Book One - 'The Inn Joke'

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An uncompromising romp through the shadowy terrain of contemporary clandestine Britain

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No similarities to persons past or present is intended. This entirely fictional narrative is strictly for the purposes of entertainment. Nothing referenced in the text represents anything even remotely relevant. In fact the whole thing is a massive tissue of lies, woven loosely together with nought but a cobweb of truth.

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CHAPTER ONE – The Briefing

It was Tuesday, 2:15pm and Sir Alfred Trimble QC was considering ordering another jug of Pimms.

He had an important briefing coming up and he needed to be suitably refreshed.

The drawing room waiter in the Barrington club of Whitehall had been purposefully dithering with the floral arrangement in the foyer. He didn't particularly enjoy Sir Alfred's daily visits to the drawing rooms and he dreamed of escape, perhaps to work on a Nordic cruise ship full of purple rinsed octogenarians from Milton Keynes.

"They would appreciate my serving talent" he said to himself.

Almost subconsciously, Sir Alfred noticed a familiar figure swanning through the French doors.

"I say, isn't that whatsisname … Bertrand DeVille .. from St Georges.

Hey there, that chap …. Over here will you, I haven't seen you since Abruthnet's garden party at Cloisters last spring. " Sir Alfred beamed and waved his arms, welcomingly.

"Hellllllo Sir Alfred, absolutely great to bump into you here." said Tarquin, falsely.

"Do sit down dear boy, Care for some Pimms would you?" asked Sir Alfred.

"Yes indeed I would Sir Alfred, How are things getting along? I was worried that you'd been implicated in that terrible international shipping mess. Did they ever find out what happened to all those non compliant defibrillators?" said Tarquin, getting his low punches in early.

“Never mind dear boy, absolute pigs ear that was. A bloody pigs ear. Let’s say no more about it. How are things getting on with that chap you pilfered off our friends from across the way? I gather they were a bit peeved that you got involved in the first place?” said Sir Alfred, by way defence and also counter attack.

"He's just not very good at his job, so he gets stressed and takes it out on everyone else"

Tarquin gave a smug smirk and shrugged.

“So what use is he to you then?” asked Sir Alfred, logically.

“He has a rather unique skill-set and then there’s also the fact that he speaks Spanish, Italian and Yiddish.” answered Tarquin.

“Righto, Quentin… skill set, hmm yes... so this 'job' then ..... what exactly is the title and er ... when did he apply for it?”

“How do you mean, Sir Alfred?”

Tarquin was becoming rightfully suspicious of Sir Alfred’s line of questioning.

“Well Caspian …. one assumes there must be some form of documentation like hmm, well a 'job description' or something. So that the candidate knows what on earth is expected of them, Yes?”

"Well , erm .. no not exactly... it er .. doesn’t quite work like ..."

Tarquin looked down at his tan coloured, brogued Oxfords. This briefing was turning into a bit of a nightmare.

“What’s that you say Cuthbert..?. Your organisation doesn't work like that....

Right right, so it's just a simple series of bullet points or something then? Half a page of a PDF perhaps... A brief outline in an MS365 doc or something... Yes?”

Somewhat taken aback by quite how specific Sir Alfred’s file format literacy was, Tarquin DeRochfort quickly gathered his thoughts. Was the old man on some kind of witch hunt?

Had Tarquin crossed that invisible line, that everybody always talks about but can never say where it is? He needed to take the steering wheel of this particular train-wreck and quickly;

"No no, we don’t actually advertise the position, write any descriptions or in fact admit that such jobs exist in the first place. To be quite honest, we employ any and all possible means to not leave any paper trails. In addition we move heaven and earth to never be direct or transparent”

“Hmmm, I see Cecil, so if you’ll excuse my ignorance, how exactly do you actually hire them then…. What’s the format?…. As in, how do they know they’ve been hired?”

“It isn’t what you’d really call ‘hiring’ as such. That’s a bit too black and white.” said Tarquin, evasively.

“It all sounds a bit rum to me, dear boy. A bit bloody rum.”

Tarquin decided that he needed to make this briefing a lot less black and white;

“We just direct a series of our people to pretend that they’re a part of their business network or social lives and generally keep tabs on them for us. Then we do incredibly abstract things in the background of their day to day existence. Meanwhile running all manner of invasive surveillance on them. We actually do it with most of our own capable citizens as well as any incomers. It’s all ‘underpinned by the law’ you know"

“Hmm yes, don’t remind me ... and um, what exactly does any of this actually achieve, dear boy?”

"We’re able to take advantage of any business opportunities we pick up on the surveillance, which is great for the economy. If at any point they themselves materially benefit from our abstract endeavours, then they've taken the proverbial Queens shilling and we can crack on regardless."

Sir Alfred poured them both another tumbler of Pimms.

“Okay, Cedric…. I get where you’re coming from…

But apart from the fact that the Queens shilling was outlawed several centuries ago, surely there's a substantial risk of them not playing ball - if they don't actually have any idea of what's going on?

I mean, surely the public coffers can’t be increased if your subject isn’t on-board?”

Tarquin accepted his second Pimms, but placed it on his chair side table and continued;

"Yes, but a lack of cooperation is not always a downside for us. In the event of them going off-piste, we usually try to leverage some further, hopefully more lucrative scenario out of it, which we wouldn’t want them knowing anything about either."

Sir Alfred wasn’t put off by this overt attempt at material distraction;

“Hmm, sounds like it's potentially a gargantuan waste of time dear boy, at least from where I'm sitting.”

"Well yes and no.” said Tarquin “You must bear in mind that efficiency isn't really our mandate Sir Alfred. That's what the conventional face of the state is theoretically for. We prefer to rely on barely perceptible role playing by our people. We also employ highly obscure symbolism to get our points across. Really it’s the entire cornerstone of our unaccountable position and our plausible deniability."

Sir Alfred knocked back the dregs of his eighth glass of Pimms and pushed on;

“Indeed dear boy, indeed …. and in the event of you not being able to leverage anything else out of it, get your points across, or generally achieve anything whatsoever?”

"Then yes, we can get a bit …. well ..miffed, when things don't go quite according to our secret plans... which the subject obviously doesn't have any knowledge of. But if we feel that we’ve been put in an embarrassing position then we usually go out of our way to punish the subjects and possibly even the lower ranks of the people around them.”

“I see... and all this blundering buffoonery is normally successful is it, Cornelius?”

"Sorry Sir Alfred…" said Tarquin looking down, "but if you'll excuse me, I just need to leave on an unrelated matter."

Tarquin DeRochfort appeared a touch flustered and purposefully headed off through the ornate exit of the Barrington club drawing room with his mobile phone clutched tightly in his hand.

"Right you are Tobias, I imagine you have a prior engagement shaving off the edges of square pegs so that they'll fit into round holes.

Yes yes of course, off you go. Wonderful to see you again dear boy, good luck Clarence.…"

Sir Alfred waited until he knew Tarquin could still hear him, but only just. Then he muttered;

'silly arse'

Later on that afternoon at around 4:45pm, Sir Alfred Trimble had polished off several more jugs of Pimms to himself and was weighing up the value of a visit to a Thai massage parlour he knew in a quiet side street located just south of Victoria. The patronage of the Barrington club had become even more sparse and there was a palpable risk of boredom setting in. The briefing could have gone better and he still needed to get something substantial he could use on that DeVille character.

Synchronously, the familiar figure of Tarquin DeRochfort appeared in the lobby vestibule:

"Ah hello again Cedric, or is it Crispin….. er … I do get so confused sometimes, especially after luncheon. "

"It's Tarquin, Sir Alfred ….Tar - quin"

"Yes yes of course, terribly sorry, please forgive my manners. Help yourself to some Pimms dear boy. Any developments in your sociopathic, triple blind game of charades?"

"It's not looking so good actually Sir Alfred, when he's not offending everyone around him with his churlish New World ways, he's making in-roads with some Old World Europeans that we'd rather he didn't"

"Ah, I see … not really turning this one around are you Conrad?"

"Well if we had a handle on it, there would be no need for us to get a handle on it, would there Sir Alfred? It's all about the perceived need, at the end of the day"

"It sounds like you'd be best placed reviewing the parameters of your operating criteria, Yes? Perhaps all this secrecy for no apparent reason isn't really panning out so well?"

"No it doesn't really work like that Sir Alfred and its unlikely that it ever will"

"What do you mean dear boy? Obviously if your plans are proving to be a series of ill conceived and unworkable farragos, you change them midstream. You know … pivot, as in the whole 'fast moving operation' concept?"

"Ha Ha... No no Sir Alfred, that really is just a bunch of PR tosh that the girls in the front office thought sounded punchy. We generally like to take our time with these type of affairs. We've got a few layers of people that work around the clock,

but most of us prefer to stick to normal office hours. Wouldn't want to be doing more than a thirty hour week."

“I see.. So what will you do about this colossal cock-up then?”

"The standard procedure would be to wire tap even more of their digital lives or invent some civil, legal intervention, then siphon all the contacts out of their phone and spin a series of totally false narratives to everyone they know. If that doesn’t get us what we want, we can always ratchet things up a bit and use remote psychological monitoring. That generally gives us an edge."

“What on earth is that?” asked Sir Alfred, looking somewhat horrified.

“You know, the old tinfoil hat trope. It’s been around since your day Sir Alfred”

“Right..right... still exploiting every conceivable facet of the old Naval Law racket I see.

And what, pray tell, is the purpose behind such a display of unnecessary and really quite insidious zealotry?” Before Tarquin could answer, Sir Alfred’s brow furrowed as he spotted the drawing room waiter heading back into the foyer.

“Er hang on just one moment; Waiter! … I SAY WAITER!!!.. yes over here, thank you.

Yes if we could have some more Pimms if you please, there’s a good man. Do go on, dear boy, you were saying? …..”

"It's designed to intimidate them and force them to go along with whatever abstract messages we're communicating - with the opaque methods I mentioned earlier. Its also intended to isolate them from any support networks they have. It’s all standard, Tavistock play-book stuff"

“Ah right, of course Terence of course.... and is it all… how can I put this, erm…. Unfolding according to your ….. somewhat idiosyncratic script?”

"No not really, he's got quite a challenging background. Grew up among some quite volatile types in New Jersey, so he’s got quite a major problem taking blind directions from anyone, never mind us Brits."

“Ha!…. so not exactly what you could call a resounding success then, is it Trenton?

Or even a particularly effective method? In fact, you could say that it’s causing far more trouble than its worth? “

“Well I don’t know that I’d go that far Si….”

“Ha! Well I would young Caxton. I would….

It is, if you will, firmly inserted into a cocked hat, dear boy – A COCKED HAT I SAY… Ha!

Please tell me that it isn’t going to turn into yet another high profile international hodgepodge, like that bloody awful Gloucestershire affair, is it?”

Tarquin DeRochfort had learned many things in the drawing room of the Barrington club and possibly the most important lesson had been when to change the subject;

"Well we've had to clock up a whole heap of virtual overtime hours on it, so at least I'll be able to take Jocasta on that shopping trip to Dubai in September. Witherington-Smythe in accounts is paying for a whole new kitchen with his time-sheet"

“Splendid work dear boy, splendid…. good to see the taxpayers money going to good use again. Do you think you'll be able to keep riding it for another few years?”

Tarquin mentally breathed a sigh of relief. It was looking like the old man was just about sozzled enough to forget about this inquisition and focus on the value of his own Crown contracts.

"No, we'll probably just burn him in some media exercise that we've got going at the time. Depends what will pay out the most. Could be something to do with smuggling yellow cake in shipments of baby-milk powder, or a giant killer hogweed domestic threat, or perhaps a mass murder spree in the John Lewis changing rooms, or something along those lines. We've usually got thirty or forty on the go simultaneously."

“Right right, so just business as usual then?”

"Yes while this whole global awareness campaign is taking priority, we really have bugger all else to do"

“Of course yes.... Hmm, more Pimms?”

"No I better not, Jocasta is having some of her old gymkhana buddies round for a few hands of contract bridge this evening and it usually escalates into quite a scene of debauchery. So I’ll need to keep my power dry for that one. Anyway, just super chatting with you again Sir Alfred. Do stay in touch"

“Yes of course, wonderful catching up with you. Mind how you go dear boy.…”

Again Sir Alfred waited until the last possible moment that Tarquin could hear him and muttered under his breath; ‘feckless lolly-gagger’

He then regained his normal oratory prowess and bellowed;

“Waiter ….! Order me a cab will you, that’s right, yes... the Golden Lion Gate Way in Pimlico… and stop daydreaming man, the Pimms man, FETCH THE PIMMS!”

SBL NEWS

Dog meat factory discovered in West London

Local residents in Southall expressed shock and dismay this week, when an industrial unit was found to contain caged dogs. The organisation of the premises indicated that they were being kept for the production of dog meat. Many of the animals showed signs of neglect and had been kept in harsh conditions.

Local police responded to reports of howling coming from the unit on Tuesday. On entering the property the officers discovered two aisles of cages containing a variety of dog breeds. A spokesperson from a national dog welfare charity condemned the practice of keeping dogs for meat: *"We see this type of business operating overseas but it's very rare in the UK. The fact that this highly organised business has clearly been operating for some time, is of major concern to us"*.

An area of the unit contained tables and sinks indicating that animals had been butchered and processed on site. Exactly how long this business had been operating is unclear. However when asked for comment, a Met spokesperson stated that their estimation was in the region of several years. According to ongoing investigations, the opinion of the police at this time is that the processed meat was transported to destinations outside the local area.

All animals discovered in the unit were examined by officers from RSPCA Hillingdon and several were treated on-site for dehydration and malnutrition. The number of animals rescued during the operation has raised questions regarding their future. Robert Howser from the charity K9 Freedom Now gave SBL News the following statement; *"We've had to distribute the animals to several different RSPCA shelters as there were simply too many for any individual rescue centre. Several concerned local residents have volunteered to provide homes for some of the animals, however there are still a large number requiring caring homes and owners"*

An appeal has been launched on the K9 Freedom Now website

Canoeist rescued from River Brent

Dog walkers on Fitzherbert Walk spotted an overturned canoe on Wednesday evening. Forming an impromptu rescue party, the group of four used mobile phone lights and their dogs to search the West bank of the River Brent. After approximately twenty minutes they located the unconscious canoeist caught on branches lodged in the banks of the river.

Mr Robert Schech regularly uses Fitzherbert Walk to walk his two German Shepherds;

"*I had been taking some photographs of the water erosion on the river bank. There was a couple of women shining lights on a canoe drifting down the middle of the river. They told me that they had heard a shout and some splashing sounds. We started looking up and down the river to see if we could find anyone when another dog walker joined us. It didn't take long for the dogs to find the man who had capsized. One of the women had already called 999 and we could hear sirens coming from the hospital. We were all worried that he would not survive because he was very cold and had quite a weak pulse."*

The 43 year old canoeist, Mr. Christopher Abbot from Notting Hill was taken to the nearby A&E of Ealing Hospital where he was kept overnight and treated for hypothermia. He was released on Thursday morning and is expected to make a full recovery.

Ralph Lockwood from the Canal and River Trust made the following statement;

"*We would like to remind canoeists that safety must be their first concern when using the river Brent, or in fact any waterway. Had it not been for the considerable amount of wood in the river, this could easily have ended up as a fatal accident."*

The CRT hosts an all ages waterway awareness program and instructors run canoeing courses in Southall during summer months. Visit canalrivertrust.org.uk for further details.

Ruislip revellers run amok

An Eastcote Road anti lockdown party spiralled out of control on Friday night. Officers responding to noise nuisance complaints came under attack from an aggressive group of party goers.

A crowd of at least 60-70 people, many of whom were visibly intoxicated threw bottles and other missiles at the two police vehicles from West Ruislip police station. Chants of *"We are the 99 percent"* – "*Eastcote Hardcore"* and *"Free Julian Assange"* were heard by residents in the surrounding area.

Reinforcements from West Ealing police station were called in and dispersed the crowd using public order vans. Several arrests were made for offences including disturbing the peace and criminal damage. Organisers of the party were questioned by police on Saturday regarding the anti-social behaviour of their guests. Local resident Ewan Cholmondley (46) criticised the organisers for their lack of civic responsibility;

"*In all my days, I've never seen anything like it. The people who live in the house are in their twenties, but they generally behave themselves. I had no idea they were planning this party and they didn't invite any of the neighbours. The repetitive beats blasting out of the open windows made it absolutely impossible to sleep. I was making a cup of camomile tea to relax when I heard the sound of bottles smashing outside. This unruly mob had gone totally insane and started attacking the police cars. It was a full on riot going on right outside my front door and not a single one of them was even wearing a face mask".*

Metropolitan police have responded to several events that have got out of hand since the easing of lockdown restrictions in 2021. A spokesperson from West Ruislip police station gave SBL News the following statement;

"*Multiple units attended an incident in Eastcote Road on Friday night. The first units attending were subject to attack by a large group of people. No officer injuries were sustained, however this is only as a result of following correct procedure and withdrawing until additional units could offer support. Several arrests were made and the residents who organised the event have been questioned".*

Anyone concerned about antisocial behaviour in their area should contact their local Neighbourhood Watch or report it to police on 101.

CHAPTER TWO - Patrol

As the long wheel based vehicle came to a gradual stop in the backlog of traffic, Dave Stoneleigh asked his colleague;

"What the hell is he doing now?"

Janet Beckton his long term co-driver and team partner, a statuesque blonde woman in her mid thirties chuckled and answered;

“He’s using some kind of subsonic audio signal to interfere with all the smoke alarms in the building”

“How the hell is that even possible? What’s sound got to do with smoke?” asked Dave, incredulously.

Janet was the technician in this unit. She had showed promise with counter electronic insurgence but moved sideways when she discovered what the average profile of her peers would be. It wasn’t that she disliked the academic sort, but she knew that most people find a suitable partner in the workplace and that particular profile didn’t really float her boat.

“We’re not sure, we think he taped Pringles cans to them and filled them with cheap tubes of glitter from the corner shop.”

“What the hell for?” asked Dave “and who even thinks of doing something like that? I mean come on, the bananas in the exhaust pipe was one thing, but this is… it’s just too much.”

“It’s not as crazy as you’d think, the sound vibrates the glitter and it definitely interferes with the software at our end. It makes it much harder to define the imagery. All the transcoders crashed when he first did it and we had to get some new kit from the Americans…. or Germany via the Americans or something.”

Dave was horrified at hearing this. He grew up wishing he could have grown up a decade earlier and flown on Concorde. As a result he believed that British engineering was on par with that of Starfleet Command.

“I mean …. in the name of … don’t we have some kind of countermeasure for cheap tubes of glitter from the corner shop? What is this, bloody Saturday morning TV?”

Janet could tell that Dave was getting into one of his rants and decided to try and nip it in the bud.

“We can only work with what they give us Dave, don’t start getting all worked up like you did up in that deer park in Stratton”

Dave frowned.

“You said we weren’t going to talk about that ever again … and I actually trusted you to mean it” he replied, with a note of disdain.

“Well, keep it together then will you? We’ve still got another thirteen hours of the shift left to go and there’s nothing in the glovebox except two packets of freeze dried Parsnips.” snapped Janet.

Dave's complexion changed and with a look of intense authority, he said;

“Now listen here you. I need those Parsnips for my daily folate, so you just keep your sticky little hands off, or you can forget your invitation to the barbecue on Sunday”

Janet smirked and waved at him as if to focus his eyes on the road ahead, then replied;

“Will Arthur, Darren and Karl be there? I haven’t seen them for ages.”

“No they’ve been promoted for having a three way civil ceremony and I think they’re all collectively known as Shaeron now, with an E.”

“Right…” said Janet, with apparent disappointment “they always were a trio of clever bastards.

Don’t suppose they’ll be needing any more hands in that basket.”

Dave could see that Janet was getting all broody again. He’d grown accustomed to her semi regular fears of being left on the shelf.

“Anyway, I’ve invited a couple of the boys from the Hiking club, so if you play your cards right you could end up with a pull after the surf and turf”

Janet looked horrified;

“Oh Jesus Dave! Not again, the last ones were so quiet, I thought they were from the local BSL school.”

Dave continued with his self appointed match maker routine;

“No no no, these two guys are the life and soul of any party – total pair of Mr. Personalities. I would have invited all the rest of the club, but there’s some job going on in the centre of town next week and they all have to get fitted for Postman's uniforms”

“Christ, that sounds like a right pain in the arse.

It’s not shorts is it?” asked Janet

“Yes it is, the new blueish grey ones with the insignia on the wrong side”

Janet looked down and ran her hands over the seams of her green uniform.

“Tsk, typical. Meanwhile we’re stuck in these boiler suits. It does nothing for my figure you know.”

“Come on Jan, it’s not like there’s exactly a huge amount of opportunity to meet your future husband while we’re running these perimeter patro…oh.”

Before Dave could finish his sentence, a dishevelled man of indeterminate age staggered between the cars opposite them waving his arms at the vehicle in front. The occupants of the vehicle ignored his attentions and carried on with their debate about who should have won last weeks episode of Britain's Got Talent. Although difficult to interpret, the phrase he bellowed at them sounded like something concerning the price of cigarettes, today not being a bank holiday and the colour of his fathers Ford Mondeo.

Janet quickly reached under the seat and retrieved an A5 black notebook, opened it and scanned down the front page.

“Light it up Dave, there’s a job in Perivale going live right now.”

“Oh bloody hooray” said Dave sarcastically, “We’ll have to drive most of the way on the wrong side of the road and the pavement again. Hope you’re not feeling queasy.”

Dave switched on the siren, looked briefly in his rear viewfinder and proceeded to do a U-turn into the opposite carriageway. As the long wheel base vehicle straightened up, he nodded discreetly to the dishevelled man and accelerated up the middle of the highly congested street.

The dishevelled man did not acknowledge the nod and instead carried on shouting and staggering in the other direction. Now his subject matters seemed consumed by the asylum rights of refugees, the lack of sufficient cycle lanes in the borough and the three o’clock handicap at Doncaster.

If the dozens of motorists waiting in line for the lights noticed him, they certainly didn’t show it.

That is except one. A robust African woman in a green hatchback, who had observed both the inhumane bellowing and the subsequent ambulance U-turn. Now she was intently staring at her mobile phone.

A message blinked across the screen, it contained only four words;

“Are you in position?”

She frowned and keyed in her response;

Stuck in traffic. 20 mins or more from location.

She continued to watch the screen of her mobile device, confident that another message would be forthcoming. It was;

“Divert to Harlow garden centre. Purchase one green plastic watering can from third shelf, row D, fifth aisle & three packets of phosphate plant food from top shelf, row A, second aisle”

She responded with a single word answer

Understood

She sighed slightly, put her mobile phone back in the dashboard holder, turned the radio back on and examined how much was left in her Barista served Mocha with a dash of mint syrup.

By this point the dishevelled man had almost reached the traffic lights. Once he was within a hundred yards of the junction he increased his proximity to the vehicles. His shouting became much less aggressive and turned into a heartfelt plea for financial assistance.

If any of the motorists noticed him, they certainly didn't show it.

With the extra wide chassis and the tail lift for stretcher access, the appliance issued to Dave and Janet was not the most nimble of vehicles. Nonetheless, Dave expertly manoeuvred the multi ton ambulance through the surrounding streets and reached the Perivale site in a little over six minutes. There were several white vans parked on the kerbs of both pavements. Two of them appeared no more conspicuous than the average construction works van, if a bit too clean, but one of them had darkened windows and sported a full body kit in matching white. It resembled in many ways, the type of cosmetic additions made to their utility vehicles, by itinerant carnival workers. All that was missing was the neon light underneath.

Dave pulled up alongside one of the vehicles without the spoiler, which contained two men in black overcoats and had a curly wire extending across the dashboard.

"Alright Charles?" he said as the offside window of white van was rolled down.

"No we bloody are not Dave, what took you so long?" Replied Charles Hornchurch.

"Steady on Charles, it's absolutely chocca from here all the way to Acton. We got here as quickly as we could"

"Sure sure, whatever. Probably busy stuffing your face with those space vegetables again. Isn't it Harry? Ha ha!"

The driver of the white van laughed in agreement and slapped his deliberately distended stomach, He then made a waddling motion by way of an implication that Dave would soon be putting on quite a lot of weight if he didn't stop eating all those freeze dried Parsnips.

"Well we're here now, what's the situation" said Dave.

Charles shrugged and said "We don't really know much more than you peasants, it's the usual restricted access bollocks. We were pulled off a job watching some rogue gardeners in Twickenham to provide assistance for them lot."

At which point Charles nodded at the body-kitted van without actually looking at it.

Dave resisted the urge to look at the darkened windows of the van and instead looked at the ground

"Er .. It's not another airport run is it?" he asked.

"Probably, we've been given a clear path through to Northolt, So I guess someone is off on their holidays." answered Charles, in his normal flippant manner.

"Who are they, do you know?" Dave's voice had a rising note of intrigue.

"One of the targets is apparently some Yank who's done a runner. Something to do with a suspicious load of baby-milk powder in the upstairs bedroom. Oh and we've to be out of here sharpish. So don't be dragging your heels."

The baby-milk reference caused Janet Beckton to look whimsically at the window of the upstairs rooms, as she said quietly to herself;

"Maybe this barbecue thing might be a good idea."

SBL NEWS

Broadway drug factory exposed

As part of an undercover investigation into the shadowy world of Drill music, an SBL News reporter gained access to a major drug operation in the Broadway area. The three bedroomed house was being used as a venue for the packaging of drugs including crack cocaine. In the hidden camera footage, approximately ten people can be seen working at trestle tables. Many of them (including several women) are seen wearing only their underwear. According to the local police, this is thought to be a tactic employed by the drug dealers to prevent workers hiding drugs on their person.

The property is managed by a South London letting agency. The tenants are believed to be overseas and did not have any knowledge of the illegal activity taking place in their home. Criminal gangs are known to target empty properties or vulnerable tenants to set up drug dealing premises. This practice is normally conducted outside of their local area and is colloquially referred to as going ‘up country’.

In 2021 alone, the Metropolitan police closed down over twenty of these illegal dens or ‘trap houses’ as they have become known. The value of the drugs seized by local police is estimated to be in excess of £150,000. A representative from Southall Police Station made the following statement *"This property appears to have been used for the packaging and distribution of class A drugs for at least six months. We are pleased to have recovered such a substantial quantity of drugs and prevented them reaching the streets of West London."*

Among the personal items seized by police were several portable media players. All contained music or videos which would be categorised as 'Drill'. West London has been known as the home of Drill music for a decade or more. Many Drill artists are known to the police as members or associates of criminal gangs. A local shop owner (who wished to remain anonymous) expressed anger at the scale of the illegal operation.

"This isn't Los Santos you know, it's a normal Ealing suburb. The community has had problems with drug dealers coming into the area to sell drugs before. We don't want our young people getting into this sort of lifestyle. These dealers losing so much money will send a strong message to anyone else who might be planning anything like this"

If you see drug dealing activity in your local area contact CrimeStoppers on 0800 555 101

CHAPTER THREE – Arithmetic

“Look dear, it’s only going to be three couples, I really don’t see what your problem is”

Giles Tilbury hadn’t anticipated this spat, but as usual his wife had ambushed him as soon as he had come through the door. Before he had a chance to even reach the decanter set in the living room.

“Only three couples, are you completely stupid man? Bridge is played by two couples not three. What’s the point of having three couples for a game that requires only two? Shall we also have a game of tennis with five players instead of four? I mean what were you thinking Giles … really!”

Giles could well have done without this welcome home. He’d not had the best day at work and was really only interested in how much brandy he could consume before driving to Belvue Park.

“I didn’t organise it dear, so I don’t know why you’re giving me such a hard time about it. Why don’t you take it up with Jocasta. She’s the one who organises this type of thing, I just tag along to make up the numbers. Would you like a drink?”

“You bloody …. damn …. inconsiderate stupid fool Giles, you know that you’re the only one she listens to. Nobody else can get a bloody word in edgeways. If you’d stopped for a moment before accepting the invite …or … if .. if you’d bothered to count higher than two couples, we wouldn’t be in this sorry mess.”

“It’s not the end of the world dear. The odd couple can just organise drinks and you know, put on music or whatever”

Giles now had the brandy decanter within his reach and noting short of a three minute warning was going to stop him reuniting with that dark golden liquid.

“Oh my GOD! ‘The Odd couple’. Can you hear yourself Giles? Do you honestly think I want to be known as ‘The Odd couple’ among those people. I mean come on Giles, what do you take me for…. Jack bloody Klugman. Does that make you the other guy, does it? So we’re a gay couple now are we Giles?”

Giles had managed to pour himself a quadruple brandy by this point and was making some serious headway consuming it .

“You’re getting a bit carried away dear, I meant odd as in the couple who will not be playing hands at that point. Now, will you be having a Campari, yes?”

Christabel was undaunted;

“I know what you meant you stupid man. Regardless, thanks to you and your typical scatter brained social calendar-ing, I’m now cast in the role of …. of … Quincy… Howser MD. I mean is that how you see me Giles? As a balding bachelor coroner

who lives on a clapped out old boat?”

By this point Christabel Tilbury had worked herself into such a towering rage based on the faint and somewhat confused memories of several different 80’s television series, that she seemed as if she might have a massive stroke at any moment.

“No poppet, you’re still the elegant water nymph that I married all those years ago. Now will you sit down and have a Campari, I picked up the low calorie soda water you like at Sainsbury's on the way home”

Wafting air over her face, Christabel draped herself over the living room chaise longue and gestured for her cocktail to be handed to her.

“I don’t know Giles, it’s all just awfully inconvenient. I’m not sure we should go. Can’t you just say that we can’t come. That maybe …. I don’t know … you’ve twisted your testicles again or something?”

“Well I don’t really see why my testicles have to be the excuse. Couldn’t you say something about your own private parts for once. Why does it always have to be about my testicles?”

Christabel was beginning to reduce her emotional whirlwind to something more resembling a heavy autumnal southern breeze.

“Oh do shut up you stupid man, everyone knows that you’ve done it many, many times. It’s the price you pay for wearing those silly Polo jodhpurs without a jockstrap. As well you know.

Anyway, what time are they expecting us?”

Giles had finished his quadruple brandy and was eagerly refilling his glass.

“Seven thirty for eight dear, I’ve got the necessary items in the car. I thought we might stop and pick up the others on the way.” said Giles, discreetly adjusting the crotch of his slacks.

“If you insist, although I’m not sure that we need multiple accoutrements, two is usually enough. Nobody can hold more than two at once.”

“I meant the other couple dear, Clive and Petula”

“Oh I see, well yes that would make sense. Is it on the way?”

“Yes dear, it’s just a short diversion, shouldn’t be more than ten or fifteen minutes out of our way. It’s practically en route.”

“Yes that’s fine. Oh I’m sorry Giles, you really are a considerate man sometimes”

Giles sat down next to his rapidly de-escalating wife and put his arm round her narrow shoulders. Her Campari and soda was finished and the effects were beginning to make his life tolerable once more.

“That’s better dear, now why don’t you pop upstairs and get ready. We’ll have to be there in a little under two hours. So chop chop.”

As Christabel climbed the stairs of their Paddington mews cottage, Giles poured himself another quadruple brandy and considered the potential benefits of multiple accoutrements. With there being three couples maybe it would have been a good idea. But two was what he had collected, so anything else would need to wait for next month.

The dressing room mirror reflected Christabel’s wraith like appearance in a somewhat more flattering manner. Giles had specifically chosen it after a discussion with the salesman on the subject of fairground mirrors and how they can make the user appear considerably fatter.

He had always been aware of his wife’s weight complex, since well before their marriage. They had first met one evening at a university social just after Christabel had been purging into the shrubs of the stately home. Watching women vomiting had always seemed very primal to Giles and he couldn’t help being attracted to her. But Christabel’s weight loss complex was considerably offset by her weight gain complex. So he considered the mirror deception to be in everyone's best interests. His wife never once questioned it, despite using conventional mirrors in other homes and hotels on a frequent basis. She seemed content with the lie and didn’t use any of the other mirrors in their Paddington house.

As Christabel applied multiple layers of foundation, she considered what sort of music would be appropriate for this evenings bridge match. Unfortunately she still had the jaunty theme tune to Quincy rolling around in her head and couldn't come up with anything other than a series of big band, swing music hits.

With her trusty bridge playing handbag, she finished straightening her red Alice Temperley dress just in time to hear the familiar sounds of Giles going through his usual ritual of pre-journey car worship.

The powerful engine of the Daimler Sovereign easily negotiated the route. Giles had it serviced every three months and apart from filling up with petrol, never gave vehicle maintenance another thought. He often considered how much value there actually was in having roadside assistance for a vehicle which never broke down. In fact it had occurred to him to fabricate a breakdown just to get his moneys worth and a ride in the recovery vehicle. There was something incredibly attractive and private about the back seats of the recovery vehicles he had seen and he wondered if they would be expansive enough to lay down comfortably in.

At the end of the day it provided a certain peace of mind knowing that however much brandy he drank, the 20th century Daimler always somehow managed to get them home. As far as Giles Tilbury was concerned, there were only two countries that made acceptable cars, Britain and Germany. He often thought about the irony of these two countries spending many years trying to destroy each other. But this was a new century and after all, the propaganda budget had been scrapped after a mere forty years. So admiring the quality of German cars was perfectly OK with him. As far as there being auto-mobile manufacturers from other countries, he really didn't care. If a car wasn't in his accepted list of anglo-teutonic manufacturers he dismissed it as being some generic foreign nonsense. He didn't ever consider owning one and if anyone else did, he automatically marginalised them as being inept, or perverse.

The Daimler really was a trustworthy vessel and he would continue to resist the jibes of his colleagues on the subject of owning a more modern car. Also he had tried out the leather seats in several other more contemporary German saloons and it never felt quite right against his bare skin.

Christabel was humming some kind of big band jazz music to herself and consequently he dared not turn on the radio. This was absolutely not the correct setting for yet another heated argument on the subject of his consideration, or lack of therein.

As they pulled into the driveway of the third couple's West London home, Christabel was looking over her shoulder, curiously eyeing the plain plastic bag lying on the back seat.

"Are those the items you mentioned earlier darling?"

"Yes that's right dear, one's a German import and the other is apparently a realistic facsimile inspired by Errol Flynn"

"My word, does Jocasta know you're bringing them?" asked Christabel with a gleam in her eye.

"She certainly does, in fact it was her who gave me the address of the place where I got them in Pimlico. Apparently her uncle is the landlord of the flat upstairs and overheard them being used"

Christabel was visibly enthralled by the enigmatic items Giles had procured.

"I say, how delightful. Is her uncle part of … you know … the scene?" she asked.

"No he just rents the building out, I think it was Jocasta who put two and two together"

"Well I'm glad she did, they sound absolutely thrilling. I really can't wait"

Giles pulled up the handbrake and shifted the automatic transmission into park mode.

"Right that's us here, did you want to go in, or shall we just beep the horn?"

Christabel gave a dismissive look and turned to examine a new conservatory which had appeared since their last visit.

"Just beep the horn darling, I don't want to have to listen to any more drivel about their loft conversion. It really is the most boring thing."

"You're the boss dear" said Giles with a barely detectable trace of sarcasm.

"Clive, how great to see you. I was just saying to Christabel that it's been far too long"

“Yes it has, lovely to see you both again” said Clive as he vigorously shook hands with Giles.

Despite going through the motions of kissing Petula once on each cheek, Christabel Tilbury was not impressed in the slightest with how easily Giles lied through his teeth. Neither of them had much time for Clive and Petula, but in the interests of maintaining the social network, they both kept up the pretence. There was also the fact that Christabel was godmother to their eldest child Sebastian. When he was an infant, Christabel found great comfort in spending time with him, but as he’d gotten older and more difficult to control, she found herself becoming less maternal.

Regularly consolidating their enormous social network was a matter of some importance for the Tilburys. Having no children of their own meant that their purpose in life could often seem decidedly absent. They had tried several times and had been through some really quite traumatic failures. Eventually they decided to give up on the hope of ever bringing another life into the world. They had settled for regular social events, the odd bit of charity work and of course., the demanding civil service career path of Mr Giles Montague Tilbury.

As a stay-at-home wife, Christabel managed the thirty hours a week separated from her husband, with semi regular yoga classes, extensive remodelling of their Paddington house and helping out at the local Salvation Army hub. It left her free to put time into arranging their twice weekly social events and to keep abreast of any local goings on. She’d never strayed far from the marital bed. After witnessing Giles going through six months of cold water douching to increase his sperm count after his Polo jodhpurs incident, she believed that putting up with one man's daily routine was more than enough for any woman.

While she exchanged small talk with Petula on the subject of home improvements, her mind kept wandering onto the subject of realistic Errol Flynn facsimiles. Giles might be an utter snake in the grass, but he still knew how to peak her interest.

Petula very much enjoyed the company of the Tilbury's. She considered them to be ‘beautiful people’ the likes of whom are normally associated with Martini adverts or the pages of Hello magazine. She accepted that Christabel could be high maintenance at times, but that only added to her fascination. With four children, neither her nor Clive had many opportunities to attend social gatherings. She always had family or house issues to deal with and Clive was always busy selling shipping insurance. His work often required meeting clients in the evening and Petula often referred to herself as a fin-tech widow. Consequently, being invited for bridge with the Tilburys and DeRochForts was the highlight of her monthly calendar.

“How’s the children darling? I haven’t seen Sebastian for absolutely ages. I doubt I’ll recognise him now… and how’s Lucinda getting on with her riding?” asked Christabel.

“Very well actually, thank you for asking” replied Petula with more than a hint of pride in her voice. “Sebastian’s practically moved into the rowing club since he graduated, so I’m not sure that I’d recognise him either. We took Lucinda to some stables out in Surrey last week and we think she might try out for the ‘khana later this year.”

This casually abbreviated mention of the equestrian institution caused Christabel's face to light up;

“Oh that’s just absolutely top darling, absolutely top. Do you think Wendy will be doing the same in a few years?”

Petula’s hint of pride dipped into a more matter of fact tone;

“Not so sure about Wendy, she seems more interested in skateboards and denim dungarees at this point. Don’t know if it’s just a phase or if it’s the shape of things to come.”

Christabel adopted her dismissive look again;

“Never mind darling, even if she does end up preferring girls, it’s not a barrier to enjoying the ‘khana. Do you remember Winifred Stoke-Morton, she ended up owning her own stables”

Petula nodded. She certainly did remember Winny and she also remembered the momentary frisson they had shared in the hayloft above the Stoke-Morton family farm.

She then quickly put such thoughts away, herded the men away from admiring the new conservatory extension and they all headed down to the metallic blue Daimler parked in the driveway.

Clive beamed as he approached the elegant auto-mobile;

“Always look forward to a ride in the Daimler Giles”

“It’s a great car” replied Giles “Never let us down, not even once”

“Yes, they just don’t make them like that any more do they Giles?” said Clive. He was holding his chin, reminiscing about a time before Bluetooth headsets and engines that switch themselves off at the traffic lights.

“No they don’t old bean, they certainly don’t”

“Will you two stop droning on about cars and lets get a move on shall we?” interrupted Christabel.

Christabel’s patience was wearing thin. She couldn’t care less about cars and considered them as a purely utilitarian object. She’d felt much the same way about her parents chauffeur. Whenever Giles started into one of his lengthy monologues on the value of patent leather seating, it was all she could do not to threaten him with divorce papers.

“Is it ladies in the back or are we going to be continental?” quipped Petula

“Continental every time” said Giles. “But I thought we’d mix it up a bit, you come in the front with me and Christabel can keep Clive company in the back” at which point he glanced sideways at his wife to see if she was paying attention.

“Oh that’s fine by me darling, we can have a good long chat about German imports and Errol Flynn.”

Giles gave his wife a discreet, wry smile.

“Yes indeed dear, you absolutely read my mind”

As the last door of the Daimler Sovereign was firmly closed, the ignition sparked and they pulled out of the driveway into the busy streets of Notting Hill.

“Are those what I think they are?” said Clive, staring intently at the carrier bag now relocated to the parcel shelf.

Christabel leaned closer to Clive, put her hand on his shoulder and said in a hushed voice;

“Yes they are Clive, now pay attention and let me tell you all about it.”

SBL NEWS

Parakeet egg thieves caught in sting operation

Two West London men were arrested by police last week for stealing eggs from the nests of rare birds in the Hanwell area. Hanwell Meadows is home to several protected species including the indigenous Skylark, Kites and also a number of nesting pairs from the recent influx of Green Parakeets.

Animal protection officers coordinating with local police and the Canal and River Trust, used state of the art equipment in the investigation. Nests which were known to have been raided previously, were targeted by the officers for the placement of 'decoy eggs'. These realistic looking decoys contained GPS location devices and covert surveillance cameras. This allowed the officers to not only record the thieves in the act, but also establish where the eggs had been taken to.

Penalties for the theft of rare bird eggs in the UK range from fines to custodial sentences for repeat offenders.

Ralph Lockwood from the Canal & River Trust was surprised at the number of Green Parakeet eggs which had been stolen.

"The parakeets are a relatively recent addition to the local flora and fauna. They're not on any protected lists and we haven't seen anyone stealing their eggs until now".

Somaliland Mayor targetted by identity thieves - again

A visiting dignitary was the victim of identity theft on Monday following a weekend shopping trip in West London.

Abdikarim Ahmed Mooge, the incumbent mayor of Hargeisa, Somaliland was visiting London on a weekend city break. Both he and his travelling companion were the victims of unauthorised bank transfers on Monday morning. According to a statement from Dara-Salaam Bank, the timing of the transfers indicate that card details were most likely obtained during purchases made on Saturday.

Staff from several West End shops were questioned by officers from Paddington police station on Monday. The unauthorised transactions included purchases online totalling £8397.50 for a variety of goods. Additionally several store cards had been purchased racking up another £1400.

A regular visitor to London, Mr, Mooge is understood to be an avid theatre fan. Attending performances at several London venues from Sadlers Wells in the East to the Dominion theatre in Tottenham Court Road.

During a visit in April 2020, Mr. Mooge and his aide were the victims of a notorious West End pickpocket gang. Officers from SO14 Royalty Protection Group swooped in on the pickpockets and made several arrests. Unfortunately the thieves had already communicated financial details to their accomplices. In that incident Mr Mooge had £1800 worth of transactions illegally made on two of his credit cards.

The Royalty Protection Group regularly provide security for visiting dignitaries. As a result of their quick response in April 2020, four prominent members of the pickpocket gang were successfully prosecuted. Two received custodial sentences and two received rehab and community payback orders. As a result of these professional thieves being taken out of circulation, pickpocket crimes in the West End decreased by an estimated 70%.

A spokesperson for the Hargeisa Municipal Council gave SBL News the following comment:

"*The citizens of Hargeisa and Somaliland are most grateful to the Queen of England's bodyguards for protecting our beloved Mayor. But we are worried that there are some people who work in London shops who are cheaters."*

Somaliland is the unrecognised state to the north of Somalia. Formerly known as British Somaliland prior to independence being gained in 1960.

Beauty Parlour targetted by hackers

A boutique hairdresser salon in Ealing was visited by local police on Thursday. Phishing attacks and DDOS traffic had been identified as originating from the premises of 'Ealing Concealing'.

Hundreds of thousands of scam emails coming from the boutique had been identified by ISP's and international anti-spam organisations. Initially the opinion of the police was that the emails had been 'spoofed' to look as if they had come from the boutique.

Spoofing involves masking the sender details to make the email appear as if it has been sent from a legitimate email account. This is intended to prevent spam filters and ISP software from detecting fake emails before they are seen by the user. As the email sender and return addresses are false, it is generally difficult for users to identify spoofed emails, or do anything about it.

Approximately half of the emails sent via the boutique's broadband account were phishing attacks. This type of scam involves sending official looking emails which redirect users to insecure web pages and then capture financial details. Phishing attacks have been a problem for internet users in the UK over the past two decades.

As a result of extensive analysis of ISP and mail server logs, the team from West Ealing police station concluded that substantial traffic had not been spoofed and was actually originating from the premises. In order to conduct spoofing of this type, an attacker would normally have to gain access to the router or modem on the premises.

Along with the phishing emails, a series of 'Distributed denial of service' (DDOS) attacks were identified as having substantial volumes of traffic routed through the boutique's ADSL connection. The DDOS attacks were targetted at multiple locations including UK .gov websites, UK and overseas commercial premises and government offices of several foreign countries.

Distributed denial of service involves using numerous compromised connections to attack the target. This distribution method prevents the automatic blocking of a single source by ISP's or the firewalls protecting the target.

Officers obtained CCTV footage from Ealing Concealing which identified two separate individuals who may have been working as a team.

Staff from Ealing Concealing contacted customers on Friday to inform them of the incident. Anyone using the boutique's free wifi between November and February was advised to contact their bank and change passwords for any online accounts.

Calls made over VOIP services such as WhatsApp, Skype, Telegram, StringCans or Signal were potentially intercepted by the attackers.

A regular customer of Ealing Concealing, Anna Pfolachik (28) told SBL News about money which had gone missing from her online bank account:

"*I didn't notice it until the shop contacted me. All the transfers were for small sums of money and I just assumed they were renewals on my direct debits. If someone steals a hundred pounds from your account, you would soon find out and contact your bank. But all of the transactions were for less than fifteen pounds. I felt a bit funny contacting the bank to complain about such small amounts, but they all add up and the people doing this should definitely be stopped."*

Avoiding large withdrawals is known as 'account training'. It is a tactic frequently used by digital thieves to avoid detection by the victim. None of the transfers were too close together and many were single transactions. It is thought that many of the low value, single transactions were repeated monthly as a way to build up a profile of the victims financial status. Once the hackers know that small amounts have gone unnoticed, they can coordinate much larger withdrawals against multiple accounts.

SBL News contacted West Ealing police station and received the following statement;

"*Officers are keen to speak to anyone recognising the two men seen in the images released. Customers who visited this establishment over the past four months are advised to examine their online accounts for any unauthorised activity. This includes bank accounts, social media, messaging apps and any online accounts which require a log in. Attacks of this type generally require a high level of organisation and could only be conducted by technically skilled individuals. This is not an isolated incident and we have been in communication with several other police forces across the country. Substantial amounts of data have been uploaded to foreign locations which are outside UK jurisdiction. Consequently we advise any customers affected to take a proactive approach to securing their mobile devices."*

Anyone concerned about phishing attacks , hacking or identity theft should contact the police on 101.

CHAPTER FOUR – Baby Milk

The cable ties cutting into his wrists made Tareeq Faqim elMait quite uncomfortable. He knew there was no point in asking for them to be loosened. They would be cut off and replaced with rigid handcuffs before they was taken out of the house anyway. He tried to look up from his position on the floor but the movement made the wrist cutting even worse, so he relaxed and tried to think of something calming. This would all be over soon enough, so there really was no point in getting too worked up.

This wasn't his first dance and at the end of the day, it was better than working for his uncle as a painter and decorator.

Across the hallway his wild eyed co-conspirator, Mr Bennet Joaquin Hoffman of New Jersey, was still resisting his would be captors. The carpet was now well beyond ruffled and several of the eight matching dinner chairs had been overturned. Several dozen tubs of infant formula were stacked in a pyramid against the rear wall and had thus far remained intact.

The two men in black overcoats who were attempting to subdue him hadn't reckoned on Bennet having been up all night experimenting with near fatal doses of PCP.

"Jesus, get his bloody hands" exclaimed Matthew Chelmsford, narrowly avoiding a blindingly fast punch aimed at his throat.

With these coarse words, the other man in a black overcoat let go of Bennet's trouser leg and attempted to grab him by the forearms. Unfortunately for him, PCP usage makes for much faster reaction times than people give it credit. Bennet effortlessly deflected the grabbing motion. He then responded by trapping both Gerard's arms with one of his own and kicking out with his now freed right foot. The kick found its target, right between Matthew Chelmsford's legs.

"Aughffff" groaned Matthew loudly, as his legs turned to jelly and he crumpled onto the floor like a deflated lilo.

With his hands and feet now completely free, Bennet felt a momentary sense of preparedness. He levered Gerard's arms against himself and brutally shoved him back. Regathering his positioning, he quickly settled into what appeared to be some kind of Chinese Northern Eagle Claw stance.

Gerard Leabridge decided that enough was enough. This crazy American was quite clearly not your average, run of the mill, radical politico. He looked like he'd had training from Ip Man himself and was perfectly capable of punching his way out of

any detention. With a fluid and well practised motion, Gerard pulled out his fourth generation Glock 17 from his utility vest holster and in a blink of an eye had it stuck firmly into Bennet's chest.

“Stop Bloody Struggling – or Else!” he shouted.

Bennet’s adrenalin had temporarily neutralised many of the psychoactive effects of the PCP still coursing through his veins. He decided on reflection that he had made his point well enough and there really was nothing to be gained by getting his upper torso splattered all over the dining room walls. So he promptly relented and put both hands forward in a gesture implying submission.

“Do it, take me then. You sons a’ bitches” he hissed, grudgingly.

Within no more than a couple of seconds, a pre connected, extra width cable tie had been removed from the utility vest underneath Gerard's overcoat. It was then placed over Bennet's wrists and pulled tight enough to prevent his fast moving fists being any further risk to Gerard or Matthews immediate safety.

“Are you OK down there?” asked Gerard, with a not inconsiderable amount of concern.

“Ugh, I’m ….. urgh… no, no I’m ….urp… bloody not.” replied Matthew trying to force back the vomit rising in his oesophagus.

Nobody had told Gerard or Matthew about the powerful stimulants which Bennet Hoffman had been using all night. Which was, they felt, a truly unfortunate lapse in actionable intel. Had they known, they would have undoubtedly utilised a different plan for his apprehension. Matthew was now on his hands and knees, trying to get to his feet.

“You ….. utter …. urgh…utter…. bastard” groaned Matthew, staring maliciously at Bennet.

“Got you a good one right in the orchestras there did he?” asked Gerard with a patronising smile.

Gerard now had both hands occupied with Bennet’s detention. He had placed him face down on the ground and was pinning the back of Bennet’s calfs with his own knees. He produced another handful of cable ties from his vest and looped three of them together. Two were placed over the ankles of this notorious transatlantic criminal and the third was pulled tight.

“Get stuffed Gerry” replied Matthew “you wouldn’t …. urgh…. You wouldn’t like it”

By now Matthew Chelmsford had managed to raise himself to a standing position and surveyed the scene with a rather green complexion.

“What a …..bloody …. urgh …. disgrace” he complained.

This wasn’t the first time Matthew had been hit in the privates during a physical altercation, but it was certainly one of the hardest. He carefully felt around the sides of his scrotum checking for any tears, major damage and / or rapid swelling. Fortunately it seemed that this time he had remained relatively unscathed. Several years ago, he had not been so lucky. While a deep cover anti-racketeering operation was unfolding, he was struck in the testicles by a rogue skateboard which had come rocketing over the lip of a skate rink in Royal Oak. After three weeks in hospital, his scrotum still resembled a pair of fair sized oranges in an old carrier bag.

But this time it had been no rogue skateboard and thankfully, nowhere near as angular either. While this PCP deranged American defector might be aggressive and seemingly possessing of practically superhuman strength, his accuracy was definitely impaired. All in all, thought Matthew, today wasn’t the worst kick in the nuts he’d ever had.

“Just ’low it Bennet man, you’re not doing us any good” shouted Tareeq from across the hallway.

“You just shut the hell up in there” barked Matthew. “You’re lucky we don’t just shoot you both right here”. As he said this, Matthew produced his own sidearm and gingerly stepped into the hallway, still wincing from the lucky blow to the testicles. He placed his free hand on the collection of cable ties securing Tareeq’s legs and started dragging him into the dining room.

Tareeq didn’t answer as his face bumped over the carpet rod of the dining room doorway, he was quite familiar with the realities of firearms. Working with various proxy groups in the middle East and occasionally mainland Europe, had taught him that it’s better not to argue with people carrying guns, especially when you were not. After all, they hadn’t used them yet, so there was a good chance they didn’t want to.

Outside, Charles and Dave were now standing in front of their vehicles discussing the menu for Sundays barbecue.

“But if you’re going with Salmon, won’t that be a bit heavy on top of all that beef?” asked Charles

“No I think it’ll be OK” replied Dave “We’ve got at least two pescatarians coming, so they should polish off most of it”

“Right, you do know a lot of fishy people, don’t you Dave?”

Charles looked at Dave, as if expecting him to laugh.

“I like Salmon as well, you know” interrupted Janet from inside the ambulance.

“Yes, but you’ll do your usual and gobble up all the cock-tail sausages beforehand” said Charles with a grin.

“Get lost Charles” replied Janet. She was clearly not impressed.

Harry Brentford was about to slap his stomach when Janet caught his eye and with a cutting stare, convinced him not to.

Charles and Harry’s slapstick routine was temporarily stalled so Janet continued;

“I’m actually really looking forward to this barbecue. He always does a mean slice of Sirloin on that grill of his. I think it’s the way he adds the onion and garlic at the very last minute. “

At the mention of Dave's signatory seasoned steak, Harry Brentford couldn’t control his enthusiasm and despite Janet’s earlier warning, once again slapped his deliberately distended stomach and made a point of licking his lips in a pantomime fashion.

“Mmm I could go some of that right now as it happens, I’m really quite hungry.“ said Janet as her eyes dropped to the sizeable glove box compartment of the ambulance dashboard.

Dave whipped his head around to look at Janet, cutting Charles off before he could come up with any of his usual abrasive comments. He pointed a finger at Janet through the windscreen and commanded;

“Just leave those bloody Parsnips alone, do you hear me?”

Janet raised her head, gave him a quizzical look and then casually pulled an eyelid down with her middle finger.

“How do you think it’s going inside” asked Harry from the drivers side of the white midi-van, his lips glistening with saliva from his comedic celebration of Dave's seasoned steak.

“Oh it’ll all be over in a jiffy. They’ll be sat down by now, trying to extract any critical intel” replied Charles.

“Yeah, they’ll want to know about any tripwires or fail-safes in the bedroom upstairs” said Dave in a matter of fact way.

“I wonder why they chose to use baby-milk powder” mused Janet. “Do you think there’s any significance in that?”

“Christ knows, it’s probably just a red herring anyway.” replied Harry Brentford.

“What do you mean by that?” asked Dave.

“You know dumbo, red herring equals fake – false – not real – a total load of shenanigans. That sort of thing” said Charles, sarcastically.

“What…. you mean to say that, I just drove all the way here on the wrong side of the road and up several pavements, just for a load of nonsense?” said Dave, looking quite put out.

“Dave, the guy’s a bloody CIA defector. What are the chances of anything to do with him being in any possible way – on the up and up?”

“Hmm, yeah I see what you mean” said Dave with a look of resignation.

“Shouldn’t we be in there helping?” Asked Janet, with genuine concern in her voice.

“Are you insane?” replied Harry. “The last thing I need is some pair of highly volatile, totally unpredictable …. bloody mental bastards giving me a hard time”

“Oh come on, Harry” said Charles with a smirk “The snatch team boys aren’t that bad…...”

This joke had been rolled out by Charles Hornchurch at least fourteen times in their collective past and as such it barely registered with the group.

“They are too and you know it” said Harry with a frown, “You won’t catch Dave inviting them to his barbecue”.

“Yeah, that’s a fair point” said Dave. “I mean I don’t know about you two, but I don’t want to find any more picnic bars in my fish pond or cling-film over my toilet seat. Not again, not after that disaster at the office Xmas party”

“Did you ever get those stains out of your tuxedo Charles?” asked Janet, barely masking her amusement.

Charles looked down and muttered something about rental T&C’s and deposits. He clearly didn’t enjoy recalling the memory, So Janet seized the opportunity to press the matter further;

“You didn’t really come out of that one so well, did you Charles? Ha ha.”

“Look, how was I supposed to know what was in that bloody water pistol” asked Charles, rhetorically.

“I guess the smell alerted you pretty quickly once it was sprayed all over your face” said Harry, laughing.

“See that’s what I’m talking about” said Dave. “Any normal person would just have filled it with pee or something”

“Normal person?… I hope you’re not saying I would have done anything like that Dave?”

“Look you know what I mean Jan” replied Dave impatiently.

Harry leaned over the passenger seat and stuck his head out of the window;

“You know it takes a special kind of lunatic to drink two litres of sunflower oil, just so that they’ll have the shits in time for a prank at an Xmas party”

“Yes it does, Harry” admitted Charles, still looking at the ground. “yes ...it…. does”

Dave was about to start enthusiastically recalling the events which had lead up to Charles getting a festive dousing of sunflower based faecal matter, but before he could, the front door of the property half opened and the distinctive voice of Gerard Leabridge rang out;

“In here you bunch of twats …. quickly”

Without hesitation, all four of them grabbed their various bags of department approved equipment from their vehicles and hastily made their way up the garden path. As they entered the property, Matthew designated the roles for the forthcoming extraction;

“You two” he said to Dave and Janet, “we need one stretcher for each of those.”

He waved his Glock carrying hand toward the two men hog-tied on the dining room floor. He then turned to face Harry and Charles

“You two, keep an eye on the crazy looking one. He’s off his tits on some kind of American superman drugs. Probably bloody …. bath….time … bloody salts... or something. Just watch him. If he gets any ideas, you are absolutely authorised to neutralise him.”

Harry and Charles reached into their respective black rucksacks and produced a pair of yellow electronic taser guns.

“What the hell’s that?” exclaimed Matthew. “I said you could neutralise him, not tickle his arse with a feather”

“It’s all we’ve been issued” explained Charles. “There’s a directive from the brass to reduce the number of collateral casualties.”

“It’s your bloody fault” said Harry Brentford, gesturing at Matthew with his 50,000v Lithium Ion powered, plastic handpiece. “If you lot hadn’t riddled those Mexican Mormons full of holes on the Thames cycle path, we’d still have proper guns”

“That’s how dem Babylon does the black man” shouted Tareeq from his face down position on the carpet.

“Just shut the hell up will you?” snarled Matthew. “This isn’t a bloody tribunal. We’re trying to get these two out of here with as little fuss as possible. The SOCO will be here in a minute and we don’t want them seeing any of this bloody clown show. Now just watch them until they’re bloody secured”

Charles and Harry did as they were crudely instructed. Neither felt particularly reassured by their electronic non-lethal firearms. Especially with the increased risk from the bathtime-salts. But they had confidence in the cable ties and confidence was what this game was all about.

Dave and Janet had now returned from the ambulance with a collapsible full length stretcher and a fold up wheelchair / gurney hybrid. Dave produced two pairs of rigid cuffs and a pair of wire-cutters from his green hold all. Janet opened a small black case and brought out a large hypodermic syringe filled with a transparent liquid.

“Which one’s going in the neck brace?” asked Janet

Gerard raised his eyes to the ceiling, “Oh you know, I’m thinking probably the one who’s higher than Ben Nevis and nearly kicked Matthews bollocks into a low earth orbit”

“Okay, Okay” said Janet, administering the injection to Bennet’s shoulder. “I was only asking. No need to bite my bloody head off.”

With the two subjects secured in the back of the ambulance, the convoy of vehicles exited the otherwise peaceful Perivale terraced crescent and headed North West.

Dave switched on the siren and put on his sunglasses. In the second place van with the body-kit and darkened windows, Matthew Chelmsford grimaced and shifted his weight around uncomfortably in the passenger side bucket seat.

As the sound of the ambulance siren faded, a darkly dressed man crossed the terraced street and let himself into the house. He purposefully went straight into the kitchen, reached up to the ceiling and unclipped the face of the smoke alarm. Retrieving a small circuit board, he then moved into the dining room and repeated the same actions. Glancing at the geometrically arranged cans of baby-milk powder, he shook his head and removed the top can, placed it on the table and walked into the hallway. No more than two minutes after he entered the building, he let himself out and casually walked back in the direction he had come.

SBL NEWS

Conflict diamonds seized in boat raid

The Southall section of the Grand Union Canal (Paddington arm) was busier than normal this week as an anti smuggling operation concluded several months of surveillance. Southall police netted an estimated £500,000 worth of suspected conflict diamonds during a raid on a wide-beam narrow boat which was being used as an illegal brokerage.

The majority of the high value gems recovered are thought to have originated in the Central African Republic. Diamond production in the C.A.R accounts for a substantial percentage of the national GDP. Drug cartels and militia are known to

utilise diamond smuggling to finance their activities.

Canal users and boat residents were oblivious to the high end gem trading taking place on the well

appointed narrow boat. The luxurious vessel has been seen moored in various locations along the Grand Union canal. It was commonly thought to be used as a holiday home.

Onboard the boat, officers discovered not only a considerable cache of uncut diamonds, but also an undisclosed amount of additional precious stones including opals and sapphires. Both vendors and buyers are suspected to have been attracted to the black market outlet due to its proximity to Heathrow airport.

Local officers coordinated with UK Border Force, Heathrow security and Interpol in a long running operation which included investigations in Britain, Portugal and the Central African Republic.

A spokesperson for Southall police provided the following statement;

"The majority of the purchases were initiated from outside the UK. As a direct result of this operation, police have seized over half a million pounds in unregistered diamonds. Much of the profits from sales would potentially have financef ongoing conflict in the Central African Republic".

CHAPTER FIVE – Belvue services

In the interests of punctuality, Jocasta had finished most of the main preparations by early afternoon. She generally found last minute dashing around to be incredibly vulgar and consequently believed in going to some considerable lengths to avoid it. Tarquin did not always arrive home at the same time and she didn't want this to skew any of her arrangements.

Opening the door to the pantry, she overheard a faint siren through the easterly facing window of the kitchen. The house looked out across Belvue park and the adjacent golf driving range so it wasn't uncommon to hear such sounds emanating from the nearby A40. She dismissed it without a second thought and continued looking for the chocolate fondue set they had been given as a Christmas present by Tarquin's Aunt Hillary several years prior.

She located the fondue set underneath what she considered to be the most tasteless item of cooking apparel in the entire world of kitchenware appliances. It was one of those electric meat grills that had become so popular in the late nineties. She couldn't remember the name of the manufacturer and nor did she care to. Tarquin had purchased it in a moment of uncontrolled exuberance while watching a late night special on a twenty four hour shopping channel. The DeRochforts owned several spontaneous purchases which Tarquin had made after his briefings at the Barrington club. Possibly the least useful was the telescopic fly-fishing rod, currently cluttering up the brolly stand.

Placing the fondue set on the oversized kitchen table, she weighed the pros and cons of donating the electric grill to a local charity shop. Tarquin barely used the thing and if it wasn't around any more he might actually get the damn barbecue finished. It was a matter of some contention between the two that the large pile of Fife brick at the end of the garden had remained in situ for the past eight years. It no more resembled the elegant barbecue that Tarquin had shown her advertised in the pages of The Lady magazine than the pile of wood nearby resembled an Elizabethan gazebo.

Erring on the side of caution, she put the grill back in the pantry, deliberately placing it a couple of shelves further down than where she had found it. Closing the door, her thoughts switched to the requirement of the chocolate itself and quite how much of it would be necessary for three couples. She knew exactly how much was left in the Lindt hamper and it wasn't going to be enough.

She removed her mobile phone from her hip pocket, swiped it open and held down the number two on the keypad.

"Hello Jocky, I'm just on my way now. Is everything okay?" asked Tarquin.

“I do wish you wouldn’t call me that Tarquin. It’s not funny and you make me feel like an overweight darts player every time you do it.”

“Oh don’t be silly my sweet, it’s just a bit of fun” said Tarquin, defensively.

“Yes, well anyway. Can you pick up some chocolate on the way? There’s not enough left in the Lindt hamper.”

“Right you are my love, I’ll stop off at the sweet shop in the high street.”

Jocasta sighed audibly into her mobile phone;

“No Tarquin ….you won’t, that’s not a sweet shop any more and hasn’t been for some time. It was taken over by that Australian hipster couple and now it’s a kraft ale shop, remember? We did go to the opening where you made a bloody fool of yourself, yet again.”

Tarquin was taken aback. He knew that she was right. But somehow had completely forgotten about the absence of the local confectioner. He didn’t agree that he had made a fool of himself at the opening, but then perhaps his slightly foggy memory of the events had something to do with all that kraft ale.

“Oh yes of course. Well I’m sure I can find something nearby. It’s fairly ubiquitous these days – is chocolate”

“Right, well just make sure you get enough. I don’t want to have to explain myself to Petula again. You know how pass-remarkable she can be.” said Jocasta

“No problem, my love. I will not return without the trophy of the hunt”

“Okay then, don’t be long. They’ll be here soon. Bye.”

Jocasta terminated the call and with a shake of her head muttered under her breath;

‘The trophy of the hunt indeed’

Tarquin had expected this call. He wasn’t sure exactly what the item would be, but he knew perfectly well that there would be something for him to source from the local shops in the area before he arrived home. The absence of the sweet shop had blind sided him though. Jocasta was quite correct, the shop had been closed down some years ago after the local council discovered that the neighbour next door was some kind of secretive and industrious mole man who had tunnelled under the shop, the pavement and the main road of the street outside. The whole thing had caused a sizeable disruption to the lives of everyone in the otherwise unremarkable suburban district. With a nostalgic smile, he turned the Mercedes into Ruislip road and started scanning the shops for a suitable vendor.

“No no, that just won’t do” said Tarquin to the eager Asian shopkeeper. “It needs to be dark chocolate. You can’t have a fondue with milk chocolate, it’s just not cricket”

“You want cheese Sir, for a fondue?” asked the shopkeeper, somewhat bewildered by this frantic English man.

“No no, look I just need twelve bars of dark chocolate, it’s not complicated. Do you know anywhere that I could find some?”

Tarquin was becoming extremely vexed with this wild chocolate chase. This was the third shop he had been into and his patience was running out. Except for a series of garishly packaged snack bars, the only thing even close to dark chocolate he had found was a box of dark After Eight mints which he was quite sure were several years out of date.

"You could try the petrol station on Western Avenue Sir, they have all kinds of chocolate there" said the shopkeeper, helpfully.

"Right, okay then… thanks for you help" Tarquin replied.

Somewhat deflated he climbed back into the Mercedes and accelerated toward the Church Road roundabout. Time was slipping away and he didn't want to upset Jocasta's carefully made plans for the bridge evening.

As he sped along Church road, he passed the Australian kraft ale micro brewery and couldn't help thinking that it was somehow unfair on the former sweetshop owners that the local council had made a compulsory purchase on the property. The tunnelling skills of the mole man had not gone to waste and the council had certified his labyrinthian endeavours without a second thought. Consequently, the Australian couple had a basement property for their brewing which rivalled the floorspace of the local supermarket. It fact, it was so cavernous that Tarquin assumed their staff must use fold up bicycles or possibly electric scooters to get from the vats to the kegs.

As he approached the Western Avenue service station he could hear a siren approaching from the dual carriageway of the A40 coming East. Like most London residents he dismissed it out of hand and focussed on the much more pressing acquisition of fondue materials.

The hundred and twenty five millilitre injection of benzodiazepine tranquillisers had gone some way to negate the vast amounts of PCP which Bennet Hoffman had consumed the previous night. His body temperature had become raised however and he knew he was definitely dehydrating.

His pupils were becoming gradually less dilated and apart from his feverish sweating he was almost what could be considered back to normal. Consequently he found the rigid neck brace and Velcro straps restraining him to be horribly restrictive.

"Can't you just like, I dunno… loosen them a bit. I'm kinda losin' my shit here lady"

Janet Beckton didn't really like Americans as a people, but she was unavoidably curious as to what the cans of baby-milk powder stacked in the Perivale house had been for. The gurney restraints could probably withstand her acquiescing to this not unreasonable request, so she decided to use it as a means of gaining trust with this international rogue operative.

"Okay" agreed Janet "but don't try anything or I'll pump you so full of tranqs, you'll end up having to wear adult nappies."

"Sure sure, just lemme move my head a bit and maybe scratch my nose." said Bennet, clearly undeterred by the prospect of lifelong incontinence.

Janet unclipped the straps which held Bennet's head in place and fed some slack into his chest restraints. She noticed his defined musculature and briefly thought about the breaking strain of the Velcro restraints.

"Aw yeah, that's what I'm talkin' 'bout" said Bennet with a look of relief.

"Can you like, undo my shirt some. Or put on the air-con or somethin'? It's hotter than a Vegas cat house in here"

Janet looked at Bennet's shirt. It had popper studs instead of buttons, so she couldn't see much harm in undoing the top four. The appliance didn't have any air-con so her options were limited.

She needed to get this man talking, there had been no opportunity to conduct any intel gathering up until this point, so she undid the poppers and re-applied the restraints.

"Did you plan on hiding drugs in those cans of baby-milk, or do you just have a lot of young children?" asked Janet, with a mildly flirtatious edge.

Janet knew perfectly well that the chances of Bennet Hoffman, or indeed anyone being the proud parent of half a dozen children under the age of three were quite remote. She was deliberately appealing to his masculinity to try and extract an organic response. She could tell from his upper chest development that he wouldn't have much trouble attracting a suitable partner for any procreation plans and someone of his profile was probably a bit of a philanderer. Unfortunately she had completely miscalculated the cultural differences.

"Yeah right, sure thing, that's what I do lady. I put crack in baby food and sell it to addicted pre-school kids"

"No need to be like that, I'm just trying to understand your motivation." replied Janet with a distinct note of scorn.

"Look lady, this shit is way above your pay-grade OK? Just stick ta working the god damned blood pressure machines and leave the complicated shit ta me.. OK?"

This brusque rejoinder didn't sit well with Janet, she had been considerate enough while attempting to manipulate this boisterous blow-hard, so she roughly shoved his head back into the brace and re-attached the clips. "Careful there Sir, we wouldn't want you getting a whiplash injury."

Janet was quite enjoying this. Bennet apparently had quite a formidable reputation and she was no stranger to power games. Bringing this out of control, Langley asset down a peg or two, was not without a certain thrill.

"Jesus lady, what the god damned hell is your problem?" exclaimed Bennet.

"The baby-milk powder is my god damned problem, what were you doing with it?"

Bennet was keen to regain his minor amount of comfort and as such realised that a degree of reciprocity might earn him some leeway.

"Jesus H Christ lady, it ain't nothin' to do with the formula, we just use the business as a god damned smoke screen"

"So there's nothing wrong with those cans back in the house then? There's … no drugs or anything in them?" Janet's interest in the baby-milk powder was becoming quite out of place.

"Nah it's just a front. Import export from the US ta Europe, we bring in 100 tons at a time on pallets, repackage it and ship that shit straight ta the distributors, via DHL"

"I see, so you have more than we saw in the house then?" Janet was clearly not going to let this baby-milk issue rest until she had all the information she wanted.

“Sure we do, we’ve got another four houses full of the damn stuff all over West London”

Janet was satisfied that Bennet was being honest with her, so she undid the head straps and tilted the gurney into a more upright position.

“Roughly how many cans do you think you have in all these five houses then?” she continued.

“I dunno, like seven or eight thousand. We were waiting for a truck ta pick most of them up when your boys came through the front door like something outta god damned Chuck Norris movie”

Janet smirked at the mention of Chuck Norris, she’d always been more of a Steven Segal fan. She considered Chuck Norris to be a poor woman’s Kris Kristofferson.

“And you definitely weren’t doing anything crazy with them?” she said, purposefully.

“No look, I told you already. It’s just a damned front. I mean who the fuck is gonna use formula to hide drugs in, that’s just some stupid shit you saw in an episode of CSI or NCIS or …. somethin’. Nobody does shit like that in the real world. Like, Jesus lady, get your head outta your ass. You limey broads are all way too uptight”

Janet considered this answer to have strayed into a bit of an anti English and decidedly misogynistic rant on Bennet’s part. So she removed the pin holding the gurney headrest causing it to slam down onto it’s base.

“Jesus fuckin’ Christ lady. Quit tryin’ ta break my god damned neck, will ya?

“I did warn you about the whiplash, Sir.” Said Janet with a thin lipped sarcastic smile.

“I swear ta god lady, you need ta take a step back wit’ this shit. I’m tryin’a cooperate here and you just keep on bustin’ my god damned balls already”

Janet considered putting a ventilator mask on Bennet and attaching it to the NO2 supply. She also considered putting several layers of survival blankets over him. If he was overheating, the increased insulation would certainly cause him some major discomfort. On reflection she felt that she would keep these tactics in reserve, for the moment. There was also something about this American criminal which she found oddly appealing in a combative way. She had the upper hand in this game and she would make sure he knew it.

“Don’t worry about it, we’ll have you home in a few hours and you can explain it all to your own people.” replied Janet, her sarcastic smile widening.

Bennet didn’t have anything to say to this. He wasn’t in the least looking forward to any forthcoming reunion with his former employers. Things hadn’t really gone according to the carefully constructed plans that he and Tareeq had made last week. If they had, he would be a few hours from relaxing poolside, in a luxury hotel in the Qaurtiere Aurelio in Rome.

The darkened windows of the body-kit van allowed for substantial privacy in any setting, so Matthew Chelmsford had taken the opportunity to examine his injury in greater detail. He had retrieved a chilled bottle of mineral water from the in-vehicle refrigerator and was sitting astride it, in his boxer shorts.

“How are you feeling ….down there?” asked Gerard. His eyes darting toward Matthews improvised ice pack.

“Still a bit raw to be honest” replied Matthew “He must be wearing bloody golf shoes or something”

“Never mind, I’m sure Sandra will kiss them better for you” said Gerard, barely containing his mirth.

“She bloody won’t. She still hasn’t forgiven me for that bloody hedgehog in the bed.”

Gerard was visibly taken aback by this disclosure;

“Are you serious, she’s still giving you grief over that? But it was months ago. No sense of humour that one. Don’t know why you ever married her.”

Matthew was about to respond with something along the lines of shotgun weddings, her father being a Major and the alternative being much worse, when he caught sight of a grey Peugeot drawing parallel with the ambulance in front. There was something suspicious about it and he trusted his instincts enough to consider it as a potential threat.

“Here, what’s that twat in the Peugeot doing?” he asked Gerard.

“Not sure. Looks a bit previous though, doesn’t he. Get on the radio and let Dave know. We don’t need any more bloody cock-ups on this job” said Gerard, with a substantial note of concern.

Matthew raised the Motorola mouthpiece, pressed the button and was about to go through the required protocols associated with operational radio procedure. Before he even had the chance to speak, the rear offside window of the grey Peugeot descended and the distinctive barrel of a Berretta ARX-160 assault rifle emerged, pointing directly at the cab of the ambulance.

“Jesus Christ! – Get Off The Road!” shouted Matthew into the mouthpiece. Any consideration to correct radio procedure having been cast aside.

Dave had been thinking about the seating arrangements for his much anticipated barbecue on Sunday. He knew that Janet would want to interview his friends from the Hiking club at length. She was constantly evaluating men as to their suitability as a prospective partner / parent and he figured that the sooner a pairing was made and it was all settled, the better for everyone concerned, especially him.

The barely intelligible shouting coming from the ambulance radio speaker was decidedly out of character for a job like this. What were Matthew and Gerard doing and why weren’t they observing correct radio procedure? He glanced in the rear viewfinder as he picked up the handset.

“Say again, Sierra Tango One Niner, not understood. Over” he said calmly.

“Get off the road.. Get Off The Fucking Road!” shouted Matthew Chelmsford

Dave recognised that the situation must be really quite serious for Matthew to have abandoned protocols in such a profane manner, so he dismissed any thoughts of questioning this order and complied immediately. The multi ton ambulance swerved onto the hard shoulder and the three white vans moved seamlessly to form a shield between it and the attackers in the grey Peugeot. Matthew pulled out his Glock 17 and fired two shots in quick succession through the windscreen of the body-kitted van. Both shots went through the rear wind-shield of the Peugeot and the barrel of the Berretta assault rifle slid

backwards into the interior of the car as it accelerated away from the ambulance.

With the sound of the shots from Matthews sidearm ringing in his ears, Dave Stoneleigh pounded on the divider separating the cab from the rear of the ambulance.

“Secure the package, we have incoming!” he shouted.

Janet turned around to check on Tareeq and his restraints, but as soon as she took her eyes off Bennet, he levered himself upright, bursting the Velcro chest restraints and pulled off the neck brace. Instinctively Janet reached for her black case full of tranquilliser injections only to find that they were no longer there. Before she could look back up at Bennet, she felt a sharp pain and a cold flush in her left shoulder.

“Dave! Help, he’s stuck me ..” she said, as a wave of fatigue rushed over her.

In a single coordinated movement, with both hands still manacled in a pair of standard issue rigid cuffs, Bennet raised himself from the gurney, pulled out the now empty hypodermic syringe from Janet’s sturdy shoulder and dumped her barely conscious body down in his place.

“Told ya to take a step back, ya crazy broad” he said, triumphantly.

Tareeq had not expected anything like this. It wasn’t how this journey was supposed to unfold. He had been quite comfortable with the knowledge that he wouldn’t be flying anywhere today. Apart from a bit of a roasting from his line manager, he didn’t really have much to be worried about. This unforeseen escape performance by the crazy American was potentially going to make everything much, much worse.

“You gonna lay around all day or what?” asked Bennet, now sweating quite profusely. He pulled at his shirt and the remaining popper studs opened leaving him resembling a heavy drinker at an Essex summer beer festival.

“What you go and do a dumb arsed thing like that for Bennet man. Things be getting a whole load worse now fam, you’ll see.” said Tareeq, still restrained in the Velcro straps.

Bennet looked down at the restrained Tareeq, straight into his eyes, which was really quite alarming. Not only was his split to the waist wardrobe a challenging sight, but he was also looking extremely psychotic due to the lethal cocktail of drugs that he had both eagerly consumed and also had involuntarily administered to him over the past eighteen hours.

“Do you wanna stick around and get waterboarded for the next three weeks?” asked Bennet.

“No Bennet man, but …..”

Tareeq couldn’t really say much more. How could he possibly explain to this psychotic American that the whole thing was a triple blind operation being coordinated by his superiors in St George’s? He decided to go along with the daring escape bid. Mainly to prevent Bennet from killing him, but also because his improvisational skills were a bit restricted by the current events .. and the Velcro.

“Did you notice that we is in the back of an ambulance, on the motorway bruv?” asked Tareeq, quite reasonably.

“Don’t you worry ‘bout that” said Bennet with a maniacal grin “We got some rough and tumble cavalry boys comin’ over the hill”

“Help a bruvva out with these bloody restraints then, will you?” said Tareeq, not at all happy that he needed rescuing by a man dressed as the Incredible Hulk, who should rightfully be in a drug induced coma.

“Aw, do ya need me ta make ya some sandwiches as well, wit’ the crusts cut off for ya?” replied Bennet, undoing the gurney straps.

Dave had expected a response from Janet after his pounding on the separator. He thought he heard her say something about a truck, but he couldn’t quite make it out. In any event, things were fairly popping off, what with all the gunfire and everything so he decided that getting off the A40 would probably be the smartest move. It was also what Matthew had been shouting about on the radio before all the gunfire, so Dave deftly steered the ambulance onto the slip road leading to the nearby services.

Gerard grabbed the handset of the radio.”Golf alpha one three, we are relocating. Over”

The speaker of the radio crackled and the voice of Gary Weycross cut in;

“Roger that one niner, have target ahead, pursuing now. Over”

The body-kitted van and the midi-van driven by Harry Brentford fell into single file behind the ambulance. The third white van accelerated to catch up with the grey Peugeot and gradually faded from view. Matthew Chelmsford was still aiming his pistol in the direction of the grey Peugeot as he scanned the other vehicles on the road for signs of suspicious activity.

“Jesus, what the hell was that?” exclaimed Gerard. His head cocked to one side in order to see through the parts of the windscreen not obscured by the striations of the bullet holes.

“Let’s not stick around to find out” replied Matthew. “Let’s just get this package dropped the hell off and call it a bloody day”

SBL NEWS

Tower block jumper talked down

A resident of the new WestWorks development has been admitted to hospital following a four hour window ledge negotiation on Monday last week.

Trained negotiators from Ealing police station were called in when neighbours called 999 . The emergency services received multiple reports of a man in distress remonstrating with passers-by and threatening to jump from the balcony of his apartment on the twelfth floor.

Adjoining properties were evacuated due to safety concerns while officers conducted negotiations with the man. The Centre banqueting venue opposite provided refreshments for the evacuated residents while they waited for permission to re-enter their homes. Fourteenth floor resident Tamara Welwyn praised the negotiators for their bravery and selfless actions;

“*One of the other residents said that they thought he might be planning an explosion. As you can imagine we were all very scared, but the police didn’t hesitate. They went straight into the flat next door and started talking to him across the balcony. This is a new building and nothing like this has ever happened here before.”*

Concerns regarding possible explosions were laid to rest shortly after the negotiating officers established communication with the man. Residents were re-admitted to the building when an ambulance took him to Ealing Hospital. He is thought to be in his mid thirties and it is not known if he has a history of mental illness.

Footage acquired from evacuees shows the man shouting and waving his arms at the negotiating officers. At one point he can clearly be heard shouting;

"*No man can serve two masters"*.

Colin Hamilton, a neighbour from the seventh floor of a neighbouring block, told SBL News how surprised he and the other residents were;

"*I've bumped into him several times in the communal gardens. We chatted about ordinary things like his passion for golf, the effects of lock-down and the maintenance of the building. He seemed like he was perfectly stable but I suppose he must have had some problems."*

If you or anyone you know are experiencing mental health issues, call the Samaritans on 116 123

CHAPTER SIX – Inside Passing

The three quadruple brandies that Giles Tilbury had rapidly consumed during his high tension arrival home from work were beginning to wear off. He considered retrieving the hip-flask he kept in the glove compartment of the Daimler, but on reflection decided that openly drinking while driving might cause a bit of consternation among his passengers. Christabel was generally non judgemental about his frequent drinking, but he didn't know where Clive and Petula stood on the rather controversial subject of driving while under the influence. All things considered he could probably hold off until they arrived at the DeRochforts. Tarquin generally had a well stocked drinks cabinet and was even known to have the odd bottle or two of Courvoisier.

Petula had made for a well rehearsed passenger. He had discovered more about the dynamics of her relationship with Clive than she had ever imagined telling him. In fact she had not actually told him much of what he now knew, not verbally anyway. Giles had deliberately fed her a series of calculated questions and statements. Programming her with thoughts which were specifically designed to get her talking about certain aspects of her and Clive's often rocky marriage. He then gauged her responses according to a standard department checklist of personality attributes. He had committed this checklist to memory long before he had been promoted. Very little of this process had anything to do with the actual words coming out of Petula's mouth. However the micro facial expressions he observed in his peripheral vision and the inflections in her voice, were a rich repository of highly revealing information. Giles had mined it, ruthlessly.

The A40 was busier than normal for a Tuesday evening. Regardless, Giles gunned the Daimler up the outside lane at a respectable 80 to 90 mph. Occasionally he had to overtake on the inside, but this was London and if you didn't drive in a confident manner you would never get anywhere at all.

Giles was no stranger to colouring outside the lines when it came to behaviour which would directly facilitate his drinking. An evening of croquet last September had turned into a much more competitive affair than anyone had anticipated. When the host offered to put up a 2002 Jeroboam of Louis Roederer Cristal for the tournament winners, Giles had engaged in a most comprehensive winning strategy. He went into the hosts kitchen on the pretence of finding a lemon, only to sabotage the rather tame punch with a litre and half of Polish pure spirit vodka he'd found in the scullery. Naturally Giles stuck to the G&T's that evening and predictably took the Jeroboam home. Christabel would probably have been more impressed had she not indulged so heavily in the not so tame punch.

During one of these non textbook, passing on the inside events, the grey car he was overtaking increased its' speed to prevent Giles from passing them. If he'd been more sober, it's possible that Giles would have noticed the shattered rear windscreen before he initiated his illegal manoeuvre. But this was a bridge evening and a sober bridge evening was something he just could not reconcile. Giles glanced at the passenger and with a frown, gestured at them to get out of his way.

The passenger was a heavy set man in his mid to late thirties with dark, two day stubble from chin to crown. He was wearing a charcoal flecked suit jacket, with a mandarin collar, over a black shirt with cream buttons. This unorthodox attire perplexed Giles momentarily and he inadvertently made eye contact with the man as his face slowly turned toward the Daimler. His dark brown eyes had the most penetrating stare Giles had ever seen.

The heavy set man casually opened his suit jacket and with his right hand, retrieved something bulky from the inside left pocket. His left arm slowly became visible above the door sill and with his hand extended out of the window, he made an obscure gesture with his rather stocky fingers.

Upon seeing this gesture, Giles Tilbury blanched. He instantly took his foot off the accelerator and allowed the Daimler to slow down quite dramatically. The grey coloured car moved ahead of them and this time Giles certainly noticed the shattered rear windscreen. He also noticed the blood spatter on the boot, the slumped figure in the rear seat and the rental motif on the bumper. He instantly committed the number plate to memory and unusually, even recorded the fact that the car was a Peugeot.

Without checking his mirror or indicating, Giles smoothly moved into the inside lane in an effort to obscure the grisly scene from his passengers.

Christabel felt the unusual motion and the even more out of character deceleration. She sat forward and enquired from the back;

“Is everything OK Giles?”

The normal rosy complexion of her husband’s countenance was conspicuously absent. In fact he appeared distinctly ashen faced. Christabel hadn’t seen him so drained of colour since she had booked an island hopping holiday in the Scilly Isles. Apparently Giles didn’t consider twice daily helicopter transport to represent particularly good value. Even his long standing admiration of the economic structure of the Duchy of Cornwall hadn’t mellowed his ill tempered resistance.

With a concerned expression, she leaned through the gap between the front seats, rested both her slender hands on the cushion of the dividing compartment and reiterated her question;

“I said … are you OK Giles?”

“Yes yes dear, everything’s fine. Absolutely nothing to worry about. No need to get alarmed. It’s nothing at all, really. Just erm … sit back and relax, we’ll all be there soon” said Giles hurriedly.

The content of this response didn’t fool Christabel for a second. She knew her husband well enough to know when he was blatantly trying to fob her off. This particular performance was one of the worst she could remember.

“It’s just, you’ve gone all sort of... well .. green about the gills darling, are you sure there’s nothing wrong?”

Christabel’s insistence was not completely based on concern for her husbands well-being. Quite the contrary, their two decades of marriage had produced an often adversarial relationship. While she had not been exposed to the professional training that Giles had received, her natural feline ways more than made up for it.

“Are you ignoring me, darling?” she said, with a definite shift in tone.

Giles really didn’t have the patience to be further placating Christabel. She could be more tenacious than a Foxhound in a Mink farm when she felt that she was being lied to. Things had become really quite harrowing and the hand gesture from the heavy set man was still making him sweat. He needed some kind of compelling and plausible narrative to get her to leave the subject alone.

“I think I’ve twisted my testicles” he said, abruptly.

Clive and Petula laughed out loud.

“Oh no Giles, not again” said Clive “It’s only been a couple of months since the last time”.

“What can I say” said Giles “It’s these infernal slacks. I think they must be cut for eunuchs”

Christabel settled back into her patent leather seat, any genuine concern she had felt now rapidly evaporating. She unclenched and looked casually out of her window.

“It’s been less than two months you know, he did it again three weeks ago when we were up at the regatta in Cerney Wick. Totally ruined the day for everyone.”

Clive and Petula were still chuckling. “Do we need to pull over” asked Petula. “There’s an Eighteenth hole not far from here. I’m sure they’d have something to fix you up Giles. They know a lot about retrieving balls from the rough!”

Clive and Christabel laughed in unison and even Giles managed a bit of a smirk, more inspired by relief, than by Petula’s bawdy attempts at golfing humour.

“No no, I’ll be OK” he said. “Lets just get to the house and get the game started shall we?”

He took the lack of response as confirmation that his improvised deception had indeed been successful. Capitalising on this victory, he continued;

“This is all getting a bit congested. Let’s get off the main drag shall we? I know a local short cut. It’s a bit circuitous but definitely quicker.”

Christabel shrugged in her usual dismissive manner and neither Clive nor Petula considered it their place to raise any objections.

Giles checked his rear view mirror, there was nothing of note behind them. He could see some very distant blue flashing and a white van speeding up the outside lane. But compared to the scene he had just witnessed, this was not particularly out of character for an evening on the A40. He dismissed them both as relatively trivial, indicated left and took the first available exit onto the Western Avenue frontage. At this point, Giles had stopped actively sweating and now felt completely sober.

The grey coloured car with the smashed rear window was several hundred yards ahead and did not appear to be slowing down. With the change in road surface, Giles reduced his speed to a more practical 50mph and took the opportunity to discreetly adjust the crotch of his slacks.

Dave’s sunglasses were becoming more of a liability than an asset. Since the multiple gunshots in the middle lane of the A40 , his aviators with peripheral leather shields had become quite seriously steamed up. He removed them and tossed them onto the dashboard. He could worry about finding the case later, assuming there weren’t any more drive-by shooting incidents.

Bennet Hoffman had just finished releasing Tareeq’s Velcro restraints. Janet Beckton was completely unconscious on the gurney and Bennet felt comfortable in the knowledge that she wouldn’t be regaining consciousness anytime soon.

Without her sarcastic smile or domineering attitude, Bennet couldn’t help noticing that this uptight EMT chick was really

quite attractive, in a kind of healthy farm girl way. Having grown up in the urban ghettos of New Jersey, Bennet had always had a bit of a thing for healthy farm girls. Had things gone a different way, he could see himself married to someone that looked just like this crazy limey broad. They would own a farm in up-state New York. Probably livestock, he thought. He and this strapping cowgirl would raise a clan of curly headed kids and own several hundred head of Long-horned cattle. Maybe if he hadn't started working for Jacob the undertaker when he was twelve, or maybe if his mother hadn't opened the wheels & rims shop in Seabrook Farms.

Maybe if ….

Bennet's thoughts of alternate forking paths were rudely interrupted by Tareeq frantically shouting questions at him.

"What we going to do now, bruv? Why didn't you let me know you was doing something like this?… I mean .. just ...What The Bloody Hell – Bennet man??"

Bennet was becoming really quite irritable. Whether it was the insufferable heat, the crude interruption to his romantic train of thought, the side effects of the cornucopia of drugs or just the generally difficult day he'd been having, he felt that he had endured the gutless sniping of this limey Arab for just about long enough;

"Jeez, just shaddup already. I'll leave ya here if you're gonna keep on bein' a whiny lil' bitch"

Tareeq was frantically hunting through Janet's rucksack and didn't have the spare bandwidth to engage with Bennet's argumentative jibes.

Bennet carried on anyway;

"Just look at ya, what ya gonna do – finish her god damned crochet or what? Quit screwin' around already, this shit is going down whether ya like it or not."

Tareeq found what he was looking for and turned round to confront Bennet.

"Look fam, we need THESE! Or is you planning on chewing your way out of them bloody cuffs."

He shoved a leather utility keyring in Bennet's face.

Bennet felt a bit embarrassed, so he said nothing and with a humble demonstration of cooperation, unlocked Tareeq's cuffs without further comment.

Rounding the corner of the service station at a speed somewhere in excess of 40mph elicited quite a loud screeching from the rear tyres of the ambulance. But since graduating his mandatory enhanced driving course, Dave had taken some extra time to practice in the skid control site. He knew what these vehicles were capable of and he estimated that there was at least another 10mph in the bank before it succumbed to the forces of gravity and toppled over. Even if it all went wrong, there would be no rolling over in one of these long wheel base, box backed appliances, just a lot of grinding, sliding and flying glass.

The G forces of Dave's rally style driving became a bit of an issue for the occupants of the ambulance rear compartment. Tareeq's attempts to unlock Bennet's cuffs suddenly turned into him stabbing Bennet in the nose with the sharp end of the rigid-cuff key. Bennet's shirt sleeves and collar had become entangled in his cuffs while he was wiping the cascade of sweat from his brow. When they reached the apex of Dave's high speed cornering, the momentum of Tareeq falling forward ripped both Bennet's shirt arms and collar away from the body. As Bennet yelled out in pain, they both toppled onto the gurney containing the unconscious Janet Beckton.

Janet had been drooling in her benzodiazepine induced stupor and now had a large puddle of saliva formed on the front of her green uniform. With the additional weight of Tareeq pressing down on top of him, Bennet's face landed squarely in this substantial patch of spittle.

The radical cornering manoeuvre now complete, Dave aimed the ambulance into what he estimated would be the air & water area. This was definitely a gamble, but as with most urban service station amenities, there was at least a 50% chance that the air and water pumps would be out of order. He was hoping that he wouldn't have to face the unspeakable horror of ploughing the multi ton vehicle into any unsuspecting motorists busily calibrating the air pressure of their tyres. Gaining a full view of the empty bays at the last second, Dave concluded that on this occasion, the gods of ancillary motoring services were definitely smiling on him. He allowed himself to relax ever so slightly and simultaneously stamped on the footbrake.

The shift in G forces didn't really help the situation in the rear of the ambulance. Tareeq had been attempting to raise himself but had been thrown head first against the separating bulkhead. He was then rendered unconscious by the NO2 cylinder falling off the equipment panel. The extensive forward inertia had driven Bennet between Janet's powerful legs and his face was now pressed between the ample breasts of her saliva drenched chest.

By the time Dave had exited the cab and had run around to the side door of the ambulance, the body-kitted van containing Matthew and Gerard screeched to a halt alongside the air & water bay. Behind them came the midi-van with Charles and Harry. Harry yanked the steering wheel to one side and pulled up the handbrake. The midi-van broadsided to a halt leaving only a couple of feet between the near-side body panels and the tail lift platform of the ambulance.

With the ambulance now parked safely in the air & water bay and the two white vans forming a protective perimeter, all four of them exited, drew their weapons, rapidly circumnavigated the vehicles and made for the rear door of the appliance.

Pulling open the side door, Dave didn't really know what he was going to find. His concern for Janet's safety was clouding his judgement. They had been working together for over five years and he considered her to be his closest friend. There had never been any romantic complications which he was grateful for. He'd seen it go wrong for other teams when they let their hours of sharing a cab turn into nights sharing a bed.

Consequently, when he saw a shirtless Bennet on top of Janet, drooling all over her with Tareeq unconscious on the floor, he didn't stop to consider anything but the worst case possible scenario.

By the time Charles and Harry managed to get to him, Dave had pulled Bennet out of the ambulance by the hair with one hand. With the other hand he was simultaneously clubbing him repeatedly in the face with the recently detached NO2 cylinder.

"Jesus Dave! …. Calm the hell down" shouted Harry.

"Should we use the bloody taser?" shouted Charles, pointing his non-lethal deterrent at Dave's head.

Dave still had the Nitrous Oxide cylinder in his hand and was not showing any signs of easing up on the frenzied beating that he was delivering to Bennet.

"This bloody Yank, thinks he can come over here and …" another blow to the face.

"Treat our women like …." and another blow to the face. The cylinder making a dull, low pinging sound with each strike.

By this point Gerard and Matthew had managed to get a hold of Dave's uniform. Between them, Charles and Harry, they finally separated Dave from the NO2 cylinder. Charles re-holstered his taser.

“Get a grip on yourself!” shouted Matthew Chelmsford. “This isn’t a bloody Saturday night in Colchester!”

Dave was seething with rage and it took some major efforts from Gerard and Harry to keep him restrained. “I’ll bloody kill him!” he shouted. Charles un-holstered his taser, again.

Bennet didn’t have much to say on the subject, the numerous vicious blows to the head had quite severely concussed him and he was laid on the ground groaning. A rather ugly gash on his forehead was leaking blood all over the dividing lines of the air & water bay. With the majority of his shirt trailing from his rigid cuffs, his face rapidly swelling and a curiously round cut on the front of his nose, he was a far cry from the high profile, deadly defector he once was.

“You’re being un – bloody – professional Dave! Have you been snorting some of his bloody bath-time salts or something?” shouted Matthew.

Dave had completely lost sight of his professional responsibilities, seeing his partner being molested by this drug crazed international villain had pushed him completely over the edge.

“Who the hell are you to call me unprofessional – you haven’t even got any bloody trousers on” he shouted, still struggling.

Everyone looked at Matthews lack of trousers and Charles, Harry and Gerard all started laughing.

“Whas goin’ on ?” said a groggy Janet from the chaotic scene in the back of the appliance.

She looked down at Bennet Hoffman’s near lifeless body and Dave still struggling with Harry and Gerard, then slumped back into the gurney.

“Whad you d that fr? I was just gettin’ t’ like ‘im”, she said.

SBL NEWS

Counterfeit notes found in allotments

A substantial sum of counterfeit bank notes were discovered in the Framfield allotments on Monday. According to eye witnesses it is believed that the bin bags contained what was estimated to be in excess of £50,000.

Initially the buried swag was thought to have been as a result of fly tipping. Tenants have frequently voiced concerns regarding the regular unauthorised disposal of refuse on their allotments and the nearby banks of the River Brent.

Market gardener Martin Fields called the police when he opened one of the three bags he found behind his shed.

“To be honest, I thought about bringing it all indoors and taking the wife on a surprise holiday. Normally we just have a couple of weeks at the caravan on the Isle of Sheppey. But looking at all that cash made me think somewhere more exciting like Marbella or Ayia Napa might make a nice change. “

After discussing the find with other allotment tenants, Mr Fields decided to do the right thing and phoned the local police station.

“*Once I’d thought about it for a bit, handing it in seemed like the honest thing to do. My grandad always said that honesty is the best policy and he had an O.B.E. I thought it might have been from a bank robbery or something like that.”*

Mr Fields delivered the three bin bags to West Ealing police station by van on Monday afternoon.

Local officers subsequently contacted Mr Fields at home and informed him that the notes were counterfeit. On finding out that the notes were not legitimate he was slightly disappointed;

"*I had mixed feelings about it really"* he said.

A detective from Ealing police station gave SBL News the following comment;

"*Mr Fields definitely made the right choice. Had he tried to spend any of the money, he could well have been brought in for questioning. This find represents evidence of a considerable counterfeiting operation and we take such actions very seriously ".*

CHAPTER SEVEN – Intersection

With his twelve family sized bars of dark chocolate stacked in a plastic shopping basket, Tarquin DeRochfort made another pass around the confectionery aisles of the service station. He wanted to make sure that this particular brand, which he'd never heard of, was the only offering available.

It occurred to him that it probably wouldn't make much difference once they were melted down in Aunt Hillary's fondue set anyway. He could probably have saved himself all this aggravation and simply tossed a bumper can of cocoa into the mix with twelve bars of dairy milk. It would be unlikely that Jocasta would have been onboard with such pragmatism, but then her conservative values were one of the reasons he'd married her in the first place. Perhaps he would raise the matter between hands of bridge this evening. He imagined that Giles would certainly have at least one opinion on the subject and Christabel could always be relied on to speak her mind. Especially when it came to shopping. She'd studied Economics at Durham and seemed to have focussed much of what she learned on analysing the goals of any retail outlet she was using. They had enjoyed many conversations on the subject, from the covert cash counting devices secreted in airport metal detectors and the doorway of Selfridges, to the subliminal advertising on children's television.

After all thought Tarquin, the primary means of identifying with food brands had nothing to do with the taste buds and everything to do with the learned perception of choice. Which was actually not a choice at all and was blatantly influenced by media advertising. His mind wandered to the generic packaging which had been popularised in the 'own brand' movement of the late 20th century. The British public hadn't responded particularly well to all that plain packaging dominating their weekly shopping trip. Tarquin surmised that this resistance was a backlash against the reduction of individuality. With the conventional admixture of independent branding in their inventory of purchases, the customer was effectively creating some form of window to their personality. It was also conceivable that the consumer had viewed the austere wrappers and featureless containers as some kind of encroachment by the dreaded bogey man of communism.

"Was that all Sir?" said the cashier, to the man in front of Tarquin.

"Yes it is" said the man, with a slight accent. "Unless … I don't suppose you have any glitter?"

The cashier paused for a moment.

"I think we might have Sir. Did you check the stationery section?"

"I did, but I couldn't see any there." replied the man. His accent was somehow familiar to Tarquin, but he couldn't quite place it geographically. It was undoubtedly native to the British Isles, but he couldn't work out where. This caused Tarquin to feel a bit unsettled as he could normally pinpoint a British accent to within a hundred miles. Was it a diluted Welsh, or Scots, or possibly that non regionally specific accent associated with international school?

The cashier came out from behind the counter and headed into the maze of product shelves.

"I'll be with you in moment Sir" he called out to Tarquin.

Tarquin made the usual polite rejoinder and concentrated on trying to see the face of the man in front. If he caught sight of his facial expressions, surely that might narrow down the possible regions of origin. Unfortunately the man continued facing forwards and Tarquin couldn't even see him in the reflection of the kiosk glass. This further unsettled Tarquin as he often used the reflections of windows in his observations of people and their everyday habits.

"Yes here we are." said the cashier, returning from the depths of the product maze. "Was it just the one tube you wanted?"

"Actually no" said the man, to both the cashier's and Tarquin's surprise. "Just go ahead and serve your other customer, I'll get the rest myself."

This otherwise unremarkable comment made Tarquin more than unsettled. The hair on his arms stood up as the skin turned to goosebumps. How on earth did this man know that there was only one other customer? Who the hell was he and what in the name of God was he planning on doing with all this glitter?

As the man turned to enter the maze, Tarquin took in as much information about his appearance as he could possibly manage. Approximate age; mid 40's. Height; six foot or there abouts. Short dark hair. Black or dark grey coat. Beyond this, there wasn't really much for Tarquin to catalogue. He couldn't see his eyes due to a pair of sunglasses and he couldn't see his lower half due to a series of baskets containing random vehicle related products that were on sale. This did not make Tarquin any more relaxed and the hairs on his arms were now sticking straight out. There was something extremely unusual afoot here, he could just feel it, in his bones.

With the glitter man hidden by shelves full of engine coolant and multigrade oil, Tarquin had no valid reason to be lingering any longer. The cashier was looking directly at him with an expression of anticipation.

"Yes, over here Sir. Did you need anything else? Any fuel Sir?" asked the cashier, in an obviously well practised manner.

"Er.. no, that's all. Just the chocolate" replied Tarquin, feeling like he was being railroaded. Ideally he would like to have gained access to the other side of the counter and watched the glitter man on the internal CCTV monitors. But he felt that the cashier would probably consider that to be radically overstepping the boundaries of service station customer etiquette.

"Right you are Sir. That'll be fifty one, eighty four please"

Tarquin nearly swore at the cashier. Any thoughts of further profiling the glitter man were instantly forgotten and replaced with shock, horror and indignation.

"Are you quite sure that's correct?" he complained. He'd imagined that the price would have been less than twenty quid and wasn't in the habit of getting his underpants pulled over his head when it came to purchasing confectionery.

"Yes it is Sir. It's four pounds thirty two per item"

Tarquin re-examined the branding of the twelve chocolate bars sitting on the counter. They were clearly aimed at the discerning shopper with gradient toned wrappers featuring a golden gilt edge.

"Right … well I suppose it is .. then" said Tarquin, with resignation.

This would be the last time he ever bought chocolate here, he thought. It was one thing to spend that sort of money on fuel, he did that every few days. But fifty quid for a few bars of dark chocolate was nothing short of extortion. He felt nearly as ripped off as when he and Heath Witherington-Smythe had strayed into a Soho clip joint while celebrating UCL freshers

week.

He inserted his card into the contoured device mounted on the counter, waited the obligatory few seconds, while the device communicated his purchase details to the merchant services provider and then dutifully keyed in his pin number. Another few seconds elapsed and the authorisation came through.

“Anything else for you Sir?” asked the cashier.

Tarquin was still reeling from being assaulted with the cumulative price of his last minute fondue purchase, so he really wasn’t of a mind to be spending any more money. Certainly not in this particular roadside motorist trap.

“No that’s all thank you.” he replied, visibly displeased. He turned to make his way out and was so preoccupied with the highly offensive price tag, that he didn’t notice that between the cold drinks display and boiled sweets rack, the glitter man was watching him. In his hand was a mobile phone with an external antenna attached to it.

As Tarquin approached the Mercedes, he remembered that he had noticed a warning light on the driver display panel. The front off-side wheel had something wrong with it. Nine out of ten times this warning indicator was referring to the air pressure in the tyres. He looked over at the air & water bay to see if anyone was using it. To his disappointment, there was a weathered ‘out of order’ sign hanging from the combined pump.

“Hardly surprising” said Tarquin, to himself. The type of establishment which charged four pounds thirty two for a bar of dark chocolate, clearly wasn’t encumbered by an overwhelming duty of customer care.

The air pressure could wait, he really was in the last minutes of what could be considered preparation time and the next service station was at least ten minutes away.

He settled into the welcoming comfort of the drivers seat and started putting on his seatbelt. As the clip closed around the buckle he saw the glitter man exiting the service station shop. Now Tarquin could complete his profiling and he felt a wave of satisfaction come over him. From the general gait of the glitter man, he could see that his demeanour was one of confidence. This man was no stranger to circumspect body language. His movements were calculated, smooth and precise. His trousers didn’t reveal much information, they were a plain grey pair of what appeared to be either chinos or possibly golf or sailing trousers. His dark footwear was noticeably less conventional. Tarquin registered that the slightly outdoors looking boots weren’t any brand he recognised and there appeared to be some form of tag on the heels which looked like they had the letter ‘A’ on them.

The glitter man disappeared from Tarquin’s view as he rounded the corner of the service station shop. Presumably he was headed back in the direction of the main road and the Australian kraft ale micro brewery. This displeased Tarquin as everything about the recently conducted profiling made him highly suspicious and he would very much have liked to follow the glitter man.

But this was Jocasta’s bridge evening and an unhappy wife was something Tarquin could well do without. The forecourt of the service station was empty except for a couple of motorcyclists, so he took an extra wide turn and exited onto the main road. In his hurry to get the chocolate back to the house and settle their guests, he didn’t notice that at the rear exit of the shop, between two industrial wheelie bins, the glitter man was watching him leave.

“Clive, Petula, how wonderful.. and hello Christabel darling, where’s your devil of a husband?”

With immaculate hostess manners, Jocasta had gone out into the garden to greet her bridge guests. She’d finished her hair and makeup in good time. Now with her striking features and shining trestles of red hair, she stood before them a vision of feminine hospitality. She had even considered meeting her guests with a tray of Martini Royale’s. Unfortunately the miniature champagne flutes she had planned on using, had all been either broken while being thrown into the fireplace, or

lost several months ago during the drunken fiasco that was Tarquin's 40th birthday party.

"Oh he's just nipped down to the shops" replied Christabel, "probably gone to find a chemist. He's twisted his stupid testicles again. Anyway, you look absolutely top Jocasta, how ever do you manage it?"

Jocasta couldn't help laughing at the mention of Giles and his contused genitalia. It had become a standing joke among most of their social circle.

"Oh the poor man" she said, clearly amused. "Is there anything he needs for the game…. a cushion perhaps?"

"Oh to hell with him" replied Christabel, with her signatory dismissive air. "He should just get the bloody things removed, it's not like he uses them much anyway."

"Oh you're too cruel darling, I bet he's really a bit of a tiger" said Jocasta, diplomatically.

Changing tack, Jocasta engaged Petula on the subject of her children as they all walked up to the front door. Christabel could hear Petula rolling out the usual reports, including her misgivings about Wendy's choice in denim clothing and her pride in Lucinda following in the family hoof-prints. She also extolled about her son Sebastian's recent graduation. This made Christabel slightly sad, she was Sebastian's godmother after all and the two of them had several areas of common interest. Not least of all a healthy disdain for the cutting commentary of his super critical mother. She hadn't seen Sebastian for several months due to his increased studying and constant efforts to become the youngest single sculls champion in the history of the Barnes rowing club. If she had been entirely honest with herself, Christabel would have admitted that she was actually slightly in love with Sebastian.

Giles had no intention of finding a chemist, or any other shops. He was parked in a cul-de-sac two streets away speaking on his mobile phone in a very serious manner indeed. The content of his conversation contained frequent uses of Italian phrases and place names. At one point he became so animated that he pounded on the dashboard of the Daimler while accentuating part of a phrase

"Come ...brucia ….questo ….santo" he said, with an almost natural Italian accent.

Whoever Giles was speaking to, they were clearly not impressed with what he had to say. He regularly took a submissive role in the conversation and appeared to be sweating slightly.

For a good ten minutes, Giles continued this heated exchange until finally the speaker on the other end said something so obviously threatening that Giles simply dropped his mobile phone into his lap. By the time he recovered his senses and his mobile phone, the line was dead. Giles put the Daimler in gear and pulled out of the cul-de-sac. This bridge evening was fast turning into a real Padulo.

Tarquin was growing ever more impatient. The fifth set of traffic lights he had approached turned red at just the wrong time. He knew this stretch of road intimately and as result, he knew that if he had left the service station thirty seconds earlier, or two minutes later he would have enjoyed the exact opposite traffic light experience. "How typical" he thought, it was as if the entire world was conspiring to make him both primary cause and sole recipient of Jocasta's demonic rage. Finally he could see the turning into his street. He glanced at the digital clock on the dashboard to find that he was definitely late, but only by a few minutes. Nobody would bat an eyelid. Tangibly relieved, he reached over and prodded the carrier bag full of rather expensive dark chocolate;

"This is where you get yours, bloody …. Dick Turpin chocolate"

As he approached the entrance to their driveway, Tarquin was suddenly elated at the sight of a familiar blue Daimler pulling

into it. Pulling in behind Giles, Tarquin prepared his mode of attack. Giles was his superior at work and while they had become good friends over the past fifteen years, he had a way of making every department failure land squarely on Tarquin's desk. This was going to be good.

"Giles, you finally made it then, I thought you'd dropped the ball….s" he said, smirking.

"Oh hello Tarquin, yes we had a bit of a delay on the A40" answered Giles, closing the drivers door.

"Right, right and there was me thinking you'd had a puncture and had difficulty with your .. nuts" said Tarquin, laughing.

"Actually, I need to talk to you about something before we get started" said Giles, taking no notice of the barbed testicular banter.

"Right you are, that sounds a bit serious. Is it work related?" asked Tarquin, now considerably less elated.

"Yes I'm afraid it is, can we go somewhere private?" said Giles. The look on his face made Tarquin suddenly quite nervous.

"Erm… sure. Just let me get these essential ingredients in to Jocasta. Otherwise she'll have my …"

Giles interrupted, with a bit of a sneer;

"Yes yes, If we could get past the balls jokes please. I've had a bit of a day of it and I'm positively gagging for a drink"

"Of course Giles, yes … terribly sorry old man. Just you head down to the basement. You know where the cognac is don't you?"

Giles did know and with that clear invitation, he purposefully strode into the house.

SBL NEWS

Car part thieves involved in high speed pursuit

Motorists on Hayes road were forced out of the way on Monday afternoon as a result of two men in their early twenties fleeing a high speed police pursuit.

One of the men who is from North Hyde had been spotted acting suspiciously by shoppers in the car park of the Hayes Road Tesco supermarket. Several parked vehicles had been stripped of their catalytic convertors and had to be transported by local recovery services. It is thought that the specialist parts were being stolen to order. Prices of catalytic convertors have risen in recent years due to the semi-precious metals they contain. The manageable size of the components makes them an attractive option for thieves looking for a higher resale value than alloy wheels or other parts.

Mr Arjuna Chowdry from Greenford returned to his Toyota estate with his weekly shopping, only to discover the bonnet had been forced and his car would not start. *"Inconvenient doesn't even come close to describing it"* said Mr Chowdry, *"I usually buy a lot of frozen food and had no way of getting it home in time. Eventually I got a taxi, but most of the food was ruined."*

Responding to calls from both shoppers and Tesco staff, officers from Southall police station attended the Tesco car park and attempted to apprehend the thief. During the commotion, the man ran out into Hayes road where he was picked up by an accomplice. Police pursued the vehicle along North Hyde Road until it was abandoned on Old Station Road. The two men were arrested attempting to escape into the Nestle's Avenue industrial estate.

Mobile phone footage captured by shoppers in Tesco car park was uploaded to social media shortly after the two men were arrested. Approximately half way through, a man can be seen removing engine parts from a BMW saloon.

The value of the stolen catalytic convertors is estimated to be in the region of several thousand pounds.

Weed slaves freed by police

A group of six men were rescued from an abandoned industrial unit in Acton on Friday. Locked in, the men were maintaining a sizeable cannabis farm which had been set up in the unit.

The four men with ages ranging from 22 to 49 are all foreign nationals. Three of the men are originally from Romania and one from Serbia. They were all found in conditions described by police officers as 'hazardous'. All of the men were compelled to work on the cannabis farm to pay off the cost of their trafficking into the UK. Two of the men had been working in the unit for over three months with the other two arriving in late January.

As a result of information received from the P.A.S. (Police Air Support unit), officers from Acton police station visited the premises on Friday morning. The derelict unit behind the Victoria Industrial Estate is located between three intersecting rail lines. Police consider this location to have been chosen due to there being less chance of the farm or the workers being discovered.

Cannabis growing operations can be highly profitable and require a high level of organisation. The crop being grown in the Acton unit had an estimated value of more than £125,000. Specialist officers were seen removing equipment and bags of plants over the weekend.

The section of building being used for the growing had been secured with fencing and a padlocked gate. Amenities available to the men were limited to a single chemical toilet, a cold box refrigerator and a two ring hotplate. Provisions were apparently delivered once a week and it is believed that the gate was permanently locked at all other times.

No charges have been brought against any of the men as they are considered to be victims of human trafficking. The criminal gang responsible are the subject of an ongoing investigation by police and UK Border Force. According to a spokesperson from Acton police station, this is not the first time this gang has come to the attention of the police:

"*Officers rescued four individuals from an illegal cannabis growing site in the vicinity of the Victoria industrial estate on Friday. At this time, these individuals are not the target of any investigations. Due to similarities with several other operations of this nature, we are pursuing leads which focus on a known criminal group operating across London and the South East. This gang are considered to be highly organised and are known to use violence to achieve their goals. The unlawful imprisonment of these men and the forced labour they were subjected to, represents a major breach of human rights. The Metropolitan police take human trafficking extremely seriously and we have seen a distinct rise in people smuggling since Brexit was finalised in April 2021.*"

If you have information, wish to report a suspicion or need advice, you can contact the Modern Slavery Helpline confidentially on 08000 121 700.

Activists evicted from Magna Carta Island

Radical protestors were forcibly removed from a stretch of land they had occupied on the banks of the river Thames on Tuesday. Bailiffs were supported by officers from Surrey police and Thames Valley police during the eviction of activists and their vehicles from the unauthorised campsite near Runnymede.

The 'Freemen on the Land' first moved onto the historic site in 2021. According to leaflets printed by the group, the Magna Carta Libertatum document protects all Britons from despotic actions by the Crown. At least two of the activists appear to have had some legal training and the leaflets feature quotes from government officials dating back to the 16th century.

Local transport worker Roderick Kingney (53) from Wraysbury described how the relationship between residents and activists had deteriorated:

"*At first it was all campfire singsongs and barbecued vegan sausages. But lately there has been an influx of drug users and vagrants. Most of them were congregating on the banks of the river, but some of them have been loitering around the village. A couple of weeks ago, my wife Felicity was doing some gardening when she disturbed a man with matted dreadlocks who was defecating in the shrubs of our rock garden. I have sympathy for their cause, after all the Magna Carta is famous all*

over the world and even Americans consider it a cornerstone of modern society. But when my garden is being used as an open air toilet, something has gone very wrong indeed."

The activists also used the illegal camp as a base for protests outside council offices on St Ives Road in Maidenhead. On four separate occasions, Thames Valley officers broke up unauthorised protests outside The Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead council offices. During one of the illegal actions in September 2021, several council employees reported intimidating behaviour by protestors. No arrests were made and on-the-spot fines were repeatedly declined by all members of the group.

During the eviction, a group of local residents voiced their dissatisfaction with the duration of the protest. Retired tour guide Wendy Shawfield (71) explained how frustrating the protest had become:

"*We all understand the principle of what they were doing, but this is usually a quiet town and we're not used to uncontrollable mobs of new age travellers. My sister runs a tea shop in Old Windsor and some of these unemployed hippies stole from her. A group of them came in and ordered cups of tea, which they paid for with a lot of loose change. When they had left, she noticed that all the sugar, salt cellars and toilet paper had disappeared. She was terribly upset and had to close the shop to travel all the way to Slough for replacements. They wouldn't even put on facemasks when they used the local supermarket. I'm glad they're gone, really I wish it had happened a lot sooner."*

A solitary van belonging to Marshley bailiffs was seen remaining on site on Wednesday. It is understood that the van was unable to move off the site due to all four tyres having been deflated during the eviction.

SBL News approached Thames Valley police for comment, at this time we have not received a response.

Ickenham residents outraged by spy drones

A report by Hillingdon police was forwarded to Operation Forewing on Thursday. Dozens of local residents made complaints regarding drones which had allegedly been spying on them.

Beginning in October 2021, incidents involving drones have been reported by Ickenham residents for invasive and privacy violating behaviour. Hovering over back gardens, the drones had apparently been pointing their cameras into the windows of properties on Parkfield Road and Rectory Way. Property owners had resorted to taking matters into their own hands with several using catapults and airguns to bring down the peeping Tom automata.

Landscape gardener Kurt Mengele (47) told SBL News how concerned local residents were:

"*These were expensive drones and definitely not toys. They must have cost over a thousand pounds and it looks like they were on a preprogrammed route. Nobody in the area saw anyone operating them and they kept coming back. One of my clients is an antiques dealer and noticed that a drone appeared to be very interested in his war memorabilia. If it had just been a one off, nobody would care, but after two or three visits he thought they might be casing his house for a burglary. One of the residents on Parkfield Road does webcam work on Twatch. She was in the middle of live streaming when one of her followers told her that they could see a drone outside her window. Her husband and a few other locals have taken pot shots at them and I can't really blame them".*

Operation Forewing is a join collaboration between the Home Office, Police and UK Civil Aviation Authority (CAA). Started in March 2021 the operation involves the three organisations working together to show the work the Police is doing around tackling drone crime. This is designed to deter drone operators from breaking the 'Drone code' guidelines for legal usage.

The CAA have recorded over sixty drone incidents per month. The police have dedicated drone teams in various parts of the UK and realistic looking bird of prey drones have even been used by private firms to discourage pigeons and crows.

For more information on UK drone regulations, registration and the Drone Code please visit www.caa.co.uk/drones

CHAPTER EIGHT – Stock take

Approaching the half mile signposting of the service station, Catherine Azikiwe hoped that this wasn't going to be a repeat of the operation in Upper Siddington. She had only just managed to clean up the mess by the end of the previous week and there were several loose ends which remained untied. She was still on the phone with Charles Hornchurch and he was in a bit

of a state.

“It’s just a bloody freak show Catherine, we need to get out of this forecourt and get our act together before we hit Northolt” he said, rather desperately.

“I understand Charles, but do not go anywhere until I’ve had a chance to debrief Tareeq.” she explained.

Charles had known there was something iffy about this entire operation and confirmation that Tareeq was on the inside just solidified things in his mind. “What a bloody typical state of affairs” he said to himself. He should have known from the lack of resistance that Tareeq had put up. But everyone had more than enough to focus on with the antics of the insane American.

“Okay, but I can guarantee you’re not going to like what you find here” said Charles, honestly.

“How bad is it exactly?” asked Catherine, the more information she had before she arrived, the better.

“Oh my God, it’s just a disaster” continued Charles. “The American is half dead, Tareeq is unconscious, Janet’s been raped, Dave is acting like a possessed man, Harry’s about ready to walk and Matthew Chelmsford’s got no trousers on”

Catherine knew that it was going to be bad, but after the summary from Charles, she put both hands on the steering wheel, inhaled deeply, raised her eyebrows and said;

“What? Say again… who’s dead?”

“Nobody’s actually dead … yet, that I know of. But the Yank might be getting near it” explained Charles.

“Okay, understood .. and what is our exposure on this?” asked Catherine, not looking forward to the answer.

“It’s actually pretty low” said Charles, “nobody much uses the petrol station any more, apparently it’s too pricey.”

“I need numbers Charles, how many?” asked Catherine. Specificity was critically important in any clean up.

“Well… I’d say about two or three cars have come through while we’ve been here. Then there’s the cashier in the shop and there were a couple of bikers here when we arrived.” answered Charles.

“Okay, so less than ten then?” said Catherine with a hint of relief.

“Yes that sounds about right, although there’s probably been more like ten thousand passing by on the main road”

“I assume you followed protocol?” asked Catherine, the temporary relief now gone from her voice.

“Yes. Nobody will have seen the worst of it and everyone is inside the vehicles now” explained Charles.

Catherine could now see the slip road for the service station and all things considered, she was starting to feel much more reassured. She could understand how Charles had arrived at such a figure when exaggerating the number of passers-by. The A40 was indeed uncharacteristically busy for a Tuesday evening. But in real terms, what would any of these passers-by have

actually seen that they would consider particularly unusual. Harry and Charles were both quite experienced and he'd confirmed that they had observed the protocols associated with minimising exposure. Even if the worst case scenario unfolded, all it would require was a call to the media liaison team and possibly serving a de-notice on a local newspaper.

Much less fall out than Upper Siddington.

Catherine glanced at the empty container of her morning Mocha with a dash of mint syrup. Hopefully this service station had a half decent coffee stand. She indicated left and steered her green hatchback onto the service station slip road.

In the back of the ambulance, Tareeq Faqim elMait was still unconscious. Gerard Leabridge had put a pulse oximeter on one of his fingers and the readout was looking stable. Janet Beckton was sitting up on the gurney hybrid, attempting to clean the drool on her uniform with a packet of alcohol wipes. Bennet Joaquin Hoffman was unconscious and back in the neck brace stretcher, the gash on his head cleaned and closed with a series of steri-strips. He also had an oximeter on one of his fingers, an ECG sensor on his chest and Gerard was unpacking a ventilator.

"Is he going to survive?" asked Janet, with genuine concern.

"Yeah probably" said Gerard. "He's got a pretty hard skull and Dave was aiming for the face. If he'd really been trying to kill him, he would have gone for the neck."

"That's good.." said Janet, still wiping. "… I mean, I'm glad that Dave won't get into trouble"

Gerard looked at her with a soft smile.

"Kind of got the hots for this psycho Yank, haven't you Jan?"

Janet didn't answer and carried on wiping.

Dave Stoneleigh and Matthew Chelmsford were both in the front cab of the ambulance. Dave was considerably less enraged but Matthew still hadn't any trousers on. Not withstanding this major uniform infraction, he was still very much on the job. He had Harry Brentford's 50,000v taser in his hand and had warned Dave several times that he would most certainly use it if Dave didn't get his act together.

"That bastard should be castrated!" exclaimed Dave.

"You need to get your head in the game Dave" said Matthew "He didn't rape Janet at all, you've imagined the whole bloody thing."

"How can you be so bloody sure, you weren't there" said Dave, unprofessionally aggressive.

"Do the bloody maths Dave. A- he didn't have enough time. B – Janet is wearing a bloody trouser uniform and C – he still had his hands cuffed together. Have you ever even tried to take a piss, with those bloody rigid cuffs on?"

With this comprehensive appraisal of the situation laid out for him. Dave did the bloody maths and began to see things less emotionally.

"Oh … well .. I suppose you could be right there Matthew." said Dave, sheepishly.

“Of course I’m bloody right. That’s what I do. I’m bloody right – all the bloody time” said Matthew, dismissively.

“Do you think you should maybe put some trousers on then?” replied Dave, starting to regain his equilibrium.

“I’ll decide when it’s time to put my bloody trousers on thank you very much. I’m going nowhere until I know that you’re not going to go all full bloody ...mental …. bloody … jacket - again.” said Matthew, waving the taser at Dave with each use of the word ‘bloody’.

“No, it’s fine” said Dave, again quite sheepishly “You’re right, I mean maybe he was going to do something, but I got there in time to stop him”

“No Dave, I think they just got messed up by your bloody mental Louise Aitken-Walker driving.” said Matthew, opening the door to get out.

Dave wasn’t sure who Louise Aitken-Walker was or what her driving was like, but he was beginning to accept that Matthew Chelmsford was probably right, again…. as usual.

Catherine Azikiwe parked her green hatchback across the entrance to the service station forecourt. Put the side lights on and got out. With her mobile phone in hand she walked across to the air & water bay to assess the situation for herself.

Charles was expecting her and had made an attempt to soften the impact of the current situation.

“Thought you could do with one of these” he said, presenting a Mocha from the service station coffee stand. “They didn’t have any syrup I’m afraid, but I could get you some mint chocolate to mix into it?”

Catherine took the coffee, Charles was right, she could certainly do with it.

“No, that’s fine, thank you Charles.” she said.

Catherine knew that Charles wouldn’t have gone to this amount of effort or personal expense simply because he was a nice man. He really wasn’t, he could be snide and conniving at the best of times. But then it was these exact personality traits which made him such a useful operative. The most likely reason for him to have fetched her a coffee was to butter her up before she saw what a mess they’d all made of this relatively simple operation.

“Where’s Tareeq?” asked Catherine, sipping the froth from her Mocha and also cutting to the chase.

“He’s in the back of the ambulance. But I don’t think he’s going to be saying much for a while” answered Charles, relieved that he wasn’t the first item on her agenda.

“Okay, do we have anything we can bring him round with?” continued Catherine.

“Best speak to Dave or Janet about that, unless you think this would do the trick” he answered, lifting his coat to show his 50,000v taser.

Catherine ignored his attempts at humour and strode over to the side door of the ambulance.

Matthew Chelmsford emerged from the passenger door of the body-kitted van, now reunited with his trousers.

“Hello Catherine, got your hatchet with you?” asked Matthew with a mischievous and slightly defiant smile.

“Hmm .. Matthew. Well it’s yet to be determined whether I will need one, isn’t it?” she replied, curtly.

Matthew’s smile faded and he looked at the ground. Things hadn’t gone particularly well today. He still had a lingering pain in his abdomen from Bennet’s lucky kick, they still had the handover to negotiate and he hadn’t even had any lunch. Hopefully Catherine wouldn’t go through them like a knife through butter, like she had after the Stratton job.

“Is Tareeq conscious yet?” asked Catherine.

“Er… no I don’t think so. He’s in there, have a look for yourself” said Matthew, somewhat unsettled by Catherine’s interest in the crazy American’s sidekick.

“I’ll need him out of there and into one of your vehicles” continued Catherine, “is your van rated for secure audio?”

The penny dropped for Matthew and he frowned.

“Oh for f… you mean ….. I might have bloody known …. er … yes it is. Just go in through the back door and close it behind you.”

Matthew turned away from Catherine and walked toward the service station shop, if she had any more questions for him, they would have to wait until he’d had at least a pork pie, or two.

In many ways. Matthew resented these international, cross department operations. How much easier things would be if we all just concentrated on what was happening inside the country, he thought. But at the end of day, he was just a grunt and grunts don’t get to question the policies of the brass. With advancing years, he was losing faith in the brass and their triple blind operations. But he still had another ten years to go before he could walk away, so he figured he’d best keep his questions to himself. If he wanted his retirement on the Isle of Sheppey with Sandra and hopefully some grand children, he needed his pension to remain intact.

As he passed the front of the midi-van he looked up at Harry Brentford who was sitting in the drivers seat. He could see that Harry wasn’t dealing with things particularly well and he wanted to make sure that he wasn’t going to say anything to compound the situation. He pursed his lips and made a quick, lateral cutting gesture with his hand.

Harry responded with a nod.

Catherine climbed into the back of the ambulance and looked at the shirtless Bennet Hoffman.

“What exactly happened here?” she asked nobody in particular.

“He fell down the stairs … at least twice” answered Gerard, not looking at her.

“Don’t even start with that rubbish Gerard. I want a full run down on exactly how this man came by these injuries. How do you think it’s going to look when we hand him over?”

“It’s my fault” said Janet, much to Gerard’s surprise.

“You mean, you beat him senseless while he was restrained in a solid neck brace?” asked Catherine, sarcastically.

“No, it’s … well.. complicated” replied Janet, realising that she wasn’t being at all convincing.

“Did he assault you?” continued Catherine, “Charles mentioned something about rape, is that true?”

“No absolutely not” said Janet, becoming quite defensive. “I meant that it’s my fault for letting him get his hands on the tranqs. If I’d had them secured he wouldn’t have been able to reach them”

“I see. Well we can get into that later. What’s the situation with Tareeq?” said Catherine, looking over at the unconscious informant.

“He seems OK” said Gerard, “he’s been out for quite a while, but his pulse is strong, so I think he’s just sparkled”

“Right, well get him out of here and into the back of your vehicle and make it sooner rather than later, if you don’t mind” ordered Catherine.

Janet and Gerard both looked at Catherine with mixed expression of surprise and dismay.

“Oh Jesus” said Gerard. “I suppose you’ll need him conscious then?”

“Funny you should mention that Gerard, I was just about to ask” said Catherine, smiling for the first time that day.

Fluent in five languages, Catherine Azikiwe was a section supervisor. Her years in the Nigerian arm of Commonwealth intelligence had resulted in several commendations and swift promotion. Like many seasoned operatives, she had given over much of herself as a person to achieving the goals she had been tasked with. She had been a highly successful seductress, even managing to infiltrate the ranks of neighbouring militias with her sensual subterfuge. But that had been many years ago and by her own admission also several dress sizes ago.

In recent years she had started to see things differently and had adopted several children from refugee camps in war torn areas of western Africa. The years of working in conflict hotspots had exposed her to such shocking scenes of poverty and suffering that she had decided to do whatever she could to try and make even the smallest of differences. Her employers had not placed any obstacles in the path of her conscientious actions. Quite the opposite, they had facilitated her requirements, getting the children out of the country through back channels and into Britain on military flights.

Her husband of ten years knew that Catherine had a chequered past, he had met her while he was working for a French NGO in the Côte d'Ivoire and she was posing as one of the many girlfriends of a psychopathic Liberian warlord. But he felt that he had seen her for who she really was and knew that what she was doing for the children was testament to her humanity. He also knew about the nature of her job in London, but they never talked about it – ever. In all other respects, they were an otherwise perfectly conventional West African family from East London.

As Gerard Leabridge depressed the plunger of the epinephrine injection, Tareeq Faqim elMait suddenly sat bolt upright in the gurney hybrid. With his eyes wide open he started waving his arms above his head and shouted at the top of his lungs;

“Al-Hulul al Mustawradah wa Kayfa Jaat `alaa Ummatina!”

Gerard looked at Catherine suspiciously.

“You will forget that you ever heard that Gerard – and you Janet.” snapped Catherine.

“Heard what? it’s not like I even understood it” said Gerard, honestly.

Janet shrugged, she hadn’t taken the Arabic classes either and had enrolled for extra Op-Sec training instead.

“Well never mind, just get him transferred... asap” continued Catherine.

With Tareeq still shouting incoherently in Arabic, Janet and Gerard manoeuvred him off the tail lift, helped him out of the gurney and into a rear facing bucket seat in the back of the body-kitted van.

Catherine climbed in, sat down on the side bench and closed the double doors behind her.

Dave Stoneleigh was hunting for his sunglasses case in the cab of the ambulance. The aviators had been a birthday present from Janet and he always tried to keep them in good condition. He’d received a lot of criticism from his workmates on the particular style of the highly effective, anti glare lenses. Once Charles even said that he looked like some kind of corrupt Texan Sheriff, on steroids.

Charles could be a bit of an arse really, thought Dave. Perhaps he should recind his invitation to the barbecue on Sunday.

Harry Brentford was considering his options. If he put in his discharge papers now, he might still be able to take the Saudi job that he’d been offered during his secondment to their embassy in Mayfair.

He had certainly enjoyed the Saudi cuisine that had been on offer every night, especially the Kabsa. With fond memories of the basmati rice, meat, vegetables and an aromatic mixture of spices, his mouth began watering.

“What have we got up ahead Harry? Anywhere we can put this bloody clown shoes show back on track?”

Matthew Chelmsford had returned from the service station and was busily eating what looked like a Cornish pasty.

Harry nodded, he had been studying the GPS looking for somewhere less high profile to prepare for the inevitable appearance of Catherine, or someone else from her office. Now that she was on site, he wasn’t sure it was going to be necessary.

“There’s a place about half a mile up the road” replied Harry, eyeing the remains of Matthew’s pasty.

Matthew nodded and tossed the last bit of pasty into his mouth. “What is it?” he said, “Not another bloody marina, I hope?”

They both grimaced at the memory of the Cerney Wick mess.

“No it’s just your average outhouse from the old days” answered Harry. “I don’t think it’s been open since they finished the upgrades to the motorway. Best guess is that it’s been taken over by the country club next door.”

“Okay .. and you reckon it’s secure?” asked Matthew, becoming more positive at the thought of potentially repairing the botched situation.

“Well I can’t really tell much from a GPS image, Matthew. All I can tell you is that there aren’t many missile installations on the bloody roof”

Matthew looked at Harry disapprovingly. “You take that negativity and you just bloody park it, okay Harry?”

Harry considered telling Matthew exactly where he could park his own negativity, but thought better of it. Instead he offered what little information he had managed to find;

“It should be fine. According to the usual blurb on the database, it’s been boarded up for at least two years and there haven’t been any call outs to it. The road access might be a bit rough, but otherwise I think we’re good to go.”

Matthew nodded and opened his second Cornish pasty.

Catherine stepped out of the body-kitted van and closed the doors behind her. She walked over to the front of the ambulance and climbed into the passenger seat.

“So what exactly happened with the American?” she said to Dave, clearly aware that Dave had been responsible for the mess that was Bennet’s face.

“He was ra… I thought he was raping Janet” said Dave, correcting himself.

“Why was she alone with him in the first place?” asked Catherine, pressing the matter.

“You’ll need to take that up with Matthew and Gerard” said Dave, with some hostility. “They’re the security detail on this, or maybe Charles and Harry, basically anyone except me … or Janet” he continued.

“Okay Dave, no need to get defensive, I’m not looking for a scape goat here.”

Dave nearly told her that this would be the first time, but he didn’t want to end up driving a street cleaner, so he kept his mouth shut. Catherine looked out of the ambulance windscreen and sighed.

“So the situation is…. that you were trying to prevent your colleague from being sexually assaulted by a known, dangerous asset and you had no choice but to take appropriate actions to prevent physical and emotional distress. Does that sound about right?” asked Catherine, in a conspicuously parroted fashion.

“Well no Catherine, that’s not really….” said Dave, slightly confused.

Catherine held up her hand to cut him off. “Appropriate actions to prevent physical and emotional distress – do I make myself clear?” she snapped

“Erm … yes?” mumbled Dave.

“Okay then, that’s settled. We can do the paperwork later. Don’t leave your female colleagues alone with notorious assets in future.” Catherine started to climb out of the cab. As she was closing the door, she added;

“And take those silly sunglasses off, you look like a member of The Village People”

Dave took the sunglasses off, folded them up and tucked them into his top pocket. As he glanced around looking for the case again, he thought about how Catherine could be a total battle axe sometimes, but at the end of the day, she seemed to have their back on this job and that's what counted right now.

Gerard Leabridge was back in the driver's seat of the body-kitted van, he was examining the windscreen to establish whether the vehicle was still viable for the remainder of the journey.

As Matthew Chelmsford climbed in, Gerard asked; "What's the state of play then Matthew? Are we still going to have jobs tomorrow?"

Matthew shrugged, he didn't know if they'd even have jobs by the end of today, never mind tomorrow.

The convoy headed out of the forecourt, back onto the A40. Catherine Azikiwe remained in the service station shop to check on CCTV recordings, shore things up with the cashier and generally do what she did best. Approximately one minute after the last vehicle containing Charles and Harry pulled out, two motorcycles emerged from the car-wash and slowly followed behind them.

SBL NEWS

Laser pen nuisance on M4

Multiple motorists on the M4 were dazzled by laser pens on Wednesday night. At least twelve motorists were the victim of deliberate temporary blinding by a group of youths congregated on the West Drayton roundabout overlooking the M4. Additionally numerous other motorists were forced to take evasive action to prevent serious collisions.

Police received reports that a group of young men thought to be in their late teens and early twenties, were creating a nuisance on a bridge overlooking the motorway. Officers from Hayes police station attended the scene to find several motorists in stationary vehicles parked on the hard shoulder. A couple from Wales visiting relatives in West London were taken to Hillingdon hospital suffering from suspected whiplash as a result of emergency braking. Grandmother Joyce Jones (38) from Bangor described how alarming the incident was;

"*I was driving us home because my husband had been driving all day. When the lasers blinded me, I thought I was having a stroke or something, so I just stamped my foot on the brakes. The whole thing has left us seriously out of pocket. It was the first time we've left Wales since the start of the restrictions. With the overnight stay and the cost of towing the car off the motorway, we're not planning on coming back any time soon. The Grandkids can come down to Wales from now on. It's much nicer there anyway."*

James Beaufort (57) from Paddington was returning to London when he had to swerve to avoid a car braking in front of him. *"A lot of people have been quite negatively effected by this stupidity and I hope the police are taking it seriously. Things could have been much, much worse. The truck behind narrowly missed me and collided with the car in front. It was really very frightening indeed"*.

A spokesperson from Hayes police station emphasised the danger that a prank of this malicious nature poses;

"*Laser pen attacks have happened in this area before. In 2017 we responded to multiple incidents which were all aimed at international flights out of Heathrow airport. While this particular action was targeted at M4 traffic, it still represents a reckless disregard for the safety of the public. This is an ongoing investigation and once we catch these individuals, they will be facing serious consequences"*.

Anyone with information regarding this incident should contact Hayes police station or phone 101.

Police foil Three Bridges terror plot

Two men from West London and three from North London were arrested on Friday concluding an investigation into a suspected terror plot. The target was Three Bridges (Windmill Bridge) in Southall.

Officers from several West London police stations coordinated with the security services in a ten week operation which prevented serious disruption and potential injury to local residents.

The men ranging in ages from 49 to 26 are believed to have received training overseas in guerilla tactics and urban combat. Several improvised explosive devices were recovered from addresses in Brentford and Finsbury Park.

A Brentford neighbour told SBL News of their surprise when they heard about the arrests:

"*I think they're related"* said office manager Pamela Bulloch (53). *"When my husband had a DIY accident a few years ago, they gave him first aid treatment while we waited for an ambulance. They were very helpful. It's come as quite a shock to hear that they were involved in this sort of thing"*

According to a statement from Paddington police station, some of the men were known to the security services:

"*Two of these suspects have been monitored for a number of years. As a result of their international movements, they were considered to be persons of interest. During surveillance of the two men, police officers gained intelligence which lead them to addresses where several explosive devices were discovered. Having satisfied any concerns regarding possible accomplices, an inter agency team closed in and apprehended the suspects. Three Bridges is both a historic landmark and also part of West London's vital transport infrastructure. Had these men been able to see their plan through to completion, the lives of thousands of people could have been negatively impacted."*

At this time the men are not known to have any ties to radical extremism, however investigations are still ongoing.

Three Bridges was designed by Isambard Kingdom Brunel and completed in 1859. Brunel is also known for designing Bristol Temple Meads station and the Clifton suspension bridge. In his youth he worked as an assistant engineer on the Thames Tunnel at Wapping which was designed by his father Marc Brunel. Three Bridges conveys traffic by road, rail and canal. It is one of the few bridges of this type in the country.

Southall Spyware ring shut down

Over a hundred mobile devices were seized by officers in an early morning raid on Monday.

Spyware was found on dozens of handsets which had been supplied by a business located on the Bridge Road industrial estate. The majority of the customers were from outside London and had purchased the devices from high street vendors in their local area.

The spyware detected on the handsets allowed malicious users to gain administrator level access. Hidden from the user, this software provided a 'back door' which could be used to download contacts lists, calendar details and media. In addition the camera and microphone could be enabled remotely. According to a statement from Southall police, the gang had been shipping the compromised devices to UK vendors for several months.

Several different models of device were found to contain the spyware. This included both phones and tablets running on the Android operating system owned by Google. Users were not intended to discover the unauthorised access to their devices. The absence of alerts or notifications triggered by the spyware activity meant that the majority of users were completely unaware of anything wrong with their devices.

Business owner Arnav Kulkarni (41) operates a wholesale unit nearby:

"*Selling phones with spyware on them makes us all look bad. The men who were working in that unit were not from the local area and they didn't talk much. We had some disagreements about them parking their cars in front of my shop. This estate has a good reputation all over the country and we don't want anything to change that".*

At least half of the compromised handsets were accessed during the months of January and February and had Bitcoin mining software installed on them. Attention was drawn to the unauthorised mining when several customers returned their handsets to vendors claiming that the phones were running slowly.

The connection between spyware and Bitcoin mining on mobile handsets has become a known issue for vendors and carrier networks. SBL News approached Everything Everywhere (EE) for comment and received the following statement;

"*The price of Bitcoin has risen so quickly that the process of mining has attracted criminal elements. Conventionally mining takes place on desktop computers or purpose built mining hardware, but the cost of electricity is a deterrent. Obviously if the mining is taking place on someone else's mobile phone, that cost is irrelevant. All EE stores provide support services for any*

customers concerned about handsets they have purchased from EE".

CHAPTER NINE – The Processed

Now holding a quadruple cognac in his hand, Giles Tilbury started to feel a bit better. He swirled the low viscosity spirit around and took a deep sniff from the mouth of the glass.

"Ahhh, that's just absolutely top notch" he said, with a glow of satisfaction, "Top bloody notch".

His casual swearing shocked Tarquin slightly. Giles was renowned for watching his P's and Q's and in the decade they had known each other, Tarquin couldn't remember hearing him swear even once. Things must be really quite bad for him to have slipped up like this.

"So what's the state of play then?" asked Tarquin, anticipating something truly horrid.

"Do you remember that situation in the eighties with the Swiss Guard informant?" asked Giles.

Tarquin certainly did know about the situation and he really wished that Giles had opened with something considerably less horrid.

"A bit before my time really, but yes. I thought that was dead and buried" said Tarquin "After the whole Blackfriars... disaster.

"Well yes and no" replied Giles, downing his remaining cognac in one gulp.

"Okay and are you going to elaborate on the 'no' part then?" asked Tarquin, hoping that Giles wouldn't completely clean him out of Courvoisier, again.

"Hmm.. where should I begin. Basically there are certain forces who feel that they still have certain monies owed to them, certain large amounts of money.. and it seems that your bloody loose cannon American has been working with them - to further those ends" said Giles, reaching for the Courvoisier.

As Giles filled his cognac glass up again, Tarquin felt a sensation of dread spreading out from his stomach, this bridge evening was turning into a bit of a perfect storm.

"Oh dear God" said Tarquin. He suddenly realised that wherever that invisible line was, he was certainly on the wrong side of it now.

"Yes indeed, although in this case 'dear' would be best interpreted as 'expensive' don't you think?" quipped Giles, with a sardonic smile.

Tarquin had heard the usual anecdotes on this historical subject circulating around the department and had come to the conclusion that many of them were blatant disinformation. Precisely who was seeding this disinformation had never been obvious.

"I knew he was making overtures with the Germans and the Portuguese and I suspected possibly even the Italians. But this isn't what …. well … . I mean, what sort of figure are we talking about here Giles?" asked Tarquin, keen to get to the bottom

of the matter, despite his mounting fear.

“It’s …. telephone numbers Tarquin, bloody long telephone numbers.” said Giles, rapidly emptying his second quadruple cognac.

“I see .. and I assume that the fellows in the City aren’t exactly falling over themselves to make nice on the subject?”

“That would be an understatement. They’ve categorically stated that the Bridge fund is not up for grabs, to anyone except bloody Gog Magog himself” said Giles, finishing his cognac.

“Right .. so it seems we have reached a bit of an impasse then?” asked Tarquin.

“There’s no talking to them. As far as they’re concerned the shadowy deals they did a thousand years ago give them carte blanche to do whatever they see fit” answered Giles. “and I mean it’s not as if any of them even speak bloody Latin any more.”

“This is some rather disturbing news Giles, pour me one of those cognacs, will you” said Tarquin, becoming really quite anxious. Giles was dumping the worst possible failure on him and they weren’t even in the office.

Giles poured another two quadruple cognacs and sat down on the edge of Tarquin’s old school trunk. Handing one to Tarquin, he casually cast his eyes over the many marksmanship pennants and silver cups adorning the basement display cabinet.

“I just had a run in with some of their …. representatives, on the A40” said Giles, “and it looked like they’ve already been quite busy.”

Tarquin’s emotional state instantly turned from feelings of increasing anxiety, to those of primal, gut wrenching fear.

“Jesus Christ” he said.

“No, I don’t think he’ll be able to help us out on this one, I’m afraid. I’m also not sure that he would be predisposed to take our side in this matter anyway” said Giles, already halfway down his third glass of cognac.

“But I mean … here and I mean … well now … tonight?” stammered Tarquin.

“Yes my old chum, right here and right bloody now. I just spoke with D'Agostino in Rome and it doesn’t look like they’re in any position to help. They’ve fairly washed their hands of us, like Pontius bloody Pillate.”

“We need to get out of here and … well the women Giles, what will we do with them?” said Tarquin, looking around frantically.

“Tarquin, where exactly do you imagine we would be running to?” asked Giles, with a look of incredulity. “What were you thinking – Greenland perhaps?”

“I don’t know, I mean … but …” said Tarquin, not really having thought his statement through in advance.

“No there’s nothing for it but to ride this one out I’m afraid. If they’re planning on cleaning house, then there isn’t really much we can do… except face it” said Giles.

“Can’t we at least get some protection? I mean … for the women, naturally.” pleaded Tarquin.

“Believe it or not I had actually considered that already Tarquin. The only problem is who could we possibly trust? Millennia old allegiances aside, it’s such a mind boggling sum that absolutely anybody would be instantly corruptible. Even if they only accepted a percent of a percent as commission to hand us over, they’d still be set up for life”

Any further discourse on financial disputes between ancient clandestine institutions was rudely interrupted by Tarquin’s mobile phone ringing.

“Yes hello Jocky, we’re just downstairs. No, no there’s no need, we won’t miss it. Yes we’ll be up in just a minute. Sorry my sweet, it’s …. well … work related. Yes Ok then, maybe two minutes. Yes yes, Ok dear, two minutes .. please”

Tarquin put the phone back in his pocket. If he had been less concerned for his life, he might have noticed that there was a new icon showing in the top of his phone display. An icon that had been there ever since he purchased twelve bars of dark chocolate at the local service station.

Catherine Azikiwe was nearly finished processing the service station cashier. He wouldn’t be any trouble, she thought. Mainly due to the fact that he had been implicated in a long running fuel card scam some years ago. Another team had sanctioned the removal of his involvement from the records and he was currently registered as an active informant. They had been going through the digital CCTV when Catherine caught sight of Tarquin and the glitter man.

“I’ll need to have a copy of that file before it’s erased” she said, in a metered tone.

“Do you have a USB stick, or flashcard or something?” asked the cashier.

“Not with me, but you’ll be able to provide something suitable, I’m sure” said Catherine, forcefully.

“We’ve got a special on 64 gigabyte SD cards just now, they’re quite good and very reasonably priced” said the cashier, clearly not intimidated.

“Look here, this is sensitive information in an ongoing operation. You will provide me with this footage in a format suitable for me taking it off-site and then you will erase it. Do I make myself clear?” said Catherine, becoming really quite displeased.

“There’s no problem with any of that” said the cashier, still not intimidated in the slightest, “but you will have to pay for the removable storage I’m afraid. Oh and it’s cash only on digital media”

Catherine was about ready to straight finger jab the cashier right in the eyes.

“No I will not. I think you misunderstood me...” she barked.

“Sorry madam, but I’m afraid you will” insisted the cashier, still retaining his casual tone.

“You have, two choices” continued Catherine, “One - you can do as I ask, or Two - you can find yourself in a very inconvenient and very much enhanced interrogation. Before the end of your shift”

Catherine had grown accustomed to getting her own way in a confrontation and she found the resistance from this service station cashier to be really quite infuriating.

“No I’m sorry Madam, but unless you pay for the memory card, there’s really nothing I can do. It’s more than my job is worth”

Catherine considered the practicalities of her threats on the subject of enhanced interrogation. There’s absolutely no way she would get authorisation for it even if she tried. It was a completely empty threat and it looked like this fuel card scammer knew it.

“I really don’t have time for this” muttered Catherine as she retrieved her purse from her handbag.

“I’ll need a receipt. How much is it anyway?” she said pulling out a ten pound note.

“Thirty four ninety nine for the 64 gigabyte or fifty eight ninety nine for the 128 gigabyte” said the cashier, looking away.

Catherine was made uncharacteristically speechless by this and crumpled the ten pound note into her fist. She envisioned the same fist impacting with the cashier’s top lip. She could imagine him stumbling backwards into the ice cream freezer with blood streaming from his nose, offering his sternum as the target for her follow up. After this momentary berserker lapse, she regained her composure and replied;

“I don’t have enough cash on me, where is your ATM?”

“It’s out of order I’m afraid.” said the cashier.

“So how can you insist on cash only, when you don’t even have a working cash machine?” said Catherine, now wishing she had jabbed him the eyes when she had felt the urge.

“Sorry madam, we don’t own the cash machine, it’s operated by a third party. Their number is on the side if you want to give them a call” replied the cashier, in a well rehearsed manner.

This really was too much, thought Catherine. How dare this pompous little man roll out these highly offensive excuses. It was one thing to be put through this type of ridiculous nonsense as a conventional customer, but she was on official business as a section supervisor for a department of her Majesty’s government. She should certainly not have to put up with such preposterous service sector bureaucracy.

“Do you do cashback at least?” she said, adapting to overcome.

“Visa, Mastercard or debit?” asked the cashier.

“Visa” answered Catherine, a vein visibly throbbing on her left temple.

“Sorry madam, Visa cashback has been withdrawn from these premises due to fraud concerns” said the cashier in his well

rehearsed tone.

Catherine wondered whether she could feasibly conceal the cashier's body in one of the ice cream freezers.

"If I might make a suggestion?" said a voice from behind them. Neither Catherine nor the cashier had noticed that they weren't alone in the service station shop any more.

Catherine quickly turned round, displeased with being on the wrong end of the element of surprise.

She took a moment to recognise him, but there was no mistaking the fact that here stood the man she had just seen on the CCTV footage standing in front of Tarquin DeRochfort.

"Oh hello there" said the cashier "how did you get on with your glitter?"

"Yes fine, in fact I'll be needing some more" replied the glitter man. "It's very good value".

Catherine studied the man stood in front of her. She had spent enough time in the company of capable individuals to know that he wasn't just a random customer. His dark attire and sunglasses caused her to automatically profile him as an operator. His demeanour made her slightly uncomfortable despite him not being offensive or intimidating in any way. Who the hell was this man and what did he want?... apart from more glitter.

"Why don't you use your mobile phone?" his question was directed at Catherine.

"For what?" she asked, concerned that she was already on the back foot in this exchange.

"To take a copy of the digital footage off-site" he replied.

"I … well I hadn't thought of that" answered Catherine, feeling both foolish and also rather concerned as to how much of the conversation this man had overheard.

"Have you got an OTG cable?" said the glitter man to the cashier.

"We sell them over there" said the cashier, then a look of recognition came over his face and he turned to Catherine "but I've got one that I've been using to charge my phone, so you could just use that"

Catherine had calmed down now, there was something about the level of control this man was exerting over the situation which both reassured her and also made her incredibly uncomfortable. The overbearing rage she had felt a minute ago had completely diminished. She felt as if she could take a back seat and this man would somehow fix everything. Ironically, as someone accustomed to being in charge, this made her feel even more awkward and she really didn't like it.

The cashier had returned to his kiosk, presumably to fetch the cable. Catherine glanced around the shop to make sure she hadn't missed anyone else coming in and said to the glitter man;

"If you don't mind me asking, who exactly are you?"

The glitter man smiled and said;

“Well right now it looks like I’m the guy who’s saving the day.”

Catherine wouldn’t normally accept such flippant remarks from anyone, but she’d already lost control of the memory card situation and didn’t want to come across as someone frantically trying to regain their authority. A degree of nonchalance was clearly required here. So she reached into her handbag and retrieved her mobile phone. She entered her pin and found the file transfer option in the settings. At no point did she notice the unusual, additional icon showing in the top left hand corner of the screen.

While the footage was copying across to her internal storage, Catherine considered whether or not she was at risk of being compromised. The glitter man didn’t have visibility on the transfer process, both she and the cashier were on the other side of the counter. However, she couldn’t shake the feeling that he probably knew exactly what was in the footage .. somehow. Did he also know who Tarquin DeRochfort was? … and what the hell did he need all this glitter for anyway? She just wanted this to all be over and to get back to overseeing the Northolt handover.

Compared to this situation, dealing with the haphazard behaviour of Matthew Chelmsford’s team was really quite straightforward.

The transfer completed and the cashier unplugged the cable. Handing her mobile phone back to her, he asked Catherine “Will there be anything else?”

“No, that’s everything. Although I think you should probably get on to the ATM company and get that machine fixed” she replied, keen to regain some small amount of authority.

“Right you are Madam, have a nice day” said the cashier, with a smug smile.

As she exited the service station shop, the glitter man approached her from the kerbside newspaper stand. His newly acquired tubes of glitter in a reused carrier bag.

“Just one thing, if you have a moment?” he said.

“Yes?” replied Catherine, somewhat surprised, again.

“It would probably be a good idea to get in touch with your team up ahead.” said the glitter man.

“Why’s that” said Catherine without thinking “..but more to the point, what team and .. .who are you?”

“I think we covered that earlier on” replied the glitter man. “and to be blunt, I suspect you have a possible situation developing which you may be unaware of.”

Catherine was speechless, for the second time inside ten minutes. This man was confusing her … again, but given that all he had done was offer assistance, she couldn’t in all conscience take an aggressive approach. “What situation.. and developing how .. and where?” she said, quickly.

“When your team left, they were followed by two motorcycles. Both had pillion passengers. All four of them are more than likely armed and are definitely to be considered dangerous” said the glitter man, succinctly.

“I .. but how ….” stammered Catherine

“Look, just contact them now and let them know” interrupted the glitter man.

With a parting nod, he tucked his carrier bag of glitter tubes into his sizeable coat pocket, walked casually back in the direction of the newspaper stand and disappeared around the corner of the service station shop. Catherine walked briskly back to her green hatchback. Something about how concise the glitter man’s description of the motorcyclists had been, made her firmly believe that it was probably a very real threat to the continuing integrity of the operation.

Before she had even sat down in her car, she dialled the number for Matthew Chelmsford.

“Hello Catherine, everything’s going according to plan, we’re two minutes from the rally point. We’ll hold position and wait for you there” said Matthew.

“Matthew, be aware that you have four inbound and potentially armed aggressors - on two motorcycles” said Catherine. Her voice was flat, denoting the severity of the situation.

“Understood, do you want us to skip the regroup and go direct to the handover?”

Catherine considered their options. Going straight to the handover would definitely be the safest choice. But on the other hand if they didn’t get the American conscious and looking a lot less like he’d been in a multiple pile up, she would have no end of embarrassing committee enquiries to face. But then there was also the safety of Tareeq Faqim elMait to be considered. He had been a reliable deep cover operative for years and represented a distinct value to the department. She had a difficult choice to make, but that’s what her role demanded.

“Go ahead with the regroup. I’ll contact Gary Weycross and find out where he is” said Catherine, “he should be with you shortly”.

“Understood” replied Matthew.

Catherine terminated the call and climbed into her green hatchback. Pulling out onto the A40, she dialled the number for the driver of the white van which had gone in pursuit of the grey Peugeot.

“Go for Weycross.” said Gary, using his customary greeting.

“Gary this is Catherine. What is your situation?”

“I lost them at the turn off for Freezeland Way. The traffic’s insane and it looks like they must have changed cars. The original vehicle is off the road.” said Gary.

“Okay and where are you now?” asked Catherine, swirling the dregs of her syrup-less Mocha from Charles.

“Headed back towards you now, still on the A40, just passing Northolt”

“Okay. I need you to divert to the country club on West End Road. There’s an old building at the north end where we’re doing the regroup. Harry has identified an opening from the roundabout, which should avoid the country club entrance.” explained Catherine.

“Understood, I’m coming up on the exit for West End Road now. Should be no more than two or three minutes out.”

Catherine terminated the call and pressed her foot on the accelerator.

SBL NEWS

Suspicious package destroyed at Hayes and Harlington

Passengers on the 15:45 from Paddington to Reading reported concerns about an unattended item of luggage on Wednesday afternoon.

British Transport police responded to reports of a suspicious package on a train being held at Hayes and Harlington. The station was closed for more than three hours while a specialist unit disposed of the suspect item in a controlled detonation.

The station was evacuated during the incident and passengers were advised to use alternative routes. Station Road was closed in both directions during the incident and several adjoining shops were also evacuated.

UCL student Giorgio Agostino (21), was travelling to Langley when the unattended item was reported by other passengers;

“*This isn’t the first time my travel plans have been ruined by someone forgetting their suitcase. A few years ago I missed my flight to Malta because of the same thing. I don’t understand how anyone can get off a train and leave their bags behind”*.

Due to the anticipated opening of the Queen Elizabeth line, British Transport police are taking a zero tolerance approach to incidents involving abandoned luggage.

SBL News contacted British Transport police for comment:

“*At this time, our understanding is that the suspicious item did not represent a threat to the safety of the public. However the policy of both the Metropolitan police and British transport police is clearly established. Namely, to destroy abandoned items considered suspicious that have been discovered on any public transport service or station. We accept that this caused substantial inconvenience to local residents and passengers, but public safety is our greatest priority”*.

TFL tighten security on Reading line

An announcement on the TFL press releases web page on Tuesday, confirmed rumours that an increased security presence would be in operation on several routes including the Great Western Main Line.

The recent spate of unattended luggage incidents are believed to have prompted TFL to release the update. Additionally the usage of the GWML / MTREL route by suspected gang elements may have contributed to the decision. Posts on social media include reports of incidents involving suspected gang members. Facebook User Baz69_chips from Maidenhead made the following comment;

“*Using the line is sometimes a bit of a nightmare. After West Drayton there’s no ticket checking from there all the way into Paddington. The only staff are in the cab and I suppose they’re busy driving the train. There was a fight between four young men in the carriage just last week which ended up with blood all over the place. The train was held at West Ealing, but by the time anyone showed up the troublemakers had done a runner.”*

The Elizabeth Line (MTREL) is anticipated to complete in 2023 with the line running from Reading to Shenfield. The first phase was completed in 2015 and security concerns have been raised regularly in regards to anti-social behaviour.

SBL News contacted TFL for comment. Their press office gave us this statement;

“*An estimated 200 million passengers per annum are expected to travel on the MTR Elizabeth line. With such high volumes of traffic, TFL are committed to ensuring the comfort and safety of our passengers. MTR security coordinate with British Transport police and the Elizabeth Line Committee. Our aims are to ensure that passengers journeys will be as safe as possible.”*

A more visible security presence is welcomed by many passengers. StringCans user VinylCountdown from Taplow posted his opinions last week:

"*I do like the new trains, they're a lot roomier than the old ones. But having to put up with rowdy behaviour by groups of ne'er-do-wells isn't very nice. I'm a DJ and travel into West London most weekends. Usually the journey is pretty smooth, but I've seen a few fights take place on the way back home. I tried to get a refund for journeys that were ruined by shouting and violence, but unless the train is late there's no refund available. Having security on the trains would make a big difference to me and probably lots of other passengers."*

Mass Transit Railway (MTR) is the primary rail operator in Hong Kong. During the civil unrest in 2019/20 MTR deployed multiple solutions from CCTV to personnel in order to improve security on the Hong Kong network.

Criminals caught by police in M40 rolling roadblock

Three men from West London aged 19,24 and 25 were arrested by police on Saturday following a high speed interception near Beaconsfield.

Two units from Thames Valley and three units from the Met performed a complex manoeuvre known as 'boxing' to bring the stolen Ford Focus to a halt. Motorists on the M40 northbound carriageway between Beaconsfield and High Wycombe experienced minor delays to their journeys as a result of the fast moving operation. The Highways Agency assisted police with controlling the flow of traffic in the vicinity.

Teacher and father of two Morgan Lightfoot from Marlow Bottom was returning from London when the incident took place in front of him:

"*The first thing I knew was when I heard sirens behind me. Before I could even check the rear view mirror a group of police cars raced past. There were about four or five traffic police cars and a blue hatchback in the middle. At first it looked like they were escorting the blue car, but when I saw the police cars braking in front of it, I realised that there was something else going on. I slowed down and moved into the inside lane. A couple of minutes later, some four by fours from the Highways Agency appeared and started moving all the rest of the traffic into the inside lane. I passed the main group just after Beaconsfield and could see some of the police were pointing guns at the men inside."*

The blue Ford Focus was stolen in the Oxford suburb of Risinghurst on Friday evening and driven into London later that night. The three occupants are believed to have been involved with drug dealing in the Oxford area.

SBL News Oxford correspondent Jonathon Butler has been following developments:

"*Thames Valley Police have been monitoring two rival groups since 2020. A series of raids have been conducted at addresses in Risinghurst and nearby Wheatley. Both groups are known to have been selling drugs in Oxford and the surrounding areas. These three arrests bring the total number of arrests to seventeen since monitoring began in July 2020. In a single raid in April 2021, officers seized cocaine with a street value of over £30,000."*

Thames Valley police posted a message on their Twitter page:

@TVP_Oxford - 20th February

Yesterday TVP officers arrested 3 men from Oxford area. Support from Met armed response & Highways Agency. Stolen car boxed between M40 J2 & J3 nr Loudwater.

CHAPTER TEN – Impressions

"Are we all ready then?" asked Jocasta, holding a steak knife in one hand and Tarquin's telescopic fishing rod in the other. Stood at the head of the table, her radiant beauty dominated the scene like Boudica presiding over a pre battle feast.

"Yes" said everybody else, in unison.

"Right then" she continued, "as the eighteenth secretary of the Cholmondley bridge society, I charge you all to honour the spirit of the Cholmondley ethos and conduct yourselves according to our noble and ancient tradition. May the best couple win out."

On the last syllable, the three couples reached across the oversized kitchen table and struck their improvised cutlasses against the ones raised by their partners.

“Huzzah!” they all cheered and promptly sat down. Both Giles and Tarquin instantly reached for their cognac glasses.

Christabel rolled the pommel of the miniature sword in her hand.

“So you say he actually used this one, or was it just one like this?” she said, looking at Giles.

Giles was the treasurer of the Cholmondley bridge society, which had actually mutated into more of a Pirates of Penzance appreciation society.

“No dear, the real one is on display in the Northampton Repertory Players private room in the Royal and Derngate. It’s also much larger and is obviously quite priceless.” said Giles, with an oddly calm smile.

Tarquin was not so calm, he was fidgeting and drumming his fingers on the table.

“Is everything okay Tarquin?” asked Petula.

“Yes yes, of course. Nothing’s wrong and there’s nothing for you to be concerned about” replied Tarquin.

“I see” said Petula, it’s just that you’re perspiring and seem a bit… well off somehow. Are you absolutely sure you haven’t had too much cognac to play?”

“Look, I’m fine Okay? I’ve just had a bit of a rough day and I could do without having to pretend that I’m some kind of swashbuckling cardsharp from the nineteen bloody hundreds” said Tarquin, almost shouting.

Jocasta was quite visibly upset by this and her sculpted features darkened. She was so brutalised by Tarquin’s hysterical outburst, she looked as if she might cry. Clive reached across the table and held her hand. Giles noticed this display of consolation and raised one eyebrow.

“Now now Jocasta, you know he doesn’t mean it. Do you Tarquers?” said Clive, aiming a disapproving look in Tarquin’s direction.

“Oh I’m terribly sorry Jocky” said Tarquin, “it’s just … well..”

Tarquin didn’t actually know how to end this sentence. Should he really tell them there was every chance that the Cholmondley bridge society of West London would all be brutally slaughtered in their sleep by a much less convivial and much more ancient society from the continent?

So far, he and Giles had managed to maintain a relatively convincing front, but his nerves were shot to pieces. He poured himself another quadruple Courvoisier and desperately quaffed it.

“Maybe he’s twisted his testicles” said Petula, looking into her glass.

Everybody laughed, including Giles and Tarquin and with that icebreaker, the atmosphere suddenly lightened. Jocasta regained her consummate hostess demeanour and busied herself with the auderves.

“Let me see that German import a moment” said Christabel beckoning to Petula. Her eye’s flashing with anticipation.

Petula handed over the half sized sabre that Giles had purchased in Pimlico.

“Oh my, doesn’t it feel ….. sturdy” said Christabel, enthusiastically.

Clive picked up the realistic facsimile of Errol Flynn’s cutlass and waved it above his head.

“Have at ye – varlet!” he exclaimed.

Christabel quickly stood up, roughly pushing her chair back. She held the German import at arms length and brandished it in Clive’s face.

“Ye scurvy dog, I’ll cut ye from bow to stern” she growled.

The two of them then engaged in what could only be described as a highly comedic interpretation of a period pirate film. As they pranced around the kitchen parrying and thrusting, the attending members of the Cholmondley bridge society looked on and laughed in approval.

Giles and Tarquin avoided eye contact. It was one of those mutual behavioural patterns which needs no arrangement or reinforcement. If they were going to meet their makers, surely this light hearted social occasion was an appropriate format for their final supper.

Giles smiled as he watched his wife wielding the German duelling sword. They’d had their difficulties over the years, but he knew as sure as carts to horses that he had married the right woman. Admiring her red chiffon dress swirling around her, he felt a wave of melancholy rising. This was, in all probability, going to be their last evening together.

Tarquin was not as serene. This was due partly to the fact that Giles was a bit older and less self obsessed, but mainly it was because he’d had more time to process the ramifications of the situation. Giles had also attempted to control his situation, first with his driving manoeuvres and then with his call to D’Agostino in Rome. Having worked through several phases of panic, he was now at the resignation point. There was nothing they could do and accepting that lead to something almost resembling tranquillity.

Tarquin on the other hand, was still very much in the the primary phases. All he could think about was various means of escaping and hiding. He’d considered grabbing Jocasta and his .22 LR rifle and heading north in the Mercedes. Surely if they made it to Scotland, they’d be able to find sanctuary amongst the mountains. Maybe if they went to Wales, or hopped a ferry to Ireland or … But he always came back to the quite gut churning reality that hiding from the Roman Catholic church anywhere in Europe, wasn’t particularly realistic. He also had no idea how to get to Greenland. He assumed it would require a visa from the Danish embassy and he didn’t have any contacts there. What on earth could he do? His mind vaulted onto the protection idea he had voiced with Giles earlier. If he called it in, the department would have to do something, he thought. But then both he and Giles would also have to answer some incredibly awkward questions as to their involvement in this total disaster. It would mean the end of his career, probably the end of his marriage and an entirely tedious life spent in some God forsaken backwater like Leamington Spa. That’s assuming that the department didn’t go the other way and prepare extradition papers to offload them both to Germany or worse, Italy.

“My God”, he thought. Is this what that drunken old fool Trimble had been fishing for?

Harry Brentford dropped into second gear and pumped the accelerator, the front wheels of the midi-van bit into the verge and the van lurched through the ageing fence surrounding the outhouse. Dragging the posts and several feet of fence wire, the van bumped through the trees and emerged into what was once a turning area.

Getting out, he then put on a pair of black PVC gloves and pulled the fence wire free from the underside of the midi-van.

Dave wasn’t so sure that the ambulance would gain much purchase on the verge, so he deliberately eased off on the brakes as he approached it. Janet braced herself against the door of the appliance and put her foot against the dashboard. The appliance hit the verge at around 35mph and after lifting off the ground momentarily, ploughed straight through the gap Harry had just created.

Behind, Gerard slowed to less than 10mph and engaged the four wheel drive of the body-kitted van. He carefully mounted the verge at an angle and turned into the gap in the fence.

With all three vehicles stopped in the overgrown turning area, Matthew Chelmsford exited the body-kitted van and strode over to the front door of the outhouse.

It certainly appeared disused, he could tell that from the filthy windows and the rusted padlock on the front door. Above the door he noticed an old fashioned swinging sign. Beneath the patina of grime, he could make out an image of a village pond and the words “The Swan Inn”.

He took two steps back and with a brief inhalation, kicked the door completely off it’s hinges.

With the doorway now clear, he waved to Dave, who rapidly reversed the long wheel base ambulance to with a couple of feet of the door. Matthew then waved to Gerard who performed a similar manoeuvre, all be it with less speed and more traction.

Gary Weycross saw the tyre tracks of the previous three vehicles and aimed between them. In the dwindling light of the Tuesday evening, he pulled alongside the parked vehicles and stepped out of his van. Without hesitating, he opened the side door and retrieved a SIG716 assault rifle from the vertical gun mount in the rear compartment. He then waved to Charles and Harry and headed back in the direction of the treeline.

Charles and Harry both jogged over to Gary’s van. Charles reached in and retrieved the remaining SIG716’s from the mount. Handing one to Harry, he said;

“You take the southern entrance and I’ll cover the front of the building.”

Harry nodded and headed toward the country club, now silhouetted against the darkening sky.

Charles felt a lot better with a proper gun in his hands. The familiar contours of the assault rifle were almost as comforting to him as the fur lining of his favourite slippers. He opened the rear door of the midi-van and climbed in. With the door ajar, he sat down on an ISO equipment container and turned out the interior lights. He ran his right hand along the top of his weapon and felt around for the brightness display on the holographic sight.

Gerard and Matthew were sweeping the downstairs rooms of the derelict building. Sidearms in hand they silently moved between doorways while constantly maintaining eye contact in the dimly lit outhouse. Matthew confirmed that the downstairs was clear. He called out to Dave and Janet, who then pulled the gurney containing a still unconscious Bennet, through the doorway and into what would have originally been the main bar area.

Gerard and Matthew climbed the stairs leading above the bar to sweep the upstairs and Dave placed an industrial torch on the decrepit wooden counter top. He turned it to to face the peeling anaglypta wallpaper of the rear wall and switched it on. The bar was suddenly illuminated in a crystal white light.

“What have we got to bring the swelling down?” asked Dave.

Janet reached into the well appointed green hold all and retrieved a half litre container of white cream.

“This might do the trick, but we’ll need to slap it on. It takes a while to do anything.” she answered.

“Have we got any ice?” asked Dave.

Matthew Chelmsford had returned from the upstairs and commented;

“So now you fancy a quick Whisky and Ginger Ale do you Dave? Those bath-time salts not enough for you?”

Dave turned to look at Matthew, preparing to launch into another grossly insubordinate rant, when he saw the mischievous smile on Matthew’s face.

“Yes please and if you could knock a quick Pernod and fresh orange together for Jan, that’d be great.” he replied officiously, “just bring them out to the veranda when you’re ready”

“I always saw you as more of a Lager drinker, Janet” said Matthew.

“I’ll drink whatever’s going, well .. except Pernod or Sambuca… they’re disgusting. Make me heave every time.” said Janet, opening the large tub of sticky white herb cream.

“I know what you mean.” said Matthew, holstering his sidearm

“Bloody aniseed flavoured booze, I mean who gets up in the morning and invents that?” he continued, looking like he had a bad taste in his mouth.

Gerard joined them, also having completed his sweep of the upstairs. He looked at the unconscious form of Bennet Hoffman and asked;

“Before you get the drinks in, how’s our boy here doing?”

Janet checked the readout on the portable ECG machine attached to the leg of the gurney.

“Vitals look OK, not sure we should be giving him any of those epinephrine shots though” she said.

“You’re bloody right we shouldn’t” blurted Matthew. “Talk about pouring petrol on a fire”

Gerard considered how dangerous Bennet had been before the tranquillisers and the heavy beating with the NO2 cylinder. The thought of what he would be like with the same adrenalin shots they’d given to Tareeq made his mind reel. He would certainly need one of those tasers if that happened… and quickly.

Gary Weycross approached the hole in the fence made by Harry’s van. To the right of the remaining fenceposts was a clump of dense undergrowth. Pulling at his collar, he moved purposefully towards it. The nylon hood of his overcoat unfurled and he pulled it over his head. As he backed into the thicket, he caught sight of Catherine Azikiwe’s green hatchback approaching the verge. He reached along the side of his firearm and found the end of the mounted torch. With three clicks of the thumb switch, he activated the strobe setting and pointed his firearm directly at the approaching vehicle.

Catherine recognised the fast pulsing light and slowed down. She mounted the verge and drew alongside the missing section of fence. She switched off the ignition, unclipping a small key from the main bunch. She then reached over to the glove compartment. Walking in the direction of the thicket, she undid the flap on her right hip and tucked the angular form of her Glock 17 into the pocket of her jacket.

“How are we looking Gary?” she said.

Gary was squatting down, practically inside the undergrowth. With his black hood obscuring most of his face, Catherine could only make out a vague form in the rapidly darkening light.

“So far so good” answered Gary. “Any idea what we’re expecting?”

Catherine ran through the details she had, which weren’t nearly as many as she would have liked.

“Any other vehicles that we know of?” asked Gary.

“No, just the two bikes … at this point” said Catherine. She knew where Gary was going with this.

“OK, so it doesn’t look like they’re wanting to take anything home with them then.” he said, not expecting an answer.

“I think we can assume not” answered Catherine. “Where’s the rest of the team?”

Gary gave a short account including the locations of the recently more heavily armed Charles and Harry.

“Do we have comms set up yet?” said Catherine reaching for her mobile phone.

“Haven’t checked yet, but the PTT should be working. Charles is closest to the van, give him a blast on it”

“Okay. Good work Gary. I’ll leave the car here.” said Catherine and with a slight sigh added; “Please don’t destroy it unless it’s absolutely necessary.”

“I’ll try and keep your no claims intact” said Gary, shuffling himself deeper into the thicket.

Catherine walked into the gloom of the treeline with her hand on her right hip. With her other hand she felt in her pocket and pulled out a set of headphones. With one earbud inserted into her left ear, she unlocked her mobile phone and pressed on a bright orange shortcut.

Charles had almost acclimatised to the darkness of the midi-van interior when he felt a vibration in his coat inside pocket. He reached in and pulled out his mobile phone. The entire screen was flashing and caused him a moment of night blindness.

“Can’t see a bloody thing” he muttered. He then exited the midi-van and blinking his eyes, walked towards the third van which had been driven in by Gary.

Inside the former public house, Matthew and Gerard also felt vibrations and likewise retrieved their mobile phones. Matthew gestured to Dave and Janet to check their devices. As he pushed the buds of his headphones into his ears, the familiar sound of Harry Brentford’s voice cut across all their headsets.

“Radio check”

One by one, they all confirmed. Except Charles who was adjusting the settings on the central console of Gary’s vehicle.

Finally he held down a similar orange shortcut on his own device and said “System check clear.”

Catherine had reached the group of vehicles parked in front of The Swan Inn. Spotting Charles emerging from Gary’s van, she pressed the miniature button on the cable of her headset, angled her head downward slightly and said;

“Coming up on you now Charles.”

Charles peered into the darkness and could just make out the familiar shape of Catherine walking towards him. He waited momentarily and then fell into step beside her as they both walked toward the hole where the pub front door was, before Matthew had removed it.

“How long have we got?” he asked.

“Unknown” answered Catherine. “We don’t want to spend any more time on this than we have to. The flight’s not arriving till midnight but let’s not push our luck.”

Charles nodded and climbed back into the midi-van.

Matthew turned to face Catherine as she entered the building. “Have you called this in yet?” he asked.

Catherine looked uneasy. A combined response from Northolt security would definitely take the pressure off, but it would also compromise the containment efforts of her and her entire team. The Americans had been quite specific on minimising the exposure of Bennet Hoffman’s recovery. The whole thing was a huge embarrassment on both sides of the pond.

“Ideally I would rather hold off on that unless we have absolutely no other choice” said Catherine, her reluctance to advertise their improvised situation quite apparent in her voice.

“Well let’s hope we don’t have to” said Matthew. He looked at Catherine in rare moment of agreement and thought about how long they’d known each other. She was a stone cold manager and Matthew genuinely respected her for that.

Dave and Janet were in the process of applying the herb based anti-swelling cream to Bennet's face. Janet was holding his head while Dave carefully applied the sticky substance with his blue gloved hand.

"What were you even thinking?" asked Janet, her disapproval quite apparent.

"Look, it wasn't like I planned any of that Jan" said Dave, "but from where I was standing it looked like he was going to town on you".

"Well he wasn't" said Janet, gently smoothing Bennet's hair away from the cream which was gradually masking his bruised features. "He's just …. well he doesn't seem like that type, Dave"

"Jan, none of us know this guy from a hole in the ground. He could be Jack the bloody Ripper for all anyone knows" protested Dave. "What exactly happened back there anyway?"

"I don't know, all I can remember is one minute I was interrogating him and the next thing, you were trying to kill him."

Dave looked uncomfortable. Janet was clearly quite angry with him and he felt a bit put out.

"I just lost it when I saw him hurting you Jan… or thought he was"

"It's okay Dave, I understand, I'll remember that, the next time I see you with a woman." she said, with a sarcastic smile.

Noticing the change in her tone, Dave looked up and said "Next time I'll try not to ruin the atmosphere. Maybe put on some Barry White or something."

They both smiled without looking at each other and carried on plastering Bennet's face.

Catherine and Matthew were stood at what was once the bar of The Swan Inn. Matthew holstered his sidearm, put his hands on the counter top and give it a shake.

"This place has seen better days" he said "the atmosphere reminds me of that place in Hendon where you had your engagement party."

Catherine wasn't in the mood for Matthew's trademark banter. She looked at him purposefully and said;

"If we're not calling this in, it's going to have go by the numbers Matthew. I mean no slip ups, no cowboy antics and none of your usual knee-jerk reactions. Is that understood?"

Matthew sighed with exasperation.

"Sure Catherine, by the numbers…wouldn't have it any other way."

Changing the subject, he continued;

"Do we know what their goal is?.. or even who they are?"

Catherine shook her head and replied “No, but I think it’s probably safe to say that there are probably quite a lot of people who want that man silenced, permanently”. She gave a slight nod in the direction of Bennet.

“No other vehicles in the picture then?” asked Matthew.

“Not to my knowledge, but none of this is confirmed anyway, so it could change.” said Catherine.

Matthew nodded and made his way upstairs. If things were going to get lively, he wanted as clear a view of the entrance as possible. He motioned to Gerard, who then followed behind him. As he passed Bart and Dave, he asked;

“Is that stuff going to make him any less dangerous?”

Dave paused for a moment, looked up and answered;

“Sure.. if we rub it in his eyes. Maybe you’d like it on the soles of his shoes as well?”

Matthew snorted and continued walking towards the stairs.

Twirling a toothpick in his fingers, Clive looked across the table at Giles. He could tell that there was something very wrong between him and Tarquin. They were both acting very strangely. At no point during the main course of Brisket, had either of them said a solitary word.

“Everything Ok then Giles?” he asked, casually.

Giles looked up from studying his cognac glass.

“It’s just been one of those days Clive. You know how it is”

Clive did not know how it was, he had his own business selling digital financial services to merchant shipping companies. The most stressful incident he could recall had been when one of his brokers raised a discrepancy with some of the permits for a shipment of medical supplies. The vendor had got a bit nervous when they discovered that the shipment consisted entirely of defective equipment which should have been decommissioned before it ever left their warehouse.

“Can’t be all that bad, can you talk about it?” he said, trying to be positive.

Giles considered intimating the gravity of their collective situation, but then he remembered some of the details he had prised from Petula during their journey. If things didn’t go horribly wrong, he needed to speak to Clive anyway and this was a prime opportunity. If nothing else, it would take his mind off his own predicament.

“Not really, but I did want to ask your opinion on another subject” he said, glancing around to make sure Jocasta was out of earshot. With her back to the table, she was on the other side of the rather large kitchen, busily unwrapping endless bars of chocolate. It seemed to be occupying all her faculties. Tarquin had joined her and the two were preparing the fondue set for the much anticipated dessert. Christabel and Petula had gone into the lounge, to set up the bridge table. With Jocasta and

Tarquin otherwise occupied, he and Clive had relative privacy.

“Of course Giles, what’s on your mind?” said Clive, unsuspectingly.

“Well it’s just a small matter of your football matches – the away matches” said Giles, nodding at Jocasta with a sudden hint of aggression in his voice.

Clive gulped and tried to hide his shock. It wasn’t successful and Giles continued;

“Don’t worry, I’m not looking to rain on your parade, but you do need to consider exactly whose grass you’re mowing”

“He … wouldn’t do anything ….. stupid, would he?” asked Clive, his voice noticeably faltering.

Giles raised his eyebrows. “He most certainly would .. and without stopping to even consider giving it a second thought. Have you seen all those trophies he’s got downstairs? You do know he had a past before he became a civil servant? Don’t let Tarquin’s foppish routine fool you Clive.”

Giles was laying it on extra thick for effect. There were indeed a few rumours about Tarquin and his crack shot reputation, most of them were totally false. Giles suspected that Tarquin had actually started most of them himself. But he felt that Clive had seriously overstepped the boundaries of friendship, so the thicker he laid it on - the better. Also the volume of cognac he had consumed was starting to have some, small effect.

Clive had heard the stories. He was also personally aware of Tarquin’s sporting history. He’d been on several grouse shoots with him and even tagged along as part of the support for the national team during the summer Olympics qualifying heats, several years ago.

“Okay Giles… so what can I tell you that you don’t already know?” he asked.

“You could start by assuring me that nobody else is going to pick up on this. The last thing I need right now is getting in the middle of some sordid bloody ‘affaires de cœur’ and I assume that you don’t want this bridge match turning into a late night shooting on the lawn.”

Clive looked down at his toothpick. “No I certainly do not Giles, is that all you wanted….?”

Giles was after something, why else would he have brought this up.

As Clive raised his eyes, he added “or was there something else?”

Giles sat back in his chair and took a drink from his most recently poured glass of cognac. He wasn’t even counting how many drinks he’d had any more, all he knew was they weren’t having enough effect. Clive continued looking at him, expectantly.

“Sebastian knows” said Giles, finally.

These two words hit Clive like a low punch in a bare knuckle prizefight.

“Oh... Christ” he said in a hoarse whisper. Then with a mixture of shame and realisation spreading across his high features, he said “That explains why he’s been avoiding the house.”

Giles finished his brandy and reached for the remains of the second bottle of Courvoisier.

“You’ll need to talk to him Clive. Otherwise things could get very messy indeed. I don’t want Christabel catching on and I assume that you probably don’t want your own, actual wife to leave you and then nail you to the bloody ground?”

“No, no I certainly do not”. Clive was beginning to resemble a rabbit caught in the headlights.

He and Jocasta had been pursuing their secretive relationship for about eighteen months. Up until this point Clive thought he’d been quite successful in hiding it from anyone else. But Giles had a way of discovering people’s most intimate secrets and usually he managed to work in some element of personal gain.

Clive suddenly snapped his toothpick between his fingers.

“I’m not going to just sit here and let you dangle me with this Giles, can you just cut to the bloody chase please?” Clive’s voice was becoming slightly raised.

Giles glanced at the hosts again and leaned across the table. In a low gravely tone, he said;

“Look, I can understand your position on this, she certainly is a ferociously attractive woman. But you have to see that he’s been put under a lot of pressure at work recently. This is exactly the kind of thing that could just tip him right over the bloody edge. Now I don’t have any other agenda, so if you’re going to carry on with your away fixtures, you need to be a bit more bloody discreet old bean, is that fair?”

Clive accepted this explanation and sighed with relief. It was one thing to walk a tightrope of infidelity, but having Giles Tilbury as a self appointed inquisitor was something he really did not care for.

“How did you… find out?” asked Clive, not looking forward to the answer.

“Petula told me” said Giles, bluntly.

“What? ... but …” stammered Clive.

“Don’t get all excited Clive, She doesn’t know, or if she does she’s being pretty damn clever about it. No it was a combination of Sebastian’s absence and the new conservatory which gave it away.” said Giles.

“The new conservatory …?” repeated Clive, incredulity hanging in his words.

“Yes Clive, there’s a definite correlation between how much building work you have done and how guilty you’re feeling. Don’t ever take up poker, will you Clive.” Giles finished pouring the dregs out of the Courvoisier bottle.

Clive was stunned, to be able to make these sort of conclusions based on a new summer lounge extension wasn’t the behaviour of a normal person.

“Right … well… I’m not really sure what to say to that, Giles.” said Clive, shaking his head slightly.

“Don’t need to say anything old bean, in fact it would probably be best if we put a pin in this and leave it here.” Giles replied, draining the last of his brandy. “Anyway, I need another drink, how about you?”

“Yes, I think I could definitely use one” said Clive.

With the subject matter closed, they both stood up and headed in the direction of the lounge. Tarquin’s well appointed drinks cabinet in both their sights.

SBL NEWS

Hancock ambushed by anti-vaxxer mob

Former Secretary of State for Health and Social Care Matt Hancock, was targetted by a group of protestors on Tuesday morning while attending a hotel spa in Cirencester.

Mr Hancock and his companion were subjected to an abusive and persistent ordeal by more than ten individuals. During the incident one or more of the protestors shouted anti-vaccine related abuse at Mr Hancock’s companion in a threatening manner. The incident was brought under control by protection officers assigned to Mr Hancock. Two of the protestors had to be physically restrained during the incident. No arrests were made, however police have not ruled out potential further proceedings. CCTV recordings were acquired by officers from Gloucestershire constabulary who attended the scene to assist the protection officers.

Since resigning as Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, Mr Hancock has been focussing on his responsibilities as Member of Parliament for West Suffolk.

Janet Casbolt, a fitness instructor at Stratton House Hotel & Spa gave SBL News this comment;

“*They just came out of nowhere and started hurling insults and pointing at the couple. Mr Hancock was quite upset when his friend was verbally attacked by a load of angry anti-vaxxers. I saw one of the women filming Mr Hancock’s friend and shouting at both of them. Thankfully the bodyguards dealt with the situation quite quickly and got them both to safety. A few of the protestors were still acting very aggressively and were held down on the ground*“.

It is believed that the protestors coordinated using an encrypted messaging app to surprise Mr Hancock and his companion. The itinerary of politicians and visiting dignitaries is a closely guarded secret, specifically to prevent these types of situations from occurring. Encrypted messaging apps have been criticised in the media for facilitating illegal activity. SBL News contacted the makers of the popular app ‘StringCans’ for comment and received the following statement from their legal representatives;

“*Our client sympathises with those affected by incidents such as these. Any tool can be utilised just as readily for right as it can be for wrong. A hammer can be used to build a house or it can be used as a weapon. Nobody is suggesting that the hammer manufacturers should try to control hammer usage”*.

The security of messaging apps has been called in to question since the 2018 assassination of Saudi journalist Jamal Kashoggi. SBL News approached Mr Hancock’s office for comment, but at this time we have not received a response.

Social Media company leaks over 3 million accounts

Millions of ‘StringCans’ users were contacted on Saturday regarding a major data leak. The social media and messaging service is popular amongst singles in the 30-40 age group.

The majority of users were contacted by email to change their passwords and secret questions. Approximately 10,000 users were also contacted by telephone due to them being the subject of a more serious data breach. Users who opted to use fingerprint verification have been advised to visit their local police station to report the breach. The app uses multiple fingerprints to verify account sign in and is considered to be one of the more secure messaging apps available.

Users took to alternative social media platforms to voice their concerns. Unemployed care worker Krystal Moffat posted the following message:

@KryssieKaos

18:26 Saturday 5th February '22

Just got back from the police sttaion!

Had to get PRINTED!!!111

All my photos could end up on the web.

NEVER BEEN SO EMBARRASED IN MY LIFE!!!!!1

@Hamilton Accy's

18:31 Saturday 5th February '22

Me 2! - ***ING NIGHTMARE - R U good 4 nxt wkend?

In addition to fingerprint and password information, many users had their personal images leaked. StringCans uses cloud servers to store images captured while using the app. The images are encrypted using the unique information contained in the passwords and fingerprints. The leak of data from both these security measures has raised questions regarding StringCans claims of two factor authentication. Conventionally two factor authentication requires the use of a separate device or application to complete sign in verification.

SBL News received the following statement from Action Fraud, the UK's national fraud and cyber crime reporting centre:

"*Any users who chose to use fingerprint authentication to sign into this app should visit their local police station at their earliest opportunity. Officers across the UK are collecting fingerprint data for the purpose of eliminating these users from any ongoing enquiries. We live in an increasingly modern world and transferring digital fingerprint data onto physical objects is much easier than most people would imagine.*"

Anyone concerned about breaches of personal data should contact Action Fraud on 0300 123 2040

Brentford GSK squatted by activists

An estimated 170 activists from StopVaxNow descended on GlaxoSmithKline on Monday. Due to the majority of GSK staff currently working from home, the activists were able to occupy several floors before they were challenged.

The intruders were reported to GSK security staff by building maintenance workers. By the time the security officers responded, the group had managed to gain access to multiple offices across seven floors of the Great West Road site. Officers from Brentford Police Station (Hounslow) assisted GSK staff with the removal of the activists.

The majority of the group were students from universities and colleges in West London. StopVaxNow have held protests at a number of major pharmaceutical company headquarters since 2020. During a StopVaxNow 2021 protest outside the offices of Pfizer in Walton Oaks in Surrey, fifteen activists were arrested. It is understood that they were preventing Pfizer staff from accessing the building.

Several arrests were made during the Brentford protest for offences including affray. It is believed that the activists gained entry through an unlocked fire exit. According to building maintenance staff, no damage was sustained during the four hour occupation.

The following message was posted by Brentford Police on Tuesday:

Brentford Police @MPSBrentford

22 Feb 2022

Nearly 200 antivax protestors removed from Brentford GSK. G4S assisted by MPSBrentford. Three arrests made, released later without charge.

Cat rescued from telecom mast by Ealing Fire Fighters

‘Hector a 9kg Norwegian Forest cat was rescued from a celltower mast on Boston Road, Hanwell on Friday.

LFB Ealing conducted the rescue in response to calls from residents regarding sounds of an animal in distress coming from the top of the mast near the church of St Thomas the Apostle.

It is suspected that the furry free-climber had scaled the lofty tower after being attracted by birds nesting in the frame of the mast. His ordeal lasted several hours due to the safety regulations regarding cell tower access. Apart from getting slightly wet as a result of a rain shower, Hector was otherwise unharmed by his misadventure.

Owner and local entrepreneur Aadriti Mondal (29) told SBL News how worried she was for her long haired familiar:

“*He’s always climbing things. I think it must be in his genes. I bought one of those cat trees for him, but he still climbs the trees outside. The tower is at least quarter of a mile from here, so I’m glad that someone heard him. I was quite upset by the whole thing. I’ve had him for four years and he’s very important to me. The firefighters were really good about it and they even posed for photographs with him.”*

Ealing Fire Station posted the following message on their Twitter page:

LFB Ealing @LFBEaling

Hector the Norwegian Forest Cat reunited with owner after being trapped for over four hours. Biggest cat ever rescued by LFB Ealing. Advised to avoid celltowers and stick to climbing trees.

CHAPTER 11 – Fools Gold

The country club had been running at loss for several years. Between the economic downturn and the A40 upgrades, the proprietors had finally decided to cut their losses and wound up the daily operation. It still served as an occasional function suite, catering to engagements, anniversaries and birthday parties. Both the motorcycle training school next door and the local golf course used it as a temporary club house, but for the most part it was now just a luxurious old ghost ship moored off the coast of Greater London. Harry could see the tell tale signs of a decaying building. From the bitumen peeling on the roof, to the crumbling pointing on the eves. He wondered if it would ever regain it’s prominence or simply be demolished to make way for more luxury apartment blocks.

Harry had an uneasy feeling about the country club. It was a sizeable property and if anyone was of a mind to use it as cover to launch an attack, he probably wouldn’t be able to do much about it. There must be at least five or six exits, he estimated. He could see three of them from his vantage point in a dilapidated gardening shed between the club and the miniature boating lake.

Scanning the front of the building, his eye caught a slight movement through his holographic sights. He lingered his sweep on the first floor window, there was no doubt in his mind that there was someone inside. He could see a faint reflection in the remaining ambient light. It was moving slightly, behind the grime stained panes. Reaching into his coat, he pressed twice in quick succession on the power button of his mobile phone. Through his earbuds he heard the recognisable sound of background static cut in. He lowered his head toward the miniature microphone on his earbud cable; “We have company. First floor, east face, fourth window from north of building”. At no point did he take his eye off the window, or the unusual reflection within it.

“Can you identify?” said Matthew’s voice in his earpiece.

“Not at this point, I’ll need to take a closer look” replied Harry, confident that further investigation would be approved.

The authoritarian voice of Catherine Azikiwe interrupted;

“Hold off on that. Standby and await further instructions.”

The corners of Harry’s mouth twitched. He wanted to know who was watching them and if they were indeed hostile, this was the time to take care of it.

He lowered the brightness on his scope and refocussed. He could vaguely make out the form of a man, his body was in shadow but in the low visibility of the moonlight, a slight shimmer of light reflected on the outline of his face. As Harry strained his eyes to maximise the magnification, he could make out an oval shape obscuring the man’s eyes. Whoever this person was, it appeared as if they were watching him through field glasses. This realisation made Harry nervous, if they could see him, then they certainly knew that Harry could see them - and that he was armed. Why wouldn’t they relocate? If the watcher wasn’t hostile, then who were they and what were they doing? Harry needed to get inside and find out, but Catherine was a stickler for procedure and he didn’t want to go through another disciplinary. Not after the kicking he’d got after that disaster in Cirencester. He decided that whatever was happening, he needed an advantage, his current location was obviously compromised so it was time to move. Pulling his black nylon hood over his head, he moved silently around the dusty gardening equipment and out of the door. Without lowering his rifle or losing sight of the vague form in the window, he stepped behind the shed and moved to the furthest corner from the country club. From this location Harry was quite sure that the man couldn’t see him. He was still stood in the window, seemingly uninterested in Harry’s movements. Questioning his observations, Harry squinted through the scope. None of this made sense, why didn’t they react? What did they want?… and who the bloody hell were they anyway? Harry squinted again, the light of the moon had become obscured and without a night scope he was having difficulty seeing anything. He began to question his decisions. He started thinking that he couldn’t be completely sure that the man was still stood in the same window where he had spotted him, if there was even a man there at all. He quickly scanned the other windows, the roof line and the three exits he had identified earlier. Nothing. He moved his scope back onto the now barely perceptible shimmer in the original window.

Gary Weycross was in quite a different situation. He could quite clearly make out both the shape and distinctive sound of two powerful motorcycles approaching the West End roundabout. Even with the noise of the heavy traffic on the lanes of the A40 below, the abrasive note of their combined engines rang out in the rapidly cooling night air. He pressed the button on his headset cable;

“Incoming, two bikes. Approaching my location.”

Catherine was the first to respond;

“Maintain visibility, do not engage unless they breach the perimeter”

Gary followed the two bikes through his scope. As they progressed between the pools of orange street light illumination, he could clearly see the reflections on the helmets of the riders. He could not however, see any passengers. He depressed his mic button again;

“We’ve lost two. No passengers in sight. Repeat – no passengers.”

The riders dropped gears and slowed as they approached Catherine’s green hatchback. Gary tightened his finger on the trigger of his rifle. He estimated that at this range, mid body shots would be the best option. There was no telling what the density of their helmets would be and the polished surfaces did not present as a favourable target. He resigned himself to the fact that if they came much closer to him, Catherine’s car or the remains of the fence, he would put two shots in each of their

chests.

Gary tensed with anticipation as Matthew's voice crackled in his headphones;

"Bravo Uniform One Three, do you still have visibility?"

Gary relaxed, this was Harry's call sign.

Harry replied immediately;

"Negative. Not enough light. Should I investigate?"

There was a brief pause before Matthew responded.

"Negative One Three. Hold position"

The two riders were now stopped beside Catherine's green hatchback with their engines still running. One of them appeared to be using a mobile phone. Gary couldn't see any devices, but he recognised the stilted body language of someone speaking to an unheard voice.

Lowering his head, he whispered into his microphone;

"Both riders stopped. They're examining the car and conducting sit-rep. Should I engage?"

Again a brief pause, before Catherine replied;

"Negative Golf Alpha, do not engage unless perimeter is breached … or you are engaged"

Gary pressed his button and gave his one word response;

"Understood"

The riders were now talking to each other. Gary could make out a bulge in the leather jacket of the rider closest to him. From the scale, he assessed that it was a machine pistol of some kind, roughly the size of an MP5, possibly a Heckler and Koch, a Glock or maybe even a Beretta. In any event he wasn't planning on letting them get close enough to find out.

Harry was growing restless. He couldn't make out the shape in the first floor window any more and the idea that someone was inside, probably watching him right now, made him feel vulnerable.

He shifted his weight onto his other foot and scanned the ground floor windows. Was there someone in the corner window closest to him, or was he just imagining it? He trained his scope on the centre of the window where the four panes met. If there was anyone there, he would detect any movement behind the pane edges better than he could differentiate between half moonlit reflections in the glass. There was something not quite right about the mass behind the window. It almost looked like the visual distortion associated with a mirage. Harry's mind raced trying to explain what his eyes were seeing. If it was the shape of a person, they wouldn't be able to remain motionless indefinitely. He continued analysing the shape, there was no way he would lose sight of this elusive shimmer a second time.

He watched and waited.

Charles felt his stomach rumbling. It had been more than eight hours since he'd had anything to eat and it didn't look like this unplanned fasting was going to end anytime soon. He reached into his inside pocket and pulled out his mobile phone to check on the time. As the screen lit up, his eye was distracted from the large digital characters clearly showing the twenty four hour clock. There was a symbol he hadn't seen before in the top left hand corner of his device screen and he considered this unusual enough to merit further examination. He opened the application menu and pressed on the Task Manager icon. Quickly scanning down the list of running background apps, he disregarded them one by one as having no relevance to this new icon. Eventually he came to the end of the list without gaining any clearer idea of what this new notification was for. This lack of clarity made Charles even more suspicious, so he pressed his microphone button and said;

"Running system check, will update"

He then exited the midi-van and moved quickly over to Gary's vehicle. Launching the PTT control panel on the central console, he scrolled through the settings menu until he saw the entry titled 'Integrity check'. He activated it and waited. The screen blinked and showed a table with the first column titled 'Devices'. Beside it was a column titled 'Status'. The table was still unpopulated and the progress indicator was furiously spinning underneath. To pass the time Charles started calculating the range of their current perimeter versus the signal strength of the van's antenna. Just as he was getting into the more complex mathematics of offset tolerances for atmospheric RSSI variations, the table blinked and showed the first device to respond. It did not surprise Charles to see the identifier for his own device, after all he was standing in the door of the transmitter van. What did surprise him was the word showing in the 'Status' column. In all the previous tests he'd ever conducted, entries in that column always read "running' or 'offline', but this time it said something quite different and really quite alarming. There was no mistaking the much more challenging word "Anomaly" and it was now appearing against every device the system reported on. Instinctively he reached for his microphone button and then stopped himself just as he was about to press it. If the PTT system was compromised, advertising the fact using the system itself would be a pretty stupid thing to do.

He stepped back from the door of the van, trying frantically to think of what the correct procedure should be. He turned to look at the old pub and the dark hole where the door was. Hoping that Matthew and Gerard could see him from their positions, he pressed three times on the thumb switch on his rifle light and waved it at the pub windows. A distinct tap sounded from each of the corner windows signalling acknowledgement from both Matthew and Gerard. With another press on the torch thumb switch, he activated the fixed beam mode and pointed it at the central console of Gary's vehicle. With his right hand holding the stock of his rifle firmly against his shoulder, he placed his left hand in the beam of the torch and made several lateral cutting motions. A single tap sounded in reply from the window closest to him.

"We've lost comms!" shouted Gerard as he thumped down the stairs.

"Are you sure?" said Catherine, examining her mobile phone, "everything seems to be fine with it."

"Charles just dropped it on us right now, apparently there's something wrong with the system check. From the way he was acting, it's probably not secure." answered Gerard, pulling out his earphones.

"We…. Damn… we need to take it down …right now!" said Catherine, pulling out her own earphones.

Gerard un-holstered his Glock and moved toward the doorway. As he passed the counter top of the bar, he grabbed Dave's industrial torch. Stood to the side of the front doorway, he pointed the light at Charles and the van. He then made a similar cutting motion with the barrel of his sidearm in the path of the torch beam. Charles immediately reached into the cab and held down the power button of the central console. Six seconds later, the PTT system was offline.

Gary heard the low beep in his headphones signifying that the central transceiver was down and he subconsciously bit the inside of his cheek. This put them in a very different position, one which he really didn't want to be in. As he watched the

two riders talking beside Catherine's car, he considered what had gone wrong with the comms. He knew that the system was fully functional this morning. He had conducted the obligatory checks himself before arriving in Perivale and everything had been as it should be. There was no reason to suspect equipment failure or even a flat battery. Gradually Gary accepted that someone had deliberately taken the system offline. The last thing he had heard was Charles announcing a system check, so it was probably him. Whichever way he looked at it, nothing positive could possibly come from being isolated like this. He resisted the urge to get out of the thicket, if he moved now the riders would definitely see him and he would definitely have to engage them. He settled for consciously biting the inside of his cheek and continued observing the leather clad figures in front of him.

Harry was still feeling uneasy, there was something eating away at him and he couldn't understand what it was. The shimmer in the window didn't appear to be going anywhere and he had been watching it intently, waiting for movement. He slowly scanned the first floor windows again, unsure whether what he had been focussing on was the same target he'd spotted earlier. The uncomfortable feeling in his stomach was spreading further with every minute. There was definitely something very wrong with this picture. He started running through what he knew, again. As his mind catalogued his observations, he thought he heard someone talking. Before he could identify whether it was real or some artefact of his imagination, a deafening high pitched whine cut through his head like a white hot scalpel. A split second later he was completely blinded by an intense white light shining straight into his eyes. He stepped back and screwed his eyes shut as he instinctively reached up to pull out his headphones.

His finger's had just closed around the thin cables of the headset when he saw another brilliant flash of light. He then felt himself suddenly falling sideways. The anticipated impact with the ground never came, instead Harry found himself listing slowly through an enveloping and now very dark, world of unconsciousness.

Tareeq had almost recovered from the epinephrine injection. The mineral water that Catherine had given him was finished and its' half litre volume was causing a definite need for him to urinate. Now completely unrestrained, he got out of the bucket seat and tried the handle of the van door. It was locked. "Oh bloody great man, innit" he said to himself, looking around the interior of the body-kitted van. With no other options presenting themselves, he sighed and unscrewed the cap of the empty mineral water bottle. Standing in front of the double rear doors, he supported himself by leaning against the internal van wall and carefully relieved himself into the water bottle. As he stood there answering natures call, he began to recollect the conversation with Bennet on the subject of their planned trip to Rome. They had seats booked on a ten thirty flight out of Heathrow and not only were they flying first class, but Tareeq had even managed to reserve a halal meal. Bennet had asked for the kosher equivalent and been disappointed to discover that none were available. Tareeq had thoroughly enjoyed rubbing Bennet's face in this ethnic cuisine disparity. Not because he had any particularly strong religious feelings on the subject, but just because he felt that Bennet could be a total dick sometimes.

Laughing at the memory of Bennet's displeasure, he finished his use of the improvised urinal, screwed the cap back on tightly and tossed the bottle into the empty bucket seat. He then sat down on the side bench with his feet crossed and felt around in his pockets for his cigarettes.

Dave and Janet had completed their application of the anti-swelling cream. Bennet Hoffman's face was entirely covered in the herb-based white mass and he now resembled an unconscious Michael Myers.

"How long will it take?" asked Catherine, clearly keen to wrap things up.

Janet replaced the lid of the tub and squinted at the miniscule text printed on the side label.

"It won't do anything for at least half an hour" she said, with a shrug.

"Okay, well we don't want to be stuck here without comms." replied Catherine.

"No we certainly don't" chimed Gerard "we've got our arses hanging in the wind here."

Dave was removing his headphones from his mobile phone. He studied the screen while he bunched up the cables of the

headset.

“Here, has anyone else got this weird little triangle showing in their status bar?” he said, holding up his device.

Janet, Gerard and Catherine all looked at their screens.

“Yeah, I’ve got one” said Janet. “and .. erm.. this really isn’t good, it looks like it could be a man in the middle attack”

“Mine too” said Gerard shaking his head. With a tone of disbelief he added “Who the hell is the man in the middle?”

Catherine saw the icon and instantly switched her phone off. She showed the ‘shutting down’ dialogue to the others, while simultaneously placing her index finger to her lips, signalling quiet.

They all acknowledged Catherine’s silent instructions and switched off their devices. Catherine walked quickly among them and collected their mobile phones. She then reached into her organiser handbag and felt around in it. She retrieved a sealed plastic bag with a large silver square inside it. Discarding the plastic bag, she unfolded a substantial zip lock bag made from silver woven fabric. She dropped all four of their phones into it and zipped the bag closed. She turned to face the group and said in a low voice;

“Gerard, go and get Matthew’s phone. Dave, go and find Charles. We’ll need the other two as well … somehow.”

Gerard and Dave complied and quickly moved to recover the compromised equipment.

Harry’s feet bumped across the doorstep of the country club as he was dragged into the utility room of the industrial kitchens. His eyes were closed and his arms hung limp at his sides, the backs of his hands trailing across the tiled floor. His captor shoved him roughly between a stainless steel sink unit and a catering sized dishwasher. In the total darkness of the room, the magazine of Harry’s firearm made a sharp metallic sound as it was detached. There was a brief pause and then the softer sound of a pocket stud snapping shut.

His captor then placed something down on the metal work surface opposite the unconscious Harry Brentford. A jangle of keys sounded and the utility room was partially illuminated by the miniature Maglite attached to the keyring. With a satisfied exhalation, his captor undid the fasteners of his cloak, bundled it up and placed it on the work surface beside his night vision field glasses.

“Okay buddy, let’s see what kinda game you limeys are playin’ here” said a distinctly American accent.

Gary Weycross tasted blood in his mouth, the biting of his cheek and gone well beyond conscious or unconscious and had strayed into some form of masochistic ritual. The riders were preparing to break into Catherine’s car and Gary wasn’t about to standby and let it happen. He didn’t care about Catherine’s no claims bonus or even preserving the integrity of the average priced green hatchback, but he knew that the glove compartment would contain sensitive documents. They could not be allowed to pass into unauthorised hands. He could see a long metal tool in the hands of the rider closest to him, possibly a screw-driver or something similar. He swallowed the trace of blood in his mouth and angled his head slightly, bringing his eye closer to the scope. He aimed at the chromed petrol tank cap of the motorcycle furthest away from the riders and sent two rounds in quick succession.

The first round ripped the cap off along with a sizeable chunk of the petrol tank’s top. The second round hit the tank centrally and removed the majority of it from the frame of the motorcycle. The bike rocked on it’s stand with the petrol splashing out all over the ground. The fuel also sprayed onto Catherine’s car and much to their surprise, the bodies of the leather clad riders. They leaped away from the critically damaged motorcycle, taking shelter behind Catherine’s car. Gary kept his

holographic sights trained on the torso of the rider carrying the concealed MP5. If he made any movements to unzip his leather jacket, Gary was going to make sure that they would be the last movements he ever made.

The two riders were shouting at each other and occasionally looking over the top of Catherine's car. Gary imagined that when they bobbed their heads up and down, they looked a bit like Meerkats or Gophers. He smiled to himself and silently mouthed the words "Whack a mole".

Unclear as to where the shots had come from, the two riders were obviously panicked. Neither of them could see anything identifiable as the source of the gunfire. With their options limited by the darkness, they quickly calculated their response. Gary watched their confusion and considered what their reactions would be, when he destroyed the remaining motorbike.

The riders appeared to have reached an agreement. They both darted out from behind Catherine's car and jumped onto the remaining motorcycle. Within a minute of the first round being fired, they had started the 900cc engine and accelerated away. Gary watched them disappearing through the last patches of street light visibility. He considered whether breaking into Catherine's car had actually constituted engagement and wondered what she would have to say on the subject. She wasn't going to like it, but it would be better than having to account for allowing classified documents to fall into the wrong hands. Gary relaxed slightly and took the opportunity to adjust his seating in the prickly undergrowth.

Harry's captor turned to face the doorway leading from the kitchen. In the doorway he could see the outline of his colleague. He could also see the night vision goggles protruding from underneath his cloak. What he couldn't see properly, was the body or face of this man. He'd learned to avoid looking at the ghostly shimmer as it would potentially cause nausea and disorientation. His colleague stepped into the utility room and looked down at the motionless Harry Brentford.

"Why didn't ya just plug 'im?" he asked.

Harry's captor laughed dismissively and pointed his finger at the shimmer beneath the goggles where his colleague's face should be.

"We're not even supposed be in the country and you wanna start leaving a trail of corpses?"

His colleague was in the process of removing his cloak and had become considerably more visible. He gathered the ends, folded it into a neat square and put it down on the work top. With the external surface facing inward, it now resembled no more than a folded tarpaulin.

"They're all spooks anyway, ain't nobody gonna miss them" he said, looking down at Harry.

Harry's captor was sorting through the items he had retrieved during his rapidly conducted search. He looked at Harry's mobile phone and instantly spotted the triangular icon showing in the status bar. With suddenly brisk movements, he motioned to his colleague to look at the screen. His colleague recognised the icon and reacted by biting his fist. He then made a series of hand gestures to Harry's captor before he turned around and picked up his cape. Reactivating his night vision goggles as he moved, he hastily made his way back into the kitchen of the country club.

Charles reluctantly handed his mobile phone to Dave. He looked at the front of the old pub and raised his eyebrows questioningly. Dave responded with brief hand signals indicating up to an hour's wait time. Charles looked in the direction of the country club, then back at Dave with the same questioning look. With more hand signals and more facial expressions, they rapidly agreed that Dave would remain in Gary's van while Charles went to retrieve Harry's phone.

Charles started quickly moving toward the country club with his firearm raised. He approached the dilapidated shed which had been Harry's last reported position. Silently opening the door, he shone his attached torch at the floor and recognised Harry's boot prints. Following their direction, he moved behind the shed and repeated his downward sweeping action. The moss and clumps of grass showed signs of more than one set of boot prints and what looked very much like the evidence of a

struggle.

Charles felt a mix of emotions including fear, concern and anger. Harry and he had been partners for more years than he could remember and while he found Harry's obsession with food to be quite out of place, he felt sick to his stomach at the thought of Harry being in harms way. Moving with increased stealth, he headed to the nearest entrance of the country club.

As he approached the door to the utility room, Charles saw something move at one of the upstairs windows. He instantly lunged forward and pressed himself against the wall of the country club. Turning to face the location of the movement, he aimed his firearm directly up at the window. He looked through his scope at the ledge beneath and as the clouds parted, he could make out a dark band appearing between the ledge and the bottom of the window frame.

It was opening.

Tareeq stood on his cigarette butt, extinguishing it on the floor of the body kitted van and shouted;

"About bloody time, bruv. You lot is lucky I had a bottle in here."

The rear doors of the body kitted van opened. Tareeq pushed himself off the bench seat and started to stand up. The loading lights above the door frame provided enough light for him to see the darkly dressed form of his would be liberator.

"Bloody starving as well, what's happening with some dinn…"

Tareeq suddenly realised that the man standing at the door of the van wasn't anyone he recognised.

"Who the bloody hell are you?" he shouted.

Without speaking, the darkly dressed man quickly stepped into the rear of the van, pulled the door to and pushed Tareeq back into the bucket seat.

"Sit down and be quiet. If you're lucky you might just make it out of this alive" said the man, flatly.

"No I don't bloody think so bruv" said Tareeq, pulling the still warm bottle out from underneath him.

"You lot leave me in here and I'm supposed to sit and be quiet like a good little boy. I swear down, you dickheads haven't got a bloody clue bruv, not a bloody clue." said Tareeq, waving the yellow bottle at the man. "This isn't what I signed up for, d'you get me?"

Tareeq was quite clearly dissatisfied with the treatment he'd received from the members of the team throughout the day. Unfortunately for him, the darkly dressed man wasn't overly concerned with the performance of the team and even less concerned with Tareeq's emotional state. Any further protestations were cut short as a non telegraphic, two knuckled punch connected with the major blood vessel in the left side of Tareeq's neck. Knocked out for the second time that day, he silently slumped back into the bucket seat. The bottle made a slapping sound as it fell to the ground and rolled at his feet.

Catherine was standing at the entrance to the room above the bar. Placing Matthew's phone in the silver zip lock bag, she nodded at the window and said;

“We’re going to have to get out of here and proceed directly to the handover. What’s Harry and Charles’ status?”

Matthew shook his head and replied, “Without comms, we’ve got no bloody idea. They could be in there cooking up a batch of savoury pancakes for all we know.”

Gerard looked out of the window, also shaking his head;

“They wouldn’t take any chances. The SOP is to regroup if comms go down, so they should have been back by now. Something’s definitely wrong and …. Harry reported seeing someone in that building.”

Catherine looked down at the silver bag full of mobile devices in her hands. Weighing the bag in her hands as if it represented the gravity of the situation, she looked up at Matthew and with her authoritarian tone said;

“I’m going to need you two to go and find them, or … at the very least, recover Harry’s phone”

The last part of her sentence made both Matthew and Gerard feel decidedly uncomfortable. They looked at each other briefly, then purposefully headed for the stairs with their Glock 17’s in their hands.

Catherine walked slowly downstairs. With Matthew and Gerard both gone, she was the only armed person in the building and she needed to have eyes on Bennet Hoffman.

“Where’s Dave?” she asked.

Janet Beckton was studying the display of the portable ECG machine, with a perplexed look she replied;

“I haven’t seen him since you sent him to get the phone off Charles”

It had been over ten minutes since Catherine had sent Dave outside and she felt that there must be something wrong, the van was only a few metres from the door.

“Stay with him” said Catherine nodding at Bennet, “and don’t take your eyes off him.” she added as she walked towards the front doorway of the pub. Opening the flap of her hip pocket, she closed her hand around her Glock 17 and gently felt the trigger under her finger.

Gary Weycross curled his toes inside his boots. Maintaining position in the thicket was starting to cause cramp in both his lower legs. Another five minutes and he could risk getting out to find a better location, he thought.

As he scanned the immediate vicinity for alternative cover, he heard a faint sound coming from the treeline behind him. It sounded like the high pitched scratch of fabric moving against undergrowth. He turned around and leaned deeper into the thorns of the thicket. Without comms he was in a vulnerable position and he wasn’t about to let someone creep up on him from behind. Adjusting the brightness on his scope, he peered into the indistinguishable gloom of the trees. Seeing nothing but endless shadow, he momentarily considered using the mounted torch on his firearm to increase his visibility. But that would be really quite reckless, he thought. If they were hostile, he would be handing himself over on a plate. He held his breath and strained his ears to try and pick up any sound which would indicate their position. There it was again, the distinctive sound of someone moving through the bushes wearing some kind of bulky overcoat, or so he imagined. This time he had a bearing, so he turned the brightness of his scope to the minimum setting and once again peered into the darkness. The moon was behind the area that Gary was examining and he correctly assumed that anyone between him and the treeline would have some small amount of light shining on them. He should definitely be able to see something. But he couldn’t.

Then he heard the sound again, this time it was louder, sharper and definitely closer to him. He made a conscious effort to ignore what his eyes weren't seeing and concentrated on his hearing to estimate the direction the sound was coming from. It was now a continual rasping of material against material. There was definitely someone walking directly towards him and he still couldn't see anything at all. With this potential aggressor practically on top of him, he considered himself to be out of possible options. He quickly pushed the thumb switch on his torch, piercing the darkness with a sudden flood of light. He was expecting to see only one of two things, either someone he recognised from the team, or someone not from his team. In the event of it being the latter, he would probably have to shoot them. Consequently when he didn't see anyone at all, he was quite massively confused. There was something blurry caught in the beam of the torch, but it wasn't a person. Gary couldn't make sense of what was happening and his delay in reacting was exactly what his opponent had been anticipating. A muted thud sounded underneath the cape of his attacker and Gary felt a sharp impact against the right side of his chest. He tried to depress his trigger finger, but the signal from his brain couldn't connect with the nerves in his arm. His toes uncurled and he slumped sideways, his nylon hood catching on the thorns of the thicket as he lost consciousness.

Catherine walked toward Gary's van with her hand still on the sidearm in her pocket. She could see Dave in the drivers seat and waved her free hand to attract his attention. Dave smiled in recognition and opened the door as she approached the van.

"Still waiting for Charles" said Dave, his expression now quite nervous.

"We're proceeding directly to the handover. I need you to go and let Gary Weycross know. I want everyone back here and ready to move out in the next five minutes." said Catherine, not acknowledging Dave's anxiety

"What about Charles and Harry?" asked Dave.

"Matthew and Gerard are taking care of that, I just need everyone here – and I need it to happen now, do you understand Dave?"

Dave nodded and moved quickly in the direction of the treeline.

Catherine turned to head back to the pub. As she passed the side of the ambulance she noticed that the rear door of the body-kitted van was slightly ajar. Frowning she pulled it open and stuck her head inside. The van was empty apart from the mineral water bottle she had given to Tareeq at the service station. It was now lying on the floor and looked very much like it was full of pee. This was not really what Catherine had been expecting. She stepped back from the vehicle and pulled her Glock 17 from her hip pocket. With her finger on the trigger, she quickly moved inside the doorway of the pub and shouted to Janet;

"Tareeq's not in the van, do you know where he is?"

Janet was busily packing up the contents of the green hold all. She looked at Catherine coming through the door and shook her head.

"Maybe someone moved him to another van?" she suggested.

"It's more likely that he's done a runner" said Catherine, frustration clearly showing on her face.

She looked at the motionless form of Bennet Hoffman on the gurney, then turned to face Janet

"Can you drive that thing out there?" she asked.

“Sure, not as fast as Dave, but I get fewer complaints” said Janet, with her trademark sarcastic smile.

“Okay, well get your stuff together and let’s get him secured” said Catherine, looking back at the gurney, “We don’t have a lot of time left and we’ve got …. “

“Our arses hanging in the wind?” interrupted Janet.

“Yes Janet, we certainly do and I don’t know about you, but I think I’ve had enough of having a draughty arse for one day”

Janet nodded and zipped the green hold all closed. Placing the substantial bag on the bar, she said to Catherine;

“Are you okay to watch him while I get the tail lift down?”

Catherine nodded casually, she was only half paying attention as she ran through the details of the situation in her mind. Things were getting to be quite seriously out of control, she’d lost contact with the majority of her team and now it looked like she’d also lost a high value operative.

Dave emerged from the trees and spotted the shape of Catherine’s green hatchback silhouetted against the street lights of the roundabout. As he approached the hole in the fence he noticed something moving quickly away from the hatchback. He stopped to look more closely. It wasn’t that he thought he might have been mistaken, he was quite certain that he’d seen something move. But he couldn’t work out what it was. It was roughly about the size of a person, but nothing about it made any sense to him. There was definitely nobody standing there, yet all his instincts were screaming at him that something was wrong. Looking around for somewhere to hide, he noticed the thicket next to the fence. He ducked and quickly moved over to the cluster of bushes, keeping his eyes on the green hatchback where he had seen the movement. Reaching the outer canopy of the thorn bushes, he almost fell on top of the unconscious Gary Weycross.

“Jesus Gary, what the hell are ..”

Dave’s question was cut short by the sound of Catherine’s fuel tank rupturing. The explosion ripped the car in half and sent the damaged motorcycle tumbling across the lanes of the roundabout. The surprise caused Dave to instinctively dive for cover and he tumbled into the thicket beside Gary. He lay there motionless as burning fuel and pieces of fibreglass fell around the two halves of the once green hatchback.

Catherine heard the explosion from inside the pub. Raising her sidearm, she ran to the entrance of the doorway. Janet was in the middle of lowering the tail gate and was looking in the direction of the treeline.

“What the hell was that?” she said.

“If I had to guess, I’d say it was my car” answered Catherine, “any sign of the others?”

“No and didn’t you just send Dave up there?” said Janet, looking at the treeline with concern.

“I had no choice, we need everyone back here now and we need to get moving” snapped Catherine, gradually realising that she had now completely lost control of the situation.

Gerard and Matthew both heard the explosion and looked at each other. Whatever had caused it, they were too far away to assess the situation accurately and still needed to locate Charles and Harry. Silently they moved out from behind the gardening shed with their sidearms raised. They rapidly approached the door of the utility room, if Charles and Harry were both still alive, the chances were that they'd be inside. The tracks behind the shed had given them both reason to suspect otherwise, but until they knew for certain they would proceed on the basis that this was a rescue, not a recovery.

The moon was shining through the rear window of the utility room and as their eyes adjusted to the reflected light of the tiled interior, Gerard shouted "There!".

Charles and Harry were both sitting on the floor, motionless. Gerard already had his hand on Harry's neck. Matthew did the same to Charles and as soon as they both felt a pulse, they turned and gave each other a look of relief.

Matthew stood up quickly;

"Whoever they are, they're trying pretty hard not to kill us" he said.

"These two wouldn't have been a walk in the park either" agreed Gerard.

SBL NEWS

GreenFord Robbery

Greenford Road was closed on Thursday as a result of a robbery at the premises of E.G Ward.

A hooded man wearing a face mask entered the Greenford jewellers at around 10:45 AM and demanded that staff empty the display cases. While no weapons were used, it is believed that the thief was carrying pepper spray or some other noxious chemical.

Numerous high value items were stolen in this highly audacious endeavour. The thief was able to complete the robbery and make his way out of the premises before police arrived. However as a result of information received from members of the public by Greenford Broadway police, a suspect was taken into custody on Friday morning. Traffic on Greenford Road became gridlocked in the aftermath. Local resident Oksana Protaziuk described the scene;

"*I feel sorry for the staff from the shop, it must have been horrible. I was walking to the dry-cleaners in the high street when a man carrying a bin bag came running past. Everybody on the pavement was pointing at him and there was an alarm going off. When he ran across the road, the buses stopped and the road got blocked. This is usually a quiet part of London, it's very surprising to see this kind of trouble."*

With Greenford Road blocked in both directions, motorists attempted to use side streets to find a route past the congestion. As a result Oakfield Gardens, The Broadway and Ruislip Road East were all gridlocked for several hours.

SBL News contacted Greenford Community policing and were given the following statement;

"*As a result of information received from a member of the public, we arrested a 28 year old man at a Perivale address on Friday morning. Following a search of the property, officers retrieved the majority of the items stolen from E G Ward. Investigations are still ongoing, however at this time we do not expect to make any further arrests"*

Members of the public who may have witnessed the incident or have information should contact Greenford police station, dial 101 or call Crime Stoppers on 0800 555 101

Laughing gas site shut down

A collaboration between police and Royal Mail lead to the closing down of a darkweb site on Tuesday last week. Following reports of mail fraud received by Royal Mail, officers from West Ealing coordinated with various agencies including the National Cyber Security Centre to issue a take down notice and seize equipment.

Numerous customers of ‘Flying High’ (an established .onion website) complained to Royal Mail when their orders were not delivered. The majority of the orders were for packs of NO2 cannisters. While it is not illegal in the UK to possess nitrous oxide, also known as laughing gas, sales of the gas have recently come under review due to potentially harmful side effects. Home Secretary Priti Patel ordered a review of the sale of nitrous oxide in September 2021.

Used as an anaesthetic, a motoring accessory and a propellant for food products, NO2 has become increasingly popular among young people for recreational usage. In the 2013/14 Crime Survey for England and Wales, 7.6% of 16-24 year olds admitted to having used NO2 within the past year. Inhalation of the gas causes euphoria in most people and some users have even reported hallucinations. With the increased popularity, various negative side effects have come to the attention of the NHS and the Home Office. Occasional usage is not considered hazardous, however certain people have experienced fainting, low blood pressure and even heart attacks. Long term users are at risk of damaging their bone marrow and developing serious neurological issues.

SBL News spoke to a teenage resident of West Ealing who now has a debilitating nervous system condition as a result of using NO2. Their name has been omitted;

“*I never thought I’d end up like this. Everybody thinks it’s just a good way to have a laugh with your mates, but it can really mess you up. I used to play five-aside but now I can’t run at all and it takes me half an hour to walk to the bus stop on the other side of my block. My doctor told me that they hope some new medicines will be invented to help, but right now there’s nothing”.*

The operators of Flying High were served with take down notices two weeks ago. The website was taken offline in response however it is believed that the operators simply moved their business to another marketplace. As a result officers from West Ealing police station visited business premises in Ealing Broadway on Tuesday. Officers confiscated computer equipment including servers used to host the darkweb marketplace and hard drives thought to contain records of transactions.

SBL News obtained the following statement from a West Ealing police spokesperson;

“*As a result of information received from Royal Mail, we launched an investigation into the activity of this supplier. When the scale of the business was established, additional support from the NCSC allowed us to identify the physical location of the marketplace. We would like to take this opportunity to point out the potentially dangerous consequences of using nitrous oxide as a recreational drug. Like most medicines, use of NO2 should only ever be used under supervision by a healthcare professional.”*

At this time it is not known if the operators of the closed down business will be facing charges.

Defective fireworks seized by police

A shop in Southall had thousands of fireworks confiscated by police on Thursday.

Complaints from residents on the Havelock Estate lead officers from Southall police station to a ‘pop-up’ shop on Western Road. The offending products were all from the same manufacturer and police removed all fireworks made by the overseas company.

School cleaner and mother of three Fatima Abdulahi told SBL News how concerned she was over the safety of the fireworks;

“*It starts in October around Halloween time and goes right through Diwali into the New Year. Sometimes we can hear people letting them off in the middle of the day. This year my sons bought some of the mortar packs and set them off in the garden. They started normally but when they got close to the end of the pack, lots of the tubes fired very quickly and the last ones went off all at the same time. My oldest son picked up one of the used mortar packs and it disturbed some tubes which had not fired. It gave us all a nasty shock and burned his hand quite badly.”*

More than ten thousand people are injured by fireworks in the UK each year. In 2020 at least eighteen people were killed in the UK as a result of fireworks accidents.

Asif Khan from WillowBrook Road criticised firework buyers for being irresponsible;

“*We have problems with some people who like to hang around in the allotments. They obviously don’t have anything better to do than stand around in the cold all night, letting off boxes full of cheap fireworks. It’s very annoying, especially when they start competing with other pyromaniacs letting them off on the other side of the canal”.*

Vendors of fireworks are required to obtain licenses from the Trading Standards Dept. or the Fire Service. The Western Road vendor has not had their license revoked as the fault was found to be with the products, which were supplied by a wholesaler. Police also visited several other vendors in the area but no further confiscations took place.

Any readers having purchased the Emca Inc. ‘Master Blaster’ mortar packs are encouraged to hand them in to their local police station or Fire station.

CHAPTER 12 – Flowering

“Do you think they’ll be returning before we’re packed away?” asked Petula.

Christabel and Jocasta looked at each other and then quickly returned to studying their cards.

“It’s just not what I was expecting really.” continued Petula.

“I’m sure they’ll be back as soon as possible” said Clive, not looking up from his hand.

“You could go and fetch them Clive, if you actually wanted to help” replied Petula, beginning to raise her voice.

Clive stared uncomfortably at his cards. He’d had quite enough of the third degree earlier and he really didn’t relish the prospect of any more. Whatever Giles and Tarquin were discussing at the bottom of the garden was nothing to do with him, he hoped.

“Yes, I think that’s an absolutely super idea” chimed in Christabel, “Go on Clive, be a good sport and tell them to hurry up.”

Clive nervously considered his options. On the one hand he could continue blocking the request of his wife and risk further heckling from the Cholmondley ladies. He would also have to endure the cold shoulder from his wife for the rest of the night, or possibly even the rest of the week. On the other hand, he could risk interrupting Giles and Tarquin in the middle of something which was obviously extremely serious. Giles would probably be quite angry and Clive really didn’t want to trigger him into saying the wrong thing in front of Tarquin. It was an utterly impossible situation, he thought to himself as he peered at the jack of hearts in his hand. Finally he laid his cards face down and rose from his chair.

“Right you are, you salty old sea dogs” he said with a forced smile as he headed for the back door.

Striding across the bamboo decking, Clive peered into the darkness of the garden. He couldn’t see either of them, but he could definitely hear Tarquin talking quite quickly and Giles trying to shut him up. He decided that announcing his presence in advance would probably be the best thing to do and cleared his throat in an overly loud manner.

“Just give us a minute Clive.” said Giles, almost hiding his growing impatience.

“Yes Very Sorry Clive! Oh and could you see your way clear to bringing that bottle of Absinthe in the kitchen - on your way back!” shouted Tarquin maniacally.

Clive waved in agreement and headed back across the decking. Tarquin was definitely getting into a bit of a state, what with all the cognac that he and Giles had consumed before the game. He could tell that whatever had been going on between the two of them, hadn’t been remedied by several bottles of 40% spirits. Clive had never tried Absinthe but he’d heard that it was quite strong. Something to do with Van Gogh’s missing ear and tankards full of the stuff. Maybe he’d try it out tonight, he thought.

“I didn’t do this all on my own bloody initiative - as you well know” said Tarquin, gripping his empty glass.

“Yes yes, I do know that. But it doesn’t really make any difference right now Tarquin. Things have obviously been set in motion, do you understand?” explained Giles, somewhat exasperated.

Tarquin paced up and down in front of the disassembled gazebo, rubbing his forehead.

“But I mean … can’t we just close it down and walk away... somehow?” he pleaded.

“That’s what I’m saying.” answered Giles, “We were already in the process of closing it down and trying to walk away. But then we basically got caught squarely in the headlights, you do see that don’t you Tarquin?”

“You always do this Giles, it always lands on me. It’s a different bloody story when everything’s working properly. Oh yes, then it’s dinner at Blenheim for Giles and pats on the bloody back all round.” complained Tarquin, kicking at the pile of Fife brick.

“Look, there’s nothing to be gained at this point from playing the blame game Tarquin. So just calm down, have another drink and we’ll go back in and continue with the bridge match, shall we?” said Giles. He was getting really quite tired of managing Tarquin’s behaviour but he didn’t want him blurting out any more work related issues in the middle of his bid.

“Yes, sure sure.. wouldn’t want to ruin a bridge match over something as trivial as my … I mean, all of our – lives” said Tarquin, correcting himself.

“Now come on old bean, getting dramatic about things isn’t going to help. Look there’s Clive now with the reinforcements”

Clive stepped down from the decking and approached them with a tall green bottle and and a glass.

“Right, here we are then, who’s for a top up?” he said, jovially.

Giles and Tarquin both offered their glasses enthusiastically, as Clive broke the seal.

“Aren’t we supposed to set it on fire or something?” he asked. “I didn’t see any matches”

“Just skip the theatrical nonsense and fill it right up, if you’d be so kind” replied Giles, gesturing impatiently with his empty glass.

With glasses filled to the brim, the three of them stood and stared into the dense woods separating the DeRochforts garden from Belvue Park.

“What’s in that big clump of trees Tarquin, anything interesting?” asked Clive

“Why don’t you go and take a bloody look if you’re so interested” snapped Tarquin.

Clive looked down, he had been trying to lighten the tone and Tarquin’s response was quite unexpected. He began to wonder if Giles had already said something.

“Steady on Tarquers” said Clive “I wasn’t trying to start a ruck.”

Giles frowned at Tarquin. Tarquin didn’t care and wasn’t paying attention anyway, he was staring into the trees with a deranged look on his face as if he could see some form of salvation between the Elms.

“Yes, ease up a bit there old chum” said Giles “and calm down with that bloody Swiss grog will you? It’s not exactly a rum and coke.”

“Right … of course.. big clump...” said Tarquin, still staring madly into the trees.

Clive remembered what Giles had said about Tarquin’s stress levels at work. With that demented look on his face he looked like he might very well have gone, as Giles had put it, right over the bloody edge.

“Need a top up, anyone?” said Clive, trying to stop thinking about what might be happening.

For once, Giles had the majority of his glass still remaining. He shook his head and looked back up at the house. “We should probably get back in, they’ll be about ready to have us flayed by now.”

Tarquin wasn’t listening, he’d had the beginnings of an idea that could potentially save them all from the impending catastrophe he’d been imagining for several hours.

“What are you thinking Tarquin?” asked Giles, moving into Tarquin’s fiendish glare as he sipped his Absinthe.

Tarquin snapped out of his fugue state and looked Giles straight in the eye;

“The bloody island” he said, beginning to smile.

Giles began to frown and then as recognition spread across his face, he reversed the direction of his eyebrows and grinned.

“My God, you’re a bloody genius Tarquin. Have I ever told you that?”

“Not nearly enough” said Tarquin as he walked purposefully toward the house.

“What island? What are you two talking about?” asked Clive as he hurriedly fell into step behind Giles.

“Never mind Clive, just work stuff. You know how it is” answered Giles, dismissively.

Clive did not know how it was, but he was certainly glad it was work stuff and not wife stuff. So he politely agreed and said no more as the three of them walked back across the decking.

"The Inn Joke" continues in book two - The Petersham Eight