bet by another ten pounds, “That is interesting...”

“Used to play with us occasionally” the first player then confirmed, “His poker skills were as bad as some of the cars he sells, fall apart at the first corner if you go too fast!”

“So, anyone care to speculate why Mickey was targeted?” The Commander then generally asked as he tapped his fingertips on the table to indicate he was checking the bet as it came around to him again.

“The word going around was he had been taking his camera into places where it is not welcome” the player to The Commander's right remarked, “Snooping on some naughty goings on and not the sort of thing you would think Mickey would be looking at either.”

“Hmm...” The Commander replied as he then raised the bet by another ten pounds and two of the players then dropped out of the hand in response.

“I'll see your ten and raise a further ten” the player to The Commander's left then called.

The Commander then duly checked his two cards again before looking at the four upturned cards in the centre of the table and considered the odds carefully.

“I'll call” he then declared, tossing a further ten pounds into the pot to then bring on the showdown.

“Three Queens” the other player announced as he turned his two cards over which with best three of the five community cards in the centre of the table gave him the three queens.

“Sorry, straight flush” The Commander then announced as he revealed his King and Jack of Clubs which with the queen, ten and nine of clubs made his hand better.

“Very nicely played” one of the players commented as the cards were gathered up and The Commander took the pot of chips, “You've played this before, haven't you?” he then asked.

“Oh, a few times, when I was a young boy” The Commander honestly admitted, “and as much as I would like to stay and play some more, regrettably I need to go.”

“If you play as well as that all the time, you are welcome back any time, officer” one of the players then remarked, a declaration that received agreeing nods from the others, “Give Mickey our regards and tell him to get well soon?” he then asked.

“I will” The Commander agreed as he pushed his chair back and stood up, “Good night gentlemen, and thank you.”

A couple of minutes later, The Commander stepped outside into the street from the same side entrance he had used earlier to enter the building, wrapped his long overcoat

tightly over his uniform and looked up and down the deserted narrow side street as a gentle rain began to fall.

South Street was a short distance away at the end of that narrow side street and it was toward it that he then proceeded, turning left and heading south at the corner.

That time of night there was very few people about, Haychester city centre often being all but deserted past nine o'clock in the evening.

The Commander stopped momentarily on his journey in the direction of the Southgate Gyrotory to look in a shop window, but he was not interested in anything on display or his reflection in the glass but merely checking.

He then resumed walking down South Street, crossing the road behind the last 700 bus of the evening as it passed by, nearing journey's end at the nearby bus station.

There was no waiting for the traffic lights as there was little traffic about and soon The Commander found himself approaching the railway station which, in the misty rain, took on an almost ethereal look whilst the arcing from the wet electric rail flashed as a train departed, clattering over the adjacent level crossing before disappearing off into the distance.

Something did not seem right to The Commander though as he headed towards the main station entrance where, upon passing through the doors into the deserted ticket hall, he paused for a moment and looked up at the huge clock on the wall above the ticket office windows before looking to his left and then turning smartly on his heels and proceeding through to the London bound platform one.

With the departure a minute earlier of a London bound train, the platform was also deserted and there were just a couple of waiting passengers on the opposite side as The Commander looked around and then strolled along the before turning away from the platform edge and then pressing the button to summon the lift.

The doors creaked as they slid open, allowing The Commander to enter before he turned to face the doors as they then closed again and the lift descended to the old subway that runs beneath the tracks, a little used part of the station that dated back to Victorian times and was the only part remaining of the original station following its modern rebuild in the 1960's.

A few moments later, the creaky old lift slowed to stop at the bottom of the shaft and the doors slid open.

The Commander shrugged a bit as the significantly colder air of the old brick lined Victorian subway tunnel hit him as he stepped out of the lift and began to walk towards the far end, the doors of the lift closing again behind him and the car ascending back to ground level.

As he reached the middle of the subway, the doors of the lift ahead slid open and two men appeared, brandishing firearms whereupon The Commander stopped and stood his ground.

“You have been meddling in business that does not concern you Lieutenant Commander” one of the men formally called.

“Tell me gentlemen” The Commander asked as behind him, the other lift returned, and the doors began to open, “Can you see in the dark?”

At that moment, the lights went out and gunfire began, the flashes from the muzzles of at least four different firearms piercing the darkness with deafening noise as bullets ricocheted off the walls.

Moments later the gunfire stopped and then the lights came back on, revealing a very different scene with the two men who had appeared and confronted The Commander now lying on the floor, multiple bullet wounds and blood everywhere.

The Commander was also on the ground, sat up against the wall and breathing heavily as he looked at the two dead men before looking to his right and seeing two other men, taking of night vision scopes and holstering their own weapons as they approached.

“Are you all right Sir?” one of the men asked as the other checked the bodies.

“Erm...” The Commander tried to compose himself and looked down at his uniform tunic where there were some splatters of blood, “I think I bashed my spine when I fell” he then confirmed, “At least I haven't got any more holes in me.”

“These two are dead” the other man confirmed as he searched the bodies, “No i.d. on them either.”

“I presume you two are Crowthorne's guys?” The Commander then asked as they helped him back to his feet.

“Yes Sir” the second man confirmed, “We were asked to keep any eye on you in case.... Well, this sort of thing happened.”

“Thanks fellas, I owe you both a big drink” The Commander declared, “And Richard Crowthorne too for that matter” he then added.

Outside the station, the quiet scene of a few minutes earlier was shattered with the arrival of several emergency service vehicles, of which Longton was one of the first on the scene.

“Now what?” Longton remarked as he got out of the patrol car before reaching for his radio, “Control from One Eight One, show me on scene at the reported shooting at the station” he then declared, “Has anyone managed to get hold of One Three One yet?” he asked.

“No response on his radio and he isn't answering his phone at home either” Control confirmed.

“Right...” Longton responded, a heavy feeling occurring to him as he headed inside the station whereupon he went through the ticket hall and on to the London bound platform where he then saw The Commander appear from the subway lift further down the platform with the two MI5 men.

“Control from One Eight One” Longton then called as he approached them “Never mind, I have found him.”

“Hi Al!” The Commander called, “I ran into a spot of bother.”

“Why am I not surprised?” Longton responded, “And your friends?” he then indicated the two men with him.

“Associates of Mr Crowthorne” The Commander explained, “Actually, you two had better make yourselves scarce seeing as officially you are not here.”

“Understood Sir” one of the men confirmed.

“Please pass my thanks to Richard and we'll catch up for that drink at some point” The Commander then remarked.

“All yours then mate” the other MI5 man remarked to Longton before they both nodded and then left, making their way off towards the far end of the station platform to exit from the rear gates into the goods yard.

“There are two dead guys downstairs with automatic weapons who need picking up” The Commander then remarked, “I want to know who they were, no i.d. on them but somebody will be missing them.”

“Dave!” Longton called to Forrester as he and a couple of other officers appeared on the platform and approached.

“I take it, whatever happened, we missed it?” Forrester asked.

“There are two fresh stiffs downstairs in the subway that need shifting on the QT” Longton instructed.

“You'll find two semi-automatic weapons down there too” The Commander added, “Get them bagged and checked over, a rush job please, I want answers and fast.”

“Come on mate” Longton remarked to The Commander “Let's get you back to the office and see if the Guvnor has anything to pick you up in his desk drawer.”

“We'll take care of things here” Forrester confirmed, “Come on lads, we have got work to do.”

“Oh Al, my life flashed before me again” The Commander then admitted as he and Longton headed back out of the station, “Still not much to see though.”

“I think I'll drive” Longton then suggested as he opened the passenger side door of the patrol car whereupon The Commander nodded in agreement and duly got in.

The Commander looked out of the windscreen and let out a deep sigh as he sat back in the seat whilst Longton went around the back of the car and then got in the driver's seat.

“You are in shock...” Longton remarked as he started the car before reaching for the radio, “Control from One Eight One” he then called, “One Three One is all right, I am just about to bring him in for some TLC as I am reasonably certain he won't want to go to the hospital, call it instinct...”

“You got that right...” The Commander grumpily confirmed.

“Advise the Guvnor that there has been an incident but maybe keep the details sufficiently vague for now” Longton then instructed, “At least until Sam and I have worked out just what the hell actually happened.”

“Goodnight Dave, I am going home” Crowthorne called as he turned off his desk lamp and picked up his briefcase, “There is a decanter of finest single malt with my name on it waiting for me at home.”

“Goodnight” Collins replied and reached for his mug of coffee when the telephone on the desk rang, and he reluctantly leaned across to answer it.

“Duty officer, Dave Collins speaking” he called.

Crowthorne was halfway down the corridor when he heard the call from his office.

“Richard!” Collins shouted towards him “Trouble at mill!”

“Nuts...” Crowthorne muttered under his breath in frustration before turning smartly on his heels and making his way back.

“Trouble at Mill?” he then called with a look of incredulousness.

“I'm from Yorkshire” Collins reminded him, “Anyway, more sort of trouble at station really” he then indicated the telephone, “Two guys just tried to waste Lieutenant Commander Sam Edwards at Haychester Railway Station about twenty minutes ago.”

“Bloody hell!” Crowthorne responded, putting his briefcase back down in his desk, “Is he all right?”

“A bit shook up” Collins confirmed, “Fortunately our guys managed to reach him just in time before they done the job.”

“Dead or alive?” Crowthorne then asked, “The bad guys” he then clarified.

“Died in the exchange of gunfire” Collins responded, “Our guys are okay, the shooters had no i.d. on them but they were definitely professional.”

“Their weapons may provide some answers perhaps” Crowthorne suggested.

“A Lieutenant Commander Alfred Longton has ensured that the firearms have been collected and bagged and is running them through the fast lane for analysis” Collins confirmed.

“Good, good” Crowthorne thoughtfully responded, “Al Longton is a friend of the family if you know what I mean.”

“Uh huh...” Collins agreed.

“Oh Dave...” Crowthorne rubbed his face with his hands, “What the hell is going on?”

“Someone somewhere is stirring the pot” Collins then commented.

“Yeah...” Crowthorne agreed, “and they have got a very big far-reaching spoon...”

The Commander was lying on the leather couch in Edwards office, looking up towards the ceiling but in actual fact, staring off into the distance, just the glow from the nearby desk lamp and some light coming through the slats of the window blinds barely illuminating him.

There was a tentative knock on the door which caused The Commander to tilt his head whereupon Longton came in, smiled and then closed the door so they could talk alone.

“How are you feeling mate?” Longton asked as he went over to Edwards’ desk and looked in the bottom drawer where he found the Chief Superintendent’s bottle of Scotch and glasses.

“Like someone wants me dead” The Commander confirmed as he sat up and rubbed his eyes “It happens a lot as it turns out” he ruefully admitted “but then, that is the closest anyone has managed to get to actually getting the job done for quite some time.”

“Here” Longton poured a measure of Scotch into a glass and then passed it to The Commander “I think you could use this.”

“Thanks Al” The Commander responded as he took the glass and then had a sip before looking ahead into the darkness with an expression of deep thought.

“You okay mate?” Longton then tentatively asked.

“Quite frankly Al, no I am not!” The Commander responded matter of factly, which took Longton a little by surprise, “What the hell am I doing?” he then generally asked, frustration readily apparent.

“I think that depends on to whom I am talking” Longton thoughtfully suggested.

“Oh, the mask is off” The Commander duly confirmed, “This is Eddie right here now.”

“Go on” Longton then prompted.

“Why the hell am I doing all this, huh?” The Commander then asked, “I mean, I put my life on the line all the time, constantly being shot at, almost blown up, belittled by stupid pompous pratts like Chief Superintendent Travis, hell, I have been declared dead at least once if not twice, and for what?”

“Eighteen and a half grand a year plus overtime and southeast weighting?” Longton tentatively replied.

“Huh!” The Commander retorted before gulping the rest of his Scotch down in one go, “Yeah, that’s about right, except what is the point? I never get time to spend it, too busy doing the job, and that is all I am isn’t it, I am the job, I hide behind the uniform and in turn the real me, the one that should have just given up and died back in 1969, hides behind even deeper inside, screaming in the dark to be let out when nobody is around and yet afraid of what would happen if he ever did.”

“You take risks, put yourself in harms way, go where angels fear to tread” Longton replied, “Not because you want to or you think that is what the job or the people you swore when you joined the Service to protect expect, but because you think, to hell with it, you have already lost everything, you might as well go all in.”

“If I get killed, nobody will even notice” The Commander then responded, “Well, you’ll get my parking space, some snotty nosed useless university graduate type will get parachuted in to take my desk, there might be a brief mention on page eleven of the Haychester Gazette but only assuming I don’t die on a Thursday afternoon after they have gone to press, Chief Superintendent Travis will probably put a formal request to have a dance floor built over my grave and somewhere in the depths of Thames House, a man from MI5 will formerly stamp the word DECEASED across the front cover of my file, again...”

“You sell yourself short” Longton tried to counter The Commander’s stance, “You would be missed by the rest of us, you are a character, unique, you actually have a personality, wit and the willingness to not suffer fools gladly which is more than can be said for the cloned robotic graduates they are hiring on fast track programmes into the Service these days or the lumbering dinosaurs like Travis.”

“Oh, spare me, give me good old fashioned hard working, grafting coppers any day” The Commander then semi-agreed.

“When this is all over, perhaps you should take some time off?” Longton then suggested, “God knows you have earned it and then some, the Service owes you a huge debt for all the work you have done, maybe it is time you cashed in some favours.”

“What would I do though?” The Commander then asked.

“I don’t know” Longton responded thoughtfully, “Travel a bit, maybe just go and meet a girl perhaps?”

“Oh, I would love to” The Commander then honestly admitted.

“Indeed” Longton responded before doing a double take when he realised exactly what it was The Commander had replied to, “Erm, hang on a minute, I am sorry?” he then asked.

“Contrary to popular gossip, and don't deny it, I know the canteen gossip is always a hot bed of dubious speculation” The Commander honestly admitted “Actually I would like to have a lady in my life, someone to come home to, ask me how my day was, because you know what? I have been alone since I was twelve years old, and yes it would be lovely to have someone in my life I can actually care about!”

“So, why the hell don't you just meet someone?” Longton asked, clearly confused.

“Because I am terrified!” The Commander honestly answered, “The thought of allowing someone into my chaotic madcap life scares the hell out of me and I will tell you why, because I am afraid that if I were ever to meet someone, because of me she would be dead inside of a week, and I could never allow that to happen.”

“Woah...” Longton took all this in with a stunned look.

“I have a list of enemies and people who I have generally pissed off that is so long, they could have a special tie made up for their exclusive club” The Commander then rantingly went on, “I have more holes in me than a Swiss cheese and every time I go near a metal detector, it goes off like Blackpool Illuminations because of all the bits of shrapnel still stuck in me!”

“I err see your point...” Longton quietly agreed, not really wanting to interrupt him in mid flow but he felt he should say something at that point.

“So you see, if I were to have someone special in my life, it's open season for the bad guys because they will just use her against me, a weakness there to be exploited and she would be hurt, or worse” The Commander passionately explained, “The crazy thing is, I have never met her, probably never will but I find myself having to sacrifice all chance of happiness, love, even just a hug now and then, to make sure she is protected because if anything were to happen to her, I would never be able to live with it.”

“Blimey, half a glass of Scotch and you suddenly open up” Longton remarked, looking on slightly shocked, “I think no more alcohol for you tonight” he then wisely advised, taking the bottle away, “or indeed ever...”

“Well, you know me” The Commander responded, “In fact I would say you know even more now, sniff of the barmaid’s apron and I am buzzed...”

“Would now be a good time to talk about the two guys who tried to kill you earlier?” Longton then tentatively ventured.

“Why not?” The Commander readily agreed, it is not like I have any kind of personal life to get in the way, is it?”

“Err, quite...” Longton responded as he stood up, “I’ll be back in a minute” he then declared, “Don’t touch the Scotch...”

“I’ll stick to Lucozade and tea in future” The Commander agreed as Longton nodded and then left the office.

Exiting into the dark corridor, Longton closed the door quietly behind him and found Edwards standing there.

“How is he?” Edwards asked, motioning towards the door.

“I take it you heard all that?” Longton tentatively asked.

“Yeah...” Edwards regretfully confirmed, “I always knew he kept things bottled up but, bloody hell...”

“I was just about to tell him about his two assailants and we erm got a little sidetracked as you just heard” Longton then explained.

“No kidding” Edwards agreed, “and it gets worse...” he then passed across a printed report, “Break it to him gently, unless you want me to do it?”

“Oh, dear God...” Longton responded on scan reading the report, “I had a feeling about this one, looks like I was right for once.”

“Tread carefully” Edwards then ominously warned, “That goes for both of you.”

“I’ll try to remember that Sir” Longton agreed before with a nod, Edwards duly left, disappearing off into the darkness of the dimly lit corridor.

Longton proceeded down the corridor to the Investigation Room which was empty and proceeded to pick up a large paper evidence bag before heading back out again.

“Right...” Longton then declared to himself before taking a deep breath and then went back into the office where he found The Commander stood by the window, his reflection visible in the glass as he looked out across the city towards the spotlit Cathedral a short distance away, dominating the skyline.

“Did you know the cathedral spire collapsed once?” The Commander asked Longton when he came in.

“No, no I didn’t” Longton admitted.

“The original cathedral as built did not have a spire, later they built the spire on top but the foundations and structure below were never upgraded to carry all that extra weight” The Commander told the tale, “So one day in about 1861 if I remember correctly, all these big cracks appeared in the structure and sensibly, they got the hell out of there whereupon the spire collapsed, fortunately straight down otherwise it would have probably squashed the Army & Navy store.”

“That must have been a hell of a bang” Longton remarked.

“Funny story though, the spire can be seen for many miles all around and out to sea and was used as a navigational aid by fishermen out of Selsey” The Commander then continued, “and the story goes that a fisherman on his way back into harbour, looked up, saw the cathedral spire to check his position, looked down at his charts then looked up again and it was gone, leaving him not only a bit lost at sea but also rather bemused.”

“So, actually it is a replica?” Longton remarked as he came over and joined The Commander in looking at the spire out of the window.

“Completely rebuilt to the original design but with much better supporting foundations beneath” The Commander confirmed, “There is a moral in there somewhere...”

“That sometimes, things can come back stronger after being completely defeated?” Longton suggested, “Can equally apply to people too you know?”

“Point taken Al” The Commander conceded with a smile, the first from him in some time.

“That’s better” Longton then responded.

“So, what were you and the Guvnor talking about just now?” The Commander asked.

“Huh?” Longton looked on, slightly confused.

“Call yourself a detective...” The Commander smirked, “Either side of my head are flappy things called ears, they work you know, very well in fact.”

“He’s worried about you” Longton confirmed, “Quite frankly we all are.”

“I’m touched...” The Commander replied.

“So, the two comedians who tried to whack you this evening” Longton then handed over the file, “No identification on them, not so much as a bus ticket.”

“Yet they had tailored suits and automatic weapons” The Commander pointed out, “Those, I presume?” he nodded towards the two paper evidence bags in Longton’s right hand.

“Yeah, straight from ballistics” Longton confirmed, “Each of them had an identical Heckler & Kock MP5.”

“These are standard Security Service issue” The Commander responded with obvious concern as he read the accompanying report, “Bloody hell, these are actual law enforcement specification ones too.”

“Yep...” Longton grimly confirmed, “Most definitely not the sort of thing your average thug, armed blagger, hired gun or fully paid-up member of any terrorist organisation would be carrying about, let alone two of them.”

“So, what about the serial numbers?” The Commander asked.

“Help yourself” Longton nodded towards the evidence bags whereupon The Commander, his intrigue suitably piqued, proceeded to open the first one and take out the weapon whereupon he went over to the desk lamp and looked it over under the light.

“What the...?” The Commander remarked before putting the first weapon back down and taking the second one out of its bag and examining it too.

“No serial numbers?” Longton asked.

“Yeah, no serial numbers” The Commander confirmed, “and not even ground off either, they were never here in the first place.”

“According to my friend in Ballistics” Longton then remarked, “the manufacturer does supply unmarked units without serial numbers for special orders, only to special operations departments of national police and security services.”

“Christ...” The Commander responded.

“Yep, someone wants you dead and they are going around with Government issued firearms” Longton concluded.

“Ah well...” The Commander responded with a resigned look, “As Mad Max once did say, I’ll add it to my threat collection...”

“You should get some sleep” Longton then strongly suggested, “You’ve been through hell over the last few days, and I would wager it is not going to get any quieter.”

“Oh, all right” The Commander admitted as he grabbed his uniform tunic, “I’ll see you in the morning Al” he then declared, patting him on the shoulder as he passed him, “Good night...”

“Simon?” Phillips called as she walked into Fuller's office, “Is this what you were looking for?” she then asked as she passed a small evidence bag to him.

“Erm...” Fuller responded, taking the evidence bag and opening it before taking the item inside out, revealing it to be a small black box with some wires protruding from it, “Yes, I think that's it” he then declared, placing it carefully on his desk.

“Forensics found it in the hotel laundry area, tucked behind some cable ducting” Phillips explained, “Once they were sure it wasn't going to go boom, they photographed it in situ and as they had no idea what it was, thought you might like it.”

“Very thoughtful of them” Fuller responded as he put on a set of magnifying spectacles and activated an overhead lamp in order to give the device a closer look.

“Erm, do you know what it is?” Phillips asked, her curiosity piqued.

“This lovely bit of gear is the other half of this” Fuller held up the device he had found hidden in the hotel suite earlier, “This first bit is a microphone essentially, bit more sophisticated though which records everything in the room and then instantly transmits it on an encrypted radio frequency to a recording device which is this lovely thing you have brought me here.”

“What's the range of that thing?” Phillips then asked.

“Depends a bit on the structure of the building between transmitter and receiver” Fuller explained, “but as long as there isn't too much metallic clutter in the way, somewhere in the same building not more than five hundred metres should work.”

“The laundry area is on the ground floor right outside the top floor balcony of the suite” Phillips confirmed, “So that sounds about right.”

“Now, my little friend” Fuller remarked to the device “Let's see what secrets you are keeping.”

“I'll leave you to it” Phillips responded, “Apparently The Commander has been sent home to get some rest and hopefully nothing else will go wrong until tomorrow.”

“I'll believe that when I see it...” Fuller commented, not taking his eyes off the devices on his desk.

“Which?” Phillips asked, “Nothing going wrong or The Commander getting some rest?”

“Huh!” Fuller replied, “Both!”

As the night progressed, the streets of Haychester fell silent, the last trains and buses ran their final stops, the pubs closed their doors, and the last few merry patrons headed for home.

The Commander returned to his home to an empty house, opening the front door to be greeted only by the tabby cat in the hallway who merely looked on, unimpressed before she wandered through to the kitchen.

“And a very good evening to you” The Commander mused as he then hung up his uniform tunic and went through to the living room whereupon he promptly collapsed into the armchair and looked all around, reaching across to the lamp and turning it on to provide a modest bit of illumination.

On the coffee table alongside was that day’s issue of the Haychester Gazette, the weekly paper for the city and surrounding area, often maligned as the 'Whingers Weekly' on account of the number of letters complaining about petty issues that often featured in it.

“Mystery of explosion at hotel” The Commander read from the front-page headline before scan reading the story which was illustrated with a fairly useless distant photograph of the hotel which showed very little that was relevant to the actual events being reported.

“The usual vague journalistic claptrap there” The Commander then dismissed the reporting which clearly had been affected by the D-Notice that had been enforced in the wake of the explosion.

Discarding the paper back onto the table, The Commander reached instead for the August 1986 edition of the Railway Modeller magazine, one of the very few hobbies and interests he had outside of the job.

He spent a few minutes reading the article about the Southern Railway S15 Class steam locomotive and studying the scale drawings on the opposite page before resigning himself to the fact he really was tired, and his eyelids were starting to get heavy.

“Oh Eddie, get some sleep” The Commander then called on himself, putting the magazine aside and then almost instantly falling asleep in the chair.

“Jesus, you look like hell!” Frances exclaimed on seeing her fiancé as he came in through the front door.

“Thanks, my love” Longton responded with a weak smile, “You look beautiful as always” he then complimented.

“But of course my dear Albert” Frances agreed, “So, what kinds of chaos and mayhem have you and your illustrious sidekick got into today then?” she then asked.

“Oh, where to begin?” Longton responded as slumped onto the sofa, “Gunfights, explosions, nutters, Government agents, the usual” he then admitted, “and to top it all, two goons showed up at the end of the evening and tried to kill The Commander.”

“Oh my God!” Frances responded in shock, “Is he okay?”

“Bit shaken up I think” Longton confirmed, “and just a tad angry about it all too.”

“Can’t say I blame him” Frances agreed.

One person who was working right through the night was Simon Fuller, still ensconced in his office, surrounded by computers and electronic equipment in various states of disrepair.

What he was working on so intensely, was the recordings recovered from the hotel suite which he was attempting to match up with the audio recording from the secretly hidden device.

“Come on, come on...” Fuller remarked to himself as he spooled through a sequence of video tape before noticing something, quickly hitting pause and then rewinding it back a little.

Speeding through the footage meant that what had been recorded across multiple cameras which he had spent the last hour sequencing so that they were running in parallel, ran almost as a blur of movement but there was something that just made him wind back again and look more closely.

“Now, you don't fit in, where the hell did you come from?” Fuller then asked as he carefully moved the footage frame by frame back and forth until he finally settled on a specific frame from one camera which just showed the face of one man who had arrived in the suite by a back door.

Fuller reached across to the computer terminal and pressed a function button on the top of the keyboard which saw the printer nearby begin to warm up and start to print the image.

Whilst waiting for the printer which was going to take a few minutes to output the image, Fuller ran the footage on at a reduced speed, carefully tracking the progress of the man through the suite which was when he noticed something else, every camera he passed, he managed to look away or stay in the shadows where his face was partially or fully obscured throughout.

“Now, don't be shy...” Fuller commented but it was no use, no matter which camera angle he looked at or adjusted the contrast of the screens, nothing worked.

He yawned and sat back in the chair, letting the footage play at normal speed until he then noticed something else and then scrambled to pause and rewind it again.

“Oh...” he then remarked as he saw the mystery individual suddenly stop, his back to a camera and then on playing on at a reduced speed, saw him becoming increasingly animated as if angry at something, gesticulating and confronting someone he was facing who was standing just off camera.

“Ah, and then...” Fuller commented as he watched the parallel image from another camera on an adjacent monitor where the large Irish man known to be Patrick O'Connor was seen to step into the frame, brandishing a sawn-off shotgun before turning smartly on his heels and firing it at someone off to the right.

“Christ...” Fuller then exclaimed as he paused the footage at just the moment that the flash of the shotgun being fired emerged.

On the other camera views which were also paused at that exact same moment, there was several individuals looking around, clearly shocked at the events that were unfolding at that moment, an exact precise instance, frozen in time.

“Oh, hang on a minute, man of mystery” Fuller then remarked as he noticed something else in one of the frozen images, “Got you...” he then smiled with sense of great satisfaction.

As the sun began to rise, lightening the sky to the east of the city, The Commander was looking out of his kitchen window as bacon sizzled in the frying pan nearby.

He had not got much sleep which to be honest, was not something he really did get much of anyway, instead he was very much someone who believed in a hearty breakfast instead to start the day.

Looking away from the window, The Commander then noticed his bacon was ready and went over to the hotplate, taking the pan off and shutting off the gas before using a pair of tongs to lift the crispy bacon onto a waiting piece of thick sliced white bread before liberally applying a considerable amount of tomato ketchup.

Not standing on ceremony, The Commander merely dropped the other slice of bread on to the bacon and then picked it up.

It was just as he was about to take his first bite that the doorbell sounded causing him to pause, roll his eyes upwards and then looked across to the cat and smile sarcastically.

“You couldn't make it up” he then remarked before choosing to take a big bite out of the sandwich and then put it back on the plate and then heading for the front hallway to answer the door.

“Morning!” Longton called as The Commander opened the door.

“Is it?” The Commander replied, looking up at the rapidly lightening sky, “Come in Al, I can make you a bacon sandwich if you are hungry.”

“Tempting” Longton responded as he duly followed The Commander inside, closing the door carefully behind him “but I’ll pass, the good lady at home made sure I was fully fed and watered before I left.”

“Ah well, all the more for me then” The Commander joyously responded.

“Did you get any sleep?” Longton then asked, “Or is that a stupid question?”

“Take a wild guess” The Commander wryly suggested as he passed across a mug of tea that Longton did gratefully accept.

“Well, if it makes you feel any better, you weren’t the only one not getting much sleep” Longton then remarked, “I stopped by the office on the way over here and found Simon Fuller still plugging away at the footage we recovered from the hotel suite, and he thinks he may have found something.”

“Do tell” The Commander prompted which saw Longton reach inside his uniform tunic and take out some pieces of paper which he then unfurled and handed across.

“It seems there was a mystery guest in the suite on the night of Ms Grey’s murder” Longton explained, “Came in through some sort of back door, remonstrated with someone off camera and then it seems, ordered the killing of the girl.”

“Are these the photos of the mystery man?” The Commander asked.

“Our mystery guest enters the suite via an unidentified door, maybe by way of the rear fire exit stairs but not absolutely certain of that” Longton then continued “and it seems he was aware of the cameras in the suite as he managed to evade them pretty much throughout.”

“Who the hell is he?” The Commander asked.

“The best shot is the last one there” Longton then nodded towards the pictures that The Commander was looking through, “Whilst he managed to avoid the cameras, he can be just about seen in the reflection of a mirror.”

“Ah, there he is” The Commander remarked on finding the correct picture, “Still not really clear though.”

“The forensics guys found the recording unit that the listening device we discovered in the suite sent the recordings too” Fuller continued “When I left, Simon was attempting to decode it and see if he can synchronise it to the video tapes.”

“It would be nice to hear what they were saying” The Commander agreed, “Can we get anything done with these photos?” he then asked.

“I think Fuller is working on it” Longton confirmed, “He has quite a few tricks up his sleeve I believe, hopefully one of them might shed some light on our mystery man.”

“Ah, I see our big Irish friend actually did the deed then” The Commander remarked as he looked at the two photographic stills of the actual moment of the murder, “Just like Sara said.”

“So, what do you think?” Longton asked.

“Lord Francis hosts a business meeting in his suite” The Commander summarised as he finished his sandwich, “A meeting that is almost certainly about some sort of operation or deal that they are working on which probably involves drugs, guns, cash, jelly babies, who knows...”

“Whatever it is, you can bet it involves something very naughty” Longton remarked.

“Quite” The Commander agreed before continuing his musings, “So, whatever is going on, it involves the movement and thorough laundering of considerable amounts of money for which Lord Francis and his numerous business interests with accounts all over the place including access to Government financial accounts is ideally set up to be the money man.”

“He wouldn't be the top man in all this though” Longton then suggested.

“Could that be our mystery guest?” The Commander pondered, tapping the photos now sitting on the worktop alongside him.

“Maybe” Longton replied, “It does seem clear he is calling the shots, literally.”

“Yeah...” The Commander responded.

“So, our big Irish friend?” Longton then asked.

“Well, it is pretty clear he isn't over this side of the Irish Sea for a bit of rest and relaxation on a sabbatical which is what Special Branch seem to think” The Commander confirmed, “I reckon he is the hired muscle sent over to oversee the deal that is going down.”

“That fits” Longton agreed, “I think Special Branch may want to go back to whoever their man on the inside is and ask him or her why they are spouting porkies.”

“They may not know it” The Commander pointed out, “If their paymasters have found out that they were a grass, they may well use that as an opportunity to feed dud gen on to the authorities, throw a few red herrings about, the informant then duly passes on said dud gen without realising that it was a load of old pony or that they had been found out.”

“Well, until they cease to become useful as a feeding point of disinformation and are then retired to the bottom of the nearest canal, reservoir or recycled as a reinforcing rod in a concrete pillar somewhere” Longton ominously pointed out.

“Exactly” The Commander agreed.

“So, who is this mystery man?” Longton then indicated the photographs.

“I don’t know” The Commander admitted, “but I am willing to bet whoever he is, he is the one calling the shots and you can bet he isn’t in it for some cause or calling, but strictly for the vast profits he is no doubt accumulating, tax free naturally.”

“Naturally...” Longton agreed.

“We need to identify this man and find him” The Commander then declared “and unless anything else comes up, we need to make that our number one priority.”

“Trouble is, where do we start looking?” Longton then mused as he watched The Commander look around before clicking his fingers in realisation, going over to the kitchen cupboard and taking out two packets of biscuits before pausing in thought.

“*Two* packets?” Longton then remarked.

“Good point Al” The Commander agreed as he then reopened the cupboard and took another packet out, “It's going to be a three packet day” he then declared, placing the biscuits in an old carrier bag and handing them to Al.

“That wasn't quite what I... Oh, never mind” Longton gave up trying to change The Commander's eating habits, knowing he would only be on a losing streak irrespective.

“Huh?” The Commander responded, as he put his uniform tunic on and holstered his firearm that was lying on the worktop amidst the accumulated washing up.

“I...” Longton began again but then gave up once more, “Let's get to work” he then suggested.

“What time are we meeting back at the office this morning?” The Commander asked as he got in the car with Longton joining him alongside in the front passenger seat.

“About half eight I think” Longton recalled, “Where do you want these?” he indicated the three packets of biscuits The Commander had handed him earlier.

“Stick them in the glove compartment” The Commander confirmed as he started the car.

“You've got two packets in here already” Longton then pointed out.

“Don't worry” The Commander responded, “They will all be eaten by the end of the day.”

“I'd hate to be your cholesterol level...” Longton commented.

“Something else I can't spell, ergo I don't worry about it” The Commander calmly declared as he drove off.

“So, where are we going?” Longton then asked.

“Back to the scene of the crime” The Commander then declared, “What has happened to that twit of a hotel manager?” he then asked.

“His very expensive lawyer got him sprung on bail late last night whilst you were having your little adventure down in the station subway” Longton confirmed, “I meant to tell you last night, but you were off on one...”

“Yeah, I probably did go a bit over the top” The Commander admitted with a wry smile, “Just occasionally I feel the need to let off steam, especially when someone has just tried to kill me.”

“I understand” Longton agreed, “I guess that doesn't happen all that often?”

“What?” The Commander responded, “The letting off steam or someone trying to kill me?” he asked, “The former, very rarely, the latter annoyingly more common than you think.”

Edwards walked into his office and immediately let out a bit of a sigh at the pile of messages and reports that were waiting for him on his desk.

Approaching his desk, he scanned quickly through the messages, most of them routine but two did catch his eye, the first being a written note from the Control Room Supervisor advising that someone from the Home Office was attempting to get in contact which saw Edwards roll his eyes in a mix of disbelief and no real surprise, the other was from Simon Fuller which saw him drop everything and head back out of the office, a swift purpose in his stride.

“Morning Sir” Phillips called as he passed her in the corridor.

“Morning Lieutenant” Edwards responded, “Is Mr Fuller in his lair?” he then asked.

“I believe so Sir” Phillips confirmed.

“In which case, come with me” Edwards gestured with a wave of the finger that was his trademark beckoning gesture.

“Sir” Phillips responded, turning and duly following her superior officer down the corridor.

“Dare I ask where that mad adopted son of mine and his sidekick are?” Edwards then asked.

“Longton has gone over to Sam's place to go and pick him up” Phillips replied, “I heard about last night's excitement, what was that all about?” she then asked, her concern obvious.

“I wish I knew Lieutenant; I wish I knew” Edwards regretfully admitted as they approached Fullers office door, and he then duly knocked.

Initially there was no answer from the other side of the door which saw Edwards look on with a slightly concerned look, but Phillips was not so worried.

“He pulled an all-nighter so he may have dozed off” Phillips advised.

“Right...” Edwards responded, carefully opening the door enough to look around and then on seeing Fuller fast asleep, face down in a pile of papers on his desk, duly went inside.

“Told you Sir” Phillips remarked.

“Wakey, wakey Lieutenant” Edwards called, shaking Fuller's shoulder gently.

“Whe..., What?” Fuller suddenly awoke and looked up, initially confused and disorientated before gathering his senses, “Oh, morning Sir...” he then called on realising where he was and who he was talking too.

“Sorry to awaken you from your slumber Lieutenant” Edwards apologised, “but you sent a message you wanted to see me ASAP?”

“Oh, erm yes Sir” Fuller confirmed which was when Phillips handed him a fresh mug of black coffee, “Thanks...:” he then responded, taking the much-needed drink, “Where is The Commander and AI?”

“The dynamic duo were last seen heading back to the scene of the crime” Phillips confirmed.

“Right, that could be useful actually” Fuller remarked, “You see, I have managed to splice, edit and piece together a real time video of events that occurred in that hotel suite on the evening that the young woman was murdered using the footage taken by the Lord's intricate network of cameras, the sound recording from the bugging device we found hidden in there and the, by comparison admittedly poor quality cameras that watch the corridor outside the suite, the rear of the premises and the main reception area.”

“All very neat” Edwards remarked, “Are we going to get a show?”

“Absolutely Sir” Fuller agreed.

“Should I have brought popcorn?” Phillips asked.

“Don't bother” Fuller confirmed as he prepared the equipment, “This isn't exactly what you would call fluffy pre-watershed family viewing.”

“Ah...” Phillips responded in realisation.

“Okay, I'll give you the edited highlights version” Fuller then declared as he began the simultaneous playback on three large screens in front of them, “we begin with the arrival of the guests who were careful to avoid the camera in reception even though the chances of them being identifiable from these pretty awful pictures is pretty slim, it must be said.”

“The big guy in the long dark coat” Phillips pointed out one individual, “That the Irish heavy by any chance?” she asked.

“Probably” Fuller agreed, “We see him better when they get upstairs, they evidently did not know about Lord Francis' setup, speaking of which” he then indicated another screen, “there is our genial host and the two ladies.”

“Why is there no sound?” Edwards asked, “I thought you said you found a sound recording device?”

“We did Sir” Fuller confirmed, “It hasn't been installed yet.”

“Huh?” Phillips asked.

“You'll see” Fuller explained, “When Lord Francis begins his recording, the two ladies are already there in the suite” he then continued, “the first we see of them is here” he then indicated on the screen off to their left where the two young women in revealing evening dresses were seen in conversation with Francis, “then at about the time the guests are knocking at the door” he then nodded across to the screen showing the corridor outside the suite with the various men approaching, “he ushers them into a small side room and closes the door.”

“No camera in there?” Edwards asked.

“Not that I have found, no” Fuller confirmed, “but from the architects blueprints I have managed to locate, that is just a dressing room with no window or exit, no way in or out other than through that door.”

“Gotcha” Edwards replied.

“Now this as they say is where it gets interesting” Fuller then continued, “Lord Francis goes across the suite to the door and answers it, letting in six individuals which is when we get our first decent look at them.”

“Yep, that's O'Connor all right” Phillips agreed, “and well-known career criminal Lionel Davidson in the suit with his ever-present right-hand thug Prentis.”

“Isn't that the used car guy?” Edwards pointed out the fourth man to enter the suite, “Erm, Dodgy Dave?”

“Yeah, that's him” Phillips agreed.

“What about these other two?” Edwards then asked.

“No idea” Fuller replied, “Haven’t been able to match a name to the face on either of those two yet but the suits they are wearing say money, lots of it.”

“I didn’t think their wardrobe came from the Violent Thug at C&A Collection somehow” Phillips wryly remarked.

“Now, watch carefully over there” Fuller then pointed towards the left-hand monitor where at that moment in the playback, Grey was seen to exit the small room, carrying some sort of small object.

“Now, where the hell is she going?” Phillips wondered.

“You’ll see” Fuller confirmed as they all watched Grey across the various views make her way in the shadows to the master bedroom where she was seen to look all around the room before reaching underneath the bedside table and then quickly leaving again.

“So, that is how the listening device got there then” Edwards commented.

“Unfortunately, it’s listening range was only pretty much the interior of the master bedroom and to a certain extent the immediate environs” Fuller continued, “So we will have to rely on body language and lip reading here” he nodded towards the screen on the right which was showing the men gathering in the luxurious lounge where business was clearly being discussed and drinks being consumed extensively.

“What’s in the case I wonder?” Phillips wondered as on the screen, Prentis was seen to produce a briefcase that was placed on the table and then passed across to Francis who could be seen to open it.

“Let’s freeze it there” Fuller remarked whereupon with the press of a button, the videos all stopped, “and then we zoom in on the case and... Wow...”

“That is a *lot* of money...” Edwards remarked as they saw that the case clearly contained wads of banknotes, packed in tightly.

“Looks like the deal is going down” Fuller agreed as he then resumed the footage, and Francis was seen taking some of the packs of bank notes out of the case and then passing them to Davidson who tossed one of them onto his ever-present sidekick Prentis before stuffing the rest inside his jacket pocket.

“Yeah, but a deal for what?” Edwards asked.

“The Commander reckons weapons and drugs feature prominently in this mess somewhere” Phillips remarked.

“Lots of smiles and handshaking going on” Fuller then commented, “Whatever the deal is or was, has definitely been sealed.”

“Just wish we could hear what they were saying” Edwards remarked with a sense of shared frustration.

“This is where another briefcase changes hands” Fuller pointed out as he changed the view of cameras to a different angle which showed a second case, larger and made of metal pass from Francis to the large Irishman, O'Connor who smiled when he took a brief look inside it, unfortunately without any camera picking up the contents before it was closed again.

“Given that guy's record, I'd put a tenner on that being weapons of some sort in there” Phillips commented, “That big kid with a new toy look is a dead giveaway.”

“Now, the next bit we can skip” Fuller then remarked as on the screens, the meeting was coming to a conclusion, and Francis was showing the guests through to the bedroom area, “unless you really want to watch and listen to half a dozen men having sex with the two girls for the next hour.”

“Err, no thanks” Edwards agreed, “Not my sort of thing.”

“Maybe later...” Phillips replied which caused Fuller and Edwards to look around at her, “What?” she then asked.

“Whatever turns you on as my grandmother used to say...” Fuller remarked, “Right, now, skipping over the saucy stuff” he then fast forwarded through an hour of footage in less than ten seconds, “this as they say is where the plot thickens...”

“The mysterious visitor?” Edwards suggested.

“Watch over on the left there” Fuller nodded over to the far-left screen as the footage resumed normal playback speed, “Our mystery guest appears.... now.”

“Where the hell did he come from?” Phillips asked.

“That is the big question” Fuller responded, “As far as we can tell, there are only two ways into the suite from inside the building, both covered by the cameras, unless he climbed up the wisteria and in through the balcony, which given how high up this floor is, is extremely unlikely.”

“Does his face appear anywhere?” Edwards asked as they watched the mystery man walking through the suite, always managing to keep his face turned away from the cameras.

“Regrettably, no” Fuller confirmed, “at least not directly, either he has some psychic ability, or he knew exactly where the cameras are.”

“Hmmm...” Edwards mused.

“Now, listen to this and watch” Fuller then grimly announced, turning up the playback volume.

All three of them listened intently to the faint sound recording where the conversation was indistinct and muffled but it was clear that the discussion went quickly from calm and businesslike to raised voices and arguing.

“That doesn't sound good...” Phillips remarked.

“You may find the following scenes upsetting...” Fuller then ominously warned.

They all watched as the mysterious man was seen giving orders before O'Connor pushed Francis out of the way and then went through to the main bedroom where the two young women were resting, both still practically naked from their earlier efforts.

“You!” O'Connor was then heard clearly call, pointing directly at Grey before grabbing her roughly by the arm and then dragging her away, “You stay!” he then ordered Sara before shoving Grey out of the door.

Grey was pushed and shoved through to the main room where the rest of the men were but then stopped just out of sight of the cameras.

The listening device recording was overwhelmed with shouting and arguing from the room before O'Connor was then seen producing a sawn-off shotgun and opening fire.

The sound of the gunshot burst through the speakers in the room before a lengthy stunned silence, which was mirrored by the reactions of the three officers watching the footage until Fuller paused it.

“That was the moment the unfortunate Ms Grey was killed by O'Connor” Fuller then announced, “as per the forensic report, shot in the back whilst near naked and then falling onto the expensive carpet in which she was later found wrapped up in the back of an abandoned Bedford HA van two days later.”

“And our mystery guest is calling the shots” Edwards added, “Literally...”

“From here on, the participants in the meeting then make their excuses and start leaving” Fuller then resumed the footage, “Leaving only O'Connor, Francis, our mystery guest and a terrified Sara still in the bedroom.”

“So, they have a dead body on the deck, an hysterical potential witness in the bedroom and Francis has the whole thing on tape” Phillips summarised, “Get out of that one, fellas...”

“Here we go...” Edwards then remarked, “Our mystery guest is leaving” he pointed out as the stranger was seen to shake hands with Francis and O'Connor before leaving the suite as mysteriously as he had arrived.

“And....” Fuller then called before suddenly pausing the footage again, “There he is.”

“Where?” Edwards asked.

“Whilst our mystery guest was careful to cover himself from the cameras, he is visible momentarily in that mirror there” Fuller pointed out before reaching across for a printout of the image and passing it across to the others, “Now I admit it is a little fuzzy, but if we were to find that man, we would be able to match him up I reckon.”

“All we have to do now is find him of course” Phillips pointed out.

“Now, there is O'Connor with a Swiss Army knife, probably cutting the carpet out with the blood stains in preparation to dispose of the evidence” Fuller continued, “Unfortunately this is the point at which Francis slips into the control room for the cameras and turns off the recording” he then declares as the screens then went blank and turned to static before he turned them off.

“So, how the hell did the mystery guest arrive and depart without any record of him coming or going?” Edwards then asked.

“I have an idea about that” Fuller responded, “Can you get hold of The Commander?” he then asked.

“Not a problem” Phillips responded.

“Oh, for God's sake...” Parr, the Hotel Manager responded as he looked through the slats of the venetian blind in his office window where he saw the patrol car coming down the driveway before pulling into the parking spaces near the main entrance, “Now what?”

“Ah, I see they managed to put the place back together” The Commander remarked as he and Longton got out of the car and noticed that the frontage of the hotel building had been largely repaired with glazing reinstated and two workmen installing a new set of doors at the main entrance.

“The amount they charge to stay at this place, they can probably afford it” Longton commented as their feet crunched on the neatly manicured gravel on their way to the main entrance.

Other than some slightly damaged woodwork, it was almost impossible to tell that anything had happened when Longton and The Commander entered the ornate main reception.

The Receptionist looked up from her desk as the two officers approached whilst Parr discretely watched through the slightly ajar office door.

“Good morning” The Commander then declared, “I take it the top floor is still sealed off?” he then asked.

“Err, yes Sir” the Receptionist confirmed, “No one has been up there except your colleagues.”

“Excellent, many thanks” The Commander responded before turning towards the stairs but not before looking to his left “Good morning, Mr Parr!” he then cheekily called which was when the Hotel Manager looked on from his office with a stern stare before slamming his office door shut.

“Operation Wind Up the Hotel Manager successfully completed” Longton remarked with a wry smile.

“Uh huh...” The Commander agreed as they started up the stairs.

“Whisky Sierra X-Ray One Three One from Two Four One, good morning” Phillips voice called over the radio.

“Good morning” The Commander responded as they continued up the stairs.

“Lieutenant Fuller would like to ask a favour of you” Phillips then explained.

“Go ahead” The Commander agreed.

“Are you in the hotel suite Sir” Fuller was then heard to call.

“Just arriving on the top floor now” The Commander confirmed as he and Longton reached the top of the stairs and then ducked underneath the crime scene perimeter tape, “What have you got for me?” he then asked as they made their way towards the main door into the suite which was being held open by more crime scene tape.

“I have pieced together the footage from the late Lord Francis’ elaborate camera system spliced with the soundtrack from the MI5 recording device that Grey planted in the bedroom” Fuller explained, “It all pretty much matches up with the statement Sara gave us, a few details in the wrong order but given the ordeal she was put through, I think we can forgive her.”

“Yeah...” The Commander readily agreed.

“Did Al tell you about our man of mystery?” Fuller then asked.

“He did indeed” The Commander confirmed, “And I take it, that solitary photo you managed to print which Al showed me is the only vaguely half decent image of him we have?” he then asked.

“I am afraid so” Fuller confirmed, “Now, what we cannot figure out is how our mystery guest entered the suite” Fuller explained, “and then left again, all without being seen anywhere or by anyone outside.”

“Okay” The Commander responded, “Talk me through what you have.”

“Right then” Fuller called as he reached for his blueprint plan of the top floor of the hotel, “Where are you now?” he then asked.

“Erm, main lounge I think” The Commander confirmed, looking around.

“The main meeting took place in that room you are in now” Fuller explained, “Mister Mystery entered the suite from somewhere beyond the bedrooms.”

“Down here I presume?” Longton indicated the connecting corridor off to their left and together, they duly headed down it.

“Master bedroom should be off to your left, secondary bedrooms to your right” Fuller then called, tracing the route on the plans as Edwards and Phillips both followed, looking over his shoulders.

“Affirmative” The Commander confirmed.

“Now that should lead to the study and what is labelled here as the library” Fuller then called.

“Desk, bureau, lots of Books” Longton response, “I would say that is pretty much on the money.”

“There are no cameras past the library door” Fuller then explained, “at least, none that I have managed to find...”

“So, wherever this guy came from, he entered the suite through here, somehow” The Commander concluded.

“No doors in here” Longton remarked as he looked all around before trying the handle of the window which refused to budge, “and this is either locked or has been painted shut for years I would reckon.”

The Commander looked all around, sensing something in the room was *quite* right but was unable to put his finger on exactly what until he did a double take at some of the bookcases off to his right.

“Hang about...” he then called, going over to the bookcase in the far corner and looking more closely, “there is a draft coming from over here...”

“Windy books?” Longton asked, clearly confused.

“Not exactly” The Commander responded as he began to feel with his hand all around the area to try and locate the exact source of the draught, “Ah, here we are” he then declared.

Longton looked on, still confused as The Commander began to feel all around the bookcase and its contents until suddenly there was a click and then with a creaking, he managed to open a secret door hidden within.

“Open sesame...” The Commander then declared with a sense of triumph.

“Nice...” Longton remarked as he came over and together, they peered into the darkness.

“Okay Simon” The Commander then called over the radio, “It looks like we have found some sort of secret back staircase, probably some old servants access from when this place used to be a manor house I think.”

“Oh, that isn't on the plans” Fuller responded as he rechecked his paperwork, “Where does it go?” he then asked.

“I have absolutely no idea” The Commander admitted, “Al, you got a torch on you?” he then asked.

“Err, yeah” Longton confirmed, producing a small pen torch from his inside tunic pocket, lighting it and passing it to The Commander who then used it to try and illuminate the interior beyond the mysterious secret entrance.

“Looks like we have got some spiral stairs, stone construction, rather dusty and heading downwards” The Commander then confirmed, “Let's see where it leads, shall we?” he then suggested.

“After you my friend” Longton insisted.

“Really?” The Commander responded with underwhelming enthusiasm, “Ah well then” he resigned himself to going first despite his fear of spiders of which there were sure to be plenty ahead in the darkness, “Here we go then.”

With some trepidation, The Commander duly began down the spiral staircase, the light from Longton's pen torch being only barely sufficient to illuminate their progress.

As they proceeded down however, a loud bang from behind them gave them both a fright.

“Hell...” The Commander responded as they both looked back to see that the doorway through which they had just come through had slammed shut on them, “That would have given me a heart attack if I had one...”

“Didn't you explore any dark creepy places when you were a kid?” Longton asked as they resumed their descent.

“Does the Northern Line count?” The Commander asked.

“Probably” Longton admitted.

As they headed further down into the darkness, they passed several points where in the wall there were at one time, entrances off the spiral staircase into other rooms but which had long since been sealed up with rudimentary brick work long ago.

“There must be a way out of here somewhere” Longton remarked as, after five minutes of walking carefully down in the darkness, they approached what appeared to be the bottom of the staircase.

“Someone has definitely been through here recently” The Commander remarked as he stooped down and took a closer look at the dust covered stone floor, “This has been

disturbed” he then indicated clear marks in the dust and debris where somebody had walked through.

“Here we go” Longton pointed ahead into the darkness where a level brick lined passageway headed off to their left.

“After you” The Commander indicated ahead.

“Thanks...” Longton unenthusiastically responded before heading off, shining the torch ahead before pausing at seeing something on the wall.

“Walls have ears...” The Commander read from the old World War Two era Government safety poster that was still visible on the wall despite the decades that had passed, “I guess this must have been used as some sort of shelter during the war.”

“Ah, there we are” Longton then called as the light of the torch caught something ahead, “I think I have found the way out.”

“Thank gawd for that” The Commander agreed as they proceeded to the end of the passageway where a small set of steps led upwards to a pair of old dilapidated wooden doors set at an angle above.

“On three?” Longton suggested as he and The Commander buffered their shoulders up against the doors.

“On three” The Commander agreed with a nod, “One, two and...”

“Three!” they both called together, pushing upward and successfully opening the old doors which crashed down outside.

“One Three One, are you still receiving, over?” Fullers voice was heard calling over the radio as Longton and The Commander emerged into the daylight and looked all around.

“Err, yes” The Commander then confirmed, “We just came out about fifty yards or so from the rear of the hotel building, in the middle of a forest it seems” he explained.

“Sam!” Longton called from nearby, “This is worth taking a look at.”

“What have you got Al?” The Commander asked as he walked over to him.

“Tyre tracks, fairly fresh ones and two different vehicles I would say” Longton pointed all around.

“Yes...” The Commander agreed, “Some sort of large car I would say and then overlapped by a smaller vehicle at a later point.”

“Our mystery guest arrives in some sort of posh motor, heads up the back stairs, enters the suite, orders the killing of Grey, leaves again the way he came and then a

little while later someone rocks up in that tatty old Bedford HA van that we found with the dodgy plates on it, and takes the body away?" Longton concluded.

'I think that is pretty much on the money" The Commander then agreed, "Simon" he then called over the radio, "We got a couple of vehicle tyre tracks here I would like photographed and casts taken if possible."

"Roger that" Fuller confirmed.

"Send the forensics guys over here as soon as you can" The Commander then explained, "Out the back of the hotel, forestry track which I reckon comes off the old railway line probably."

"I'll get them off and up to you in but a moment" Fuller confirmed.

"One Three One from your boss" Edwards then ominously called.

"Go ahead Guv" The Commander replied.

"Any chance of you gracing us with your presence back here at some point?" Edwards asked.

"I'm on my way back now Sir" The Commander confirmed.

"Good" Edwards responded, "Make sure you come and see me the moment you get back, won't you?" he then asked.

"Of course, Sir" The Commander agreed "One Three One out..."

"I'll wait here until the forensics guys arrive" Longton confirmed.

"Thanks Al" The Commander responded.

"Your friend Mr Parr won't be best pleased to see our lot coming up the driveway again" Longton then commented.

"Ah, diddums..." The Commander mockingly replied with a smirk.

At the top of the National Security & Police Service sits the National Administrator General who resides in an office on the top floor of the iconic New Scotland Yard building in Broadway, central London.

The current holder of the position of highest-ranking Police Officer in the land was held by James Peters who had been in office for several years now and that morning was in his office, working through files and paperwork which seemed to him to come in from the Home Office and other Government departments in ever increasing amounts.

It was, therefore, almost a relief when the telephone on the desk began to ring which gave him the excuse to toss the files aside, take a deep breath and then reach over to pick up the handset and answer the call.

“This had better be interesting Marion” Peters called to his Personal Secretary in the outer office, “I was halfway through dozing off to the latest musings of whoever is the Home Secretary this week” he remarked.

“I think that depends upon your point of view Sir” she responded, “Sir Robert Walmer is on the line” she then confirmed which saw Peters roll his eyes upwards in response.

“Have some strong coffee on standby and put him through” Peters then requested with some reluctance.

“Putting him through now Sir” Marion then confirmed.

Peters tapped his fingers on the edge of his desk with anticipation as he waited for the call to come through.

“Administrator General!” came the forthright sounding voice of Sir Robert Walmer, the Government’s Secretary of State for Government Information, “It has come to my attention that we have a situation regarding a well connected member of the Establishment.”

“If you mean the late Lord Francis, Minister” Peters responded, “I can assure you that the investigation is in full swing, and we have the very best officers in the Service on the case.”

“Not good enough!” Walmer immediately snapped back in an officious manner that made Peters glower at the telephone, “I want the highest level of attention on this matter, with careful monitoring of what information is released to the press, there is a risk of potential collateral damage to the reputations of several key nominals and friends close to the Government which we cannot allow.”

“In other words, Minister, you want this matter either dead and buried, swept under the carpet or whitewashed” Peters replied.

“Now, now Administrator General, I appreciate your sense of humour, but I am deadly serious” Walmer responded, “I want a full round table meeting convened today with all the officers involved present, I want to hear facts, I want to know exactly what is going on and then I will decide what course of action is necessary.”

“Very well Minister” Peters relented, partially to get rid of him “I will arrange the meeting and advise your office of the time and place.”

“Good” Walmer tersely responded, “Remember, Administrator General, I want a tight lid on this matter, good day” he then prompted and abruptly hung up.

“Prat...” Peters remarked as he hung up the telephone and then sat back before taking a deep breath and then letting it out.

He swivelled the chair around to look out of the window, across the city skyline as if in search of inspiration before something suddenly occurred to him and he smiled just a little.

“I wonder if...” Peters then remarked to himself and then rotated his chair back to the desk and picked up the telephone once again, “Marion?” he then called to his Personal Assistant once again, “Get me Divisional Superintendent Jim Edwards at Haychester as soon as possible please” he then requested.

“Right away Sir” Marion confirmed whereupon Peters hung up the telephone again and looked on with a wry smile.

“Heh heh...” Peters then smiled, “All right Mr Walmer, you want a meeting with everyone involved, you shall have it!”

The telephone rang once again and he quickly answered it, “Jim?” Peters then called, “I have just had an unpleasant conversation with a two-faced prat from the Government.”

“Oh, really?” Edwards replied from his office back in Haychester, “That doesn’t really narrow it down much, which one?” he then asked.

“Sir Robert Walmer” Peters confirmed with a barely disguised snarling under his breath, “Basically, he wants the whole Lord Francis case dead, buried and whitewashed.”

“Now, there is a surprise...” Edwards sarcastically responded.

“I have been given the order to round up everyone involved and get them in a room up here at the Yard ASAP” Peters then explained, “Do you think young Sam is up to facing a room of powerful people and not letting them get to him?” he then tentatively asked.

“Oh yes, he will be well up to the job Sir” Edwards confirmed with a knowing smile, “What do you have in mind?”

“Oh, I think it is time that odious toad Sir Robert was taken down a peg or three and I think our young colleague is just the man for the job, don’t you?” Peters suggested.

“I do, Sir, I do indeed...” Edwards fully agreed.

“Is this the best we have got?” The Commander asked as he came into the office and indicated the blown-up photograph of the mystery man taken from the videos which was prominently placed on the wall.

“Simon Fuller is working his best to try and clean it up” Forrester confirmed, “He's got his work cut out though.”

“If anyone can do it, he can” Longton remarked with a confident look.

“What about these other photographs?” The Commander then looked all over them on the wall.

“Managed to find the names of a couple more” Phillips confirmed, “The photographic club in this instance and they are squeaky clean with cast iron alibis” she explained, “One of them was in a restaurant with the Mayor of Haychester at the time.”

“Blimey...” The Commander responded.

“I think we can probably rule out Mickey's photography club as being involved in this mess” The Commander then concluded “What about his surveillance photographs?” he then asked.

“I have a couple of ideas about that” Philips responded as she picked up a file that was on her desk that contained copies of the photographs, “I am going to grab one of the mid shift newbies to drive me around looking for a match a bit later.”

“Let me know if you find anything” The Commander then requested.

“Your two friends from last night” Longton passed across a report, “We still have them on ice in the secure section of the morgue but there is not a shred of i.d. on them, and yes, they checked *absolutely* everywhere.”

“Eww...” The Commander remarked, screwing his face up at thought.

“Also, not even so much as the tiniest smudge of a fingerprint on their weapons either” Phillips added.

“Even the ammunition?” The Commander asked, more out of hope than expectation.

“Even the ammunition” Phillips regretfully confirmed, “Whoever these guys were, they were definitely not amateurs” she then remarked.

“Well, somebody doesn't like me and wants me dead” The Commander responded, “Mind you, that isn't exactly an exclusive little club” he then muttered under his breath.

“Perhaps you should keep your head down for a while?” Longton then tentatively suggested, even though he knew full well that was a totally fruitless suggestion.

“Not my style, you know that” The Commander reminded him, “Anyway, just think, if I buy it, you all get to draw lots for my parking space...”

“Let's just try and make sure that doesn't happen” Phillips suggested.

“Oh, I need biscuits” The Commander then declared, sitting down behind his desk and opening the bottom drawer, retrieving one of the packets of digestives and promptly commencing eating them.

“You always need biscuits” Longton remarked with a wry smile.

“All right” The Commander then declared as he finished a biscuit, “Let's see what the forensic guys say about the secret exit from the hotel, maybe the tyre tracks will match that old van, but the other set could be the vehicle that brought our Mr Mystery to the scene and took him away again.”

“Where are the rest of the gang?” Phillips then asked as she looked at the still photos taken from the video footage.

“Assuming the whole deal has not yet been completed” Longton summarised, “Then the various parties involved must still be around somewhere, either waiting to hand over the goods or awaiting delivery of whatever it is they are dealing in” Forrester suggested.

“In which case let's get out there and start searching for them” The Commander agreed, “The question is, where do we start?”

“We could trawl the B&B's, guesthouses, short term rentals, that sort of thing” Phillips suggested.

“It's worth a try” Longton agreed when a thought occurred to him, “What about a yacht or boat of some kind?” he then remarked, “Did you have any luck tracking down Lord Francis' boat?” he then asked Stride as he came into the room at that point.

“No one has seen it at any of the local ports or harbour docks for at least a fortnight” Stride confirmed, “I have got our friends from the coastguard watching out for it though, as soon as it appears, we'll be the first to know.”

“Excellent” The Commander responded, “Now, what about our drug dealing friend, err what was his name again?”

“Sylvester, Iain George Sylvester” Phillips confirmed, “We may have struck lucky on this one” she then declared, “We've got the warrant ready to be signed off in court as soon as they are in session later this morning but the cream on the cake is that his gaff is in fact an illegal squat and Haychester City Council have been trying to get him and his fellow squatters out of there for months.”

“Oooh, does that mean we can bring those lovely unsubtle guys from the bailiff's office with us as well?” The Commander asked, practically relishing the prospect.

“Absolutely...” Longton confirmed with a big smile.

“Much thinking to do, that requires more biscuits” The Commander then declared, taking another biscuit from the packet and then eating it.

“Sam!” Edwards called as he came into the investigation office to find The Commander behind his desk, where he was still munching biscuits and dropping crumbs all over the place.

“Sir?” The Commander responded, looking up and pausing mid biscuit.

“Your presence has been requested” Edwards explained, wiggling his finger in a beckoning motion, “bring everything you have got on this whole sorry saga.”

“Erm...” The Commander began but then paused to finish his biscuit before standing up, “Where am I going?” he then asked as he then piled the files into his briefcase along with the packet of biscuits before only just managing to close and fasten it.

“We” Edwards emphasised “are going to the Yard.”

The Commander initially looked out of the office window and down at the car parking area below.

“Scotland Yard” Edwards then clarified, “Come on, you're driving.”

“Great...” The Commander responded despondently as he started to put his uniform tunic on, only for Edwards to stop him.

“Put your decent one on, the one with all the medal ribbons” Edwards instructed, “...and less biscuit crumbs down it...” he then added with a wry smirk.

“Okay Guv” The Commander agreed, still not entirely sure what it was he was walking into here as he returned his tunic to the back of the chair and retrieved his best one from the coat rack behind him and put it on, “Better?” he then asked.

“Very tidy” Longton remarked.

“Now you look respectable” Edwards duly complimented him, “Come on, we need to get going” he then encouraged.

“Al!” The Commander called to Longton he and Edwards exited into the main corridor, “As I seem to have had a Papal Bull served on me, you are in charge until I get back.”

“Right” Longton confirmed, “Err, where will you be if I need to contact you?” he then asked.

“Scotland Yard” The Commander regretfully confirmed.

“Ah...” Longton replied, “Have fun and avoid the canteen's sausage rolls, my cousin at West End Central says they are like bricks.”

“I'll try to remember that thanks” The Commander agreed, “See you later, I hope...”

A couple of minutes later, Edwards and The Commander were outside, approaching the patrol car.

“All right Guv” The Commander declared as he unlocked the car and they both got in, “I’ll bite, what’s going on?”

“This has got political” Edwards ominously warned, “Lots of nervous people pacing up and down the corridors of power, mumbling and muttering.”

“They’ll wear a groove in their taxpayer funded Axminister carpet if they keep doing that” The Commander wryly pointed out as he drove down the side service road towards the main exit.

“You never let political status or power dissuade or influence you, do you?” Edwards commented.

“I don’t give a monkeys who they are, what they are or what hand the game of life has given them” The Commander, “If they are up to no good, I’ll nick them regardless.”

“What? Even the Queen?” Edwards casually asked.

“Oh no, she’s fine” The Commander confirmed, “Serves up a decent cup of tea and Prince Philip is rather good at poker too...”

“Not bad for a South London lad...” Edwards summarised.

“And a technically dead one at that” The Commander pointed out.

The silence in the Interview Room was suddenly pierced by the raspy sounding buzz as Longton activated the tape recorder before sitting down alongside Forrester at the table located in the centre of the room.

“Interview with Iain Sylvester” Longton announced towards the microphone, “The time is ten thirty-two on Thursday 21st September 1989, this interview is taking place in Interview Room Three at Haychester Security Service Office, present in the room are myself, Lieutenant Commander Alfred Longton, Lieutenant Graham Forrester and the suspect.”

Sylvester looked on from his seat on the other side of the table, unresponsive, his eyes barely moving as if he were in some kind of meditative trance.

“I remind you that you are still under caution and that you still have the right to ask for and consult with a solicitor or other legal representative at any time” Longton then informed him.

“No comment...” Sylvester quietly responded.

“I am showing the suspect exhibit AL01” Longton then declared for the benefit of the tape recording as Forrester passed him one of the clear plastic evidence bags from the floor which he took and placed in the centre of the table, “Approximately a hundred individually wrapped small plastic bags containing an unknown substance but believed to be a Class A narcotic.”

“No comment...” Sylvester casually replied.

“These were found about your person when you were arrested, as was these” Longton nodded to Forrester who proceeded to pass him two more evidence bags, adding them to the one already on the table, “Exhibits AL02, seven hundred and forty-five pounds in used banknotes and exhibit AL03, a nine millimetre Beretta semi-automatic pistol and seventeen rounds of ammunition.”

“No comment...” Sylvester once again casually replied, rolling his eyes around the room.

“As it stands” Forrester summarised, “At the very least you are going down for possession of a firearm, possession with intent to supply a Class A narcotic, and possibly money laundering as well.”

“I’ll say this again for the hard of hearing...” Sylvester replied before leaning forward, up close to the microphone, “NO COMMENT!!!!” he then theatrically shouted before sitting back again and calmly smirking.

“You should consider yourself lucky Mr Sylvester” Longton then remarked, “My colleague who regretfully isn’t available right now has a very dim view of drug dealers, especially cocky arrogant ones such as yourself.”

“Oh yes...” Forrester agreed, “He’s very much a graduate of the Frank Burnside school of diplomatic interviewing.”

“Huh?” Sylvester responded.

“Do you think he can swim?” Longton casually asked Forrester, “I mean, after what happened with the last dealer we had in...”

“Probably depends on if his legs still work” Forrester replied.

“Good point” Longton agreed, “Never mind Mr Sylvester” Longton then informed him, “You’ll be meeting our colleague later, when we turn over your drum” he confirmed with a wry smile as he and Forrester duly stood up, “Interview terminated at ten thirty-nine.”

Forrester duly switched off the tape recorder and took out the two cassettes, returning them to their boxes as Longton gathered up the evidence bags.

“Have a good long think Mr Sylvester” Longton then strongly suggested, “You’ve got a couple of hours whilst we sort out the search warrant.”

“You don't frighten me, copper...” Sylvester warned.

“We'll see if you feel the same whilst you watch us tear your place apart, shall we?” Longton remarked as he opened the interview room door and got the attention of the Custody Suite officer on duty, “Kev, take him back to his cell and let him stew for a Bit” he then instructed, “We have got a warrant to sort out...”

“Park in the street or use the car park?” The Commander as he drove along Victoria Street with the glass towers of New Scotland Yard approaching.

“Down into the car park” Edwards confirmed whereupon, just as the traffic lights changed, he turned off left into Broadway and then crossed the opposing flow of traffic to reach the top of the ramp that led to the underground car park beneath the New Scotland Yard building itself.

“Divisional Commander James Edwards, Haychester” he confirmed to the officer on duty at the top of the ramp, offering his warrant card.

“Ah yes Sir” the officer responded as he looked at Edwards' warrant card and then handed it back, “You are both expected, park anywhere down there and you will be met in main reception.”

“Thank you” Edwards replied whereupon the barrier was raised, and The Commander duly drove on down the ramp.

“Oh blimey, a bit busy down here, isn't it?” The Commander remarked as he drove around looking for a free parking space before finally finding one near the lift lobby door and skilfully reversing into it.

“Right then” Edwards declared as he released his seatbelt and got out which was when he did a double take and then smiled on seeing the sign on the wall immediately behind the patrol car signifying to whom that space was formerly allocated

“Into the lion's den?” The Commander suggested as he locked the car and duly followed Edwards, looking briefly back at the car where its gentle patina of dust and dirt from Haychester's rural roads contrasted sharply with the pristine vehicles of the Metropolitan Division in among which it was parked.

“Exactly...” Edwards agreed as they entered the waiting lift, the doors duly closed, and they quickly ascended to ground level and the reception area.

As the lift doors opened, Janice the Receptionist looked up from behind her desk and smiled as Edwards and The Commander approached.

“Hello again” Janice then called, “Back so soon?” she remarked.

“I was summoned!” The Commander ominously confirmed, “This is my Guvnor, Divisional Commander Jim Edwards, we are expected apparently.”

“Indeed you are gentlemen” Janice efficiently confirmed from her notes on the desk in front of her, “I believe you are going to be met here shortly, take a seat.”

“Thank you” Edwards responded whilst The Commander nodded his appreciation before they went over to some of the seats nearby.

“Ah, I see they dragged you up here too?” sounded a familiar voice whereupon Drugs Squad Commander Forster appeared and walked over to them.

“It would seem so” The Commander agreed as they shook hands, “This is my Guvnor, Divisional Commander Edwards” he then introduced his superior and they duly shook hands, “Yes we are related, technically...” he then vaguely explained.

“Family business, huh?” Forster remarked as he joined them on the seats.

“Something like that” Edwards agreed with a smile.

“We nabbed our local drug dealer last night” The Commander then remarked, “Nasty defiant scrote by the name of Iain Sylvester, got form and was carrying large amounts of Class A, cash and some serious firearms.”

“Sylvester...” Forster tried to recall the name, “Has he got form?” he then asked.

“Plenty” The Commander confirmed, “However, he seems to have promoted himself up a few leagues since the last time we had him in” he then explained, “Anyway, he is stewing in our cells back at Haychester, saying nothing so when I get back later today, we are planning to take him around to his place and tear it apart.”

“That usually works” Forster agreed, “The name rings a bell, I’ll check our records when I get back to the office and if I find anything, I’ll send it on to you.”

“I would appreciate it” The Commander replied with much gratitude.

“Jim, good to see you, it’s been a while” a very formal booming voice then called from across the room whereupon they all stood up as the Administrator General, Sir James Peters appeared and approached them.

“Thank you, Sir” Edwards replied as the two senior men shook hands warmly.

“Sorry I am a bit late” Peters then apologised, “Some country bumpkin has parked their patrol car in my space.”

“Whoops...” The Commander quietly remarked to himself as he realised the significance of the Administrator General's remark.

“And you must be the legend that is The Commander” Peters then remarked.

“I thought Sir that to be a legend, you had to be dead?” The Commander responded before suddenly realising something, “Oh, hang on a minute...” he then quietly said to himself.

“Well, let’s put it this way” Peters explained, “You are certainly becoming noticed thanks to your Herculean efforts, quite a record for one so young” he then commented.

“I just enjoy my job Sir” The Commander replied.

“Of course,” Peters responded, “Shall we?” he then indicated off down the main ground floor corridor whereupon he led the way whilst Edwards, Forster and The Commander followed.

“Where are we going Sir?” The Commander then asked as they strolled down the corridor.

“Briefing for the National Security & Intelligence Committee” Edwards explained, “Representatives from MI5, Special Branch, the Home Office and a few other people will be there” he then added, “Primarily this is for the benefit of the Prime Minister’s Special Security Adviser, Steven Crammer who will be overseeing the meeting.”

“An odious little political no-neck” Peters confirmed, “Mind you not as bad as Sir Robert Walmer, the Government Information Management and Coordination Minister, a.k.a. the Secretary of State for Bullshit!”

“Oh no, don’t tell me he is going to be there Sir?” Edwards asked with a clear sense of disgust.

“He wasn’t supposed to be but when he heard about this whole affair, he invited himself along” Peters explained.

“Who is giving the briefing?” The Commander then asked.

“You are” Peters duly informed him which was the point at which The Commander stopped dead in his tracks and looked on with a slight sense of disbelief.

“Me?” The Commander responded, not entirely sure he had heard the Administrator General correctly.

“You are the only one who is going to be in that room who knows more about what is going on than anyone else” Peters explained, “You’ll be fine, I know you have faced far worse situations than standing up in front of a committee of cigar smoking alcoholics with political agendas so complex they don’t know what policy they are supposed to be supporting from one day to the next.”

“Crammer is quite a forthright man” Edwards then warned as they continued on down the corridor, “He will ask you some pretty direct questions, he can be a tough cookie...”

“He needs to be, working for the PM” Peters added.

“So, if he asks you a direct question, speak your mind, give him a direct answer” Edwards advised.

“Got it” The Commander agreed.

“And here we are...” Peters then declared as they reached a double door where two officers were on guard outside who immediately proceeded to open it and let them through.

The Commander proceeded inside slightly hesitantly whilst Peters and Edwards remained outside the room for a moment.

“Err, I got your message about Chief Superintendent Travis” Peters then discreetly informed Edwards once the other meeting attendees were out of earshot, “I am arranging for him to be put on the proverbial gardening leave as soon as possible, he overstepped the mark and not for the first time, so it is time he was put out to grass.”

“Thank you, Sir,” Edwards responded.

“We will say no more about that until it’s official though” Peters then suggested to which Edwards nodded in full agreement, “Good, right then, let’s see what you stepson is made of, shall we?” he then suggested before leading Edwards into the briefing room.

“Hello, here comes trouble...” a familiar voice called from across the room as The Commander walked around the table, making his way towards his designated seat when he looked up and saw Richard Crowthorne smiling at him from the opposite side of the table.

“Blimey, they have dug out the family silver for this!” The Commander responded as he took his seat, “I owe you and your two lads a drink.”

“I got the message” Crowthorne confirmed, “I’ll make sure they get it.”

“You have a friendly man from MI5?” Forster asked as he sat down next to The Commander.

“Old friend of the family” The Commander explained with a knowing smile.

“Always useful to have” Forster then admitted.

“Okay, ladies and gentlemen” Peters declared from the front of the briefing room, “If we are all comfortable?” he then looked around as the last attendees took their seats, “Then we can begin.”

“Showtime...” Edwards remarked aside to The Commander.

“Now, I hope there is no need to remind you that this meeting is classified and that nothing discussed in the room leaves this room” Peters then continued, “This matter is, as I have been reminded by the Secretary of State, Sir Robert Walmer” he indicated the short stout officious looking man sat at the far end of the table, “a matter of extreme concern to Her Majesty’s Government, there is some concern that there could be some err, what was the word you used Minister?”

“Load of old pony?” The Commander quietly muttered under his breath which prompted a smile from Edwards and Crowthorne.

“Negative publicity, Administrator General” Walmer almost grunted in response, the look of disdain remaining on his face, unchanging in any way, “We have a General Election coming up and we want to ensure everything is squeaky clean and smelling of roses, no backwash from any unfortunate coincidental activities that may or may not have been uncovered by your investigations.”

“As you wish Minister” Peters agreed, managing professionally to hide his deep distrust and aversion to him, “The investigation is under the jurisdiction of the Haychester office and their Chief Superintendent, Jim Edwards has joined us today along with the officer heading the investigation, so without further ado, may I introduce Lieutenant Commander Sam Edwards” he then indicated The Commander.

“Good morning” The Commander responded as he stood up and looked around before taking a deep breath and commencing his briefing.

The others in the room, with the notable exception of Walmer responded with warm greetings which The Commander allowed to settle down before continuing.

“This is a complex case” The Commander then began, “many strands, a lot of people lying, a lot of money, vested interests, shadowy figures and the potential for some nice juicy scandal.”

“This should be good” Crowthorne remarked, practically rubbing his hands with glee.

“The first we became aware of this case was a few days ago when the blood-stained designer handbag of one Sophie Elizabeth Grey was found in an archaeological excavation trench in Priory Park, located in the centre of Haychester.”

The audience was attentive as The Commander paused momentarily to check his notes before continuing.

“Supposedly, Ms Grey, who was twenty-one years of age, worked as a Facilities Manager at the very high class Wadhurst Manor Hotel, located approximately fifteen miles north of Haychester” The Commander then continued, “At that point she was classified as a missing person as there was no trace of her other than the very interesting handbag which I am reliably told by those that know a lot more about women’s fashion than me, cost way more than a young woman of her age and apparent employment could possibly afford, this also being reflected in the well-appointed yet barely lived in apartment in the centre of Haychester.”

Some of the people present made some discrete notes, other simply remained attentive whilst Walmer continued to look distinctly disinterested.

“Early on in this investigation, it became apparent that the woman in question not only had disappeared but that on examining documentation, we discovered that according to the Register of Births, Deaths & Marriages, she actually died at the age of three” The Commander then revealed, “and yet managed to get a driving licence and a passport many years after her death which, after some more digging around led us to the conclusion, subsequently confirmed by my friend and colleague from MI5 here that she was in fact an agent working deep undercover and that the deceased’s identity was being used to form a legend.”

“Very naughty...” Peters remarked whereupon Crowthorne grimaced slightly in response...

“Whilst the late Ms Grey, to use her assumed name was officially working as a Facilities Manager, her actual cover was as a high class escort” The Commander then continued, “This allowed her to get close to this man” he then produced a number of photographs, “Lord Richard Francis, third son of the Earl of Haychester, a very rich and foolish man, fond of fast cars and faster women and who spent most of his time when he was not racing around in one of his massive collection of cars, screwing pretty much every young woman in Southern England and recording said trysts on a very sophisticated video recording system set up in the top floor suite which he permanently rented.”

“Two hundred and thirty-seven different women in his bed in the last eighteen months alone” Edwards confirmed.

“Bloody hell...” Crowthorne remarked, unsure whether to be either impressed or horrified.

“In addition to his motoring and carnal interests, Francis had a lot of business interests which made him the perfect man to launder vast sums of money through his various accounts, but I am getting ahead of myself here” The Commander then redirected his thread back, “Further investigations regarding the disappearance of Ms Grey led us to a bus journey she took the previous day where she alighted approximately half way between Haychester and Midhurst, that evening her body was discovered in the back of an abandoned Bedford HA van, wrapped in a segment of carpet about which more later, she was shot in the back at point blank range with a sawn-off shotgun.”

“Ouch...” Peters winced.

“Do we know where she was killed?” Crowthorne then asked.

“Oh yes...” The Commander confirmed, “But we are in danger of getting ahead of ourselves again...”

“Please do continue” Peters then prompted.

“Investigations led us to a photographic club, a poker club and time and again, Lord Francis kept popping up like a bad penny” The Commander then continued, “In the course of these investigations, a number of incidents occurred that clouded the situation remarkably, firstly one of our key witnesses was shot and seriously wounded in the poker club's meeting on the first floor and another person involved was found dead in his car after talking to us, a wadge of grass shoved in his mouth.”

“Classy...” Forster remarked, “that was the gopher guy with the baked bean cans full of illegal narcotics, wasn't it?”

“Yeah, that was him” The Commander confirmed, “and he wasn't killed for the dubious MOT on that clapped out old van of his either.”

“Bean cans?” Peters asked?

“Part of whatever is going on seems to involve the importation and onward distribution of narcotics” The Commander went on to explain, “A significant quantity of it was found, being smuggled inside catering size cans of baked beans, apparently a fairly well-known trick of drug smugglers so I am told.”

Forster nodded in agreement.

“As a direct result of that discovery” The Commander continued, “Three arrests were made, all low-level helping hand gophers, nobody of any significance, the only significant individual on site made their getaway, killing poor Marcus on the way.”

“Our big Irish friend I presume?” Forster asked to which The Commander nodded in confirmation himself, “Any luck finding him?” he then asked.

“Yes and no” The Commander then admitted, “We do know who he is, one Patrick Shaum O'Connor, thirty-five years old and a strongman stroke enforcer for a little outfit based in Ireland called the IRA...”

“Uh oh...” Peters responded.

“According to the inside source of our friends at Special Branch” The Commander continued as he passed O'Connor's photograph around the table, “Six months ago, he got into a spot of bother, had a bit of a falling out with one of the local Brigade Commanders so was sent over here to the UK to take a break, cool his heels off, do some sightseeing.”

“That's what we were told...” Special Branch Section Commander Heathfield agreed with a notable tone of reluctance.

“Bad news, your source has, possibly without realising, been feeding you dud gen” The Commander then confirmed.

“That would explain why our source was found face down in the River Liffey this morning with a bullet hole in the back of his head and his mouth stuffed full of grass” Heathfield then regretfully confirmed.

“O’Connor is in fact very active” The Commander then announced, “All the evidence suggests that far from being on a sabbatical, he is in fact the overseer for this little deal that they have got going on, a triangle deal of drugs, weapons and good old fashioned cold hard cash, lots of it.”

“Let me guess” Heathfield remarked, “Your Lord Francis is the money man.”

“Give the man a gold star” The Commander confirmed, “Lord Francis’ is the financial lynch pin in the whole thing, a man with very high status, multiple bank accounts, lots of cash moving through his various business interests all the time, the perfect man for a spot of laundry.”

“Erm, Lord Francis had numerous investments registered through Government accounts...” Walmer worryingly remarked.

“Yes, I suspect he probably did” The Commander agreed, “Which means....”

“Government funds have been used to launder cash and finance arms and drug deals...” Peters concluded.

“Whoops...” Crowthorne remarked.

“Exactly” The Commander confirmed, “On the evening of Ms Grey’s death, the various parties involved in this caper gathered in Lord Francis’ top floor suite where, thanks to his fondness for recording everything that he gets up to in there, admittedly mostly pornographic, we have a visual record of those that attended, not only our big Irish friend O’Connor but also various other faces known to us such as these two characters” he then passed some more photographs around the room, “Lionel Davis, well known armed blagger amongst other talents and his ever present sidekick, the muscle of that particular outfit, Tony Prentis.”

“This guy Davis, I know very well” Peters remarked, “I was in Robbery Squad at the time, and we had him well and truly pinned on for an armoured car job in Willesden in 1978, couldn’t make it stick though as the evidence and witnesses were got at by person or persons unknown.”

“Is this some form of IRA cell we are seeing here?” Forster suggested.

“No, I don’t think so” The Commander responded, “I believe our friend from Special Branch here will confirm?” he then looked towards Heathfield.

“Indeed I concur” Heathfield confirmed, “IRA cell’s tend to be very much Irish only, no outsiders” he explained his reasoning, “This group have local talent, outsiders, all sorts going on and they are not being really all that subtle about it, also there is no way they would get involved with someone like Lord Francis, a man who is a major part of the very British establishment they so abhor.”

“So, what are they doing?” Peters asked.

“Best guess?” The Commander responded, “Smuggling in arms, explosives and paying for it in laundered cash raised from the importation and distribution of drugs, all of it laundered through a middle man so interconnected with the Establishment, using Government financial accounts that if it were to come to light, the scandal and embarrassment for the Government would be huge.”

“Which explains what he is doing here...” Edwards discreetly pointed towards Walmer.

“Got your bucket of whitewash ready by any chance?” Crowthorne sarcastically remarked aside to Walmer who merely sneered in response.

“At that meeting in the hotel, we have now established that money changed hands between the parties involved before most of them retired to the bedroom for some, erm...” The Commander tailed off with a little embarrassment.

“R&R?” Edwards suggested.

“That’ll do” The Commander agreed, “Anyway, afterwards, the video recordings pick up a mysterious gentleman arriving by a hitherto unknown secret entrance into the suite, he manages to evade the various cameras so we never really see his face but it is clear he is the top man involved in all this as he then orders the execution of Ms Grey, shot in the back by O’Connor, confirmed by the carpet her body was found wrapped in, matching that in the suite where a section had been very recently replaced.”

“Any idea who this guy is?” Crowthorne asked, his curiosity piqued.

“This was the best image we managed to get of him” The Commander passed him another photograph, “the side of his face was momentarily caught in a mirror, it’s not much to go on I am afraid.”

“Hmm...” Crowthorne thoughtfully responded as he looked at the photograph, being careful to shield it away from Walmer’s eyes, “Do you mind if I keep this?” he then asked.

“Be my guest” The Commander confirmed, “So, we know that an MI5 agent working undercover in an attempt to get close to Lord Francis was killed on the orders of a mystery man by an IRA enforcer.”

“Christ...” Peters exclaimed.

“It gets better Sir” The Commander then continued, “Lieutenant Commander Longton and I decided to pay Lord Francis a visit at his luxury suite on the top floor of the hotel, when we arrived, he was in a hurry to leave, we pursued him downstairs and out to his car where as he duly started the ignition, it blew up, killing him instantly and nearly taking Al and I with it.”

“Is this the ‘D Notice’ that was issued, Lieutenant Commander?” Peters asked, consulting his own notes.

“Correct Sir” The Commander confirmed, “As far as the world and his wife are concerned, Francis’s car exploding was the result of a faulty fuel line and poor maintenance, in reality it was plastic explosive and a detonator that had all the hallmarks of an IRA manufactured explosive device.”

“A bomb...” Walmer responded despondently.

“A bomb” The Commander agreed, “The subsequent search of Lord Francis’s suite led to the discovery of the sophisticated video recording set up that in turn led us to the meeting.”

“What was he recording?” Forster asked.

“Mostly his bedroom antics with a *lot* of different young women” The Commander confirmed, “According to Francis’ own records, somewhere in excess of two hundred different women have been in his bed in the last eighteen months alone, all recorded and carefully catalogued and indexed.”

“The blackmail potential of all that alone doesn’t bear thinking about” Peters commented, “Anyone notable on his list of conquests?” he then tentatively asked.

“Well, apparently his final conquest on the night before he died was the teenage granddaughter of Haychester’s esteemed Member of Parliament” Edwards remarked.

“The tabloids would love that” Peters commented.

“This is where it gets complicated” The Commander then resumed.

“You mean, *more* complicated?” Crowthorne asked.

“Err, yeah” The Commander then admitted before continuing, “We also have evidence of witness intimidation, my best informant was shot and injured in an attempt on his life, he’s okay though, as already mentioned, Marcus the fence was killed by O’Connor who also shot Ms Grey on orders from a Mister Mystery whilst the other girl, an actual escort girl was given a heck of a beating but thankfully was saved by the intervention of Francis, instead being found left for dead by a cab driver who fortunately brought her to safety.”

“What about the err...” Edwards tapped his right ear.

“Oh yes, I almost forgot” The Commander recalled, “Despite only a couple of people knowing where she was being looked after, two goons turned up and tried to erase her, she has now been moved along with my informant to a secure location, an operation that required some deception as a couple more goons showed up trying to intercept them.”

“So, how did they know where to find them?” Forster asked.

“Somebody bugged the Haychester offices with listening devices” The Commander then passed an evidence bag around, “We found these, well, our techie genius found

these in the ceiling of Superintendent Edwards' office, the investigation office, the canteen and even my patrol car."

"Sophisticated little trinket" Crowthorne remarked, "Top of the line these, way above our budget."

"So, despite your best efforts at keeping everything under wraps" Peters summarised, "walls had ears, and someone was listening the whole time?"

"It would appear so" The Commander sadly agreed, "We set up a false transport route for our two witnesses from the hospital and they completely fell for it."

"Remind me to get this place swept..." Peters wryly remarked.

"Remind me to remove our bugs before you do that" Crowthorne then jokingly responded.

"So, who planted these then?" Forster asked as he too took a look at the evidence bag now it had reached him.

"That's what I want to know" The Commander agreed, "Someone has been organising a counter operation, they want witnesses silenced either by intimidation or through death, and then there was last night's excitement."

"We are not going to like this, are we?" Heathfield suggested.

"You could say that Sir" The Commander agreed, "Yesterday evening, I met with the poker club, played a few hands, won fifty quid and got some useful information" he then announced, "On my way back to the office afterwards, I became aware that I was being discreetly followed so I led them on a merry dance to a pinch point which is when I discovered that their intention was to kill me", this revelation pretty much came as a shock to almost everyone in the room and further grabbed their undivided attention.

"Fortunately, I had a couple of guardian angels watching over me yesterday evening" The Commander then continued, "and thanks to their assistance, both potential assassins were neutralised."

"Who were they?" Peters asked, obviously concerned.

"Unfortunately, these two men had no identification on them whatsoever other than they were armed with these" he then passed over evidence photographs of the firearms recovered at the scene.

"MP5's" Peters remarked as he looked at the photographs before passing them on around the table, "Nasty..."

"Law enforcement specification ones no less" The Commander then confirmed with a subdued irritation barely detectable in his voice, "and for a bonus, these ones have no

serial numbers on them, that means they were supplied to a UK Government department or agency that specialises in secret operations.”

“This is ridiculous!” Walmer tried to protest but The Commander just ignored him.

“That means, gentlemen” The Commander then continued, “that someone in this room, or someone under the command of someone in this room has gone off piste, which makes me well and truly piste off.”

“Are you saying that someone wants you dead?” Heathfield asked, scarcely believing what he had heard.

“Well, it wouldn't be the first time” The Commander honestly admitted, “but this is the first time to my knowledge that someone in the corridors of power wants me dead.”

“But why?” Peters asked, “I don't understand?”

“Because someone is very afraid” The Commander explained, “Afraid that in the course of my typically unsubtle investigations, I might stumble across something potentially embarrassing or damaging to the Government which brings us to you...” he then looked directly at Walmer, “Why are you here?” he then asked him directly.

“I'm sorry...” Walmer responded, clearly confused, “What do you mean, Lieutenant Commander?”

“In this room right now are the senior representatives of virtually every major law enforcement agency and section in the country” The Commander proceeded to explain, “plus little old me and then there is you, Mr Walmer, a snivelling little civil servant from a Government department that has absolutely nothing to do with police and law enforcement, not part of the chain of command, nor in any way connected with the Home Office, therefore I ask again, why are you here?”

“It is my responsibility you jumped up little twerp to ensure the integrity of Her Majesty's Government!!” Walmer angrily responded.

“Integrity, that's a good one...” Crowthorne scoffed at the thought, but Walmer was so intent on making his point that the remark did not even register.

, “and all the time amateurish morons like you keep pushing your nose into business that DOES NOT concern you, I have the responsibility of ensuring that full damage limitation is in place to ensure a continuity of secure Government.”

“In other words, you want a whitewash, sweep it all under the carpet and all those killed and injured by all this can go to hell?” Peters angrily responded.

“As we say in my Department, NMP...” Walmer defiantly replied.

“NMP?” Edwards asked The Commander aside.

“Not My Problem?” The Commander suggested to a look of realisation from Edwards.

“Exactly...” Walmer then confirmed with a sneer.

“Now, I don’t give a monkeys whose agenda I am treading on” The Commander then authoritatively continued, “but it is drastically clear that someone is trying to stir the pot for their own ends and that must stop, I don’t care who and I don’t care how but I do care when” he then warned, “The fact remains two people have been murdered, two more seriously injured and we have very serious crimes being committed and it is my job, my duty to find out who is doing what, stop them, nick them and throw them in jail where they belong.”

“Well said” Peters readily agreed.

“...and if anyone here has a problem with that, or indeed has a problem with me” The Commander then honestly stated, “Then quite frankly that is between you and your shrink, it has nothing to do with me.”

Walmer merely looked on, still sneering but now realising that it was time to shut up and retreat from the debate before he got another verbal mauling.

“So, what do you need?” Peters then asked.

“Quite frankly, I need tea, biscuits and a break” The Commander honestly admitted, “We need to identify and find this man” he then held up the photograph of the mystery individual from the hotel suite meeting “and we need to find the weapons, drugs and cash before any of it is delivered and or disappears.”

“Well, whatever resources we have that may be of use are yours” Heathfield confirmed, “Just pick up the phone and ask.”

“I might just do that, thanks” The Commander agreed, “in the meantime, if any of you have any influence over the goons trying to bury this whole mess for their own convenience, tell them to call off the dogs and let me get on with my job.”

“This is going nowhere Julie” Stride remarked to Phillips as they continued to walk around the old Roman city walls that encircled the city of Haychester as she scrawled off another possibility on her list of possible locations for the photographs.

“Tell me about it” Phillips reluctantly agreed as they crossed the top end of North Street and headed across towards the narrow Priory Lane.

“Well...” Stride then remarked as he took the copy of Mickey’s photographs and looked at them for himself, “Mickey took these somewhere, the question is, where?”

“Let’s try down here” Phillips pointed the way ahead down Priory Lane where in the distance was a small rear entrance through the wall into Priory Park at a point where the Roman city walls resumed, forming the northeastern perimeter of the Park.

“Back where it all began” Stride commented as they passed through the small stone arch and then headed up to the left, back up onto the top of the high walls, looking down on the bowling green with the old Priory building beyond before looking around when he realised that Phillips was looking in completely the opposite direction, over the wall.

“Dave...” Phillips called back whereupon he went over to join her, “What do you think?” she then asked, showing him one of the photographs that up until now she had dismissed as not of any importance.

“Come again?” Stride responded, not exactly understanding the context.

“We have been looking at the main set of photos showing the meet” Phillips then explained, “This one came from earlier in the film roll, probably Mickey testing his lens or hoping to see someone in a bedroom window I expect but call me old fashioned but that” she indicated the scene in the photograph “look a lot like that” she then pointed ahead to the rear of the houses on Franklin Place in the shadow of the outside of the city wall.

“Well, this was taken at night and here we are in broad daylight” Stride remarked as he compared the photograph with view ahead “but I reckon that is one and the same tree for a starter.”

“Right, finally, now we are getting somewhere!” Phillips gleefully declared as she then scanned around the park below them until something else caught her eye and she then headed off further around the wall which caught Stride out who had to rush to keep up.

“Hey, Julie, wait for me!” Stride called after her.

“Ah, yes this is it” Phillips then declared as she checked another of the photographs and then pointed ahead to the old castle mound that dominated the north east corner of the park, once part of a medieval motte and bailey castle but now simply a large hill with a formal garden on the top and a spiral pathway winding its way around up to the summit.

“Okay...” Stride responded, not really understanding what he was looking at.

“You see in this photo” Phillips then explained, “If you look behind the three guys there, you can see a metal fence, and that fence is right over there” she then pointed directly ahead at the mound and specifically at the metal spear point palisade fencing that ran on the outer edge of the spiralling path.

“I see what you mean” Stride agreed after looking carefully at the photograph, then the railings and then back to the photograph again, “Good place for a meet too, late at

night, park closed, limited lighting, no nosey neighbours watching from behind their net curtains.”

“Now all we have to do is find out who the hell these guys are and where we can find them” Phillips then remarked, “What’s happening with our local friendly drug dealer and that search warrant?” she then asked.

“I think Al should be getting it stamped and authorised sometime this morning” Stride confirmed “and then when The Commander gets back from his pow wow at Scotland Yard, we saddle up and go and kick a or two door in.”

“Should be fun” Phillips responded with a smile, “Come on, let's get back to the office and tell them what we found.”

The meeting at New Scotland Yard had concluded and the attendees were moving out of the room when Walmer came storming out of the room like a bull on a charge.

“So, when are you executing this drugs warrant?” Forster asked The Commander as they walked down the corridor together.

“Oh, as soon as I get back hopefully” The Commander confirmed.

“Would you mind if I and a couple of my lads joined the party?” Forster then inquired, “You could probably use our expertise.”

“By all means, always welcome” The Commander confirmed with a friendly smile but at that point Forster became aware of someone approaching with grim determination.

“Don't look now, but your new best friend is heading this way...” Forster quietly remarked to The Commander as he noticed Walmer heading straight for them.

“Oh, deep joy...” The Commander responded as Walmer stomped to a stop right behind him.

“Now, you listen here Lieutenant Commander” Walmer protested whereupon The Commander calmly turned around to face him, “I am the Government representative here and I order you...”

“Erm, you cannot actually give me orders Minister” The Commander politely yet firmly pointed out, “In fact, if I find you are interfering in my investigation in any way, I shall not hesitate to have your collar felt for Perverting The Course of Justice and anything else I can think of, I trust that was clear enough for you?”

“Consider your card marked, Lieutenant Commander” Walmer then angrily responded before storming off in a major huff.

“That guy has some serious personal issues” Forster remarked.

“Oh yeah...” The Commander agreed, “I need to tap up my usual sources and see what dirt we have on file for him, he is definitely going on The List.”

“Well, that was entertaining, I must say” Peters remarked with a big smile as, with the side show now over, he, Edwards and Crowthorne headed down the corridor from the briefing room as Walmer pushed past them without saying a word and disappeared off towards the lifts.

“If there is one thing that Sam is good at more than anything else, it's putting the wind up people who most definitely deserve it” Edwards remarked, almost with a sense of pride in his adopted son.

“So, why the hell has he not been promoted yet?” Peters then asked.

“Believe me Sir, I have tried” Edwards then admitted, “He just won't take it.”

“Ah, well, I am sure we can think of something” Peters then remarked but at that point decided not to continue with the subject as Forster and The Commander joined them.

“Impressive stuff Lieutenant Commander” Crowthorne remarked with a big smile, “I do enjoy a good vocal joust, especially if it some officious twerp on the receiving end.”

“You do realise that Walmer can make a lot of noise?” Peters then warned.

“So can a flatulent rhinoceros” The Commander then pointed out.

“Quite...” Peters responded with an awkward smile as he and Crowthorne struggled to suppress giggles whilst Edwards merely rolled his eyes upwards in response.

“So, what is your next move, Lieutenant Commander?” Crowthorne then asked.

“I have colleagues working on trying to locate any members of the gang that we can find” The Commander then summarised, “We have calls out all over the place seeing if we can find out who the mystery man is and then there is the drugs connection, a search warrant for which is hopefully being sorted out as we speak which means I can go and kick in someone's door as soon as I get back to Haychester.”

“I swear by almighty God that the evidence I am about to give is the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth” Longton declared, his right hand on the rather battered old leather-bound bible, “Lieutenant Commander Alfred Tiberius Longton, Badge Number WSX One Eight One attached to Haychester office.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant Commander,” Judge David Unwin, the presiding Judge of that morning's sittings of Haychester Crown Court responded as he made some notes

in the official record of proceedings, “I believe you have a warrant you wish to have authorised?” he then asked.

“Yes, My Lord” Longton confirmed as he produced the official document and handed it to the Court Usher who then proceeded to carry it across the Court and then handed it up to the Judge who proceeded to read it carefully.

“Right then, Lieutenant Commander” Unwin then remarked, “I see this is a search warrant in relation to drugs charges and other related investigations?” he then read from the document, “What are these 'other investigations' you are referring to here, somewhat vaguely? It strikes me as one of those grey areas that a certain colleague of yours is fond of dropping in to official documentation in order to give him free reign to start all manner of mayhem and chaos.”

“I am sure that my infamous colleague would never abuse formal proceedings in such a way” Longton reassured him with a smile.

“Yes...” Unwin responded, very much aware of The Commander's reputation, “Do continue” he then prompted.

“We have reason to believe that the premises listed on the warrant may hold considerable evidence relating to drug dealing, possibly including manufacture and the person of interest, currently in custody has extensive previous form for drug offences” Longton then confirmed, “In addition, the residence in question is also an illegal squat which means we have further grounds to enter and search the premises.”

“All right Lieutenant Commander Longton” Unwin agreed with obvious reluctance as he proceeded to sign, date and then stamp the document before handing it back to the Court Usher, “I agree to the search warrant, but please tell your colleague that this is not a free licence to go on one of his fishing expeditions?”

“I will be sure to tell him my Lord” Longton confirmed with a knowing smile as he received the warrant documentation back from the Court Usher, “He should be on his way back from annoying the powers that be up at New Scotland Yard within the hour.”

“Why am I not surprised?” Unwin knowingly responded.

“Wake up Guv, we are here” The Commander called to Edwards who had dozed off in the front passenger seat on the journey back to Haychester.

“Huh, what?” Edwards suddenly woke, looking around with a sense of disorientation, “Where is here?” he then asked.

“The scenic delights of the Haychester Bypass Guv” The Commander confirmed as the traffic lights changed and he moved off towards the centre of the city and onto the inner ring road.

“How long have I been asleep for?” Edwards then asked.

“About an hour I think” The Commander recalled, “Ever since I turned off the M23 at Gatwick.”

“Thanks for letting me sleep” Edwards then remarked, “I’m getting too old for all this...”

“Don’t you even *think* of retiring Guv” The Commander warned with sincerity “If you go, I’ll wind up getting promoted, or worse...”

“Yeah, the subject of your career progression did come up as it happens” Edwards admitted to which The Commander rolled his eyes upwards in response, “You made quite the impression with the Administrator General and the rest of the top brass, the way you handled that political pipsqueak Walmer in particular.”

“That snivelling little git was attempting to patronise me and insult my intelligence” The Commander explained as he drove around the Southgate one way system, past the bus station before pausing at the traffic lights as the railway level crossing barriers just around the corner were lowering, “I gave him nothing less than he deserved.”

“You stomped on him pretty hard” Edwards warned, “He could make life awkward for you.”

“If anyone has a problem with me, it is their problem, not mine” The Commander dismissively responded as the traffic lights changed and he moved off, bearing around to the right where he then noticed someone familiar emerging from the Crown Court building, “Ah, there’s Al” he then pointed out, pulling into the right hand side of the road.

“Oh, hello!” Longton called as he came up to the driver side window, “How was the big city?” he then asked.

“Not my favourite place” The Commander admitted, “Enjoyed putting the wind up some officious minister though” he then remarked with a broad smile.

“If it’s all right with you two” Edwards remarked as he got out of the car and stepped over to the pavement, “I am going to walk back to the office, I think I need some fresh air.”

“Right you are Guv” The Commander responded before he and Longton watched their superior officer walk away.

“Is he all right?” Longton asked as he got in the passenger side of the patrol car.

“I am not entirely sure” The Commander admitted, “I think he might be thinking of retiring or some such horrific possibility,”

“Nah, can't see it myself” Longton responded, “Anyway, I got the warrant” he then brandished the paperwork with a sense of triumph, “Judge Unwin did mention he could sense which bits were your contribution to it though.”

“Always nice to have your craftsmanship recognised” The Commander responded.

“He also asked me to remind you that this document is not a free licence for some kind of fishing trip” Longton then warned.

“As if I would do that...” The Commander sarcastically replied.

“A bit of good news whilst you were away” Longton then remembered, “The intrepid dynamic duo of Phillips and Stride have confirmed the location of that meeting Mickey photographed the other night.”

“Sounds promising, Priory Park by any chance?” The Commander then asked as he negotiated the one-way system before turning off into South Street and heading up towards the City Centre.

“Priory Park” Longton confirmed, “the old castle mound, the railings match those in the background of the photos.”

“Yep, that is what Mickey indicated yesterday afternoon” The Commander responded, “Call up the guys, it's time to kick someone's door in.”

“Roger that” Longton agreed as he reached for the radio, “One Eight One to Control” he then called.

“Control receiving” came Judd's familiar voice.

“Can you page the team for me” Longton then called, “We've got the warrant and are going to make our way over there shortly.”

“Understood One Eight One” Judd confirmed, “Forster and a couple of his Drugs Squad guys have just arrived, apparently you invited them along?”

“I invited them to join our little party” The Commander confirmed.

“That's a roger on that” Longton duly responded, “Have the prisoner escorted to his humble abode and we will meet them all there.”

Crowthorne fiddled with his pen as he sat in the rear of a black cab, making his way back to his office, deep in thought before reaching into his inside coat pocket and taking out the photograph of the mystery individual that The Commander had given him, back at the New Scotland Yard meeting.

Unfolding the piece of paper, he looked at the photograph with an ever increasing sense of concern before folding it and returning it back to his jacket pocket and then looking out of the side window, still very much in intense thought.

“Jerry” he then called up to the cab driver, for this was one of a number of special black cabs that were run by MI5 with their own people as drivers, but to anyone outside the organisation, just an ordinary black taxi cab much like the thousands of others on the streets of London.

“Yes Sir” Jerry responded, looking in the rear-view mirror.

“Where is the Director General right about now?” Crowthorne then asked, ominously.

“Gary took him over to his club in Marylebone about an hour ago, lunch with his opposite number from MI6” Jerry confirmed.

“That means he will be there well into the afternoon then” Crowthorne concluded, “Change of plans Jerry, Marylebone and step on it.”

“You got it Guvnor” Jerry confirmed, making a swift turn off to the right and accelerating away.

“This the place?” Forster asked as he looked over the front seats of the patrol car towards a near derelict looking house.

“Yep, this is the place” The Commander called as he shut off the engine and released his seat belt, “Al?” he then looked across at Longton.

“It matches what is on the warrant” Longton then confirmed, double checking the paperwork carefully.

“Right then, all we need is the guest of honour and then we can get this party started” The Commander then gleefully declared as he got out of the car, joined by Longton as well as Forster and his two colleagues from the Drugs Squad.

“Here they come” Longton remarked as a Security Service van approached from the opposite direction and came to a stop, nose to nose with The Commander's patrol car whereupon Forrester got out of the driver's seat.

“Right, where do you want him?” Forrester then called, as they all walked around to the rear of the van and then opened the doors to reveal Sylvester sitting there, handcuffed and looking grumpy whilst surrounded by four armed officers.

“Come on then” The Commander called “Let's be having you.”

“You are making a huge mistake” Sylvester grumpily protested as he was escorted out of the van.

“Yeah, whatever” The Commander casually dismissed his protests, “Here, your copy of the search warrant” he then handed him a piece of paper, thrusting it into Sylvester's midriff, “Keep it somewhere safe.”

“Huh...” Sylvester replied.

“Right then, shall we?” The Commander indicated the way ahead.

With that, Sylvester was escorted over towards the front gate of the house with the other officers in close attendance whilst Longton, Forster and The Commander led the way.

“Two Seven Five from One Three One” The Commander called as they reached the front gate, “You in position?” he then asked.

“Just checking out the back fence now” Forrester confirmed as he and a couple of other officers discreetly made their way down the alley that ran along the back of the target and adjacent properties.

“Right, hang tight in case anyone tries to leg it out the back” The Commander instructed, “We are going in the front in a moment.”

“Roger that” Forrester replied.

“Shall we gentlemen?” The Commander then indicated the dilapidated front gate.

“Come on” Longton ushered Sylvester ahead of him as they duly headed up the path, passing through the litter strewn garden, weeds and untamed shrubbery growth amongst which were a couple of burnt out rusty old cars and other long abandoned junk until they reached the tatty front door of the illegally occupied squat in a forgotten back street in Bognor Regis, about six miles to the south east of Haychester.

“Dear, oh dear, oh dear...” The Commander remarked as he reached the door and looked around.

“I Love what you have done with the place” Longton remarked to Sylvester as he was duly escorted up towards the door.

“You really ought to get the local Crime Prevention Officer in” The Commander then sarcastically suggested, “Give you some tips on home security.”

“What are you talking about, pig?” Sylvester responded.

“I mean, look at this door...” The Commander nodded towards the dilapidated door before unceremoniously kicking it, causing it to disintegrate and crash to the ground.

“What door?” Longton asked.

“Exactly...” The Commander responded, “Right, let's go” he then called to the others, whereupon they flooded inside.

“Looks like the leccy is off” Forster remarked as he tried the grimy light switch.

“Have to say, I am not keen on the decor” Longton remarked as they pushed through the cluttered hallway.

“You two, take upstairs” The Commander instructed Phillips and another officer, you three through to the back, we'll go through the front rooms.”

“Crap!! It's the filth!!” came a panicked sounding voice from somewhere inside the house followed by the crashing of objects as someone clearly was trying to escape.

“Oh, someone is home it seems” The Commander remarked.

“We got a runner out the back!” came Forrester’s voice over the radio.

“Al, get out there and deal with that” The Commander quickly called.

“Roger that” Longton confirmed, heading quickly through towards the rear of the premises, sending wreckage crashing in all directions.

Outside, Forrester and the other officers quickly headed into the wreckage and weed strewn rear garden where a young blonde haired male was attempting to make a run for it, only to find himself tackled to the ground.

“All right mate, you are nicked!” Forrester then informed the individual as Longton helped him, putting him in handcuffs.

Back inside the house, the search was already underway with The Commander displaying his usual lack of subtlety as he unceremoniously kicked in doors and tipped out drawers whilst Forster and one of his guys started tearing the grotty kitchen units open.

Suddenly there was a scream of a young woman's voice from upstairs which saw The Commander run up the bare wooden stairs where one was so rotten, his foot nearly fell through it as it gave way under his weight.

“What's going on?” The Commander asked as he found Phillips standing by a bedroom door.

“Erm, we found some unexpected guests...” Phillips gestured inside the room where The Commander duly peeked inside to find a young woman and a man in bed together, looking on with a shocked expression from where they had been rudely interrupted by their arrival.

“Ah...” The Commander responded in realisation, “Erm, make sure they get some clothes on and then take them down to the van” he then instructed.

“The one who made off out the back is safely snuggled down in the back of the company van” Longton duly confirmed as he came up and joined them, “With those

two, that looks like everyone in the property accounted for except for the cat who is currently hiding in the coal bunker out the back.”

“There is your criminal mastermind right there” The Commander wryly remarked as he and Longton headed carefully back down the stairs, “Never ever underestimate the cunning and nouse of a cat I always say.”

The crashing sounds from the kitchen were obvious as they approached the door, having to squeeze past the rusting remains of an old motorbike that was partially blocking the hallway along with piles of discarded old newspapers, books and magazines.

“Let's have a look up the top there Neil” Forster called to his colleague as they surveyed the trashed kitchen.

“Here, you are going to put everything back where you found it, aren't you?” Sylvester demanded to know on seeing the wreckage.

“It was pretty much as bad as this *before* we started searching” Forster pointed out as his colleague tentatively climbed up on an old chair that creaked rather alarmingly, in order to get a good look at the void above the cupboards.

“Nah, nothing up here Guv” he then called down.

“All right Neil, come back down before you wind up breaking your neck” Forster then instructed, helping him down off the chair.

“Nothing up here except these two, a couple of burnt out spliffs, three cases of cheap lager and some probably illegal hard core pornographic mags” Phillips called from the top of the stairs, “Do you want us to look in the attic?” she then asked.

“Yeah, better had” The Commander agreed, his sense of frustration at the lack of anything tangible being found becoming obvious, “Just don't go falling through any ceilings though” he then warned.

“Okay” Phillips confirmed.

“What are you smiling at?” The Commander then asked Sylvester who was grinning.

“You will never find anything” Sylvester confidently remarked but his grin soon dropped as the Drugs Squad officer began to look through the dented galvanised dustbin that he had found shoved in a corner.

“Guv!!” the officer then, hauling an object out of the bin and then holding it aloft.

“Well, well, well...” The Commander remarked to Sylvester as he walked over and took the object and looked at it, a large catering size tin can, “Eat a lot of beans, do we?”

“You wouldn't believe...” Sylvester tried to defend himself, “The wind around here is like a hurricane sometimes!!”

“Hmm...” The Commander responded, “Bag please!” he then requested whereupon Forster produced a clear plastic evidence bag from his pocket and opened it up, allowing him to drop the can inside before sealing it.

“Just taking these two love birds out to the van” Phillips then called as she and Stride escorted the two that they had discovered upstairs, now fully dressed, down the stairs and towards the remains of the front door.

“Right” The Commander confirmed, however as they walked over the bare floorboards of the front hallway, something got his immediate attention.

“Something wrong?” Forster asked as The Commander walked slowly back from the front hallway, looking down at his feet as he went.

“Maybe...” he then responded before starting to tap the floorboards with the toe of his boot in a number of places which was when he noticed that the sound was different in one particular area, sounding more hollow than solid.

“Interesting...” Longton commented as he too noticed what The Commander had.

“Yes, there is something under here” The Commander agreed as Sylvester shifted nervously from one leg to the other, “Here, help me shift this thing” he then indicated the rusty old motorbike.

“An old B.S.A.” Forster remarked as he looked at the bike, “My dad had one of these, if nobody else wants it, I'll take it off their hands” he then grabbed it, “Okay, I have got one end, you?” Forster asked.

“Yep” The Commander agreed as Longton shifted some of the loose junk out of the way, “On three gentlemen?” he then suggested.

“One, two and three!” Forster counted down whereupon they lifted the old motorbike and shifted it out of the way, revealing a trap door in the floor hidden underneath.

“Anything lurking in the basement I wonder?” The Commander then remarked as he reached down and pulled open the hatch.

“Here” Forster passed him a torch which he then used to shine down into the basement.

“Got some steps down here” The Commander then called as he descended into the depths, as the others gathered around the hatch and looked down.

“You all right down there mate?” Longton called down.

“Yeah” The Commander called back up, “I think we have found our evidence!”

“I’m coming down” Forster then called before carefully clambering down.

“Watch yourself, there isn’t much headroom” The Commander warned.

“Thanks” Forster responded as he reached the bottom of the steps and then looked around the basement with The Commander holding the torch, casting it around.

“Now, I admit I don’t have so much as a science O Level but even I know a laboratory when I see one” The Commander admitted which was when he found a battery powered lamp which he then switched on allowing the entire interior of the large basement to be fully visible for the first time.

“Jesus Christ!” Forster remarked, looking all around him “Neil, get down here, we have hit the jackpot.”

“What am I looking at?” The Commander asked.

“Basically, a drug factory” Forster did a tour around the various workbenches, “unpacking, mixing and blending, allocating and then finally, the finished product packed and ready for sale.”

“Sophisticated little operation” The Commander commented, “The trashy old house above being the perfect cover for it, no one would think to look for this down here” he remarked.

“Not looking so smug now, are you?” Longton remarked to Sylvester.

“Al!” The Commander then called up, “Take laughing boy back the factory and book him!”

“With pleasure” Longton confirmed, “Come on pal, let’s get you back to your carriage.”

“Tell me” Forster then asked as he looked through some documents he found on the side workbench, “Does anyone involved in this case of yours have any friends who own a boat?”

“In theory, yes” The Commander confirmed, “We haven’t actually clapped eyes on it mind, but in theory, boats come into this mess somewhere.”

“Take a look at this” Forster then passed across a document, “Tide table with certain days marked” he then explained as to The Commander, it meant nothing.

“Erm...” The Commander responded, “What am I looking at?” he then asked.

“Whoever marked this has noted when the highest tides are in the Haychester coastal area” Forster explained.

“How do you know these things?” The Commander asked.

“My dad was in the Royal Navy for twenty years, you pick up these things when you are in a seaborne family” Forster remarked, “Anyway, by my workings out, the last high tide was the day before your late local fence with the battered old van picked up that pallet load of baked bean cans you found.”

“Interesting” The Commander responded, “and the next high tide is...?” he then rotated the table around, trying to make sense of it.

“Tonight, about eight ten” Forster confirmed, pointing to the corresponding part on the table, “Now if I were a betting man, I would wager that the next boat load of whatever they are bringing in will make landfall this evening.”

“I like the sound of that” The Commander responded, “Now all we have to do is work out where it is coming ashore.”

“That's your department” Forster remarked to which The Commander nodded in agreement.

“I'll get on to it right away” The Commander agreed, “Are you and your lads good to sort through this lot?” he indicated the drug laboratory equipment, “More your specialist field I think.”

“Yeah, sure, no problem” Forster agreed, “I'll need to borrow your local Forensic specialist mind.”

“No problem” The Commander agreed, “That will make her day.”

As the black taxi cab pulled up outside the ornate carved stone doorway of the Club, the uniformed doorman came down the stone steps and opened the rear door to allow Crowthorne to step out after having passed a ten pound note to the driver and instructing him to keep the change.

“I am here to see the Director General?” Crowthorne inquired as he followed the doorman up the steps where the door was then held open to allow him to enter.

“I believe he is in the upstairs dining room Sir” the doorman confirmed, “Do you wish me to show you the way up?” he then asked.

“Erm no, that's fine thanks” Crowthorne confirmed, “I know the way.”

“Right, you are Sir” the doorman responded, leaving Crowthorne to ascend the ornate staircase which wound up until he reached the third floor.

The main dining room of the exclusive members only club was located off to the left of the corridor where murmured conversation and the gentle tinkling of finest bone China, crystal glass and solid silver cutlery filled the smoky air.

“Ah, Richard my boy!” the large genial figure of the Director General of MI5, Sir David Camberwell called on seeing Crowthorne enter the dining room and approach, “A drink?”

“Err yes Sir” Crowthorne responded, “Scotch, a double please” he then asked of the waiter who nodded in agreement and then departed to fetch his drink.

“Here, have a seat” Camberwell then indicated, “I must recommend you to become a member” he then remarked, “seeing as you are about to be anointed with the Royal bread knife for services rendered.”

“That's very kind of you Sir” Crowthorne responded as he sat down and his drink was handed to him, “Thanks.”

“Right, you are having a stiff drink, and you have just come straight here from your meeting at New Scotland Yard which must mean there is trouble brewing” Camberwell concluded, “Am I right?”

“Pretty much Sir” Crowthorne admitted.

“That's why they pay me the big bucks Richard” Camberwell confirmed, “So, what happened?”

“The Haychester lads have got a very serious situation down there” Crowthorne explained, “Not only are there smugglers in drugs and weapons on their manor, but they also have money laundering, a possible connection to the IRA and the stale whiff of a large scandal for the Government if this gets out.”

“The lead office on the case is..?” Camberwell asked.

“Lieutenant Commander Sam Edwards” Crowthorne confirmed to a look of recall from Camberwell as he thought for a few moments.

“Erm, isn't that...?” Camberwell then began to ask.

“Yeah, that's him” Crowthorne confirmed, “and someone somewhere is stirring the pot, his words, as not only did someone blow up that womanising wally Lord Francis, but they have also attempted to kill The Commander too.”

“What?!?” Camberwell responded.

“A couple of goons showed up in Haychester last night with Government issue MP5's with no serial numbers on them and tried to kill him” Crowthorne explained, “If it weren't for my two lads keeping tabs on him, he would be dead by now, again...”

“Who is behind this?” Camberwell then asked sincerely.

“Well, the briefing earlier was gate-crashed by that obnoxious toad, Sir Robert Walmer, the Secretary of State for Lying and general whitewashing” Crowthorne

continued, “Fortunately, The Commander gave as good as he got and sent him running with his tail between his legs.”

“Heh, heh!” Camberwell responded, “Good for him!”

“There is another issue too” Crowthorne then reluctantly took out the photograph he had in his inside pocket and handed it over, “This mystery man seems to be the mastermind calling the shots, literally.”

“Is this the best photo they have got?” Camberwell asked.

“I am afraid so Sir” Crowthorne confirmed, “This individual ordered the execution of my agent, the beating up of another woman and who knows what else he has had his fingers in.”

“Doesn't look like your normal gangland villain, does he?” Camberwell remarked, “In actual fact he looks a bit like... Oh hell...”

“I am glad, and also disappointed that you and I are on the same wavelength Sir” Crowthorne responded, “The question is, if it is who we think it is, what are we going to do about it.”

“Tricky” Camberwell responded, exhaling deeply, “If we were seen to be publicly pointing this individual out, it could backfire on us quickly and much unpleasantness could come our way, there are political parasites like Walmer who are just itching to roll on into our business and take over.”

“That was what I was thinking” Crowthorne agreed, “Maybe what we need is an anonymous tip in the right ear?” he then tentatively suggested.

“It could work” Camberwell nodded in agreement, “It's been done before, can I trust you to do the honours, Richard?”

“Absolutely Sir” Crowthorne confirmed, “Consider him well and truly dropped in it.”

“In which case, I think another drink is in order” Camberwell then declared, “Waiter!” he then called.

“No, no, no, it will be some sort of pleasure craft, something innocuous” Longton called down the telephone in the main investigation room, “A ruddy great cargo freighter would look awfully conspicuous rolling into Haychester Harbour, if it didn't get grounded on a sand bank first.”

“Good grief!” Edwards remarked as he came into the room and saw how busy it was, “Anyone free to give me an update as to what the hell is going on around here?” he asked.

“One minute Sir” Phillips responded as she too was busy on the telephone.

“Sure, no worries, I am just the Guvnor...” Edwards then quietly remarked to himself.

“Oh, hello Guv” The Commander called as he came into the office, a half-eaten bacon roll in his hand, “Welcome to the mad house.”

“Would someone mind explaining to me just what the hell is going on?” Edwards asked him as he followed The Commander over to his desk.

“Well, for one thing, I am regretting not picking up some hash browns with this bacon roll” The Commander admitted, “and I reckon the canteen ketchup is either not their usual cheap catering brand or is going off.”

“Well, thanks for that culinary report on your dinner” Edwards sarcastically responded, “I meant about the case?” he then asked.

“Oh, that...” The Commander remarked whilst scoffing down the remains of his bacon roll before brushing the resulting crumbs off his desk, “Yes, erm, well we had a very successful search of Sylvester's luxury gaff, turned up a drug laboratory in the basement, an empty bean can from the same batch we found at Marcus's place in the kitchen and a rather nice classic BSA motorbike in the hall.”

“What does the BSA have to do with the case?” Edwards asked.

“Absolutely nothing” The Commander admitted, “It's just a nice old classic that caught our eye, that's all.”

“Oh...” Edwards responded, looking somewhat bemused,

“Sylvester and his house mates are in the Custody Suite being charged with a veritable smorgasbord of offences ranging from dealing and possession through to manufacture and distribution of narcotics and anything else we can think of” The Commander went on to explain, “Forster and his Drugs Squad boys are dealing with the narcotics side of the case, seeing what else they can turn up, but we did find this” he then produced the clear plastic evidence bag containing the tide table.

“Ah, a tide table with the high tides for Haychester Harbour marked” Edwards remarked, “I am beginning to see the connection, at least it explains why Al seems to be trying to track down a boat.”

“Now, I admit Guv that this is a bit of a flyer” The Commander then admitted “but I reckon they have got some sort of load of goods coming in tonight, somewhere in the Haychester coastal area.”

“That's a pretty big area, a lot of coastline” Edwards warned as he looked up at the local area map on the wall behind The Commander's desk, “I mean you have got all the way from Bognor, around the peninsular and then around to the Harbour and on towards Thorney Island, that is a hell of a lot of ground to cover.”

“Yeah...” The Commander reluctantly agreed, “We can rule out some areas though” he remarked as he got up and joined Edwards at the map, “Bognor and down towards the peninsular is a non-runner, to many under sea rocks apparently and after that, it's marshland and the nature reserve.”

“Uh huh...” Edwards agreed.

“The end of the peninsular is no good, too many houses and eyes watching” The Commander continued, “besides, anything approaching this area would be picked up by the radar at Selsey Bill anyway.”

“So, it's the west side we should be looking at” Edwards then added.

“It would have to be somewhere where any boat can come in to some sort of established dockside so they can unload” The Commander confirmed, “and it has to be with a road access that a large van or small light goods truck can navigate without too much difficulty.”

“What about Dell Quay?” Edwards indicated one place on the map.

“That's a non-runner Sir” Phillips confirmed as she joined them, “The Harbour Master's office is there and they would see them coming a mile off, we would be all over them before they had even dropped their anchor.”

“Bosham wouldn't work either” The Commander then remarked, “at high tide, most of the harbour there is underwater, believe me, I have attended enough parked cars left by dopey tourists who cannot read signs who come back to find their prize motor is now three feet below sea level.”

“All right then, that leaves the east side of Thorney Island, and the top of the Harbour” Edwards then summarised, “assuming they aren't going to sail up the Haychester canal on a narrow boat that is.”

“How's the overtime budget Guv?” The Commander then suggestively asked.

“The coffers are well and truly empty” Edwards admitted before sighing in surrender, “All right, what do you need?” he then tentatively asked.

“Four unmarked cars, two in each car, dedicated radio channel and a Specialist Armed Response unit on standby in case anything goes sour” The Commander reeled off a list to a look of slight disbelief from Edwards.

“Anything else?” Edwards then asked, almost fearing the answer.

“Well, anything involving the water we can leave to the coastguard guys” The Commander then admitted, “All we need from them is to report any suspicious ships heading in towards the coast and where they are headed, we can then take it from there.”

“Sounds reasonable” Edwards agreed.

“Once we know where they are bringing the merchandise ashore” The Commander continued, “we can then follow them to wherever they are taking it and hopefully we can catch them all, preferably red handed.”

“Risky...” Edwards suggested.

“You have any better ideas Sir?” The Commander asked.

“Actually, erm no” Edwards then admitted.

“Guys!” Longton then called across the office after putting the telephone down, “I think we are in business!”

“Well, that's worth a celebratory biscuit” The Commander responded, returning to his desk and retrieving his biscuit packet from the bottom drawer.

“You know, most officers keep a bottle in their desk rather than a biscuit tin” Edwards remarked.

“Yeah, but I am not your normal kind of officer” The Commander confirmed.

“You can say that again” Longton quietly remarked under his breath.

“Anyway” The Commander brandished a chocolate digestive, “These taste better, so, Al, what have you got for us?” he then asked.

“There are three vessels of interest that we have found that have connections to Lord Francis or any of his associates” Longton checked his notes carefully, “two of them, the Darling Clementine and the Rogering Fellow are luxury yachts, both of which have been up on stilts in a boat yard in Bitterne since last month, apparently chummy boy was so busy screwing every bit of skirt he could get into his bed that he forgot to pay his docking fees.”

“Oh dear...” The Commander remarked unsympathetically.

“The third one is a motor boat called the Lazy Lady, big boat, old fishing trawler converted to a luxury floating gin palace stroke knocking shop by all accounts” Longton then continued.

“That sounds like it could carry some cargo easily enough” Phillips remarked.

“It left port in the south of Spain about three days ago” Longton continued, “It was recorded passing through the Strait of Gibraltar a few hours later after which, it's location transponder was turned off and now, it could be anywhere.”

“It must be on its way here; it has to be” The Commander concluded.

“Coastal radar will pick it up whether it is transmitting its identification or not” Phillips summarised, “Fairly straight forward, it will be the one that nobody knows what it is.”

“Having fun everyone?” Forster asked as he came into the office.

“Having biscuits at the very least” The Commander confirmed as he consumed another chocolate digestive.

“I come bearing gifts” Forster then announced, placing some evidence bags on the desk, “Item one, a sample of the Class A narcotics found in your man Sylvester's basement, finest product of Columbia.”

“How much in total?” Edwards asked.

“Excluding spillage and a few small bags we found under the bed upstairs” Forster summed up, “About seventy-five grands worth of gear, of which about half was already cut and packed, ready for distribution to street dealers and on to the final end consumer.”

“Lovely...” The Commander responded.

“Item two, a small plastic box containing twenty-eight 9mm bullets, twelve rounds have been used” Forster continued, “and for a bonus, one nine-millimetre semi-automatic pistol, Beretta as it happens.”

“Oh, hello...” Longton remarked as he took the evidence bag containing the gun and examined it carefully, “We'll get this down to the ballistics guys ASAP.”

“Item three” Forster then continued, “A briefcase, containing a significant quantity of cash.”

“Not really surprising given the nature of Sylvester's trade” The Commander remarked.

“Normally I would say yes yet these are not your ordinary bank notes” Forster continued as he put on some gloves before taking the briefcase out of the evidence bag and then proceeding to open it.

“Funny money?” The Commander suggested.

“Well, no” Forster remarked as he released the catches, “Still legal tender, just not around here.”

“Ulster Bank?” Longton asked on seeing the unfamiliar bank notes inside the case.

“Northern Ireland” The Commander responded, “Home of our big Irish friend O'Connor and his chums.”

“What is Sylvester saying about the finds at his drum?” Edwards asked.

“Gone all mutton on us” Phillips confirmed, “Not helped by his extraordinarily expensive brief who rocked up an hour ago and could get Stevie Wonder a driving licence.”

“I wonder who is bank rolling that?” The Commander asked.

“I could make some discrete enquiries?” Phillips suggested.

“Alas, no” The Commander responded, “We are not allowed to investigate the legal counsel of a suspect, nor who is paying their bills, if we were caught doing that, an entire case could be chucked out before it even reached court and we would be having a very unpleasant conversation with the long coated sense of humour failures from the Ombudsman's Office.”

“Understood” Phillips confirmed, “What about acquiring said lawyer's business card?” she then asked, producing a small piece of card and handing it to The Commander.

“Nice one” The Commander responded as he took the card, “I know just the man who can make the discrete telephone calls.”

“Careful...” Edwards warned.

“Aren't I always?” The Commander asked.

“Not normally, no...” Longton responded which resulted in a sneering look from The Commander.

“So, what about this boat?” Edwards then asked.

“Well, high tide isn't until half six” Phillips summarised from her notes.

“A ship that big will not be able to come into port in shallow waters like that until about seven at the earliest I would have thought” Forster then added.

“Do I get my resources Guv?” The Commander then asked.

“All right” Edwards reluctantly agreed, “There is going to be a limit on overtime after this for a while.”

“Can I have a helicopter as well?” The Commander then tentatively asked, to a rolling eyes upwards look from his superior.

“I'll see what I can do” Edwards then replied.

“Right, in that case” The Commander then declared as he got up, “I suggest we get as much rest as we can, inform your wives, girlfriends, fiancé's, budgerigars, whatever you have at home that you won't be home for tea tonight and we reconvene in the main briefing room at five o'clock.”

“If you like, I am happy for me and my two guys to carry on looking at the drugs side of the case if it is any help?” Forster suggested.

“I would appreciate it” The Commander agreed.

“Great, I'll sort out some accommodation” Forster responded.

“Try the Services Office in B Block” Edwards then suggested, “Maureen will sort you guys out.”

“Cheers Sir” Forster confirmed, “I'll leave these exhibits with you” he confirmed as he then left the office.

“Right, lunch” The Commander duly declared, “Come on, I am buying.”

“Did I just hear that correctly?” Phillips asked, “He's buying?”

“I do believe you did” Edwards agreed, “Squadron scramble...”

“Dave, in here” Crowthorne indicated to Collins as he walked briskly into the office.

“Err, right you are” Collins responded, pushing back his chair and getting up before following Crowthorne through to the adjacent office.

“Shut the door Dave” Crowthorne then ominously insisted, a tone of concern that Collins quickly picked up on.

“Is there something wrong Boss?” Collins asked as he watched Crowthorne pour a drink from the decanter before holding it towards him.

“Something? No” Crowthorne responded, “Everything? Yes, you will need this.”

“Right...” Collins replied, taking the drink, “Thanks.”

“We are walking down a very dark path, you and I, Dave” Crowthorne remarked as he then poured himself a drink, noticeably larger than the one he had given Collins, “If this goes pear shaped, at best, someone might get hurt and a reputation or two will be flushed down the proverbial toilet, at worst, much unpleasantness will come our way and the Government could collapse under the weight of the scandal.”

“I see...” Collins replied, talking a little of his drink, “Actually, no I don't but I get the gist.”

“What do you know about this man?” Crowthorne opened a leather-bound folder he had brought in with him and took out an official looking black and white photograph of a man that he then rotated to face Collins before pushing it across the desk towards him.

“Face rings a bell” Collins admitted, “Can't quite place the name though.”

“That there is Sir Derek Chichester” Crowthorne explained with an obvious sense of regret, “Cousin of the Lord Chief Justice, advisor to the Home Office, the Joint Intelligence Committee, the Foreign Office, the Chancellor of the Exchequer and old family friend of the Prime Minister, a man of many interests.”

“Oh, I remember now” Collins recalled, “Wasn't there some hushed up scandal a few years ago about some money going missing and a dead stock market trader?” he then asked.

“Your memory serves you well” Crowthorne agreed, “It was a rare moment of error from Lord Chichester, the stock market trader was allegedly laundering money for him through the global stock market, nothing proven of course as the evidence and the witnesses mysteriously disappeared late one night and the bucket of official whitewash was trotted out and applied liberally.”

“Now there is a surprise...” Collins sarcastically responded, “So, what has he to do with this mess?” he then asked.

“You, I and the Director General know about this and nobody else” Crowthorne explained, “What I am about to tell and show you does not leave this room, and you will speak of it to nobody ever, do you understand?”

“Yes, I do” Collins quickly agreed.

“All right then” Crowthorne, “Our old friend Eddie Regent, a.k.a. Lieutenant Commander Sam Edwards of the National Security & Police Service in Haychester has in his possession a photograph, a still taken from a surveillance video which shows a mystery man enter the hotel suite of one Lord Francis and then order the immediate execution in cold blood of one of my best agents in the field.”

“I remember” Collins confirmed.

“During his time in the suite, despite numerous cameras secreted throughout it, the mysterious visitor managed to keep their face hidden from all of them except for a brief reflection in a mirror, et voila...” Crowthorne then placed the image that The Commander had given him earlier on the desk and moved it alongside the photograph of Sir Derek Chichester.”

“Oh hell...” Collins responded as he joined the dots and realised, he was looking at two vastly different photographs of the same man.

“Indeed” Crowthorne agreed, “Kind of makes you sick, doesn't it?”

“Yeah...” Collins admitted.

“Now...” Crowthorne then continued, gathering up the photographs and returning them to the file, “I have consulted with the Director General and he and I are in

agreement that this issue cannot be allowed to continue, Lord Chichester has been a blight who has got away with it for far too long, so you and I are now authorised to do something about it.”

“Why am I suddenly worried that this could all go south very fast and take us with it?” Collins remarked.

“Your caution and concern are well placed” Crowthorne agreed, “This is the black file I have accumulated over the years on him” he indicated the leather bound folder, “Now, making some snide money on the side or upsetting a few politicians I can let pass but when he is involved in issues such as drugs and arms smuggling to those who would happily blow us up for breakfast and then directly orders the execution of one of our own, it is time to do something about it.”

“I am in full agreement” Collins agreed.

“You know what it says above the door?” Crowthorne then asked.

“Fire Exit or Department of Freshwater Fish?” Collins asked.

“Hmm...” Crowthorne was amused, “Regnum Defende, Defending the Realm, it's what we do, our sworn duty to protect the country and its citizens from threats both within and outside and that is exactly what we are going to do.”

“Absolutely” Collins confirmed.

“Right, so this is what we are going to do” Crowthorne then declared, “In a few minutes time, the Haychester Security Service office are going to receive an anonymous tip naming our friend here” he tapped the file, “at some point later this evening I am willing to bet that Eddie will ask someone technically minded to seek out everything they can on Chichester, I want you to make sure this file is accidentally discovered and exits into the public domain where it will be made good use of.”

“I think I can arrange that” Collins confirmed.

“I cannot emphasise this enough” Crowthorne then insisted as he handed the folder over “this must not be traced back to us in any way, as far as the world outside these four walls is concerned, this collection of valuable facts and faces was put together by some mysterious freelance journalist who has long since been recycled as a reinforcing rod in a concrete pillar holding up an interchange on the M25.”

“Consider it done” Collins agreed, picking up the file and holding it close to him.

“Right, in which case, let's get to work” Crowthorne declared, finishing his drink with a flourish, “Time to make a phone call...”

“Okay ladies and gentlemen” The Commander began as he looked around the Briefing Room, “The randomiser of nonsense has allocated us the moniker for this

little operation of ours, so welcome to Operation Osprey.”

“One of the better ones it has come up with” Forrester remarked.

“Quite” The Commander agreed, “Right then, we suspect that at some point later this evening, a large pleasure boat, converted from an old fishing trawler, the MV Lazy Lady, err did anyone find a picture of it?”

“Here you go” Phillips passed a large photograph of the vessel across, and The Commander duly pinned it on the board.

“Lovely” The Commander responded, “We expect it to make landfall somewhere along the west side of the Haychester peninsular in order to unload goods of the illegal variety, what we don't know is exactly where.”

“Do the words needle and haystack ring any bells?” Stride remarked.

“The good news” The Commander continued “is that we have both the Harbour Master and the Coastguard watching out for this ship, as soon as it appears off the coast, they can track where it goes and from there, we can narrow down the list of likely unloading points” he then nodded towards Phillips.

“On the map here” she indicated the area map on the wall “we have nine possible drop off points, based on accessibility for the size of ship we believe we are dealing with plus the requirement for road access which can take something like a Transit van or light goods vehicle, all indicated by these red pins.”

“The green pins are the four locations where we are going to position ourselves so that as soon as we are given the nod, we can move quickly” The Commander then continued, “Four unmarked cars, two of us in each car, a dedicated radio frequency and armed back up on standby in case these guys show up tooled up.”

“What about the boat?” Forrester asked.

“The plan is we let them unload and leave” The Commander explained, “Once the boat is away and out of sight of the docking point, the Coastguard Coastal Patrol is going to intercept them for us.”

“Lovely” Stride remarked.

“Meanwhile, we are going to follow the vehicle or vehicles as they leave the offloading point and follow them discreetly to wherever they are going” The Commander confirmed, “I want to make sure we nick as many of the gang as possible, so study the mugshots” he then indicated the various photographs on the next noticeboard, “including the Man of Mystery here.”

“Don't we have a name for that guy yet?” Forrester asked.

“I am afraid not” The Commander regrettably responded, “In addition I want everyone to be careful on this, not to be discussed outside this room but there is the

significant possibility that there is a third party involved in this case who are interested in ensuring that the whole matter is dead and buried, possibly literally judging by last night's attempt so the big message here is, watch your backs."

"Where these the same people who bugged the office, do you think?" Phillips asked.

"Almost certainly" The Commander agreed, "and they have access to some very nice expensive toys so keep them peeled, anything that looks iffy be it you think you are being followed, watched or vehicles that seem to be tailing, call it in to me and me only."

"Right" Stride agreed along with nods from all the others.

"Okay" The Commander then resumed, "I've managed to secure some unmarked cars from the motor pool, you can toss a coin for who gets the old Ford Granada with the knackered suspension."

"Go on, I'll take it" Phillips remarked to some astounded looks from the others, "It's got to be better than my battered old Skoda, hasn't it?"

"Good point" Longton agreed.

"Right, in which case may I suggest you all take one final look at this rogues gallery" The Commander indicated the photographs on the wall once again, "make sure you are all stocked up with your choice of hot drinks, sandwiches and biscuits, check your assigned partners and locations and, as Shaun Taylor says on Police 5, Keep em peeled."

As the briefing ended, Edwards watched from the doorway with an impressed expression.

"Nicely done Lieutenant Commander" Edwards remarked to The Commander.

"Thanks Guv" The Commander responded, "Are you going to be listening in on the fun and games?" he then asked.

"I'll settle for the post-match analysis once you have all the bad guys locked up" Edwards replied, "Just don't do anything rash that fills my desk with paperwork, I still haven't shifted the last couple of lots yet."

"I'll bear it in mind Guv" The Commander agreed as he and Edwards left the room, and they headed down the corridor towards the main office.

"Who are you partnered with?" Edwards asked as The Commander sat down behind his desk and retrieved his biscuits from the desk drawer and then shoved them in his pocket.

"Got your priorities right then" Edwards remarked.

“Absolutely” The Commander confirmed, “Now, have I forgotten anything?” he then wondered, “Oh yes” he then realised and opened another drawer to take out two sets of ammunition rounds for his revolver, “I might need these I suppose.”

“You really don't like guns, do you?” Edwards commented.

“Try being on the receiving end a few times” The Commander responded as he pocketed the spare ammunition and checked his old revolver before holstering it, “It does rather sharpen your world view on these things.”

“Well, I have never had the pleasure” Edwards admitted.

“The day is still young” The Commander smiled in response.

“Yeah, thanks for that...” Edwards responded as they both left the office.

A few moments after they left, the telephone on The Commander's desk began to ring but there was nobody in there to answer it.

It was only after a minute that one of the Administration Clerks passing the door came in and picked up the phone herself.

“Hello?” she answered, “Yes this is Lieutenant Commander Edwards' phone, but he is out at the moment, can I take a message?”

The Clerk listened and then found a sticky note and a pen to write down some details that the caller was relaying.

“So, that's Derek Chichester?” the Clerk confirmed as she wrote the name down, “Understood, and who shall I say was calling?” she then asked, “Oh...” she responded as the caller suddenly hung up on her.

The Clerk looked all around before taking the sticky note off the pad, annotating it with date, time and her name before attaching it to the front of the desk lamp shade so that it would be seen.

Two miles off Selsey Bill at the southern tip of the Haychester Peninsular, a fishing boat's crew was doing its last check of the crab nets before they were due to head back to port.

That part of the English Channel has always been rich fishing grounds for crab and sea fish and attracted a number of regular vessels in the area.

One of the vessels was the fishing trawler Suzy-Ann and it's Captain was watching from the wheelhouse as the crew were bringing in the nets with the sun starting to set towards the west.

As the crew finished up and were securing their gear, the Captain noticed something in the distant gloom, across the sea a couple of miles off the port bow of the ship which prompted him to pick up his powerful binoculars and trained it on what had got his attention, a ship which seemed familiar to him but stood out as being unusual in its overall appearance.

The Captain's many years of expertise meant he was able to calculate from a quick check of the charts on the map table exactly where the vessel was and it's probable heading.

"All right skipper?" the First Mate asked as he came into the wheelhouse.

"Yes, I was just checking on something over off the port bow" the Captain explained, passing the First Mate the binoculars, "Isn't that the boat that Frank mentioned earlier?"

"Yeah, I reckon so skipper" the First Mate agreed as he looked through the binoculars himself, "converted old trawler, wasn't it?"

"Yeah" the Captain remarked before reaching for the radio and selecting the required frequency, "Harbour Master from Suzy-Ann, come in, over?"

"Harbour Master receiving" Frank Callman, the Haychester area Harbour Master responded, "You all right Derek?"

"Yeah, not bad Frank" the Captain responded, "That converted trawler you mentioned, I think we can see it."

"Tell me more" Callman replied.

"I am looking at a large white boat, has the outline of an old trawler but looks like it's been well and truly tarted up" the Captain explained, "Heading due north, currently about two miles South South West of Selsey Bill, and running without any lights on either."

"Sounds like the one the boys in blue are looking for" Callman agreed, "Where do you reckon he is heading?" he then asked.

"Best guess, I would say if he keeps heading that way, he should pass between Hayling and East Head within the next half hour, just as the sun goes down" the Captain remarked.

"Roger that" Callman responded, "Can you keep a discrete eye on it do you think?" he then tentatively asked.

"We'll try our best" the Captain agreed, "but with the failing light and him running dark, I don't know how long we can keep eyes on him."

“I spy with my little eye, something beginning with ‘D’...” Longton remarked from the front passenger seat of the unmarked car that he and The Commander were sat in, parked down a narrow country lane, miles away from any resemblance of civilisation.

“Ducks...” The Commander confidently replied.

“Nope” Longton responded, “Darkness.”

“Huh?” The Commander replied.

“Well, it’s getting dark, isn’t it?” Longton explained, “How did you come up with ducks?” he then asked.

“Well, we are sitting in a pothole heavy layby on a gravel track a stone’s throw away from the harbour nature reserve” The Commander replied, “Therefore, by definition, there has to be some ducks out there somewhere.”

“Right...” Longton responded.

“I could fire a couple of shots out of the window and see if it makes anything go quack?” The Commander then wryly suggested.

“I bet you are fun at parties” Longton then remarked.

“Do you really think I am the sort of chap who goes to parties?” The Commander then asked.

“Err, to be honest, no...” Longton admitted.

“Osprey One from Control” came the call from the radio on the dashboard whereupon The Commander leaned forward and picked it up.

“Osprey One receiving” The Commander responded, “Go ahead.”

“Message from the Harbour Master’s office” Judd called from the Control Room, “Your ship of dreams is heading past East Head now, possibly heading towards either Itchenor Dock or Smugglers Creek.”

“Roger that” The Commander confirmed as Longton consulted the map and then indicated the likely locations on it to him, “Right, got to be there.”

“Yeah, the old moorings at Smugglers Lane” Longton agreed, “Should have guessed with a name like that really.”

“All units from Osprey One” The Commander then called into the radio, “Our ship of dreams has set sail for the promised land. Rendezvous point is location green; you all know what to do, let’s move.”

“Wagons roll!” Longton then declared as The Commander started the engine of the unmarked Ford Escort and drove off down the narrow track.

“All Osprey units from Gold One” Edwards was then heard calling from his office as he was tuned into the dedicated frequency, “Just a polite reminder that you may be on a bit of a flyer on this one, so I want no cock up's, is that understood?”

“Got it Guv” The Commander replied, “Don't you worry, everything is under control.”

“Yeah...” Edwards remarked to himself with a knowing smile.

“Take the next left” Longton then instructed The Commander who duly nodded in agreement and turned off the track and down an even narrower track, having to slow right down over rutted potholes.

“There is no way you can take a van full of gear up and down this track” The Commander remarked as they both had to brace themselves as the car jolted over the rough surface.

“There is a better track in from the other side” Longton responded as he rechecked the map, “In approximately two hundred yards, there should be a gate on the right?”

“Err...” The Commander responded, squinting into the darkness despite the light from the car headlamps until he saw the rusty old gateway, the actual gate itself long since having fallen off its hinges and collapsed into the adjacent hedge, “There it is” he then declared, turning carefully to the right and proceeding through.

“All right, if I have read this correctly” Longton then continued to follow the map, “this should bring up to a point just up from the mooring point.”

“Ah, here we go” The Commander confirmed as he brought the car to a stop and turned off the lights and engine before reaching for the radio, “Osprey One in position, all units check in.”

“Osprey Two” Stride responded, “In position on the west side.”

“Osprey Four” Phillips then called, “Just coming up on the watch point now.”

“Osprey Three” Forrester was the last one to call in “Got a nice view across the water.”

“Understood” The Commander then responded as he picked up the binoculars and trained them ahead, down towards the moorings below.

“Nobody home by the looks of it” Longton remarked.

“All the world's a stage” The Commander philosophically commented, “We are the audience, and the players have yet to arrive.”

“Osprey One from Three” Forrester then called over the radio, “There is a medium sized vessel about half a mile out, heading this way with only minimal lighting.”

“Sounds like our boat” Longton remarked.

“Osprey Two” Stride was heard to whisper over the radio, “I got a Ford A series Luton box body van coming down the approach road” he confirmed, watching as he and the officer with him lay down below the window line with the rear view mirror tilted so that he could see the van approaching, “Looks like two males plus the driver in the front.”

“Roger that” The Commander responded, “keep your head down until they are clear.”

“Probably more in the back I reckon” Longton commented to which The Commander nodded in agreement.

“Come on Al” The Commander prompted as he carefully opened the car door.

Longton followed The Commander as they made their way along the back of a hedgerow until they reached a break in the fence line which gave them a clear view of the mooring below.

“Here comes the removal men” The Commander remarked as they both watched the van arrive on the dockside, the old wooden decking creaking under the weight of the heavy van.

“I think I got the plates” Longton remarked as he watched the rear of the vehicle through his binoculars, “shall I call it in?” he then asked.

“Probably phony plates anyway but may as well” The Commander agreed.

“Control from Osprey One” Longton then discreetly called, “I need a registration check please on a Tango Whisky November Two Nine One Sierra please.”

“Understood” Control responded, “Your registration number is on the computer, you should be looking at green Austin Allegro, registered to a Mister James Norfolk of Milton Keynes.”

“That's a straight banana then” Longton replied, “Thanks anyway.”

“Worth a try I suppose” The Commander remarked, “Our Mister Norfolk is probably sat in his 1930's semi-detached three bed, sipping tea, reading the Evening Chronicle whilst his meticulously maintained green Austin Allegro sits on the driveway outside, alongside his garden with his award-winning roses from the local horticultural society and a modest collection of garden gnomes.”

“Probably got one of those national anthem doorbells as well” Longton commented.

“Oh, very likely” The Commander agreed, “For certain, he is not currently getting out of a large van with a moody registration number at an abandoned dock in the middle of nowhere.”

“Here we go” Longton then remarked, “looks like three in the back of the van” he then observed a number of individuals alighting from the roller shutter door at the rear of the vehicle, “That makes six in total on site so far.”

“Osprey One from Three” Forrester called over the radio, “the boat has turned its lights on and is manoeuvring towards the dock.”

“Yeah, thanks Graham” The Commander responded, “we can see it now.”

“Here we go...” Longton remarked.

The men waiting on the dockside for the boat to pull in alongside were unaware that several pairs of eyes were now discreetly watching them from three different angles.

“All right everyone, it's showtime” The Commander quietly called over the radio, “Now remember that we are only observing then following, so keep your heads down.”

They all watched as the boat was moored, one of the men on the shore taking the line that was thrown down to him to secure the vessel in place before a gangplank was lowered and two further men came ashore.

“Okay, now looks like two more from the boat plus possibly two or three in the wheelhouse” Longton confirmed through the binoculars, “At least one of the guys who just came off the boat is carrying” he then ominously added on seeing a firearm underneath the individual’s jacket for a brief moment.

“Well, I wasn't expecting them to turn up with catapults and water pistols” The Commander admitted.

They continued to observe as all bar one of the men proceeded to board the boat and it was a few moments later that they began to return to shore with wooden crates that were then taken down the gang plank and then loaded into the back of the van.

“That's a lot of boxes” The Commander remarked as they continue to watch a procession of boxes being unloaded from the boat, all wooden crates of different sizes, ranging from small ones, maybe only a foot or two long, to big heavy ones that need three or four men to lift.

“Definitely not baked beans this time” Longton commented, “Hello...”

“Oh, I wonder what we have there?” The Commander agreed with Longton's remark as he too saw that the last few crates coming off the boat were, in contrast to the others, metal cases, these requiring two men to lift, one each end and were the last to be unloaded before being put into the back of the van.

“Looks like they are about to head off” Longton then remarked.

“All units from Osprey One” The Commander called over the radio, “Looks like loading is complete, so let’s get ready to move.”

“Control from Osprey One” Longton then called into his radio, “Advise the Coast Guard that the target boat is about to depart, we want it intercepted and seized as soon as it hits the English Channel.”

“Roger Osprey One, will advise” Control confirmed.

“Right, road trip time” The Commander declared before he and Longton duly returned to the car and he started the engine, “Osprey Two” he then called into the radio, “the van is about to depart, once it passes you, keep a discrete distance, don't let them see you.”

“Roger that” Forrester confirmed.

Forrester and the other officer watched carefully as the dipped headlights of the large van appeared in the distance as it turned into the lane that they were parked in and then passed them, the engine of the elderly vehicle sounding as though it was struggling compared with when it passed earlier as it was now fully loaded.

“Passing us now...” Forrester quietly whispered into the radio.

“All right everyone, let's look lively” The Commander then prompted.

“Give them another thirty seconds and then let's move” Forrester informed his colleague.

“Osprey One from Osprey Two” Stride then called, “On route to the Sensham roundabout, they should pop out there if they don't deviate.”

“Makes sense” The Commander agreed, “We'll approach from the other side.”

“Hang back a bit more Steve” Forrester prompted his colleague as they observed the faint red taillights of the van in the far distance, “He is struggling to get much speed on.”

“I am not surprised with that load” Steve agreed.

“All Osprey Units from Osprey Three” Forrester then called, “This rent a wreck of a van is struggling under the load, it's going to be a good five minutes before reaching the main road.”

“It will be just our luck they get pulled by traffic on suspicion of an unsafe load” The Commander concluded which prompted him to pick up the radio, “Control from Osprey One” he then called, “Get a message through to the Traffic Division lads, and anyone else in a marked car in the Haychester area, tell them to make themselves scarce for an hour or two, I don't want anyone pulling our target vehicle, get them all into the canteen or something.”

“Roger that, will let them know” Control agreed.

“Of course, that does mean all our backup will be lounging in the canteen, drinking tea if we need them” Longton pointed out.

“Nothing unusual there” The Commander responded with a wry smile.

“Osprey Two in position” Stride then confirmed over the radio.

“That looks pretty good” Longton pointed ahead towards a layby near the roundabout.

“We’ll take that” The Commander agreed as he pulled into the layby and stopped the engine, “Now, all we need is our local friendly smugglers to show up.”

“Osprey One from Control” the radio call came through.

“Go ahead” The Commander responded as a route 700 double decker bus passed the car.

“Coastguard are following the suspect vessel, and we have a Royal Navy Fisheries Patrol ship in the area too, so they are going help grabbing them in the next few minutes” Control explained, “They are going to make it look like a routine inspection and then escort them to Southampton, safely out of the way.”

“Understood” The Commander confirmed.

“That’s the merry sailors taken care of” Longton remarked, “As long as they don’t get a message off that tips off our boys in the van, these guys have car phones don’t forget.”

“I somehow doubt an old Ford A Series truck would have enough power for one of those things, they probably can’t even get Radio 4 Long Wave” The Commander dryly commented.

“Osprey Two, we can see lights down the lane, looks like they are approaching” Stride called.

“Osprey Three, agree with that” Forrester added, “We are about a hundred and fifty yards astern of the target vehicle.”

“Astern?” The Commander walked.

“Nautical term, means behind” Longton explained, “It’s all this boat business you see.”

“Oh...” The Commander responded, “Well, you know what I am like with regards to boats.”

“Oh, yeah, paddling lake in Bognor Regis....” Longton then recalled to a momentary sneering look from The Commander in response.

“Aye, aye, here we go” The Commander then remarked, “That looks like a tatty Ford A Series to me” he nodded ahead towards the roundabout where the nose of the van was emerging from the side road, pausing to allow the double decker bus to cross its path before continuing.

“Osprey Two, following now” Stride called.

“Let's roll” The Commander called, starting the engine and pulling out into the road, towards the roundabout as the van passed in the opposite direction with, in the cloud of exhaust smoke it was emitting from the back, Stride and Forrester's cars following discreetly behind.

Running quickly around the roundabout, The Commander brought his car up behind the others as the journey continued along the main coastal trunk road that links Portsmouth in the west with Haychester in the east.

“Definitely Haychester bound it seems” Longton concluded, winding up the side window as the cloud of exhaust fumes that they were passing through was almost overwhelming, “Calling off the Traffic Division boys was a good call, even I would have pulled that heap over if it were me.”

“All the time we are on this road, we can keep following them without drawing too much attention” The Commander commented, “if they turn off, we are going to stand out.”

“I'll find out where Julie is” Longton remarked, “Osprey Four from One, location please.”

“About two miles ahead of you” Phillips confirmed.

“Hang tight, we are rolling to you” Longton confirmed, “You need to be looking out for a mobile motoring violation in the form of a Ford A Series Luton van on phony plates with serious exhaust emission issues.”

“Roger that” Phillips responded.

“So, if you were half a dozen tooled up hefty lads in a knackered van with a heavy load of hooky gear at nine thirty on a cold Thursday night, heading towards Haychester” Longton summarised, “What would you be thinking about.”

“Food” The Commander instantly responded.

“That's just you” Longton pointed out, “You are always thinking with your stomach.”

“Yeah...” The Commander agreed, “Do the honours Al” he then nodded towards the glove compartment whereupon Longton opened it and took out the packet of digestive biscuits, offering one to him and then taking one for himself.

“Dear oh dear...” Longton then remarked.

“Well, for one thing” The Commander then continued, “I certainly would not want to be caught with said gear for a starter so I would be looking to offload it pretty much as soon as possible, especially considering their chosen method of transportation's questionable roadworthiness.”

“Agreed” Longton nodded.

“So, I reckon it will be a quick stop to drop off the goods to whoever is the end receiver, then everyone down the pub for a couple of jars before heading home, cash in hand” The Commander then concluded.

“So, it would be a shame if we ruined their plans for the evening” Longton remarked.

“Yeah, it would, wouldn't it” the Commander agreed.

A couple of miles further down the road, the van continued to follow the main route towards Haychester with the three cars still maintaining contact behind them.

“Osprey Four” Phillips called, “In position, I can see the target vehicle approaching.”

“Right” The Commander responded, “Take over as lead vehicle” he then requested, as soon as you are clear, I and Osprey Two are going to turn off and take the back road and get ahead of you.”

“Roger, understood” Phillips confirmed.

“Top speed of that heap, we could walk it and still beat it to the city” Longton wryly remarked.

“No argument there” The Commander readily agreed, “Here we go” he then called as he indicated left and turned off, discreetly acknowledging Phillips in her car as they passed, and she pulled out and took over the tailing observation.

“Osprey Two, Dave, you with us?” The Commander then called over the radio.

“Right behind you” Stride confirmed.

“Right. let's see what this old thing can do” The Commander then declared as Longton put a blue flashing light out through the side window onto the roof and they accelerated away with Stride following close behind.

“What do you reckon?” Longton asked.

“I reckon they are heading for the city itself” The Commander concluded, “If they were going to head towards Midhurst or anywhere up that way, they would have turned off back there, even in that smoky old heap.”

“That makes sense” Longton agreed.

“Once they reach the city ring road, we can zero in on their likely destination” The Commander then continued to explain, “There isn't really that many places you can exchange a big van full of loot in Haychester, especially at this time of night and with the dedicated army of nosy Doris's flicking their net curtains at any sight of activity after four in the afternoon, it narrows down the possibilities considerably.”

“What's the latest?” Edwards asked as he came into the Control Room and stood alongside Judd who was the Duty Supervisor that evening.

“The target vehicle is approaching the Fishbourne roundabout” Judd confirmed, “Osprey Units Three and Four are still following at a discreet distance whilst Osprey Units One and Two are heading around via the back roads, trying to get ahead of them.”

“Hmm” Edwards pondered the map on the back wall, “We need to know which way they are going to go; they could head down Terminus Road and across the south of the city, or head around the north side which sends them pretty much anywhere north east towards Goodwood and the South Downs.”

Judd listened carefully to his headset as he was also tuned into the Osprey dedicated frequency before holding up his hand.

“Sir, the target vehicle is going around the Fishbourne roundabout now and heading towards the city centre” Judd then confirmed.

“That will put them past our window” Edwards quickly realised, “Where is the backup?” he then asked.

“Still holed up in the canteen Sir” Judd confirmed.

“Get a message down there quick” Edwards responded, “I want them out of the canteen and in their vehicles ready to roll in two minutes” he then ordered before leaving the control room and going across the corridor to one of the offices on the opposite side of the building and looked out of the window, just in time to see the tatty old van come over the railway bridge and turn into the road that runs alongside the Security Service buildings with the two Osprey Unit cars not far behind.

“I love it when I am right” The Commander remarked as he and Longton watched the van go past them, near the old railway yard, “Osprey Three and Four, stand back, we'll take it from here.”

“Roger that” Phillips agreed.

As the van turned left at the roundabout onto the city ring road with the cathedral spire looming in the near distance, The Commander took over the tailing with Stride a short distance behind whilst Forrester and Phillips headed further around the roundabout towards the south side of the city.

“I just had a horrible thought” The Commander then remarked as they passed the end of West Street and continued around the ring road that runs around the outside of the old Roman city walls, heading towards Northgate, “Name me a location we have already looked at, that at this time of night has no lighting, virtually nobody overlooking it and officially has nobody there.”

“Oh...” Longton realised as they continued to follow the van as it headed around the Northgate Gyrotory system, past the Fire Station and then back past the Theatre.

“All units from Osprey One” The Commander then called over the radio, “I want everyone to converge on Priory Park, I know this is a bit of a flyer, but I have a hunch.”

“Uh-oh...” Phillips remarked as she duly turned off the south part of the ring road and headed through the city centre with Forrester following closely behind.

“Here we go” The Commander then remarked as the van turned off the gyrotory into the top of North Street, “Osprey Two, Dave, keep going then double back via Tower Street, we'll stick with the van.”

“Roger” Stride responded as The Commander duly followed the van into North Street whilst Stride carried on past as instructed.

“The gates will be locked this time of night” Longton pointed out as the van began to slow down and then turn across the road, allowing The Commander to casually drive past and carry on.

“Gentlemen like these don't have problems with such trivial things as locks” The Commander pointed out, “Now, where are they going?” he remarked as he looked into the rear-view mirror, noting that the van was now reversing into the narrow side road which leads to the small back gate into the Park.

“Looks like they are out of sight” Longton remarked.

“Right, time to circle the wagons” The Commander remarked, “All units from Osprey One, Priory Park is a goer, let's get moving shall we?”

All across the northwest quarter of the city, Security Service vehicles began to discreetly move into position in side streets and behind buildings, out of sight but close by, awaiting the call.

“All right ladies and gentlemen, listen carefully” The Commander called over the radio, “We have at least six individuals, probably more with a battered Ford A Series truck sporting a moody reg number, currently stationary at the park end of Priory Lane” he explained, “Whatever is going down will most likely take place inside the park so I want everyone to take up positions at points around the Park but, and I cannot stress this enough, stay out of sight, no blue flashing lights and no sirens whatsoever.”

“Understood” Judd confirmed, “I'll pass on the message and get the wheels rolling.”

“Right, let's go and see what they are up to” The Commander then remarked as he parked up the car near the main park gates and then got out.

“Shouldn't we wait for backup?” Longton suggested as he duly followed The Commander in discreetly getting out of the car.

“It's all right Al” The Commander reassured him, “I can do sneaky and discreet” he remarked.

“After you” Longton nodded ahead towards the cricket pavilion entrance into the Park as he took out his sidearm and checked it.

“Thanks...” The Commander responded, “Come on” he then gestured.

“So much for being locked at night” The Commander remarked as the cricket pavilion entrance gate was barely secured, a swift jolt at the latch seeing it easily break away and allow the gate to be opened.

Longton and The Commander used the cover of darkness to scuttle across the cricket pitch and on towards the end of the Guildhall building before using the shadows to discreetly make their way towards the main gate.

“Heh...” Longton quietly whispered, tapping The Commander on the shoulder, “Over there” he then pointed towards the bowling green.

“Looks like we have visitors” The Commander quietly agreed but then they heard the sound of the van door being opened nearby.

“Here we go” Longton then remarked whereupon they both headed over to the main gate where they discovered it was actually unlocked and so passed through and then ducked down behind the brick gate post which gave them a good covered view down the narrow street where they could see in the dim glow of a street lamp, a number of men standing by the back of the van,

“Anyone we know?” The Commander asked.

“Hard to tell in this light” Longton admitted.

“Right, time to put an end to this little party” The Commander then declared, “All Units from Osprey One” he then took a deep breath before making the declaration “GO! GO! GO!”

Suddenly the air was filled with the sound of sirens and revving engines as over a dozen Security Service vehicles descended on the location, the blue flashing lights reflecting off the surrounding walls.

“Armed officers!” The Commander shouted, “You are surrounded, put the weapons down gentlemen, and let's see those hands in the air!”

“Don't even think about it pal...” Phillips strongly suggested to the man in the cab of the van who was thinking about making a run for it, only for the door to be slammed shut again on him and a gun pointed straight into his face whereupon he wisely held his hands up and surrendered.

The others were quickly overwhelmed and restrained but a couple managed to slip away and made a bolt into the small back gate into the Park.

“Al!” The Commander called before he duly headed off in pursuit with Longton not far behind.

“All units from Osprey One” Longton called over the radio as he ran into the park only to be confronted by near pitch darkness, “We have got a couple of runners loose in the Park, get every exit blocked off quick!”

“Hang on a moment Al” The Commander called from nearby, “I think they have split up, you take the wall, I'll take the bowling green.”

Longton quickly ran up the path that led to the top of the city wall whilst The Commander headed across the bowling green where he could see someone running in the distance, passing around the old castle mound out of sight.

“Osprey One...” The Commander's radio began to sound but he quickly turned it off.

On the top of the city walls, Longton could see someone running off around the perimeter and set off in pursuit when suddenly, as he passed a tree, someone appeared from the shadows and punched him hard in the stomach, sending him tumbling down the embankment to the ground level of the park below, landing in the play area.

The Commander was unaware of what had happened to Longton as he rounded the castle mound and reached the bottom of the path that spirals around the outside of it, leading up to the top.

Looking around the park, there was limited illumination other than the distant blue flashing lights on the road outside but then The Commander paused as he heard someone coughing from somewhere nearby.

Cautiously he proceeded up the spiral path, going around the outside of the mound until he reached near the top when he saw movement somewhere ahead.

Ducking behind a stone wall, The Commander observed two individuals in the shadows, one of whom was quite substantial in build whilst the other man who he was in conversation with was taller, well dressed.

“Stop right there, I want a word with you two” The Commander called whereupon the two men stopped talking and the tall well-dressed man turned to face him.

“You can have two words Mr Regent” the well-dressed man politely announced which caused The Commander to look on with some confusion at someone using his real name, “No comment” he then called with a smile whereupon he nodded to the

other man who suddenly turned to reveal he was carrying a shotgun which he promptly opened fire with.

Despite attempting to duck out of the way, The Commander was struck in the left arm and leg, sending him rolling down the spiral path until he came to a stop at the bottom.

Longton was still recovering from falling down the embankment when he was stunned by the sound of the gunshots which echoed around the park ominously.

“Any units from One Eight One” Longton called into his radio, “Shots fired in the park” he then announced as he scrambled to his feet and then headed off towards the mound.

As he approached, Longton thought that he saw someone heading away in the shadows but then noticed The Commander lying on the ground nearby.

“Ambulance required, officer down!” Longton then urgently called into his radio as he went over to The Commander and kneeled down to check him where he thankfully found a pulse, “Come on mate, stay with me” he then urged as the sound of footsteps of other officers rushing to the scene.

“Oh my God” Phillips exclaimed as she and Forrester arrived on the scene with torches that better illuminated the scene, and they saw what had happened.

“Check up there” Longton then pointed up the path.

“Roger that” Forrester agreed, handing Longton his torch before he and Phillips quickly headed up the path, weapons drawn.

“Al!” Stride called as he then arrived on the scene.

“He's still with us” Longton confirmed, “What about the bad guys?” he then asked.

“All accounted for except the two that ran into the Park” Stride confirmed.

“They'll be long gone” Longton responded, “Christ!” he then explained on seeing the blood on his hands from The Commander’s multiple wounds, “Control from One Eight One, where the hell is that ambulance?” he then demanded to know.

“Err yeah, ten minutes” Edwards called from the Control Room, “What the hell happened?” he then asked.

“Someone shot Sam, he's not looking good” Longton responded.

“Right, understood...” Edwards replied with a sense of shock at the news, “Erm, get him in a car and take him to casualty yourself, you are only a couple of minutes away.”

“Roger that” Longton quickly agreed, “Dave, find me some wheels, fast!”

“I’m on it” Stride quickly agreed, running off in the direction of the main gate as Phillips and Forrester returned.

“Any luck?” Longton asked.

“No sign” Phillips confirmed, “Just these” she then held up a clear plastic evidence bag with two spent shotgun cartridges inside, “Buckshot cartridges too, they were no warning shots.”

Lights approaching rapidly heralded the arrival of Stride, driving a patrol car that skidded on the grass until he stopped alongside them, the headlights providing much better illumination of the scene but also showing just how bad The Commander was with blood spilling onto the path as it soaked through his torn and battered uniform tunic.

“Let’s move!” Longton then called whereupon everyone gathered around The Commander’s body and positioned themselves, “Right, everyone got a bit?” which was when everyone confirmed, and they then lifted him up before slotting him onto the back seat of the car.”

“He’s in!” Phillips declared before running around to the passenger side front door and getting in.

“Go!” Longton then called, slapping the roof of the car whereupon Stride quickly sped away, sirens and blue flashing lights in full cry.

As the car sped away from sight, Longton looked around and then down at the blood on his hands before taking a deep breath.

“Okay” he then tried to recompose himself, “I want this entire place searched down to the last blade of grass.”

“Already being organised” Forrester confirmed, “We got everyone who was in the van, they didn’t put up a fight, probably something to do with being confronted by a couple of dozen heavily armed and extremely tired and pissed off officers I expect.”

“Right, let’s see what this was all about then” Longton then declared as he duly headed off back to the rear gate where, as he and Forrester emerged from the Park, Edwards arrived and joined them.

“Bloody hell, Longton” Edwards exclaimed on seeing the blood on Longton’s uniform and all over his hands as well as smeared across his forehead where he had inadvertently wiped his brow.

“Err, it isn’t mine Guv” Longton reassured him.

“Oh...: Edwards then realised the significance, “How is he?” he then tentatively asked.

“Not good Guv, not good...” Longton admitted, “Whoever plugged him got away in the confusion unfortunately.”

“Dammit!” Edwards responded with understandable frustration laced with some controlled anger before looking across at the van, “Come on, let's see what was so God dam important, shall we?”

“Abso-bloody-lutely, Guv!” Longton readily agreed whereupon he jumped up into the back of the van and looked at the numerous crates contained inside.

“Here” Edwards found a crowbar and passed it to Longton before looking around, “Anyone got a light?” he then called.

“Guv!” Forrester called, passing up a powerful torch which Edwards then turned on and trained on the large crate that Longton had selected to be the first to be opened.

“Here we go” Edwards declared as he rammed the wedge end of the crowbar underneath the lip of the crate and then used all his strength to lever it upwards, causing the nails securing it shut to creak as they were pulled free and the lid released.

“Whoa...” Longton then exclaimed as, on pulling back the shredded paper packaging material, he revealed a number of automatic firearms, all neatly packed in their manufacturer's factory wrappings.

“Oh, very nasty” Edwards remarked, “What else have we got?” he then asked, looking around the interior of the van.

“Looks like plastic explosives here” Forrester remarked, having just opened one of the metal cases, “Hang on, there is a manifest here” he then held up a clipboard with documentation on it that he had found, “Looks like we have ammunition of various sizes, plastic explosives, detonators, automatic weapons, hand guns, even some NATO specification anti-personal mines in this lot.”

“Fun for the whole family...” Longton remarked, “No wonder someone was desperate to get away and were not in the least bit bothered about blowing Sam away in the process.”

“I want this whole lot impounded, secured and checked by forensics for prints and anything else they can come up with” Edwards then ordered, “and get the Anti-Terrorist Squad down here, I am sure they will want to take a look at this as well.”

The tyres of the patrol car squealed loudly as Stride braked sharply to a stop outside the main entrance of the Accident & Emergency Department at Haychester's main hospital.

No sooner had he stopped than the medical team who were already waiting for their arrival were accessing the back of the car and lifting The Commander out and onto the waiting stretcher whereupon he was quickly taken inside.

Stride and Phillips quickly followed as the medical assessment of The Commander's condition was undertaken on the move.

“What have we got?” the Casualty Department Consultant asked as he used his stethoscope to check the breathing.

“Late 20's, shot by a shotgun, possibly a sawn off we think” Stride confirmed, “about six to eight minutes ago.”

“Looks like it is mostly the arm and leg that has taken the full force of it” the Consultant confirmed as they reached the assessment room, “strong pulse, blood pressure doesn't look good though, do we have any medical history?” he then asked.

“Not sure” Stride admitted, feeling almost useless as he watched the medical staff cut off The Commander's blood-soaked tunic and various monitors were linked up to him, “He has had a quite a time of it over the years.”

“I thought his face looked familiar” the Consultant admitted with a smile, “Okay Sir, we got you, you are going to be all right” he then reassured The Commander who opened his eyes momentarily and managed a brief smile but then suddenly his head slumped, and the monitoring equipment started to beep rapidly.

“Uh-oh...” Phillips responded.

“Let's move!” the Consultant then urgently called which was when the medical staff swiftly moved the stretcher away to the Intensive Care unit leaving Stride and Phillips just standing there.

“Boss” Collins called across the office, “Call for you on the Green Scrambler.”

“Oh...” Crowthorne responded, looking at the telephone on his desk and with a little trepidation, reaching across to it and picking up the handset before pressing the green button and taking the call, “Hello?” he then answered.

“Crowthorne” the Director General, Sir David Camberwell called, “You had better get down to Haychester by the fastest transport you can commandeer right away, Eddie Regent just got shot.”

“Right away Sir” Crowthorne quickly agreed.

“And, when this is over, I think we need to have a discussion about your future in the Service, among other subjects” Camberwell then remarked, “I'll let you get on though, good night.”

“Good night, Sir” Crowthorne replied but by then the call had already ended.

“Let me guess, trouble by any chance?” Collins asked, already sensing where this was going even before Crowthorne had got up and hurriedly put on his overcoat.

“Naturally” Crowthorne responded, “Watch the shop, I’ll call you as soon as I find out what the hell is going on.”

“Right, you are the boss” Collins agreed, “Where are you going?”

“Haychester...” Crowthorne confirmed with a meek smile before leaving.

“Ah...” Collins remarked in realisation.

“I don't care about how much inconvenience this will cause the evening traffic” Edwards called into the telephone in the Mobile Operations Unit that was now parked up in North Street near Priory Park where the scene was filled with numerous emergency services with blue flashing lights, reflecting off the surrounding buildings and traffic building up on the ring road as many of the streets in the area were now taped off.

Longton was tired, exhausted and still covered in blood as he pretty much trudged towards the Unit and reached it just as Edwards came out, looking thoroughly irritated.

“You all right Guv?” Longton asked.

“Quite frankly, no I am not” Edwards admitted, “You should get back to the office, sort yourself out, you're a mess.”

“Thanks Guv” Longton responded with the first smile in over an hour.

“One Eight One from Three Seven Two” Stride's voice called over the radio.

“Yeah, go ahead Dave” Longton quickly responded.

“Update on Sam's condition” Stride then announced, “He has just had surgery to remove a piece of buckshot that was close to some vital part, he is officially listed as critical but stable.”

“That's good news” Edwards responded with Longton nodding in agreement “I’ll send someone over to relieve you just as soon as this circus is sorted out.”

“Understood” Stride confirmed.

“Right, come on Lieutenant Commander” Edwards then declared, “Let's get back to the office, my car is over there.”

“Right you are Sir” Longton agreed, following Edwards to his car and getting in the passenger side.

As soon as the doors were shut and he and Longton were alone, Edwards took a deep breath and then exhaled.

“Okay, ranks aside Al” Edwards then declared, “How are you, really?” he then asked.

“Angry, pissed off, name your cliché” Longton admitted, “It erm, it is difficult to compute what you feel when you find your colleague and best friend lying near dead on the ground.”

“Been there, done that” Edwards responded, “I was in New Scotland Yard in 1969 when he was shot, the first time” he explained, “I still don't know to this day how he survived that, if he can survive that, he will pull through this.”

“I hope you are right Guv, I really do” Longton remarked as Edwards started the car and then proceeded to drive slowly off, pausing only for a moment to allow the officer on perimeter duty to lift the tape up and permit him to drive through.

It was only a few minutes later when they reached the office and Edwards parked up outside their building and turned off the engine.

“Get yourself freshened up Al, then come up to my office” Edwards then strongly suggested, “I'll run the show for the rest of the night, SO19 should be here within the hour, they can then have this whole mess.”

“Understood Sir” Longton agreed as he got out of the car and then headed towards the south staircase entrance.

Edwards watched Longton disappear inside before reaching for his radio.

“All units from Whisky Sierra X-Ray One” Edwards called, “Be advised that Sam's condition is reported as serious but stable” he then announced, “I want everyone involved to ensure that all notes and reports are completed as soon as possible, that means every I dotted and every T crossed, we are handing this over to the boys from the Anti-Terrorist Squad the moment they arrive.”

Longton's radio was turned off so he did not hear any of Edwards' message as he headed up the stairs to the second floor, the fire door onto the stairs landing creaking as he passed through it before walking slowly along the corridor to the toilet where he went inside and leaned over the basin, before splashing water over his face and then looking at his own reflection in the mirror.

“Al, you are a mess” Longton then remarked to his reflection, “Pull yourself together, you have work to do” he then told himself.

A few moments later he was walking into the deserted office and saw that the only light on was on The Commander's desk where the lamp had been accidentally left on.

With a bit of a slump, Longton sat in the chair and rubbed his eyes, fatigued by a combination of a long tiring day and the shock of seeing his best friend and colleague gunned down.

He briefly looked down at the slightly open desk drawer where part of one of the many packs of biscuits that The Commander kept in there was just visible and for a moment, he was tempted to have one but then thought better of it and fully closed the drawer, determined that the owner would be back soon to eat them himself.

It was then that Longton looked across at something fluttering in the breeze that was coming in through the slightly open office window, a yellow sticky note that was attached to the lampshade.

Leaning forward, he took a closer look at the note and the neat handwriting upon it, the fact that the handwriting was legible meant it was not written by The Commander but by someone else which told him this was a message for him, not by him.

“Interesting...” Longton remarked to himself as he took the note off the lamp shade and looked at it more closely before hurrying away.

Further down the corridor in his own office, Simon Fuller was working on the computer when there was a knock on the door.

“Come in” Fuller called.

“Hi” Longton called as he came in, “Sorry to disturb you.”

“Oh, no, it’s all right” Fuller confirmed, “How is Sam?” he asked.

“Serious but stable” Longton mournfully confirmed, “He’s a tough lad, I am sure he will pull through, at least I hope he does.”

“I am sure he will be fine” Fuller agreed, “I mean, so far this week he has been shot at, nearly blown up, jumped off the roof of a cathedral and had his car rammed off the road.”

“Just a typical week for him really” Longton remarked.

“So, what can I do for you?” Fuller then asked.

“Can you do a discreet name check for me please?” Longton inquired, “Someone left an anonymous tipoff for Sam, but he never saw it, must have come in some time after we left on the op.”

“What have you got?” Fuller remarked as he turned to his computer.

“Some guy by the name of Derek Chichester” Longton read from the note which made Fuller paused in mid typing and rotate his chair back around.

“The Derek Chichester?” he then asked, “Sir Derek Chichester?”

“You know the guy?” Longton responded.

“Well, not socially, no” Fuller admitted, “I am surprised you haven't though, he is the talk of the broadsheet papers political columns.”

“I only read the small red top tabloids, sorry” Longton explained, “Not exactly what you call sophisticated journalism.”

“And I am willing to bet it is not the subject that comes up in Sam's regular reading material either” Fuller agreed, “The pages of the Railway Modeller are not exactly a hotbed of political opinion either.”

“So, for the benefit of us uneducated tabloid or model rail magazine reading types” Longton then remarked, “Who is this Chichester bloke?”

“Sir Derek Chichester is one of the big movers and shakers in the corridors of power” Fuller began to explain, “First came to prominence during the 1970's when all the industrial action was happening, made a fortune out of cheap land sales of closed down factories and coal mines that he then resold for a vast profit, much of which he then used to provide loans to certain political campaigns which were then repaid at a very substantial rate of interest, making him even more money.”

“And failing to pass through the hands of the Inland Revenue no doubt” Longton added.

“Your cynicism serves you well” Fuller agreed, “He has subsequently gone on to build quite the business empire, made another fortune out of the London Docklands development thanks to favourable decisions by the planning authorities and the Home Office, adviser to various Government departments and the talk of the political hoi-polloi.”

“In other words, a greedy rich arsehole with a lot of connections” Longton concluded, “So, where is the dirt?” he then asked.

“Ah, now you are talking” Fuller responded with a knowing smile, “There were rumours that he was going over the side with the wife of a senior Member of Parliament, accusations of all sorts of naughty goings on in the bedroom department and even threats of intimidation with violence against some business rivals, all of which was covered up with a suitable liberal coat of whitewash courtesy of a certain Government representative who is now the Prime Minister's Special Security Adviser no less.”

“Oh, what a tangled web we weave...” Longton remarked, “So, what does this guy have to do with this mess?”

“Well...” Fuller moved across to the side desk and searched through the papers and documents scattered and stacked up on it until he found what he was looking for, the pinkish coloured paper being the distinctive feature of the Financial Times newspaper, “He was here somewhere” he then flicked through the pages until he found what he

was looking for, "Here you go, this is him" he then showed Longton a photograph in the paper.

"How on Earth does this guy get beautiful women into his bed ad nauseum?" Longton wondered on seeing his picture.

"Never mind the boat, check out the wallet" Fuller explained, "Money talks..."

"Ah..." Longton realised, "Hang on a minute..." he then remarked as, whilst studying the picture in the paper, something occurred to him, "Have you got that image of the mystery man at Lord Francis suite?" he then asked.

"Yeah, it's here" Fuller began to sift through more documents cluttering his desk, "Somewhere..."

"Looks like Eddie has competition for most disorganised desk" Longton remarked to himself.

"Who's Eddie?" Fuller asked.

"Oh..." Longton realised his mistake, "No one you know..."

"Ah, here it is" he then found the right file and the photograph inside it which he passed across.

"Oh hell..." Longton then had his fears realised, "I do believe we have a match, what do you think?" he then passed the newspaper and the photograph side by side back to Fuller."

"I think you could be right" Fuller agreed, "Have you seen this?" he handed over another piece of paper, "A witness statement just logged by one of our guys from a little old lady who lives in an apartment, overlooking the New Park Road end of Priory park, who describes two men leaving the Park moments after the shooting, one is tall, slim build and distinguished with receding red hair, the other, large build, long overcoat and speaking with an Irish accent."

"O'Connor the heavy" Longton concluded, "Should have guessed he was the trigger man really" he then remarked, "and his Guvnor could well be this Chichester guy."

"And we probably can't touch him" Edwards called as he came into the office, "Yes, I just came to the same conclusion in case you were wondering."

"What the hell have we waltzed into here Guv?" Longton asked, "and where did this come from?" he then indicated the note.

"I would say that came from a little birdie sitting in a well appointed office on the north bank of the River Thames, a stone's throw away from Vauxhall Bridge" Edwards remarked, "Someone wants us to deal with the problem."

“Yeah, but how do we find them before either they go to ground or someone in the corridors of power waltzes on in to bury the evidence?” Longton asked.

“This is a local crime” Fuller suggested, “I would suggest that they are staying somewhere local.”

“Hold that thought” Longton responded “and follow me.”

“Where are we going?” Fuller asked as he and Edwards duly followed Longton out of the office.

“I want to check a theory” Longton then explained as he went into the investigation room where Phillips was already back and working through a mass of documents.

“Any updates from the scene?” Edwards asked.

“The Anti-Terrorist Squad arrived about five minutes ago” Phillips confirmed, “Commander Bovis is having his specialist weapons team looking over the cargo and getting it moved to a secure location, a search of the Park has turned up nothing else except the two shotgun cartridges we found earlier and Sam's warrant card that must have fallen out of his pocket when he tumbled down the path” she handed the blood stained warrant card over to Longton.

“What about the prisoners?” Edwards asked.

“All down in our custody area, all screaming for their lawyers but apart from that, they are saying nothing” Phillips confirmed, “None of them have any i.d. on them but they all had about five grand in cash, each.”

“Nice little earner for an evening's work” Fuller remarked.

“How is Sam?” Edwards asked, “Any update?”

“Out of surgery about five minutes ago, he should be okay” Phillips confirmed, “Going to need a few weeks rest though.”

“He'll be back by the end of the week then” Edwards wryly remarked, “and its Thursday already...”

“They seek him here, they seek him there...” Longton commented as he leafed through some evidence logs, “Come on you bastard, you must be here somewhere.”

“What are you looking for, Al?” Phillips asked.

“This man” he indicated the photograph in the Financial Times paper, “He's our mystery man, I am sure of it and he and his big Irish friend have got to be staying in the area somewhere, so I am going through the hotel and guest house registers to see if he or his trigger-happy chum turn up somewhere.”

“Probably booked in under false names” Edwards suggested.

“Nothing obvious here” Longton remarked with a slightly depressed sigh, “Wait a minute...” he then pondered, “That witness that said they saw two men leaving the Park immediately after the gunshots, did they mention a vehicle of some kind?”

“Not that I recall” Phillips confirmed, “Besides, we had the entire area shut down and vehicles in every side street all around the Park so even if they did have a car, they would not have been able to get out of there without somebody seeing them.”

“And I can safely bet they didn't get on a bus” Fuller added, “Boarding a number 253 bus and paying your fare with a sawn-off slung over your shoulder would have attracted attention.”

“Which means they could well have a bolthole somewhere in the immediate area” Longton then went over to the city map and had a thorough look at it, “Did anyone check the Ship Hotel in North Street?” he then asked, tapping on a location immediately adjacent to Priory Park on the map.

“Erm, no they didn't” Phillips confirmed, “The Manager was not available at the time and erm, I don't think it got followed up.”

“Oh dear...” Edwards rolled his eyes upwards.

“I'll get onto them” Phillips then reached for the telephone.

“No, we'll go down there ourselves” Edwards nodded towards Longton, “Get hold of Commander Bovis and ask him to meet us outside the main entrance in North Street.”

“Roger that Guv” Phillips confirmed before leaving the office to head to the Control Room in order to make the call.

“Simon” Edwards then turned to Fuller, “Get back to your office and start tapping up your sources, I want every single piece of dirt we have on this Chichester guy but keep it to yourself and make sure it is safely squirreled away just in case the official whitewash squad come flying in.”

“Understood Sir” Fuller agreed.

“Come on Al, let's go and annoy someone” Edwards then declared.

“Oh, my head...” The Commander weakly remarked as he regained consciousness, lying on a hospital bed in the recovery area of the Casualty Department.

“I think you will find, Lieutenant Commander that you were shot in the lower left arm and your leg, not you head” the Consultant remarked.

“Oh, great...” The Commander responded, “a quack with a sense of humour.”

“We aim to please” the Consultant remarked with a smile, “This is the new caring sharing NHS now, don't you know?”

“I am not going to get some clipboard wielding Manager turn up at some point asking me if my stay and treatment was within expectations, am I?” The Commander then asked.

“Actually, now you come to mention it....” the Consultant began.

“What's the damage?” The Commander then inquired.

“We removed several bits of buckshot from your arm and leg, including one that was dangerously close to a major artery, and patched up the damage” the Consultant indicated The Commander's left limbs, heavily bandaged, “You lost a fair bit of blood so you have received a transfusion to top you up and you will need rest.”

“Ha!” The Commander responded, “That'll be the day!”

“Yeah, I had a feeling that would be your reaction” the Consultant responded, “You practically have a season ticket for this place now” he then remarked, “Erm, your colleague is here, shall I send him in?” he then asked.

“By all means Doctor” The Commander readily agreed.

“Officer?” the Consultant then called through the door, “You can see him now.”

“You all right mate?” Stride asked as he came in whilst the Consultant nodded in acknowledgement and departed.

“It's all right Dave, I have been shot before” The Commander tried to reassure him as he attempted to sit up, only to wince with pain all down his left-hand side, “After a while you get used to it, sort of...”

“We were worried you wouldn't make it for a while there” Stride admitted.

“It will take a lot more than a couple of dozen bits of buckshot to finish me off” The Commander admitted.

“So, do you want the good news or the bad news?” Stride then asked.

“Give me the good news” The Commander instructed.

“You are still alive” Stride began to which The Commander nodded in agreement, “We have got the van load of gear, all the guys who were on the team and the Royal Navy have got the boat and its crew.”

“What was the stuff in the van?” The Commander asked.

“Guns, ammo, explosives, enough military grade hardware to start a small war” Stride confirmed, “There is a Commander Bovis from the Anti-Terrorist Branch on the scene now, securing the goods and testing them for any forensic evidence.”

“Woah...” The Commander responded.

“And now for the bad news” Stride then ominously continued, “Two men escaped, probably the two characters who you bumped into.”

“The guy with the shotgun was definitely that Irish thug, O’Connor” The Commander grimly confirmed, momentarily shutting his eyes tightly as he saw a brief recall of the moment he was shot flash through his mind, “The other guy, tall, slim, officious looking balding guy, calling the shots, so I expect he is our mystery man.”

“We may have a name for him” Stride responded, “Seems we received an anonymous tip off giving us a name” he then checked his notebook, “Some guy by the name of Chichester?”

The Commander thought for a few moments before a look of realisation came over him.

“Sir Derek Chichester?” he then asked, a sense of incredulity readily apparent.

“Yeah, that’s the fella” Stride agreed, “Why? Do you know him?”

“Let’s just say our paths crossed once, some years ago” The Commander only vaguely explained, “Perhaps best left unsaid.”

“Do you want me to stay?” Stride asked.

“No, it’s all right” The Commander admitted, “I am going nowhere fast it would seem; you best get back and help out.”

“Right you are” Stride agreed, “Any message for the guys?”

“Tell them I will be fine” The Commander instructed, “and find that bastard before I do.”

“Roger that” Stride responded.

“Superintendent Edwards?” a man in a smart suit with a Security Service warrant card badge displayed on his breast pocket called as he came over when Edwards and Longton arrived in North Street.

“Yes, I’m Edwards” he confirmed as he got out of the car and the two men met as Longton looked on from the driver’s seat.

“Commander Anthony Bovis, SO19” the man then introduced himself and they duly shook hands.

“Welcome to the party” Edwards gestured around at the numerous emergency service vehicles and personnel who were still in the area.

“Thanks” Bovis replied, “How is your officer who was shot?” he then asked.

“I can answer that Sir” Stride called as he joined them, “He is conscious, battered, very sore down his left-hand side and I think, quite pissed off.”

“He has every right to be” Longton pointed out.

“Quite” Edwards agreed, “Well Commander Bovis, if you are amenable, we will leave the weaponry side of the investigation to you?”

“Absolutely Sir” Bovis readily agreed, “My lads are already co-ordinating with the Bomb Squad and also the Military Police regarding the boat these guys used.”

“Excellent” Edwards responded, “In that case I will leave you to it.”

“Thank you, Sir,” Bovis responded with a salute before hurrying away.

“Stride, I want you to start shifting some of these vehicles and personnel out of here” Edwards then instructed, “The show is over now and quite frankly, the overtime budget won’t take any more of this.”

“Right away Sir” Stride confirmed before he too headed off.

“What if they are in there, Sir?” Longton asked, nodding towards the Ship Hotel.

“I want them to relax, sit back, think they have got away with it” Edwards explained, “and with just you and me, the less that know about this little development, the better,”

“I agree Sir” Longton responded.

“Right, let’s go and see if they are in, shall we?” Edwards then suggested.

“By all means Sir” Longton agreed before following his superior towards the front entrance of the luxury hotel and restaurant that occupied a large plot which stretched from the main North Street right across to the perimeter of Priory Park.

The well-appointed foyer of the hotel was busy as Edwards and Longton entered and were shown by the uniformed doorman to the Reception Desk.

“Good evening” Edwards then politely yet formally called to the Receptionist as he proffered his warrant card, even though, being in full uniform and with the intense emergency service activity in the immediate area over the last couple of hours, it was probably superfluous.

“Good evening, Sir” the Receptionist responded, “How can I help?”

“I need to look at your register please” Edwards explained, “Just an informal look...”

“Erm, I'll just check with the Manager” the Receptionist confirmed before leaving the desk.

“Don't we need a warrant for this Guv?” Longton quietly asked.

“Probably” Edwards admitted, “I am starting to pick up some of Eddie's bad habits but seeing as it's a special occasion, why not?”

“Nice...” Longton responded with a smile as the Receptionist returned with the Manager.

“Oh, hello Jim” the Manager called as the two men shook hands, “Been a while.”

“That is has” Edwards agreed to a somewhat confused look from Longton “Alan and I were both at school together, I spent my wedding night here too.”

“Oh...” Longton remarked.

“So, I gather you wanted to see the Register?” Alan asked, “Strictly, it needs the appropriate paperwork, but I suppose if it just happened to be lying around whilst you were glancing around...” he then tentatively suggested.

“...and I just happened to notice something, completely by accident of course” Edwards agreed.

“I'll go and sort out my sock drawer or something” Alan then conformed as he casually opened the leather-bound register, “Brenda, time for a coffee” he then remarked to the Receptionist.

“Now, that is what you call public co-operation” Longton smiled in response.

“Hmm, no Chichester or O'Connor here” Edwards remarked as he scanned the register with a sense of frustration.

“I guess it was too much to hope they were registered under their real names” Longton admitted, “Hang on a minute” he then remarked as he noticed something, “What about this?” he pointed to one part of the register, “business group registered here, Noviomagus Investments.”

“Huh?” Edwards responded, clearly not understanding the relevance.

“Noviomagus is the Roman name for Chichester, as in ancient city of” Longton explained, “Benefits of having paid attention in A-Level History class.”

“Everything all right officers?” Alan asked as he returned to the Reception desk.

“You have a delegation from a company calling itself Noviomagus Investments staying here I believe” Edwards then asked, “Information received shall we say?” he then added with a knowing smile.

“Ah yes” Alan recalled, “third floor, the Bosham Suite, I think there are only two of the party remaining now, the others checked out this morning.”

“We'll go and say hello if that is all right?” Edwards then asked.

“Be my guest” Alan agreed, “Is this going to be discrete and subtle, seeing as that other officer of yours is not here?”

“Oh yes” Edwards confirmed, “tact and discretion, that's the name of the game, those size tens that usually get landed well and truly in it are currently resting in St Richard's hospital right now.”

“Just make sure they pay their bill before they leave Jim” Alan then asked.

“Will do” Edwards agreed “Come on Al” he then prompted Longton before heading towards the stairs.

“Shouldn't we be calling in some back up Sir?” Longton asked as he followed Edwards up the stairs.

“We don't want to make a scene” Edwards explained, “There are subtleties to be observed here, if this is Chichester, having him dragged out into the street kicking and screaming by armed officers in handcuffs amid a media circus of press would attract the wrong sort of attention from the corridors of power.”

“Ah, I see” Longton realised.

“Right, third floor” Edwards remarked, “Where is this suite?” he then asked.

“Guv” Longton indicated the intricate gold leaf lettered sign on the wall indicating the direction of the four suites on that floor.

“Bosham Suite, this way” Edwards then confirmed before they strolled formally down the ornate corridor until they reached the door.

“Room Service...” Longton quietly remarked which made Edwards smile as he knocked on the door.

They both waited patiently for the door to be answered which made them start to think that nobody was in when the lock began to be released and then the door opened slowly.

“Yes?” a man called from inside.

“Good evening, Sir, Divisional Chief Superintendent James Edwards, National Security Service” Edwards then announced, showing the man his warrant card, “We are conducting routine enquiries following an incident in the Park next door earlier this evening.”

“Oh, really officer” the man replied, “Erm, I didn't see anything, sorry.”

“That's quite all right Sir” Edwards responded, “Thank you for your time” he then declared before turning to leave again whereupon the door was swiftly closed again behind him.

“Guv?” Longton asked as they started to stroll back down the corridor.

“That's our man” Edwards confirmed, “Let's not alarm him, see what he does” he then nodded down a side corridor where there were a couple of antique carved wooden chairs and he duly sat down, “All we have to do is wait until our friend decides to check out, which given that he just got door knocked by the Old Bill means he is probably packing his bags and emptying the minibar right now.”

“And his friend, Mr O'Connor?” Longton asked as he too sat down.

“I got the impression that Mr Chichester was not alone” Edwards admitted, “Now, he could have a girl in there I suppose or our big trigger-happy Irish friend, maybe even both.”

“Cosy...” Longton responded but at that moment they heard the sound of a door opening and they quickly got up and moved across to be out of sight.

Cautiously, Longton peered around the corner and saw three individuals come out of the room, Chichester being the first with a young blonde-haired lady on his arm whilst immediately following them was O'Connor who was carrying two suitcases.

“Here we go” Longton then quietly declared as they both observed the group enter the lift.

“Call it in” Edwards then prompted as the lift doors closed and they proceeded back towards the stairs.

“Control from One Eight One” Longton called over his radio, “We have three individuals, one tall slim male with receding hairline, one late teens blonde female and one large build Irish man about to check out of the Ship Hotel on North Street.”

“Let's follow them, see where they go” Edwards suggested.

“Anyone in the area, we want them to leave the premises unhindered and are NOT to be intercepted” Longton then continued.

“One Eight One from Three Five Nine” another officer then called over the radio, “There is a black chauffeur driven Mercedes pulling up outside the hotel's main entrance right now.”

“Thanks for that” Longton responded.

“Sounds like their carriage awaits” Edwards agreed as they reached the ground floor and looked across the reception area towards the main desk where they could see the group were indeed checking out.

“The unmarked car is still out in the street” Longton suggested. we could follow them in that.”

“Sounds like a plan” Edwards agreed, “Come on, we will use the tradesman's entrance.”

A few moments later the two officers emerged from a rear staff entrance and quickly got into the unmarked Security Service car and waited.

“Here we go, wonders of a one-way street” Longton then remarked as he looked in the wing mirror to see the black Mercedes turn into the narrow street behind them and then slowly drive past before turning right, past the main entrance into Priory Park.

“Keep in touch” Edwards suggested as Longton started the engine and moved off at a discrete distance.

“Roger that Guv” Longton confirmed, “We could use some backup though.”

“All units from Zero One” Longton called over the radio, “Attention drawn to a black Mercedes saloon, currently westbound on Priory Road heading towards New Park Road, four occupants including the driver, they are not, I repeat NOT to be intercepted or pulled over by anyone unless I say otherwise” he instructed, “I need another unmarked car to join us as we follow.”

“Zero One from Two Four One” Phillips called, “I have got a motor just off New Park Road, I'll join the party.”

“I'll do the commentary if you like?” Edwards suggested to which Longton nodded in agreement, “All units from Zero One, target vehicle is a black Mercedes 500 series, registration number Echo Three Seven Two Delta Victor Yankee, indicating left, left, left out of Priory Road into New Park Road to head northbound.”

“If they were heading out of the city, I would have expected them to turn right and head towards the bypass” Longton commented as he turned left himself and maintained a respectful distance behind the Mercedes.

“Two Four One, target vehicle passing me now” she confirmed, “I'll slip in behind you.”

“Now where do you reckon, Guv?” Longton asked.

“We will soon find out” Edwards confirmed as they watched the Mercedes approach the roundabout, “Here we go” he then returned to the radio “Target vehicle is proceeding northeast at the roundabout, going past the hospital.”

“They are not going to pay a visit to Eddie, are they?” Longton remarked as they passed the main hospital entrance.

“There is no way of them knowing he is in there” Edwards responded, “Even if they did, it would be an immensely stupid move, these guys are smart, not crazy.”

The light traffic at that time of evening meant progress was swift and they were able to hang back quite a bit to avoid being noticed.

“Unless they are visiting someone on the estate, then we are heading towards Westhampnett” Longton commented.

“Left, left, left at the mini roundabout” Edwards called “and it's straight on at St James' towards the Crematorium.”

“I do hope this isn't going to be a long trip” Longton remarked, “I want my tea.”

“Me too” Edwards agreed which was when he began to think about something, “Hang on a minute...”

“Guv?” Longton asked, sensing something was wrong.

“Two Four One from Zero One” Edwards then urgently called, “Phillips, take over at the next mini roundabout.”

“Will do” Phillips confirmed.

“Al, turn right here” he then quickly instructed.

“Err, right Sir” Longton responded, indicating and turning right whilst the Mercedes headed onwards with Phillips in her car following behind.

“Right, double back and step on it” Edwards then ordered, “I think I have a nasty feeling about where they are going.”

“Right you are Sir” Longton responded, accelerating hard away before turning sharply right to head back towards central Haychester, “I have had a thought myself” he then added.

“I am all ears” Edwards remarked.

“That girl that is travelling with Chichester” Longton replied, “I have seen her before.”

“Do tell” Edwards prompted.

“When Sam and I went to interview Lord Francis just before he got blown to bits” Longton explained “there was a young woman leaving his suite, we later identified her as being the local Member of Parliament's teenage granddaughter as it turns out she was his last of a long line of bedroom conquests and I would bet a week's wages, that is the same girl that Chichester is travelling with.”

“Now that is interesting...” Edwards responded, “Control from Zero One” he then called, “Summon up the cavalry, we have got a big problem.”

“Sara, do you want a cuppa?” Mickey asked as he put the kettle on.

“Yeah love, why not?” Sara replied from the living room.

Mickey hummed a little tune from his childhood as he got a couple of mugs out of the cupboard and put some teabags in them.

As the kettle began to increase in volume, he looked out of the kitchen window which was when he noticed the headlights of a car coming along the narrow country lane that ran past the safe house, apparently slow down and then speed off again.

Whilst passing traffic was not unusual even for that remote and rural location, something just did not feel right and so as the kettle boiled and switched off, Mickey poured the water into the mugs and then moved through to the front hallway where he discreetly pulled the net curtain aside and looked out into the lane.

“You all right?” Sara asked as she joined Mickey in the hallway.

“Yeah...” Mickey reluctantly confirmed, “Just my vivid imagination” he then admitted.

“I've seen your library” Sara remarked with a snigger, “Your imagination must be pretty colourful.”

“I think you are in one or two parts of that collection if I recall” Mickey smiled in response.

“Oh...” Sara remembered something from her earlier past history.

“Come on, tea's brewing” Mickey then nodded back towards the kitchen.

As Mickey brought the tea through to the living room, the television was showing the local news bulletin that comes on after the national news.

“Here Mickey, look” Sara pointed at the television, “Haychester is on the telly, and it's a Thursday as well.”

“A spokesman for the Security Service confirmed that there had been an incident in Haychester's Priory Park earlier this evening that required their attendance” the news

bulletin presenter announced, “however they were not prepared to go into details regarding the incident as investigations are still ongoing, other than to confirm that a number of individuals had been taken into custody who were helping them with their inquiries.”

“Sounds like we missed a hell of a party” Sara remarked.

“Given how trigger happy these goons have been, I am not overly bothered I will admit” Mickey responded.

“What was that?” Sara then asked, quickly muting the television sound when something caught her attention.

“Where?” Mickey looked all around.

“I thought I heard something through there” Sara pointed ahead, “In the kitchen.”

“Stay here” Mickey then prompted as he discreetly pulled out a fire iron and then made his way through to the kitchen where, as he entered, he noticed that the back door handle was starting to turn.

Thinking quickly, Mickey ducked out of sight as the door was opened from the outside and someone began to enter.

“Whoa!!” Longton called out as Mickey was about to strike him with the fire iron, fortunately stopping just short of making contact, “It's me Mickey.”

“Christ!” Mickey responded, “You almost gave me a heart attack!”

“Sorry Mickey” Longton apologised, “Have you met my Guvnor?” he then introduced Edwards as he followed him inside and closed the door behind him.

“Chief Superintendent Edwards” he introduced himself, “You must be the famous Mickey?” he then asked.

“At your service” Mickey responded, “Come on through, meet Sara” he then led them through to the front room, “We have got company love” he then called ahead.

“Oooh, men in uniforms” Sara jokingly remarked as the two officers came into the front room, “Where is that crazy one?” she then asked.

“Oh, Sam?” Longton asked after thinking for a moment as to whom she meant, “Managed to get himself shot in Priory Park earlier, he is going to be all right though.”

“Big brutish Irish guy with a serious attitude problem and his Guvnor, some pencil thin balding half-wit in an expensive suit?” Mickey asked.

“Yeah, that's them” Edwards agreed, “and there is a possibility they may be heading this way, loose ends.”

“Those loose ends being Sara and I?” Mickey tentatively suggested.

“Unfortunately, yes” Edwards confirmed.

“Guv, there is a car coming up the lane” Longton nodded out of the window where he had been watching.

“Keep an eye on it” Edwards instructed before reaching for his radio “Zero One to Control, situation report please” he then requested as Longton headed upstairs to get a better view.

“Target vehicle has been following the country roads approaching Fittleworth” the Control Room Supervisor confirmed, “Two of our unmarked vehicles following at a distance.”

“Guv!!” Longton then called from upstairs, “We have got company!”

“Al, get down here” Edwards called, pulling his firearm from its holster, “and you two” he then addressed Mickey and Sara, “Get in the cellar and lock the door.”

“No need to ask twice!” Mickey quickly agreed before making off into the hallway and down into the cellar, escorting Sara as if he was her unofficial bodyguard.

“What have we got Al?” Edwards then asked as Longton returned to the room, also checking his own firearm.

“Two individuals walking up the lane, looks like our two likely lads” Longton confirmed.

“All right, let them get inside and then we nick them for trespass” Edwards ordered, “All units from Zero One, we need backup to Rose Cottage, Fittleworth Lane as soon as possible.”

“Gate...” Longton whispered on hearing the front gate squeak as someone opened it.

“Stand by” Edwards instructed.

They both almost held their breath as the sound of footsteps approaching door grew louder and then the door handle was tried before it was suddenly kicked in and O'Connor forced his way into the house, brandishing his trademark shotgun.

“Don't even think about it pal” Longton remarked as he stepped out behind him and pointed his gun right at O'Connor's head.

“Lose the hardware” Edwards ordered as he emerged from the shadows and now O'Connor was facing two guns pointed directly at him.

“Humph...” O'Connor grunted before reluctantly placing the weapon carefully on the floor.

“Hands behind your back” Longton then ordered, “I am sure you know the drill” he then remarked before applying the handcuffs.

“Where's your boss?” Edwards then asked, stepping forwards, kicking the weapon away and then confronting O'Connor face to face.

“I'm here, Chief Superintendent” Chichester called as he stepped through the door, “Would you mind awfully releasing my associate, it would be a shame if I had to go through official channels to achieve this, the paperwork, the endless phone calls and having to wake up senior members of the legal system to get all the documentation counter signed, especially at this time of night.”

“Your 'associate' here is wanted on at least one count of murder, two of wounding with intent and half a dozen other offences” Edwards explained, “and as for you Sir...”

“Hilarious!” Chichester responded, “You really have no idea who I am, do you?”

“A slimeball with a lot of connections?” Longton suggested, “Err, not my words, a friend of mine.”

“Charming...” Chichester responded, “That would be Mr Regent I presume?” he then asked to a look of surprise from both the officers, “Yes, I thought so.”

“You are going nowhere” Edwards then insisted, “I don't care who you have in your Filofax or who is on the take, nobody gets away with gunning down one of my best officers on my manor, nobody.”

“Really, this is laughable” Chichester responded.

“Control from One Eight One” Longton called into his radio, “Two to pick up at Rose Cottage.’

Initially Longton did not think of the lack of response but after a few moments of total silence, he looked at his radio with a slightly mystified expression.

“Control from One Eight One?” he then tried again.

“Having trouble with your communications gentlemen?” Chichester asked, clearly well aware of what was happening.

“Sunspots I expect” Edwards tried to bluff his way out of the situation.

“Well, it has been a most interesting evening gentlemen” Chichester then remarked, checking his watch “however Mr O'Connor and I really must be going.”

“You are joking, aren't you?” Edwards responded.

“Actually, Chief Superintendent, no...” Chichester confirmed with a smile as he turned to leave, only for him to suddenly shake violently in response to a flash that then saw him collapse to the ground unconscious.”

“Leaving so soon?” Crowthorne remarked as he stepped into the light cast from the doorway, a Taser device in his hand.

“What are you doing here?” Edwards asked.

“Mopping up” Crowthorne explained, “and this must be Mr O'Connor he then remarked as he stepped over Chichester's unconscious body and confronted the big Irishman.”

“One Eight One” Longton called into his radio again.

“Oh, I forgot” Crowthorne then recalled, “Try channel eight” he then suggested, “Mr Chichester's friends jammed your regular frequency about five minutes ago, van down the road with a technical guy and a sophisticated jamming device.”

“Control from One Eight One” Longton tried once again having changed the channel as suggested.

“Control receiving” Judd's voice came through, “Why are you on Channel Eight?” he then asked.

“Had a bit of a problem with a party line and some unfriendly trigger-happy nutters” Longton explained.

At that point, Crowthorne's two men appeared at the door.

“Ah, there you are” Crowthorne responded, “Did you have any problems with Mr Chichester's man in the van.”

“No problem, Sir” one of the men confirmed, producing a small device with a little red button on it and then pressing it whereupon there was a loud bang somewhere in the distance as a vehicle exploded.

“Right, now that is the office work taken care of” Crowthorne declared, “What about these two?” he then asked.

“You aren't taking me anywhere” O'Connor defiantly remarked.

“No, I am not” Crowthorne agreed, “Chief Superintendent, this one is all yours, throw the book at him.”

“With pleasure...” Edwards responded.

“Meanwhile...” Crowthorne then remarked as he knelt down beside Chichester as he was just starting to recover consciousness, “This piece of filth is ours. Gentlemen...”

he then called to his officers who proceeded to pick him up and then unceremoniously drag him away.

“You guys can come out now” Longton then called down towards the basement whereupon Mickey and Sara tentatively opened the door.

“Can we go home now?” Sara then asked.

“Yes, yes you can” Edwards confirmed with a smile.

“Oh, my head...” The Commander remarked as he tried to sit up and look around the single bed ward he had been moved to.

It was past midnight now, the hospital was quiet, and The Commander was feeling sore, battered and bruised but thankful that at least he was still alive.

“Hello old friend” Longton remarked as he came into the room.

“Ah, a friendly face!” The Commander responded, come in.

“How are you feeling?” Longton then asked.

“Like Douglas Adam's proverbial bowl of petunias” The Commander admitted to a slightly quizzical look from Longton, “Oh no, not again...” he then explained.

“Whoa...” Longton then remarked as he noticed where The Commander's shirt was ripped, the scars of his previous wounds.

“One of the nurses told me that apparently battle scars are supposed to be attractive to women” The Commander remarked, wincing a bit more as he adjusted his posture.

“You do seem to rather attract the gun totting nutters, don't you?” Longton suggested, “How many times is this now?” he then asked.

“Officially two, unofficially three” The Commander confirmed, “You get used to it after a while, I think...”

“Well, you will be delighted to know that the bad guys are in the bin” Longton replied, “Our big Irish friend O'Connor is locked up, waiting for Special Branch to work their magic on him first thing in the morning, SO19 have the weapons safely stored away in a secure evidence store, Forster and his Drugs Squad lads have enough evidence to keep Sylvester and his friends behind bars for years and Crowthorne and his boys are dealing with Chichester.”

“Let's see how he wriggles out of this one” The Commander remarked.

“I thought you might appreciate these” Longton then passed him a couple of packets of biscuits and the latest issue of Railway Modeller, “I didn't think you were interested in grapes and the Daily Telegraph somehow.”

“Very perceptive, thanks” The Commander gratefully responded.

“And the Guvnor sent a message for you” Longton then remarked, “You are hereby ordered to rest and not to leave here until you are fit.”

“Wonderful...” The Commander responded, “Ah well, at least there is a telly in here and it can get ITV” he nodded towards the television mounted on the wall, “I can tell it's a Thursday, Prisoner Cell Block H was on.”

“Oh, you will also be delighted to know that your old friend Chief Superintendent Travis has been 'retired' onto Gardening Leave, indefinitely” Longton then confirmed with a big grin.

“Couldn't have happened to a more deserving fellow” The Commander agreed, “I guess everyone over there now gets a promotion” he then remarked which was when Longton smiled awkwardly.

“What?” The Commander asked, sensing something.

“Erm, nothing...” Longton responded, not all that convincingly.

“Hmm...” The Commander responded, his sense of suspicion heightened as he ate one of the biscuits.

It was then that Edwards came in and joined them.

“Morning Guv” The Commander called, looking up at the clock.

“Morning?” Edwards asked but then glanced up at the clock on the wall and realised, “Did you tell him Al?” he then asked Longton.

“Ern, just the bit about resting” Longton confirmed “and filling him in on where our various miscreants are now.”

“Right...” Edwards responded.

“All right, what's going on?” The Commander demanded to know, “I may be injured and just acquired yet more bits of metal in my body to confuse every metal detector this side of Watford and spent the last three hours watching the telly, but I am still capable of perceptive thought which means if something is going on, I want to know about it.”

“Right...” Longton reluctantly agreed but at that point it was obvious that others were approaching the room from the increase in noise and footsteps outside the door.

“You had better hide those biscuits quick, we have got official visitors” Edwards then prompted.

“Huh?” The Commander responded, quickly throwing the biscuit packet under the blanket and brushing the crumbs off, “Anyone I know?” he then asked.

“There is some pontificating twerp from the Government, itching to see you” Longton explained, “The Minister for Government Information & Publicity or something like that.”

“Oh God...” The Commander responded, rolling his eyes upwards, “Robert Walmer? The Secretary of State for Bullshit?” he then asked, somewhat surprised, “What the hell does he want?”

“Best guess?” Longton pondered, “I reckon he has been sent by someone in Whitehall with the proverbial emergency bucket of whitewash, if you know what I mean.”

“I thought that might be coming...” The Commander reluctantly agreed, “Come on, make yourself useful and help me on with this” he then indicated his uniform tunic.

“There you go” Longton remarked as he and Edwards helped him put the battered tunic on over The Commander shoulders.

“Now that you look as decent as you ever will, shall I send him in?” Edwards asked

“Go on then” The Commander reluctantly agreed.

“Right...” Edwards confirmed, easily sensing The Commander's reluctance with a smirk before heading out of the door.

“...send in the clowns” The Commander quietly remarked to himself, as if resigned to some dreadful fate.

“Couldn't have put it better myself mate” Longton agreed as the sound of voices raised in debate was heard outside the door.

“...which means he is still my officer, and he is going nowhere” Edwards informed Walmer as they came into the room.

“Very well” the Minister reluctantly agreed before approaching the bed as Longton stepped aside to avoid the potential confrontation.

“Minister...” The Commander called, “To what do I owe this displeasure?” he then asked.

“You are a walking disaster area, you know that, Commander?” Walmer responded, “For Christ's sake, the publicity disaster this could generate is just astounding, well done!”

“Just stick another couple of holes in me on my record and start the prosecutions, it is quite simple really, we got the bad guys, they are banged up and we even got the gear they were smuggling and when the Fraud Squad starts going through the books, I am sure lots of interesting naughty goings on will come tumbling out” The Commander confirmed, “Job well done wouldn't you say Minister?”

“That won't be possible Commander” a decidedly unimpressed Walmer officiously declared.

“And here comes the big bucket of whitewash...” Longton quietly whispered behind them to which Edwards merely smirked in discreet agreement.

“On behalf of Her Majesty's Government” Walmer began to explain, getting straight to the point which meant Longton's little quip at his expense went completely unnoticed, “It is of course regrettable that you have become involved in such a sensitive issue as that which has happened, and that you have been injured as a result.”

“If there is a point, please hurry up and get to it” The Commander prompted, “I have zero tolerance for political waffle, particularly in my current condition.”

“Very well Commander” Walmer agreed, “As far as the public, the Government and everyone connected with this most unfortunate series of events is concerned, none of it ever occurred...”

“Huh?” The Commander responded with a quizzical look.

“In the interests of The Greater Good, the whole matter is now subject to a restriction order and is now covered by various sections of The Official Secrets Act” Walmer explained, “In other words, Commander, none of this ever happened and I am not here.”

“The lead pellets in my leg and the fractured bone in my arm says otherwise” The Commander pointed out.

“Wounds heal Commander” Walmer responded.

“That's easy for you to say...” The Commander quietly uttered under his breath.

“As far as this matter is concerned, only those in this room, a few others, the Attorney General and the Administrator General are aware of the facts of this matter” Walmer continued, “All of you, myself included has signed the Official Secrets Act so your silence is guaranteed.”

“Tell that to the throbbing pain in my head...” The Commander remarked, somewhat wearily.

“So, I suggest you take a bit of time off to recuperate before returning to enjoy your well-earned promotion, Commander” Walmer then declared.

“Why, thank you” The Commander responded before doing a double take, “Hang on a minute...”

“Good night, Commander” Walmer called, turning smartly on his heels and leaving in a huffy air of self-imposed over importance.

“Guv...” The Commander then called with a stern look.

“Err, yeah...” Edwards reluctantly remarked, “I was just getting to that, it has been decided at the highest level that your promotion that you have been neatly trying to sidestep for the last six months, is going ahead, whether you like it or not.”

“Oh...” The Commander responded, resigned to his fate.

“Congratulations, *Commander*” Edwards then confirmed with a wry smirk.

“Thanks Guv” The Commander responded with a meek smile.

“And just to make sure you get settled into your new role nice and easily” Edwards continued to which The Commander gave him a look which confirmed he sensed yet more uncomfortable news was coming his way, “I am taking a sabbatical for six months, on special attachment for the Robbery Squad, just as soon as you are back on your feet.”

“Does that mean I am in charge?” The Commander concluded, “Stop sniggering Al” he then remarked aside as Longton was really struggling to keep a straight face.

“Oh yes” Edward confirmed.

“Terrific...” The Commander responded, none too overwhelmed at the prospect, “Do I get a Deputy?” he then asked.

“Yes, you do” Edwards agreed “but on insistence of Walmer, it has to be someone groomed for the role which means, Sorry Al” he looked at Longton, “You are out of the running.”

“Hmm...” The Commander replied, not overly impressed but then something else occurred to him, “hang on, with all this being whitewashed, laundered and swept under the proverbial Westminster Axminster carpet” he then remarked, “Does this mean they are all going to get away with it?”

“Oh no...” Edwards quickly reassured, “Certain collars that have been felt are getting the *special* treatment...”

Despite his situation, Chichester was still smiling as he relaxed in the chair in the small room into which he had been escorted an hour earlier.

He looked up as the door opened and in strolled Richard Crowthorne, accompanied by a second man who stood by the door as Crowthorne approached.

“Good evening, Mr Chichester” Crowthorne then formally announced.

“Who are you?” Chichester asked.

“Just one of Her Majesty’s servants” Crowthorne evasively answered, “You will be delighted to know that thanks to your connections, this whole sorry affair is being suitably buried.”

“Oh, that’s great! May I go now?” Chichester responded with a look of delight as he was about to get up out of the chair.

“Err, no sorry” Crowthorne politely replied, placing a hand on Chichester’s shoulder and lowering him back into his seat, “You see that whilst any official public prosecution is quite out of the question, it has been felt in the upper levels of the justice system that you are still required to answer for your various crimes.”

“Huh?” Chichester responded, clearly confused.

“Instead of a messy public trial, it has been decided by persons way higher than I that you are going to retire from public life” Crowthorne explained, “The old spend more time with the family and disappear into the background, never to be seen again routine.”

“Oh well, if that is everything then I shall be taking my leave” Chichester responded.

“Very funny...” Crowthorne replied, “When I said it had been agreed that you withdraw from public life, I didn't get around to telling you how that is going to be achieved” he explained, “You see, there is considerable disquiet about your hobbies and activities over the last fifteen years, lots of dirt stored up which the tabloids, hell maybe even the decent papers would lap up.”

“So much for freedom of the press” Chichester remarked, “but I see your point.”

“Good” Crowthorne replied, “But there is also the small issue of a video tape that just happens to have come into our possession which show you ordering the execution of a young woman, one of my best agents, in cold blood, and I am sorry, but we can't just gloss over it.”

“Oh, I wouldn't be so confident if I were you” Chichester remarked, “I have many powerful friends, this little misunderstanding is nothing more than a little inconvenience.”

“Your 'friends' as you put it have dropped you like a hot rock” Crowthorne then took great delight in informing him, “so, with that in mind, I am going to leave you in the expert hands of Clive here” Crowthorne indicated the other man by the door who proceeded to step out of the shadows into the light, “See if you can guess what his

specialist skill set involves?” he then suggested as the man put on some thick black rubber gloves and smiled ever so slightly menacingly at Chichester.

“What?” Chichester slightly nervously stuttered as he looked up at the man whilst Crowthorne steeped back a little, “Now, hang on a minute...” he then began to protest.

“You and your... associates” Crowthorne continued to explain very matter of factly “are responsible for the death of a brilliant young MI5 officer, the distribution of dangerous addictive and in some cases fatal narcotics, not to mention the exploitation of young women for yours and the late Lord Francis’ personal pleasure and gratification, plus on top of that, you shot one of the National Security Service’s finest young officers in the course of his duty.”

“Well...” Chichester began to defend himself but was then swiftly cut off again.

“So, you see Mr Chichester, there are scores to settle, a bill to be paid and my colleague here will now extract payment, in full...” Crowthorne smiled before turning back towards the door, “Have a pleasant evening” he then called back before leaving.

As the door to the room was being closed behind him by the armed security guard on duty, there was a loud thump from inside as the first punch was administered hard to Chichester, the initial scream of pain being suddenly cut off and silence descending as soon as the door was firmly closed.

“Now that is what I call job satisfaction” Crowthorne remarked to the security guard who merely smiled and nodded in complete agreement before heading off down the corridor and up the stairs to return to his office.

The main office was dark and quiet when Crowthorne returned, most of his colleagues in the section were either out on assignment or had gone home, the lamp on his desk being one of the few sources of light.

Taking the seat behind his desk, Crowthorne took out the bottle of Scotch from the bottom desk drawer and poured himself a celebratory drink, placing the crystal glass on the top next to a stack of files that were awaiting his attention before returning the bottle back to the drawer.

“Ah well, back to the grindstone...” he then remarked, taking the first file off the stack and opening it.

It was then that he heard footsteps approaching and looked up to see Collins coming into the office, a file in his hand.

“And what delights have you brought me Dave?” Crowthorne asked as Collins approached his desk, “I already have plenty to be going on with” he then indicated the piles of files.

“An update just sent up from monitoring, one of your pet projects” Collins confirmed as he handed the file over.

“Ah...” Crowthorne responded as he opened the file and saw its contents, a newspaper clipping from that morning's Haychester Gazette with a photograph of The Commander, stood near the medieval Market Cross in the centre of the city.

“Seems your boy just got promoted” Collins confirmed.

“Ha!” Crowthorne exclaimed with obvious glee, “At last, The Commander is finally an actual Commander!”

“Do you want this put in the file Sir” Collins then asked.

“It's all right Dave; I'll take care of it” Crowthorne confirmed.

“Right you are Sir” Collins replied and turned to leave.

“Best get on to Resources though” Crowthorne thoughtfully called after him, “I think we will need to upgrade the size of his file to a whole filing cabinet, I just got this funny feeling we are going to need it.”

“I will see what I can do” Collins agreed before leaving.

Crowthorne returned to the file and looked at the photographs of The Commander.

“Nice one Eddie” he then remarked, smiling broadly.

The Commander looked on with some understandable apprehension as he put on his new uniform tunic, watching himself in the full-length mirror in front of him as he then fastened the gold buttons, starting at the top and working down.

On the shoulder epaulettes, his identification had changed, now WSX101 in individual gold metal numerals, accompanied by a pair of crossed swords below and a royal Elizabethan crown above.

The medal ribbons were all present and correct, and a second gold braided hoop now ran around the cuff of each arm, signifying his new rank as Commander Operations.

One thing had not changed however, his old six shot revolver remained, all be it now stored in a new leather holster on his belt.

In reality, he should not have been returning to duty yet, the injury to his leg was still heavily bandaged and he winced whenever he walked at anything more than a brisk pace.

But resting was not part of The Commander's ethos, where there was work to be done, he made sure that nothing got in the way, not even his own personal recuperation.

Having brushed the shoulder epaulettes with a clothes brush, The Commander took one last look in the mirror before heading off downstairs and then out of his front door to where his patrol car was parked, its red paintwork gleaming in the morning sunshine.

Getting in the driver's seat, The Commander took a few moments to think about the new challenges that lay ahead before starting the engine, looking all around and then driving off.

As he drove towards Haychester with the cathedral spire visible in the distance, his mind wandered back into the past, when he was taught to drive by his father at the age of just eight, racing along in a Mk 2 Jaguar along an old World War Two airfield and when he was a little older, getting to grips with the controls of an early model Ford Transit van, quite advanced for the time.

The traffic was light on that mild October morning, three weeks after the Priory Park events, his physical wounds were more or less healed, the mental wounds, well that was another matter.

Turning into the long driveway that leads up to the main entrance, The Commander slowed for the speed bumps before turning around and parking in one of the spaces outside the front building.

"Right Eddie, let's do this" The Commander then called to his reflection in the rear-view mirror before getting out of the patrol car and walking towards the main entrance where the automatic door slid serenely open and allowed him to enter the main lobby.

"Good morning, Commander" the Receptionist called as The Commander walked across the Security Service coat of arms that was inset into the marble floor.

"Morning" The Commander responded with an acknowledging wave as he headed for the main corridor.

He wondered what lay in store for him in the future now, not only was he now Commander Operations but with Chief Superintendent Edwards on a six-month secondment, he was now in complete charge of the whole area division, a big task to rest on such young yet experienced shoulders.

Several officers that The Commander passed in the corridor saluted him as he made his way to the C-Block building towards the rear of the site.

It was with care that The Commander entered, managing to avoid the jaws of the infamous sliding door and then headed up the stairs to the second floor.

As he ascended the stairs, his brand-new steel toe capped safety shoes squeaking as he went, his mind wandered once again to where this future would take him, would it be Haychester for the rest of his life, or somewhere else?

However, these were questions for another time, there was a job to do, a duty to perform and now he was the one in charge.

Reaching the second floor landing, he passed through the fire doors and strode purposefully down the corridor, his head held high until he reached his new office, the two red plastic plates on the door, one signifying the room number, C209 and the other, with one word, 'Commander'.

The Commander smiled briefly before opening the door which was when Longton popped his head out from the General Office next door.

“Morning Guv” Longton called with a big smile, “Welcome back!”

“Thanks Al” The Commander responded, “It's good to be back” he then admitted.

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