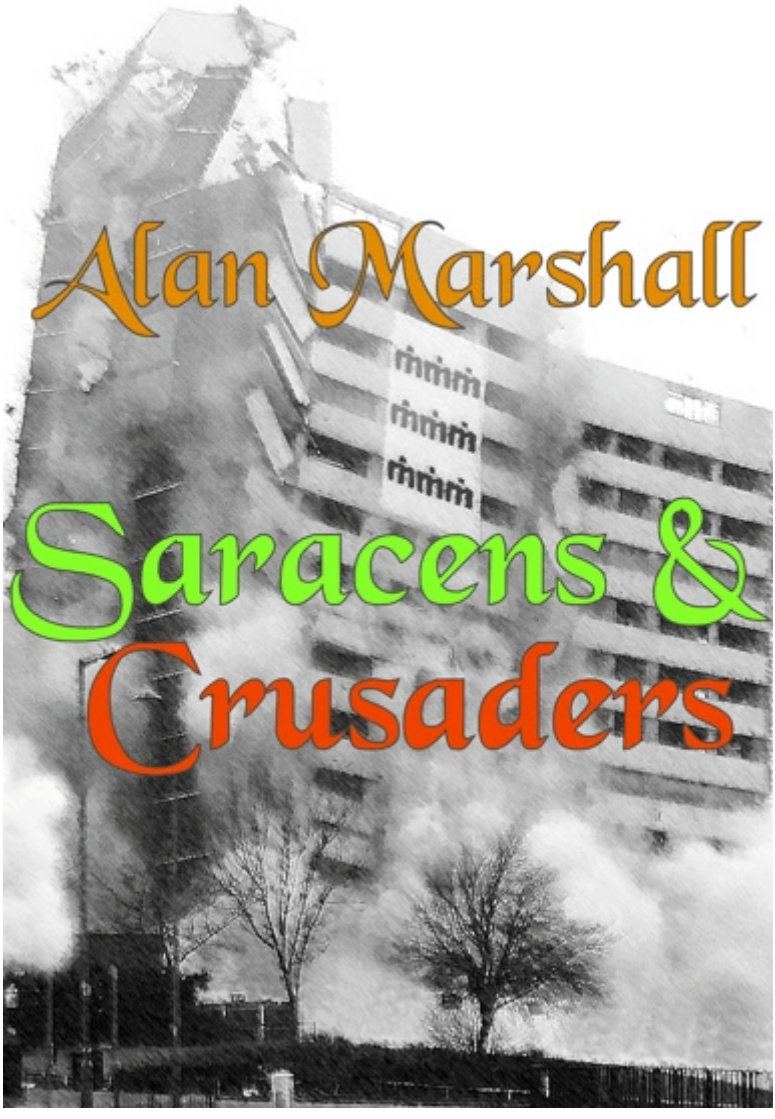



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# Saracens & Crusaders

## Alan L. Marshall

This novel contains a psychological study of the effects of arbitrary justice applied to a community with a high endemic crime rate. Instead of the lengthy process of the law, retribution comes on the same timetable as a crime – at the convenience of the vigilantes. Just as the victim has little control over the seriousness of the crime, so the penalty imposed may be extreme compared to the normal demands of the conventional legal process.

Local-born Gavin Murdoch and Lance Robbijohn, and their allies, are involved in a competition without contact to make life more enjoyable in the city of Hambourne. Their common method is to providing improvements without reference to the conventional holders of power; the police and the officers and local councillors at the town hall.

Murdoch plans to get inside the system while Robbijohn and his friends have to remain anonymous as they are being hunted by criminals with infinitely greater power and resources than they command.

Why did I call the book *Saracens & Crusaders*? Well, mainly because both belligerents of the Crusades; the home side and the visitors; thought that they were completely right and justified in everything that they did, and that their every act was the will of their God.

And also because one lot was little different from the other.

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If those charged with maintaining law and order and upholding the rights of the common citizen are unable, or unwilling, to fulfill their obligations, then champions will spring forward to fill the breach – seldom with entirely pure motives.

Oliver Devrill Parker
*– speech from the scaffold, July, 1813.*

# ONE

## On Looking Back From A New Life . . .

Looking towards the north-west from the upper floor of the motorway services complex, Arthur Hobday could see bright yellow JCBs pecking away at the grimy concrete monster known locally as *Mossy Castle*. Brenda, his wife, who had given up plucking silver strands from originally dark hair, wore a half-smile of 'pleasure through distance' as she gazed toward the gloomy, decaying barrack-block of council flats. Arthur's expression was more serious.

Arthur was a journalist by trade. One of his best jobs, when working for the Hambourne Express, had been his series on the discovery by a demolition team of a so-called *People's Prison* in Mossy Castle. Arthur Hobday knew, but he was unable to prove, that there was another undiscovered people's oubliette somewhere in that concrete lump, which was being ground away in sections but which would remain imposing even after the current phase of obliteration was completed.

The area where Hobday had grown up presented radically different aspects from each of the five surrounding hills. Those to the north had a view of the remaining Victorian buildings; thousands of blackened, ruddy blocks put together to create gigantic block-shapes with regular banks

of windows. The monumental brick structures created streets that were harmonious and boring from a distance, but full of individual style and decoration from pavement level.

They were also the wrong size and shapes for modern living, and therefore doomed. Massive headquarters buildings for clearing banks, office blocks and the shopping centre had carved a chaotic path from east to west across the middle of the city.

The prospect was calculated to bring the heir to the British throne to the full flood of indignation. It had prompted many unfavourable comparisons with the town-planning policy of Adolf Hitler's Luftwaffe. The notorious city planners of the Sixties had created Moss Park Flats in the south-eastern corner of the city.

Seen from a motorway café atop a 250-foot hill, the structure looked like a crumbling fortification, which had been built to guard the town from motorized invaders.

Successive Labour-dominated city councils had spent fifteen years discussing ways to tackle a city-size social problem. Court proceedings brought by a tenants' action committee had eventually forced the council to do more than talk. Expansion and contraction of steel frame-members had opened long cracks in the fabric of the residential complex, allowing damp to invade the flats, which were also plagued by condensation and problems with black mould due to high heating costs and a lack of proper ventilation.

The city council's options for tackling the many problems had come down to a straight fight between repair versus evacuation and demolition.

An exodus to Beechley New Town, eight miles away, had accelerated Mossy Castle's decline into pockets of decent people stuck in a haunt of squatters, criminals, drug addicts and drug dealers. Arthur Hobday was one of the few people

who knew that Mossy Castle's history was even blacker than it had been painted. His suspicions had been aroused during the first phase of demolition, which had been a trial aimed at finding out the cost to knock the whole lot down.

Huge crowds had gathered in sunny, late spring to watch the contractors destroy the north-eastern corner of the oblong structure. Scavengers had sneaked in at night, looking for copper pipes and anything else of value. One of them had found the eight bodies. Five of the men had been dead for some considerable time, just bones with tightly stretched skin. The others had been killed when their cells in a people's prison had collapsed onto them.

All eight were assumed to be criminals. Four had police records. The others could not be identified. All eight had just dropped out of sight. No one could say when.

The identifiable dead were all people who had 'gone walk-about' occasionally. No one had bothered to ask where they had gone. The police had been unable to fix a last sighting to within a couple of months, or discover who had taken them out of circulation.

Arthur Hobday had lived for seven years on the seventh floor of Bevan Court, one of the many nominal sub-divisions of Mossy Castle. His parents had moved out of a two-up, two-down slum into a comfortable, new flat. They had moved on to their own suburban semi-detached house, glad to get away from thin walls, noisy neighbours, a couldn't-care-less attitude over common facilities and growing bands of wreckers. Their son had retained threads of contact with school friends who had remained, and strengthened those bonds when he had joined the Hambourne Express.

Arthur Hobday had developed a talent for spinning together material from several different sources so that it seemed to come from another direction, thus preserving the

anonymity of the people who leaked secrets to him. He had crafted a reputation as a skilled investigator over the years. His many contacts at Mossy Castle had kept him in touch with a main pulse of the area's criminal circles. He knew now that he had allowed the familiar to cloud the true state of affairs.

It was in the interests of many groups to maintain the fearsome reputation of the Moss Park Flats. The Labour-controlled city council hoped to screw the cost of rehousing and demolition out of central government using emotional blackmail. Respectable tenants used the same tactic to get away from the squatters and criminals. The *illegals* worked on their image in the hope of keeping the police, DSS investigators, equally ruthless debt collectors and bailiffs out of their no-go castle.

A radical change in the character of Mossy Castle had come home to Arthur Hobday after the discovery of the bodies. Traditionally, crime statistics for the area were judged pretty worthless because a great deal of crime went unreported. Victims knew that they had no hope of recovering stolen goods, even if they knew who the thief was. Reporting a beating-up merely invited more of the same. Crime was a fact of life, something to be endured. Complaints were not worth the time, the broken windows, the abuse and worse.

After the discovery of the bodies, Hobday had realized that he was hearing fewer routine complaints about muggings and burglaries; the sorts that were made in pubs between complaints about the weather and other matters beyond human control. He had noticed that petty crooks were becoming more furtive and very reluctant to talk about their exploits.

One young man, a borderline drug addict, had mentioned

that someone had asked him how he would like to be locked up in a People's Prison until he reformed.

The remark lingered in Hobday's mind for several days. It linked in with more talk than usual of vigilante patrols along the lines of the American *Guardian Angels*.

There had been talk of establishing a corps of blue-bereted 'witnesses' on the Metro tram system, who would have some of the functions of UN peace-keepers. They would have no special powers of arrest or restraint. The *Hambourne Angels* would merely ride the system where the crime rate was highest and deter criminals by recording what they did and giving an account of their actions in court.

The city council was still arguing the pros and cons of endorsing the *Angels* but it was an indisputable fact that some sort of vigilante culture had been established in the city. The vigilantes had not united as a single, large group but the facts made it clear that several small, independent teams were operating all over the city, and the stories about their exploits were creating local vigilante awareness.

When someone other than his drug addict contact had mentioned, half joking, that the *People's Republic of Mossy Castle* had its own prison system, Hobday tried to go back to his original source. By then, the young man had not been seen for over a week.

Her husband spent a month digging into Mossy Castle's varied society, attempting to define the recent changes, before Brenda Hobday returned from a shopping trip to find eight milk bottles of fresh, liquid blood on the dining table. The typed note with them read: 'Spill these and you make a mess of your carpet. Spill this much of your blood and you make a mess of your life.'

One of the national newspapers had expressed an interest in Hobday's style of investigative journalism. Taking a new

job in London's restyled dockland seemed the sensible way out. The threat was too real and yet too vague for the Hobdays to fight it.

If some shadowy organization had the power to put criminals out of circulation in a people's prison; and put milk bottles of blood in the home of a nosy journalist; then Arthur Hobday had two choices. He could stand and fight, and go for the story of the mysterious vigilantes no matter the cost to himself and his wife, or he could better himself in London.

He had been *Down South* for three years now, doing quite well, struggling with a London mortgage and thanking his lucky stars that he had not tried to crash into the Southern property market any later. Whenever he and his wife visited their parents, or a solo business trip took him along that stretch of the M88, Arthur Hobday always stopped at those services for an elevated view of southern Hambourne and the area that had been his home for so many years.

About half of Mossy Castle had gone since *Phase One* of the demolition, three years before. As he watched the bright yellow diggers shifting rubble that had once been people's homes, Arthur Hobday slippered an arm round his wife's shoulders and wondered what new secrets would be exposed.

He was part of a team on his new paper. The investigators received threats, but always from an identifiable source and the load was spread on many backs. The group stiffened the resolve of each individual. None of the threats had had the impact of eight bottles of fresh blood placed in the victim's home by someone who had caused no damage getting in or out, and who had not been seen by neighbourhood watchers.

There were grim secrets in Mossy Castle. Anyone who revealed them would be a braver, or more reckless, man than Arthur Hobday. He had run from a situation in which harm

to his wife or himself could have come from any direction; from the man or woman standing next to them in a shop, from someone in the street, or while driving, or from anywhere.

The Hobdays had discussed the problem through three fairly sleepless nights. They could live comfortably with their solution. It was not something that they would ever discuss with a third party but it was a logical response to the threat. The Express had not been paying Arthur enough to become involved with really dangerous people, who were only doing the job that regulations prevented the police from doing.

Arthur Hobday felt that if only criminals were suffering as a result of their own actions, then salvation for the wrongdoers lay in their own hands.

In the meantime, he and his wife had escaped from a city which had wasted rate-payers money on erecting signs showing the dove of peace and bearing the legend: *Hambourne - A Nuclear-Free Zone*; to which a local with a paint aerosol had added the reply: *Hambourne - A Crap-Free Zone. Don't You Just Wish!*

# TWO

## The Flasher

Donald Champion, fat and fifty, was on his way from the bathroom to the front room when the doorbell rang. He carried straight on down the central hall of the flat. The caller rattled the letterbox for good measure just before he reached the door. A man of about half his age in a limp, black-leather car-coat was looking up and down the landing.

He had the characteristic hunted look of a visitor to what was left of the Moss Park Flats. His smile was friendly but strained. He showed a plastic-sealed card with his picture and explained why he had ventured unto such notorious ground.

Donald Champion opened the door on the right and pushed half of his bulk into the front room. "Terry!" He turned a fat thumb over his broad shoulder. "Bloke from the Express wants a word."

"He can have two, and the second one's *off*." Terry Champion remained sitting in his armchair, facing the television. The reporter could see him through the lace-curtained window. The young man's voice was full of uncertain defiance.

"I'm Rob Formby," the visitor said over the father's other shoulder. His editor had ordered him not to be backward about coming forward. "I need your side of things, Terry. If

you don't talk to me, all I've got is her version. How about it?"

"Quite right," said Donald Champion. "Then you've got no bloody excuse for getting it wrong, have you?"

"All right." Terry Champion pointed the remote controller at the television and turned the sound down. He was the youngest of a family of three. His brother and sister lived in other parts of the complex of council flats.

"D'you mind if we put this on tape?" Robin Formby took a cassette recorder from a patch pocket and put it on the arm of his chair. There was a smell of frying in the air. He could see dishes stacked on the dining table beyond a room divider.

Donald Champion dropped heavily onto the settee beside his son and gave him an encouraging nudge.

"Suppose you tell me what happened, right from the start?" prompted Formby. "It was three days ago. Friday morning?"

"I couldn't believe it at first." Terry Champion divided his attention between reporter and recorder.

"You've got a window-cleaning round?" said Formby.

"Right. With three mates. This cop car stopped us in the afternoon and they hauled me off to the cop shop. I was there for over an hour before they told me what it was about. This big copper kept getting angry, and he kept threatening to drag the truth out of me."

"Like they do on telly," said Donald Champion. "I had to have a word with 'im, the copper," he added importantly.

"Do you know his name?" said Formby.

"Sergeant James," said Terry. "He were bloody big. Bigger than Dad."

"Yes, I know him." Formby noted that the young window cleaner was slightly built and he had a cheeky face. He was

no match for the intimidating physique of Sergeant Derek James in an interview room.

Terry was built for running away.

"Anyway," said Terry, "when I wouldn't confess, he told me it'd save a lot of time if I told the truth. It was all a joke. He wanted me to say that: it was all a joke."

"And you had an hour of intimidation before he told you why you'd been arrested? What the joke was, in fact?"

"Right. Some old bag phoned them on Friday morning. Said I'd bloody flashed her." Terry flushed beneath a deep, summer tan.

"A Mrs. Gloria Berry, forty-three Kincardine Road. Do you know her?"

"No," said Terry, his tone suggesting that he did not want to know her either.

"Me neither," added his father. "The vicious old bag."

"I was doing the upstairs that day," said Terry. "Ted was doing the downstairs and collecting the money. I never even saw her."

"But she saw you, evidently. She described you accurately to the police."

"That's not right," said Terry hotly. "We found out all she said to the cops was the one with black hair done it. Ted and Ron have got fair hair, and Barry was wearing a woolly hat."

"So the police have been building their case up a bit. But you're sure you weren't cheeky to her, or anything?"

"I never even saw the old bat! And we don't go round being cheeky to customers. We've got a job to do."

"So you don't know why she picked on you?" Formby put on a conciliatory tone to cool the discussion.

"We reckon she must be mental," said Donald Champion. He was a big eater and a big drinker with a heavy face and greying hair. He was topping off his dinner with a couple or

three cans of lager. There was very little family resemblance between father and son.

"So what happened at the police station in the end?" said Formby.

Terry Champion took a mouthful of lager from his can. From the angle of tilt, Formby estimated that he had drunk about an inch and a half in the time his father had taken to polish off the better part of two cans.

"This inspector said they'd let me out on bail. I have to go back the day after tomorrow to find out if they're going to charge me."

"We went round the Law Centre," added his father. "They reckon she hasn't got a leg to stand on. She hadn't got any witnesses because he didn't do it, so it's just her word against his. And he's never been in trouble, ever."

"The woman said they'll probably give me a warning and say they're not taking it any further," said Terry.

"So you're not too worried?" said Formby.

Terry shrugged "Not really. But it's no fun being hauled off to the cop shop for no reason."

"I suppose you've had some stick from your mates?"

"No more than a lot. What are you going to put in the paper?"

"What I'm doing is gathering background information in case it goes to court. If it doesn't, we won't print it. You're twenty-three, right?"

Rob Formby was just a couple of years older despite his air of weary maturity.

Terry nodded. "Yeah."

"It's her should be going to court, not my lad," said his father. "What's it going to do to his job if women tell him they don't want him round any more? In case he flashes their kids?"

"Daaad!" Terry drew the word out in anguished embarrassment.

"There's going to be trouble if they try warning him and let her off free," persisted Donald Champion.

"So that's about it?" Formby said to Terry Champion. "There's nothing in her allegation? And the third degree from Sergeant James didn't make you confess?"

"That's another bloody thing," said Donald Champion. "The way he was going on, it's bloody obvious he thought my lad did it."

"You mean, he didn't conduct an impartial investigation?"

"He was on her side right from the start," said Terry. "It's not right. The woman at the Law Centre said we should make a complaint. She gave us some leaflets."

"Right, I think that about does it." Formby switched off the cassette-recorder. "Thanks for the info."

The television sound swelled as Formby approached the front door. He exchanged good-nights with the father and turned left along the walkway to the lift, which was working, to his surprise. The interior of the flat had looked pleasant enough, even if the area left a lot to be desired.

Formby was on the shorter, southern side of Mossy Castle. There was some litter blowing around the balding rectangle of grass the size of two football fields, but less than he had expected. A tall fence closed the northern side, where the worst flats had been demolished. It allowed the inmates to see out, but it prevented outsiders from wandering in.

Wooden shuttering closed a great many doors and windows on the western and eastern sides to keep vandals and squatters out of empty flats. The current plan for the Moss Park Flats was to demolish the remaining corners and repair structurally sound units at the centres of the three sides. With everything tied up in the limbo of planning, the

council had a good excuse for not painting any exteriors.

Graffiti sprawled everywhere. Names of football teams, gangs, individual symbols and general abuse formed a multi-coloured panorama. There was something different about this display, however, but Robin Formby couldn't identify it. There was something elusively strange about Moss Park Flats.

Kids were kicking balls around on the grass, despite the vandalized notices prohibiting ball games. There were the usual groups of teenagers hanging around, casting menacing looks at strangers. Everything matched Formby's expectations – but it was also different.

By coincidence, he had parked his car on Kincardine Road, a quarter of a mile away, at the other end from Mrs. Berry's house. He had heard stories about things happening to cars left unattended near Mossy Castle. The owner was liable to come back to find his vehicle propped up on bricks, minus wheels, including the spare, the radio and any other detachable parts – and possibly with smashed windows and severely scratched bodywork. There was a strong strand of Socialist envy in the area, which insisted that if everybody didn't have a car, nobody was entitled to have one.

The sky darkened dramatically as Formby drove a quarter of a mile to *The Greyhound*. Thunder crashed overhead as he entered the pub. Jenny Hobson, umbrella dripping, arrived when he was half way down his pint. Formby watched her buy a half-pint of lager and lime.

She was on the small side with a thin face and limp, dark hair in need of a reviving wash. Hobson projected an image of a woman who was small and tough rather than elfin and in need of male protection.

She propped the umbrella against the bench seat and hung her wet raincoat on a handy chair. She had a pale face

despite a generally sunny summer, and a defeated look which she used to win sympathy from unco-operative members of the public.

She took cigarettes and matches out of her handbag and lit a cigarette while the head of the match was still flaring. "Bloody weather!" she sighed through a streamer of smoke.

"What did you get from Gloria Berry, fifty-two, widow of this parish?" said Formby, looking smug and dry.

"He's a real cheeky sod, your window cleaner. You know he's done it twice before? Flashed her? Mrs. B. couldn't believe her eyes the first time."

"On account of the great size? Or did it have stripes?"

"In the end, she thought she had to do something about it."

"Mr. Champion, twenty-three, pleads innocence. And a dose of police brutality."

"Well, he would, wouldn't he?"

"The same applies to your old bat. This reporter's nose detected a convincing air of sincerity from the Champions. Despite the lager fumes, which I wasn't invited to share. Not to mention a genuine sense of grievance."

"This reporter got the same from Mrs. Berry."

"Do I detect a deviation from true objectivity in your tone?" Formby asked with a grin.

"Well, it's not exactly pleasant, being flashed by some cheeky sod of a window cleaner."

"I don't know, might put some colour in our widow-woman's cheeks. Sergeant James at the cop shop took the same attitude as you. It's alleged he went straight for the throat instead of the facts. Still, it probably won't come to anything. A woman at the Law Centre . . ."

"I take it this *woman* was a fully qualified solicitor? Not just a female person who'd wandered in off the street?"

"Whatever. Anyway, she told the Champions that if it's just Terry's word against your Mrs. Berry's, and as he's got no prior history of doing it, they'll let him off with a caution?"

"A caution?" scoffed Jenny Hobson.

"That was Mr. Champion senior's exact reaction. What if he really is innocent, though? A victim of a sexually frustrated woman with an over-active imagination?"

"What if he isn't?"

"The way things are going, no one's ever going to find out, Jen. Terry's thinking about making a complaint about the way Sergeant James treated him. That should cloud the issue nicely."

"Having met the overbearing sod, I'm not surprised," said Jenny Hobson. "Bloody Northern blokes."

"Bloody Southern women," Formby riposted. "What do you know about anything?"

"Being an outsider, I can take an objective view of what goes on here. As I remember saying at my interview for this job," Hobson added.

Thunder crashed again overhead. She flinched, spilling a few drops of her drink. Somehow, she managed to get hold of her cigarette with damp fingers. A brown stain spread through wet paper. She ground the ruined cigarette into the ashtray and sighed heavily. "Somehow, I don't think this is my day. Are you giving me a lift home?"

"I might," said Formby. "After I've made a phone call."

"To tell your wife to chuck her boyfriend out of bed and put your dinner in the oven?"

"They warned me you haven't got a sense of humour when I started at the Express," laughed Formby. "That proves it."

The public telephone had been installed next to the door-

way to the back bar. Formby did not want to leave a record of this call in his mobile phone's bill. On the other side of the doorway was a video game, which made random *ping* and *bock-bock* noises to attract attention when it was not in use. Formby knew just where to administer a sly kick to blow an internal fuse. The lights remained shining but the silly noises stopped.

"Mr. Murdoch, please. It's Rob Formby of the Express," he said when a gruff voice answered him. Clicks and distant rings marked the transfer of the call through an internal exchange.

"Yes, Rob?" There was an alert quality to the next voice, which seemed to imply that the caller had Gavin Murdoch's undivided attention.

"You wanted me to keep an eye open for cases of injustice that won't get sorted? Well, I reckon I've got one for you." Formby sketched the facts of the case.

"You think the kid might have flashed her?" said Murdoch.

"I really don't know now, but there's an injustice one way or the other if the case doesn't go to court. Either Terry gets away with flashing Mrs. Berry, which seems unlikely, or she gets away with slandering him, which seems equally unlikely."

"Sounds an interesting case."

"And I get an exclusive on what comes out of it, as we agreed?" said Formby.

"You can count on it. I'll be in touch, Rob." Murdoch replaced his receiver and touched an intercom key. "Get Stella for me," he told the minion at the other end of the line.

"Right, Chief," said the gruff voice.

# THREE

## Murdoch . . .

Gavin Murdoch settled back in his chair and sipped at a glass of tonic water. He was a six-footer with a solid build and a head like a cannonball. Male-pattern baldness on the top of his head and close-cropping at the sides enhanced the impression of bronzed roundness. He had cultivated a hard-drinking image but most of it was show now. There was rarely much vodka in his glass of vodka and tonic. He preferred to keep a clear head during business hours.

Murdoch had lived in and around Hambourne for all of his forty-two years. He had done very well for himself in a quiet way, but he had not lost touch with his roots. He still went to the same old fashioned barber-shop for a fortnightly trim. The son of the man who had cut his hair in boyhood gave his old schoolfriend Gavin a quick tour with the scissors.

Murdoch spent the rest of his half-hour barber-shop visit chatting to other customers as part of his routine pulse-taking in the area. Other stops on his circuit were the gymnasium in his health centre, where he lifted a few weights and bashed a sandbag twice a week, the adjoining swimming pool and the sauna.

He also owned a petrol station, a proper garage with work-

shop facilities, a five-screen cinema complex, a cinema club which showed soft porn to members, two restaurants, four café-clubs, an actual Chinese laundry run by refugees from mainland China and he had interests in the cash-and-carry and discount warehouse district of the city.

Murdoch was never short of somewhere to drop in for a chat – either as the boss or as a welcome guest.

Back at the start of his business career, both he and his pregnant bride had been eighteen on their wedding day. The pregnancy had been a result of reckless celebration of Kathleen Beston's birthday. They had known each other since primary school and their marriage had been a matter of 'when' not 'if' for ages.

Gavin had been working for 'cash in hand' in the local covered market then, helping to clear the mountains of refuse that built up around the stalls and doing odd jobs for the stall-holders. Kathleen had been glad to escape a boring office job by becoming a 'mum'. Another daughter had arrived three years later to complete the family.

On her wedding day, Kathleen had been a still slim, cheerful girl with curly brunette hair. She was as tall as her husband when she was standing on two house bricks. At forty-two, she was distinctly overweight, carrying a spare tyre and a fleshy face. The brunette hair now had blonde streaks.

She had begun to take an interest in her husband's business activities when Dawn, the younger daughter, had started school. Some assets were in Kathleen's name for tax and other purposes. Gavin had let her take over the running of his unofficial employment agency.

The clients were skilled tradesmen, who were willing to do small jobs for cash in hand. They paid a fee to Murdoch for referring them to customers. The customer also paid a small

fee for a guarantee that the job would be done competently, and that anything that went wrong within a reasonable time would be put right quickly and without quibbling. Kathleen was good with people and a natural conspirator. The business had prospered under her direction.

The Murdochs had moved out of Mossy Castle to a terraced house on Leaf Street, then to a semi in a new estate to the east of the city, then to a detached house in a southern suburb to which the wealthy migrated. By the time Cloë, the older daughter, left her exclusive boarding school, the empire was well established and the Murdochs had been taking tenders for their health centre.

Six years on, both daughters were married, and Gavin and Kathleen had given up on an ailing marriage. Kathleen no longer lived in the large house in its own acre of grounds. She spent most of her time travelling the world playing golf. It was what she wanted to do, and she was enjoying the freedom to get on with it.

As she had substantial paper interests in her husband's businesses, the Murdochs had decided that it was easier to stay married than to attempt to reach agreement on a division of property. Infidelity was expected, but also expected to be carried out with good taste.

As someone who made a relatively large contribution to the local economy via domestic and business rates, Gavin was about to make a move into local politics. His principal advisor was an old friend of the family.

Jack Strangford, a friend of his father's, had been *Uncle Jack* to Gavin and his sister for many years and a source of birthday and Christmas presents. Strangford was now entering his seventies and looking for ways to stretch his not very generous pension income.

Jack Strangford had been a pillar of the local Labour Party

for many years and he had served as the agent to the MP for the Hambourne area at three general elections. Then he had fallen out with Labour over piracy of Tory values; so much so that it was rumoured that he had been involved in the downfall of two Labour local councillors, husband and wife, who had represented adjacent wards for donkey's years.

There had been scandal, recriminations then resignations. Hambourne city council was expected to call a by-election for the end of August and Jack Strangford had delivered the final push to a wavering Gavin Murdoch and persuaded him to stand as an independent candidate for the city ward which included most of Murdoch's business interests.

Strangford was now working for Murdoch as a paid strategy advisor. A process of making Murdoch better known to his future constituents was in progress. Aware of the strict limits on election spending, Jack Strangford was devising ways of letting the people who mattered know that Murdoch existed without spending money which could be counted toward election expenses.

His aim was to sneak up on the current representative of the city ward, which had a traditionally low turn-out at elections.

Murdoch had obtained pirated membership lists for the local political parties. He was planning to avoid sending his literature to committed Labourites, Tories, etc. when the three-week campaign began, and to target those who were known to be disaffected; in addition to people who were likely to vote if they could see someone worth voting for.

Gavin Murdoch had a choice of three offices around the centre of Hambourne: at the health centre, at the restaurant *Chez Michel*, and at *Cairo's Club*. He approached his favourite office through the upstairs bar of his exclusive club. Family photographs decorated his desk and he had four good

quality land- and cityscape oil paintings on the walls.

The room was a comfortable retreat as well as a place for business.

Stella Cookson arrived a quarter of an hour after the telephone summons reached her. She was in her middle thirties, she had followed the Murdochs through the same primary and comprehensive schools seven years later and she maintained a plump, mousey and friendly image.

Stella was Gavin Murdoch's vision of what his wife would look like if she didn't spend a small fortune on her appearance. Stella had limp, brunette hair, the same sparkle in her brown eyes when she was in the right company, and she was about the same size and shape as Kathleen Murdoch.

Murdoch used Stella to check up on other people; business contacts, potential customers and other sources of income or expenditure. He knew that police officers, agents of the Inland Revenue, and the VAT division of the Customs and Excise Department are not above trying entrapment to deal with people who operate outside the system.

Stella had a nose for the truth. She was also aware of Murdoch's political ambitions, working actively to achieve them and on a promise of a large bonus if her boss became Councillor Murdoch.

Murdoch considered an *okay* from Stella an essential first step in any significant deal, which was why she earned as much as a cabinet minister. Like many of Murdoch's most trusted staff, she had travelled the hard road from Mossy Castle to prosperity, which cultivated in the travellers an 'us versus them' mentality, which Murdoch used skilfully to hold his empire together.

Stella Cookson left the office with a slightly unusual assignment. Murdoch had started to operate a system used by Mafia Godfathers. He was doing favours for people,

expecting them to be returned at a convenient future date. Murdoch hoped to add political influence to his many achievements. There was still a lot of money to be made on the inside of city politics. He was planning to start from a grass-roots power-base.

Stella's commission was to look into the backgrounds of Terry Champion and Mrs. Gloria Barry. If the case ended in stalemate, as seemed likely, Murdoch would force it to a conclusion and make one friend out of the exercise. Good public-relations points could be won from protecting middle-aged women from window-cleaning flashers.

A different group would be impressed favourably if a young man was protected from a slanderer.

One of the participants in the dispute decided the issue of which would have Murdoch's support. Terry Champion turned up at Murdoch's business office to seek his aid. He had heard that Murdoch operated his own version of the *A-Team*. He didn't trust the police to clear his name and he wanted a man of influence on his side.

Murdoch impressed the visitor by producing a can of cold beer from a fridge that looked like a filing cabinet. He listened to Terry Champion for six minutes, then he sent him on his way with hope. Each had made a friend and Murdoch had decided that he would prove Terry Champion innocence, no matter where the right lay.

Stella caught up with Murdoch at the gym two days later. He liked to lift a few weights and bash a punchbag twice a week. Stella, looking as downtrodden as ever, joined him in the lounge for orange juice and a chat. Murdoch was feeling exercised and relaxed after a swim and a spell in the sauna.

"Mrs. Gloria Berry is a pillar of the community," remarked Stella, selecting an orange-cream biscuit from the generous

plateful. "She's a widow, she helps her neighbours by going shopping for some of the older ones, she's well thought of; a friend rather than a do-gooder; and she works. Two days a week at a local charity shop."

"Terry has been back to the police station," said Murdoch. "Some smarmy git of an inspector told him there's no evidence he flashed Old Mother Berry. It's just her word against his but if he gets caught next time he does it, the police will remember about this time."

Stella took note of the wind direction. "Mrs. Barry has been here for five years. I checked back to previous addresses via her credit rating. Which is good. She's made two identical complaints in the past. There was just her unsupported allegation both times. No action in either case. Both the men still have a card in police filing systems, waiting to be used against them if their name comes up again."

"Three lives ruined by one over-imaginative woman."

"Are you going to give this to the Express?" said Stella.

Murdoch took note of her tone of voice. "You've got a better idea, Stell?"

"You'll get more votes out of conciliation."

Murdoch shrugged. "Okay, Stell, handle it your way."

# FOUR

## Rat Trap & a Black Boat

Riding a tide of nervous excitement, Olly Finchley checked the area carefully for watching eyes before he belted the car's nearside rear window with a half brick wrapped in a towel. He was right in the heart of the city. Traffic was going by twenty yards away, but he was standing in the gap between the assaulted car and a boundary wall of ancient brick, which was left over from the building that had been knocked down to make room for urban parking. There was an inviting briefcase on the rear seat of a dark green Ford *Granada*.

Finchley was reaching for the briefcase when something closed around his left ankle. There were men on either side of him by the time he realized that someone lying under the car had snapped a self-locking handcuff attached to a length of chain around his ankle.

His gut-churning fear was cut short when he was forced to breathe in the cold, heavy vapour sprayed into his face from an aerosol can. Finchley had been captured before and he knew what to expect.

The man under the car was wiry, in his early twenties and wearing a grubby blue overall. The other two men were the same sort of age but muscular and dangerous. They were wearing jeans and chrome-studded leather jackets.

When the smallest member of the team had unlocked the handcuff, the others took an arm apiece and half carried, half dragged their prisoner out of the car park and down a side street to a Volkswagen van parked at a meter.

A friend who, apparently, had had too much to drink, disappeared into the back of the van. The three men were in good humour, laughing over their friend's lack of capacity and completely open about what they were doing. Witnesses remembered what had happened but nothing about the participants.

Olly Finchley woke up on a dusty concrete floor. He looked for the window. Cracked and grimy, it was right in front of him. He was tensing himself for a dash for freedom when strong hands grabbed his wrists and ankles.

"You were warned about this," said a quiet voice. "What happens now is your responsibility."

Finchley was gathering breath to scream when the men flung him at the window. He tried to roll into a ball. He went through the frame in a shower of glass leaf-shapes – a marked contrast to the opaque marbles that he had made out of a toughened-glass car window. Still trying to turn himself into a protective shape, he hit building rubble. He landed on his side after a fall of twenty-five feet. The pain made him black out. A shower of rain woke him sometime later. The pain returned when he tried to move.

He had, indeed, been warned. They had thrown him out of a first-floor window the first time. And they had gone round to his flat to strip it of anything of value. They had told him that being thrown out of a window was their alternative to prison. First-floor windows for petty criminals and first-timers, higher floors for persistent offenders, building up to a drop from the top of a tower block in extreme circumstances. And there was also an element of

random chance involved. The men had thrown a couple of dice first. A double-six meant a high dive off the top of a tower block no matter what the offence; a punishment from which there could be no appeal.

If they had not crippled him, Finchley told himself as he tried to assess how badly damaged he was, then it was time to get out of the area. There were plenty of other cities where a hard-working thief didn't face defenestration if a vigilante force caught up with him.

Gavin Murdoch's other two offices lay on the upper floors of his health centre and one of the restaurants. He could look down on the marina from the rear of *Chez Michel*. The combination of river and canal had been in decline for more years than anyone could remember. Then the healing hand of private enterprise had released the death grip of a Socialist council; breaking a few fingers in the process, according to the rumours. The result was the usual compromise.

The Hambourne Development Corporation administered the ranks of berths for expensive cabin cruisers and narrowboats. There were sea-going vessels as well as canal-craft. Some made regular voyages, others had become houseboat-homes for the rich and footloose. The marina offered an abundance of telecommunication facilities for business and leisure: telephones, computer links and a cable television system with ground-based services and global satellite links.

Hambourne City Council supplied a band of security guards to protected a valuable source of revenue from the sort of people whose votes the council sought to buy with its *Care For The Community* programme. Council gardeners kept the lawns trimmed and the flower beds in good order. The cleansing department paid particular attention to keeping the area wholesome and attractive.

The city council's personnel department operated a strict screening system for staff who worked at the marina. The people who used the facilities were rich scumbag bastards mixed with a few 'comrades' who had done well for themselves. The council felt that the marina set were to be treated as golden-egg-laying geese. They were in the fortunate position of being able to up-anchor and move elsewhere if they didn't like the service. And if the marina went belly-up, so would a lot of jobs.

Gavin Murdoch had resisted the temptation to join the marina set. He was half convinced that boats are for sailing and they should be kept beside the sea, not at the far end of twenty-five miles of canal. On the other hand, he could see obvious advantages to entertaining business contacts in the luxurious and fairly exotic surroundings of the marina. He could also give them a boat ride on a sunny day.

Hambourne was no Bruges or Amsterdam, but the marina development had shamed the council into tidying up the riverside. The waterways which ran through the city could look very pleasant in the right weather.

If he did get a boat, he would have a crew like that, Murdoch thought as he gazed through his binoculars at the slim, Oriental woman on the hole-black cabin cruiser. She was in her early twenties, her black hair was short and she wore a figure-hugging outfit of yellow pullover and ice-blue jeans.

She was applying lacquer to a brass rail, working slowly as if she had all the time in the world to achieve perfection. She had her back to the riverside restaurant but Murdoch knew that her looks would match her figure. The security guards would not let an ugly woman onto the marina site.

The head of the consortium that operated the marina was *Likey* Dragoner, who preferred not to be called Lionel. He had mentioned the Chinese girl during a recent attempt to

sell a berth to Murdoch. Dragoner was another of the area's power-brokers, There were unpleasant rumours about how he had made his money during his climb to the top but his current image was pretty squeaky-clean. He knew the right people in business and council circles, and he said to be a senior figure in the local order of Freemasons. If the price of claiming Dragoner as an ally was taking a berth at the marina, it was very reasonable, Murdoch felt.

Murdoch swept the cabin cruiser from stern to bow with his binoculars. The name *Sigma 212* was picked out in gold on the solid black hull and the brass fittings had a golden sheen. Bright white hulls and varnished, wooden decks in all shades dominated the marina. A black boat had a sinister elegance. It looked as if it might hoist a *skull and crossbones* at any moment and elevate a machine-gun turret from the deck. That black boat caught the eye immediately. It just sat there, smugly, and told everyone that its owner was a VIP.

The boat was owned by a holding company, according to Dragoner. The Chinese woman had handled its registration at the marina. There had been a few visitors over the fortnight that the boat had been in Hambourne but no one of any consequence. Dragoner had described them as Yanks; all in their early forties, none looking as if he owned more than the clothes he stood up in.

Murdoch wondered how Roxanne would look; bronzed, stretched out on a white towel on the black deck of a similarly piratical cabin cruiser, making every man in sight hate Murdoch because he was screwing her. A fairly clueless former beauty queen with shoulder length blonde hair would look very good on a black boat.

The black-haired woman on the black boat moved the drip-catching cloth along under the rail. Murdoch wondered if the hull was painted black or made of mass-pigmented

fibre-glass. That he could throw around a little of the jargon of modern boat construction was a sign of definite interest. Murdoch was enjoying exploring the pros and cons of joining the nautical set. He wanted to be able to walk that fine line between a gentlemanly knowledge of the craft and the sort of detailed information needed by an employee.

One of the Americans arrived at the black boat. He was a scrawny, sun-bleached-blond type in a zip-up leather jacket of the sort worn by New York cops and drainpipe jeans. The Chinese woman waved her free hand in greeting. The Yank disappeared into the cabin. Less than a minute later, the Chinese woman reached the end of the rail. She put the lid on the tin of lacquer and trod on it to drive it home. Then she took her brush into the cabin.

One of the security guards walked past the black boat as Murdoch took his binoculars away from his eyes. The council tended to employ long-haired types, who wore their radio in a belt holster as a gun-substitute. Murdoch had no dress code for his businesses but anyone who dealt with the public didn't keep his job if he didn't look smart.

Murdoch applied the lens caps then put his binoculars away. He switched on the radio for a time check. Some of the pirate stations of the middle eighties had become legal under a previous Government's scheme for low-power, incremental radio stations.

`The pirate station One Ton Radio had stayed on the air, always several jumps ahead of Department of Trade & Industry inspectors and detectors, while raids, confiscations, prosecutions and the hope of legality had swept away their rivals. The *Through To Lunch* show was on.

Broadcasting on 100.0 MHz, the self-styled *Last Of The Pirates* cheekily relayed the BBC's time signal on the hour. According to the leading underground newspaper for the

Hambourne area, One Ton sent an annual copyright fee to the BBC but the cheque was never cashed.

The Inland Revenue and the Customs & Excise Department solicit contributions from those engaged in all sorts of illegal activities. The BBC seemed unwilling to soil its hands; as did the organizations responsible for collecting copyright fees for music performed on the airwaves. They too failed to cash their cheques.

Murdoch was interested in favourable publicity from One Ton. Surveys showed that two to three hundred thousand people listened regularly. The station could not accept advertising without laying its clients open to prosecution, but One Ton did issue bulletins about events, special offers and places that offered good value for money. If payments change hands as cash in anonymous envelopes, the system was operated with the utmost discretion.

One Ton was never afraid to speak its mind, which could be dangerous where the reputations of politicians were concerned. Murdoch felt that he could offer sufficient reasons why the radio station should not go for his scalp. He could do to One Ton what the DTI had failed to do for years. Murdoch was a man of power, who was confident about its use.

Music faded from the surround-sound speakers in his office. A voice said dramatically, "Time marches on!" Then came the familiar pips, which were followed by the news that it was noon on Friday, June thirtieth. Murdoch's gold pocket watch had lost about a minute over the last week. It needed cleaning again but he felt that part of his identity was missing when there was nothing at the left-hand end of his gold chain.

Murdoch listened to the two-minute local news summary, which was usually quite humorous. He learned that someone

called Olly had fallen out of a second-storey window shortly before leaving town; to the regret of the local firms which replaced the car windows that he broke in the course of his criminal activities.

Murdoch intended to make the right of the individual to walk the streets of Hambourne unmolested one of the foundations of his political platform. The right to leave possessions in a vehicle without having it raped was another step in the same direction. Perhaps a retainer to the One Ton news team for reports on things that they heard but decided not to broadcast would be a useful investment, he told himself. As usual, Gavin Murdoch could find more than enough outlets for his considerable income.

Informal ideas sessions; apparently idle speculation in pubs with friends and casual acquaintances; had thrown up many interesting concepts, which included establishing *rat traps*: apparently empty flats and houses, to which burglars could be attracted for capture and punishment. Another popular idea for harassing criminals was stealing their cars, preferably within seconds of their leaving them. The tactic was known as *DSW* or *driving seat still warm* to the local police.

The more extreme suggestions included sending vigilantes out to break into the homes of persistent criminals regularly, or break their windows regularly, and draining bank accounts via cash dispensers with the knowledge that the banks involved would never admit that anything dodgy was possible or that their systems were vulnerable.

Suggestions for appropriate sanctions for local criminals were never in short supply in Hambourne; but the will to apply them was. Gavin Murdoch was planning to implement a triumph of the will.

# FIVE

## Robbijohn . . .

The name Lance Edward Robbijohn was an alias. The man who used it was in his early forties and quite tall, his hair was ash-blond, his eyes pale blue and he was non-existent. He had no address, no tax code, no national insurance number, no place on either the electoral register or his local council's list of financial contributors, no credit rating and any number of alternative identities.

He lived in life's interstices.

He had been born in Hambourne's main hospital and he had lived, under his 'real' name, in Mossy Castle for many years. Curiosity had brought Robbijohn back to his home town after he had become exceedingly wealthy. He had been disgusted by what he saw in terms of the decline of both the fabric of the city and the moral standards of its inhabitants, and he was still deciding what he could do to make Hambourne a better place to live.

In the meantime, he had established a number of bases around the city, which included a grotty flat in Mossy Castle and the elegant black motor cruiser parked at the Hambourne Marina, the playground of the city's top people, which was his current location.

Robbijohn was an orphan. His only remaining relative in

the UK was a brother, who also used the same false surname. Wearing a baseball cap for the *Oakland Athletics*, a scuffed, zip-up jacket and drainpipe jeans, Robbijohn looked as American as the next arrival at the black boat sounded.

Derek, also known as Drek, was a good ten years younger than Robbijohn and his friends. He had spent two years in the Santa Monica/Los Angeles/Long Beach area, and swapped a strong, Lancashire accent for a perfect copy of the American West Coast accent. Derek was a couple of inches shorter than Robbijohn's six feet, lean and dangerous, and a fixer. His current assignment was to persuade an over-possessive, burned-out fling that pursuing Lance was a lost cause.

Derek said hello to Mi Tai, the Vietnamese boatkeeper, giving her a quick squeeze and a "Hi, honey!" in passing. He took a yellow-wrapped joint from the dispenser. He added to Robbijohn's haze of home-grown tobacco and *Hambourne Gold*, fighting away the smell of white spirit from the brush-cleaning operation.

"Been having fun?" Robbijohn said in response to a lazy grin.

Derek inhaled, then let the smoke out slowly. The grin broadened; contentment mingled with amusement. "Susie was talking about reporting you as a missing person."

"Only?"

"Only she's not sure if Lance is your first or last name and she doesn't have a key for your flat in Mossy Castle."

"I wonder why she won't be told it's over?'' Robbijohn poured Pernod over ice cubes then added water to the two glasses. The bar was conveniently at his elbow when he was sitting in that corner of the cabin.

Susie Lymme had decided that she wanted to get to know Robbijohn and she had made the first move. Robbijohn had

been amused by her attentions for a while. His amusement had worn off.

Derek shrugged. "Like you realized that bit too late, she figures you're worth a few bucks and that's all she sees in you, the money. Maybe she reckons you're one of the rich drug-dealers who live in Mossy Castle."

"Do I look like a bloody drug-dealer?" protested Robbijohn.

"Hey, maybe she knows about the sixty million bucks you copped for a share of," laughed Derek. "Talking about that." He unloaded a duffle bag onto the table, taking out bundles of French, Belgian and Swiss francs and Deutschmarks. Among them was a stray bundle of one-hundred US thousand-dollar bills.

"All that counts today is money and information," Robbijohn quoted. "Information tells you what needs to be done. Money gives you the capacity to get on with it."

"I'm not going to argue with that," said Derek.

Robbijohn lifted a briefcase from the floor to the table. Derek took out a bundle of £50 notes, which he tucked it into the inside pocket of his leather jacket, then he loaded the foreign currency into the briefcase. Mi Tai entered the cabin rubbing cream into her hands to counter the drying effect of the white spirit. She whistled over the money, then helped herself to a glass of iced Pernod and packet of crinkle-cut crisps. Her English was still rudimentary but she liked to sit in on meetings.

"So what did you tell her? Susie?" Robbijohn picked up the conversation again.

Derek helped himself to a crisp, then he shrugged. "I told her I haven't seen you for a while. Which is true if I've been to Antwerp. Maybe I should do something drastic with Susie. What d'you reckon, Honey?"

"Yo!" said Mi Tai with a smile. She had no idea what they were talking about, but she could throw in agreement when she felt that it was called for.

"I'll leave it to your fertile imagination," said Robbijohn. He glanced at a TV monitor as one of the proximity alarms sounded off with a muffled chiming.

There had been two drug-squad raids on the marina. One had been a false alarm due to malicious information. The other had netted a previously respectable businessman with an ounce and a half of cocaine for his own nasal consumption. Robbijohn had nothing more terrible than cannabis aboard, but he knew better than to try telling that to a magistrate.

Steve Cann, the new arrival, was an authentic American. He was forty-two, a year younger than Robbijohn, as tall as Derek but much more powerfully built, and his corn-blond hair was turning white and retreating rapidly. He was wearing the uniform of baseball cap; he supported the *Chicago Cubs*; and zip-up black leather jacket with jeans.

The US Army had sent him to Vietnam at nineteen. The orgy of blood and dope and acid had changed his life forever. Cann had become a ranger in the most remote area of the largest forest in the United States following his discharge. After three years of virtually his own company, he had tried to rejoin the mainstream of life in the heart of Chicago. He had been recruited into the US Special Forces while well along the road to a career in crime and gaol.

He had spent six years in South America, another four in Thailand, and then he had decided that enough was enough. He had returned to the United States to a job as a weapons instructor in a Survivalist school in Nebraska. After one more trip south; to Colombia with Robbijohn's expedition; he had joined the group in Hambourne.

Mi Tai perked up as the language switched to Vietnamese. Derek left to do his 'something drastic'. Cann accepted a glass of Pernod and a light for his joint. He was good with languages. So was Robbijohn.

"We've got the new tubes installed in the sky garden," Steve Cann reported. "Daylight fluorescents and the warm-whites. What the hell did the local fuzz have to go and buy a chopper for?"

"To fly over prison riots and keep guys on the roof awake," said Mi Tai.

"And to look down through skylights on office buildings in the respectable part of town," added Robbijohn. "To see who's growing *cannabis sativa* with his tobacco crops."

"I checked the ultra-violet spectrum from the new tubes against four reference sources," said Cann. "It came out even. Two said anyone who stays in there for any length of time will get skin cancer for sure. The other two said the risk is vanishingly small."

"So what are you doing?" said Robbijohn.

"Wearing the plastic spacesuit. What the hell," Cann added with a grin. "You need the suit's air-conditioning in our private jungle. If we could put a pool up there, we'd have a perfect holiday resort for sun-bums. Nearly as good as the Painter's island."

"Sunny, dry and hot, with a dew of resin on the leaves," said Robbijohn. "Just like North Africa."

"You goin' all poetical on me?" laughed Cann.

"Maybe he's stoned," said Mi Tai.

"I guess the last batch does give you the best and the fastest blast yet," said Cann. "I had a guy trying to sell me some Mexican, he said it was, a couple of days ago. It was pathetic, man. But this guy was raving on about what a good stone it gives you."

"He'd hardly tell you otherwise if he was hoping to sell it," Robbijohn pointed out.

"I guess not," said Cann. "So I gave him a toot of our home-grown to show him what good stuff is all about. He wanted to know where I bought it."

"Enterprising feller!" laughed Robbijohn.

"So I told him a pal in the music business gives it to me for nothing," said Cann.

"You tell him you print your own money too?" said Mi Tai.

"You still don't believe Uncle Sam printed it for us?" said Robbijohn.

"All that amount of money can't be real," Mi Tai said with conviction. "I may look like a dumb, Vietnamese gook but I'm plenty smart."

"Hey, we know that," said Cann. "If you weren't, you'd still be in a camp in Hong Kong, waiting for them to kick your ass back to sunny Vietnam. When do we eat?"

Mi Tai looked at the kitchen timer, which was ticking softly on one of the shelves. "Five minutes."

"Time to wash up," said Cann.

Mi Tai switched to careful English with an upper-class pronunciation, which sounded almost convincing. "In this country, we wash up *after* the meal. But an ignorant colonial would hardly know that.''

"I guess you won't even talk to us when you marry an English lord," Cann switch to American with a laugh.

"Yo!" said Mi Tai.

# SIX

## Specialist Industries

Roxanne Chantelle took a plate and a glass from her late lunch into the kitchen of her spacious apartment. She was in her middle twenties, an inch above average height, and a natural beauty. Her ambition to become a model had fizzled out. She was not tall enough and her legs were too short in relation to her body. A friendly photographer had told her that a model had to look as if her legs went up to her armpits.

Judges on the beauty queen circuit had seen nothing wrong with her figure. Neither had the manager of *Cairo's Club*, where she had worked as a hostess until she had become the boss's mistress. She had been part of the specialist leisure industry for almost a year now.

She expected to get the push shortly. She knew that she was on a strictly limited contract. But she had a tidy sum in the bank and she had her reserve careers to fall back on: Roxanne the hostess and her previous life as Anne Bailey, who knew the routines of working as a clerk in a betting shop.

Roxanne was wondering whether to go out for a look at the shops. Watching a video was her first reserve. Then her early warning system sounded. The bell rang to warn her

that Gavin Murdoch was on his way into the building. Part of her job description required her to be available whenever Murdoch felt like dropping in.

She put the plate and glass into the dishwasher, flicked a comb through her hair, then adopted a graceful pose on the settee with the *TV Times*. She was thinking herself into the part of a dumb blonde, who never handled newspapers because they made her hands all inky, when Murdoch let himself into the apartment.

Gavin Murdoch shed his jacket and loosened his tie. He leaned over Roxanne for the sort of explosively passionate kiss that he had never had from his wife, even in her best years, then he dropped onto a chair and waited for a drink. Roxanne poured whisky and ginger ale into a chunky glass. She handed the glass to her boss, then adopted an artlessly seductive pose on the settee.

"What do you reckon to a boat?" said Murdoch.

"How big?" smiled Roxanne.

"Something like the ones in the marina."

"It would be really nice, sailing up and down the river on a sunny day. Or we could go the Isle of Man. I hope you don't want me to take up fishing." Roxanne wrinkled a perfect nose at the thought of impaling slimy worms on hooks.

"That's not a bad idea." Murdoch took a thoughtful pull at his drink. It had just the right bite of spirit behind the fizz. Murdoch liked fizzy drinks. His wife said it was because he resented not being on the *Corona* van's delivery list during his childhood. Kathy was always explaining the world away. Next to playing golf, it was her favourite occupation.

Murdoch began to wonder which influential people he could impress with a day's sea-fishing. Roxanne went back to her *TV Times* while the wheels were going round in his

head. When he got to the logistics of the day out, Murdoch realized that he would have to send the boat down to the coast the day before the fishing expedition. He had an idea that there was a five mph speed limit on inland waterways to prevent erosion of the banks. If that applied to a canal with concrete and stone embankments, perhaps only on the tow-path side, then the sea was about five and a half hours away.

A short helicopter ride to the coast to meet the boat would impress the hell out of his potential allies. On the other hand, it could give them ideas about how much cash they could extort from Murdoch to buy their support. On yet another hand, the sort of boat that he had in mind might make the impression-factor of a helicopter ride irrelevant.

Murdoch fixed Roxanne with a critical survey. She smiled up from her magazine. She had an instinct that told her when he was looking at her. Someone had once said that Roxanne had hair the colour of spun Aztec gold. Someone else had explained that the Aztecs had added copper to their gold to harden it, which gave it a reddish tint. Murdoch wondered if an ash-blonde might not look better on a jet-black boat.

Roxanne turned an inner page of the magazine toward him. "Look, there's a boat show at the *HamEx Centre* next month."

"Yes, I know." Murdoch had already received a total of eight free tickets. He seemed to be on plenty of mailing lists.

"Are we going?"

"Guess so."

"I wonder if they'll have any black ones."

"You fancy a black boat?"

"I've seen you looking at the one in the marina from your office at *Chez Michel*. I suppose jet-black isn't a depressing

colour if it's nice and shiny."

He would have a fibreglass hull, Murdoch decided, mass-pigmented. There would be lots of sharp objects about on fishing trips: gaffs, knives, big hooks. Paint could be chipped off, leaving scars which would embarrass both the guest and his host. If the boat was a solid black all the way through, it would not show accidental damage so readily.

The boat would also be an asset. He could sell it at a profit if he got tired of it. Murdoch knew that he would have his pen at the ready when he visited the boat show. He was about to become a valued member of Hambourne's marina set.

Lionel Dragoner *was* HRM. He owned and managed Hambourne Risk Management. Most people in the area associated the initials with an insurance company without knowing what *risk management* meant. Dragoner rode around in a sleek, black, top-of-the-range Jaguar and spared no expense on his outfits. Image was everything. His company's dress code was rigid. Sloppiness was grounds for instant dismissal.

Making its first call of a new week at the start of a new month, the Jaguar turned into the grounds of a large detached house. The house was brick with stone edges, painted a gleaming white with royal blue drainpipes and gutters, and wearing with a white burglar alarm at first-floor level. An iron-shod door of dark oak fitted with a small diamond of thick, clear glass opened as Dragoner stepped out of his car. His driver closed the rear door and returned to his seat.

Dragoner extended a hand as he reached the wealthy owner of the house. There was a funereal atmosphere to their meeting. Dragoner knew that he occupied a position of power and he was enjoying it. He exchanged greetings with

Charles Mannering on their way to the drawing room and library. Mrs. Mannering was waiting in a wing chair, trying not to look too anxious. Dragoner accepted a glass of sherry from his host, the Manzanilla, and sat on a chair by a coffee table, which offered a convenient perch for his briefcase.

"I don't know, can one really taste the sea?" Dragoner said after sampling the sherry.

"It may just be a selling point," Charles Mannering admitted. "But it's still an excellent sherry."

"Yes, indeed." Dragoner opened his briefcase and took out a binder with a red plastic case.

The Mannerings leaned toward him slightly, trying not to look even more anxious.

"We discussed earlier the reports from the police and my own people on your alarm system," continued Dragoner. "It seems the system was functioning and the thieves disabled it. You hadn't forgotten to switch it on," he threw in with a smile. "So you've fulfilled your side of the agreement. We have advertised a reward for your paintings but no one has come forward with information leading to the thieves or offering to return them. Such robberies are often committed specifically for an insurance company reward. And sometimes to feed the illegal art market. It looks like your robbery was the latter. Anyhow, the company is prepared to settle your claim in full. And I have my chequebook with me," Dragoner added with another smile.

The Mannerings relaxed visibly, then looked guilty about it. They felt slightly uncomfortable about making the insurance claim, especially after the probing questions from both the police and the investigator.

"Naturally, there are forms to sign," said Dragoner. He took them from his briefcase and handed them to Charles Mannering. "And you can choose to wait to see if anyone

takes advantage of the reward."

"Do you think there's much chance of that?" said Felicity Mannering, a greying matron in her middle fifties. Her husband was ten years older. His hair had turned white before the burglary.

"Frankly, no," said Dragoner. "If a thief steals to hold the insurance company to ransom for ten per cent of the value of the paintings, he generally begins negotiations promptly. The amount of time that has elapsed more or less confirms that your pictures have been sold on in the illegal art market."

Charles Mannering took a fountain pen from the inside pocket of his jacket and signed the forms. Dragoner used his silver ballpoint to sign a printed cheque while the ink was drying. HRM had another satisfied customer.

Stella Cookson caught up with Gavin Murdoch at his gym and health centre. His doctor had advised Murdoch to take twenty minutes' exercise three times a week to ward off hypertension, which could lead to a premature heart attack or a stroke. Murdoch's favourite form of exercise took place in the peace and quiet of Roxanne's bedroom rather than the intensely active gym.

He adopted a fatalistic attitude to the state of his health because he was one of many people who were digging their grave with their teeth. All of his favourite foods and drinks were bad for him.

Stella looked as if she would collapse if she tried to pick up something moderately heavy. Murdoch watched her pour a stiff vodka and tonic at the drinks cabinet, which was shaped like a globe of the world. She joined him at the large desk, sitting beside it rather than facing him across it.

"What have you got, Stell?" said Murdoch.

"A nice compromise," Stella said with a smile. "I told Mrs. Berry one of the underground rags is looking into the story. They're planning to question the partiality of the police. How they accepted what she said and tried to bully a confession out of the window cleaner lad. I didn't let on I knew Mrs. Berry's previous history of complaints about flashers but the look on her face said she didn't want it to come out."

"Or she'd have to move?" Murdoch said with a grin.

"Something like that. So her story's changed now. Someone flashed her but she's not sure who. The shock was too much for her. The police led her into saying it was Terry Champion. Maybe not deliberately, but she was in an impressionable state and that's how it came out."

"A bit of routine scapegoating?" laughed Murdoch.

Stella shrugged. "The police are used to it. It would be an idea if you could persuade them to offer a better apology to Terry. After he hears from Mrs. Berry."

"Who's going to grovel to him a bit?"

"Even better than that. I told Mrs. Berry he's going to sue her for slander, and she could lose her house in legal fees defending herself. So the best thing she can do is offer him a reasonable sum in compensation for all the ridicule he's had to take. She's going to cash some premium bonds and give him two hundred and fifty pounds."

"She's getting out of it quite cheaply."

"Two fifty is just a starting figure. I can probably push her up higher and still make her think I'm doing her a favour."

"So we end up everyone's pal?" said Murdoch.

"Maybe except for the police," Stella returned with a smile. "We're leaving them stuck with an unsolvable flashing."

"Well, one more won't make any difference to their crime statistics. What do you reckon to a cabin cruiser, Stell?"

"I should buy yourself a crash helmet and knee pads for

the low ceilings and narrow gangways. And you have to make sure everything's fastened down if things get a bit rough, or you spend most of your time cleaning the floor."

"So you're not keen?"

"I reckon you can be a lot more comfortable on dry land for the same money. But I don't suppose it counts if you're that already and looking for something different. You're going to join the Marina Mafia, Gav?"

"Could have its advantages," nodded Murdoch.

"I don't suppose you want me stretched out on your deck in a bikini?" Stella tipped the last of her drink through a smile.

"I pay you to do what you're good at, Stell. You're brains, not glamour. It may not be as much fun, but the job lasts a hell of a sight longer."

"That sounds like the difference between a snort of cocaine and having your leg sawn off," laughed Stella.

# SEVEN

## Magnetic Boots & Other Crimes

Tall, graceful Shaun Wayne was waiting in the anteroom when Lionel Dragoner returned to the headquarters of HRM in the city's bank-studded business district. HRM occupied the fourth floor of a building with a Victorian façade. The interior had been ripped out and rebuilt to modern requirements.

The builders had managed to put in an extra floor, which placed ceilings level with the tops of windows up to the fifth floor, and left the sixth windowless. An enterprising agent had sold it as a high-security, controlled environment.

Wayne was half a head taller than his boss and just a couple of years younger than Dragoner's elder daughter. He had middle-class manners and the morals of a shark, which were tempered by the knowledge that it is easier to get away with something if no one else knows about it.

"Problem?" Dragoner read a carefully neutral expression.

"Could have been," said Wayne. "You've lost one of your Assessment Team."

"Lost how?" Dragoner parked his briefcase beside the desk and sat down with a rush of air from leather.

"Fantle was run over. Deliberately, it looks like. He was in his stocking feet, no sign of his shoes, and the last thing he

said was 'magnetic boots', the man who found him told the police."

"Ah!" Dragoner sat back in his chair and placed his fingertips together.

Jim Fantle had been a security assessor for HRM. He had found Felicity and Charles Mannering's security system so easy to by-pass that he had helped himself to four pen and ink drawings by Samuel Palmer, which had been executed during his best period in the early years of Queen Victoria's reign.

"Any signs he talked before he was run over, Shaun?"

"We've not had blokes in blue suits and big boots round to ask awkward questions," said Wayne. "Following up anonymous phone calls. Or anyone trying to blackmail you."

"Yet. When did it happen?"

"Yesterday. He'd gone rock climbing in Snowdonia. A milkman found him near a place called Rhyd-something. So what do we do? Sit tight and say nowt?" Wayne put on a Yorkshire accent for the final question.

Dragoner shrugged. "We don't know anything until we're informed officially by the police. You're happy there's nothing embarrassing outstanding?"

"When they're on an official job, the Assessment Team always dump the goods at one place and go on to another to collect a payment in untraceable cash. Any copies of the briefing notes are always in their own handwriting, which they burn as soon as possible afterwards. Even if they talk, there's no supporting evidence. It's just the word of a criminal against that of a respectable insurance company."

"No reason not to be a bit cautious in the near future. We'll keep the Palmers in store for at least six months."

"We're sure they're genuine? Not Sexton Blakes?"

"By the late Tom Keating?" Dragoner said with a smile.

"No, our expert checked the history very carefully. They're pukka. And well worth the insured price. Keep a close eye on this one, Shaun, but from a distance. We don't want to appear to know more than we've been told."

"Right, I'll keep my phone in my pocket," said Wayne. "I guess the police will be in touch eventually."

Dragoner unpacked his briefcase when Wayne had gone. He placed the documents signed by Charles Mannering in his out tray, marked for filing. He suspected that the Mannerings had not understood the full implications of the small print. They had been more worried about the company disqualifying them from payment on a technicality than about the future of their lost pictures.

The Mannerings had received a cheque from HRM and they had signed away their rights to the pictures. In effect, they had sold them to HRM. When the pictures turned up, along with loot from other robberies, the police would surrender an appreciating asset to the insurance company. It was a classic scheme for acquiring works of art that were not available on the market with a semblance of legality.

Losing a member of the Assessment Team to what looked like a case of hit-and-run would raise a few questions but the company was rich enough to pay someone to take the blame and serve a few years in gaol if there was any further fall-out from the exercise in ensuring employee honesty.

Parking in Hambourne city centre was always a problem. The meters were in short supply and the towing squad was ever vigilant to remove obstructions to the free-flow of traffic. Robin Formby counted himself lucky to have access to an overflow for the Hambourne Express in a commercial car park across the street from the newspaper's offices. The first four floors of the building were for cars. Vast open

spaces instead of windows provided ventilation. Then came a vacant zone. Floor 5 had housed offices and floor 6 a dance studio. The lift no longer stopped at either of these floors, but it did go all the way up to the garden on the roof.

On sunny days, Robin Formby liked to have lunch at the garden in the sky. Gavin Murdoch had brought a gourmet takeaway meal of steak and kidney envelopes with octagonal chips, which absorb least cooking oil when fried, and a bottle of red wine from the Crimea. They drank their wine from a pair of antique, collapsible silver cups.

"That flasher case seems to have vanished up its own orifice," Formby said to turn the conversation to business.

"Probably best for all concerned," said Murdoch.

"S.O.B. it, then," Formby said with a shrug of resignation. "But we need something in the paper to space out the ads."

"Do you do dirty vicar stories?"

"*News Of The Screws* stuff?"

"I guess so," laughed Murdoch. "You might be interested in where the vicar of St. Margaret's in Broughton goes on Wednesday evenings."

"Oh?" Formby took out his notebook. "I was wondering why you wanted to meet me on a Wednesday."

"And you might be interested in who turns up at his house when he's out on Wednesdays."

Formby wrote cryptic notes in his personal code. "Did you hear about the HRM burglar? Mysteriously run over."

"Ex-burglar. They've all paid their debt to society."

"That's bollocks. The debt isn't to society, it's to the people they robbed. And how much compensation did *they* get?"

"I take it that was a rhetorical question, Rob?"

"Did you know the same sort of thing happened to someone else about a year ago?" Formby added.

"Someone been ferreting in your paper's library, Rob?"

Formby shrugged. "The librarian's got a thing about violent death. That part of the index went on the computer first. This other bloke was a joy-rider. Incorrigible. He was still alive when someone found him. He reckoned some masked men laced him up in boots with iron soles then stood him on an electromagnet. Then they drove a car at him. Some sort of pressure pad just in front of the magnet switched it off just as the car got to him. So he went flying when it hit him."

"And you're saying the same happened to the HRM bloke?" Murdoch asked with a frown.

"It's all theory and no proof at the moment, Gavin. The joyrider wasn't wearing any shoes when they found him. Neither was the HRM burglar. The joyrider lived just long enough to tell someone what happened. The burglar said something about magnetic boots before he died."

"What do the police think about it?"

"They have verbal information but no corroboration. Two obvious hit-and-runs but no evidence or leads. I don't suppose you've heard anything about a vigilante force?"

"Have *you* got any evidence for that?"

"Not as such. But I did have a chat with Art Hobday a while ago. You know, local journalist made good and sodded off to London? He dropped a few hints about being warned off when he took an interest in what was going on below the surface at Mossy Castle."

" Big deal. There's some nasty characters in Mossy Castle."

"Then there's the people you hear on One Ton Radio. The *community spokesmen* for the decent people in the area."

"The *First-Name Friends*?" scoffed Murdoch.

"Remember the fuss they made when Olly, the car thief, blew town after he fell out of a second-storey window?"

"Education by defenestration, a bloke with a posh accent called it." Murdoch topped up the silver cups. "I reckon we

need to ban the term *community spokesman* and replace it with *community opportunist*, seeing most of the people who claim to speak for a *community* have no valid credentials, little contact with their alleged *community* and no understanding at all of the democratic process."

"I'd like to see you get away with that," laughed Formby.

The cushion-pcv on the benches had a smooth skin and a foamed centre to combined comfort with weather resistance. Hedges and shrubs provided wind-breaks, and muffled the noise of traffic rising up sixty feet from a busy street. Murdoch had made inquiries about buying the building but the ownership was buried in a tangle of what looked like dummy corporations and offshore holding companies on the Isle of Man and Jersey, or in Liechtenstein. He though the garden would make a perfect setting for receptions.

". . . to reduce the impact of crime at the human level, you have to go for the petty criminal," Formby was saying when Murdoch gave him his attention again. "You know, the little bloke, who gets his wrist slapped by a magistrate and goes right back to business. Major criminals affect few lives directly, by and large. Petty criminals ruin the lives of scores if not hundreds of people. Street robberies, burglaries, and so on. Wipe out petty crime and you'll do wonders for the store of human happiness."

"Oh, yes, I remember that speech." Murdoch speared his last chip with a wooden fork and chewed the end off the octagonal shape. "It was all about the civil liberties of the law-abiding citizen. If a criminal chooses to break the law, of his own free will, he forfeits all right to these liberties. And there was some stuff about the people who think the rights of criminals are more important that the rights of their victims."

"Our argument isn't with the system." Formby quoted.

"It's certainly not with the police. It's with a few morally bankrupt individuals, who are abusing the system and basking in the glow of their undeserved authority. Except that civil liberties are supposed to apply to everyone." Formby crumpled paper tray and wooden fork, and lobbed them into a waste bin. "Especially to those accused of a crime but later acquitted."

"Don't tell me, Rob, tell One Ton Radio. Have you got any real evidence your vigilantes exist as an organized group?"

"I know that Hambourne is full of statistical anomalies as far as people jumping out of windows and similar weirdness is concerned. That came out of the famous survey of the town at the turns of two centuries."

"Yes, that was quite amusing, the contrasts between now and Victorian times. And the things that stayed the same."

"And two blokes were tarred and feathered by masked men not so long ago."

"I've always wondered why that doesn't end up in murder. Why it doesn't cook someone alive," Murdoch remarked.

"The tar becomes liquid before it gets hot enough to burn the skin. And there's the People's Prison in Mossy Castle."

"Alleged," Murdoch said with a sceptical smile. "The other view was it was an illegal drinking den, to quote your own paper, and the people who died in it were too drunk to get out of the way of the bulldozers."

"What about the two drug pushers who were hanged?"

"As I recall, the press were invited round to photograph two alleged bodies with hoods over their heads and ropes round their necks. The bodies disappeared before the police arrived and the alleged pushers were never identified."

"But four suspected pushers disappeared about that time."

"People do disappear, Rob. Not necessarily because

they've been hanged. For simple reasons like too-tough competition."

"So you're saying the vigilantes don't exist?"

"What I'm saying is if they *do* exist, they've been clever enough not to leave any evidence the police could use against them. And you can't take One Ton Radio too seriously. They shock people as part of their illegal image."

"How close are you to One Ton. Cheers!" Formby raised his cup in salute when Murdoch had poured the last of the wine. "They're giving your heavy-metal festival a lot of plugging."

"One Ton is a music-oriented radio station. And it would be illegal to pay them for advertising if they're a pirate outfit."

"They don't plug acid house parties."

"If they did, the police would be there in force to stop them happening. And it's in One Ton's interests to get a good crowd to the heavy metal do so they can sell their teeshirts, car stickers, badges and anything else they can think of."

"Mutual back-scratching, Gavin?"

"Parallel interests. Back-scratching would be illegal for me."

"Have you heard any whispers about where their studio is?"

"As they're supposed to have cable and microwave links to several transmitters and aerials, it could be anywhere within two hundred square miles. Which explains why the DTI mob have grabbed the occasional transmitter worth a hundred or two quid but not the studio worth thousands."

"That sort of set-up must have cost thousands to get off the ground. Some people say they got the money from the Gettys because they have so many American DJs. As a sort of rehabilitation programme for Vietnam veterans."

"Some people will say anything," scoffed Murdoch. "You know, this place would be great for a select music event. You could seat a thousand people up here quite comfortably. And you wouldn't have neighbours complaining about the noise out of working hours."

"How long would it take to get them up here, eight at a time, in one lift?" said Formby. "Or using the fire escape? I suppose you could get them down quickly by mass abseiling, but you'd have a bit of a problem with fire regulations."

"And so another brilliant idea founders on the rock of practicality," laughed Murdoch. "But perhaps it's best to keep this place select."

# EIGHT

## Hidden Assets

The windows of the two top floors of the car-park building were covered with decaying, galvanized-wire screens to discourage intruders with a head for heights. Grime accumulated over several years streaked the glass. Behind each window hung a strip of the sort of reflective plastic fabric used to make mirror balloons. Thermal shutters sealed the windows completely on the inside.

A locked door in the basement of the building gave access to another lift, which communicated only with floors 5 and 6. On floor 5 was a sequence of rooms which formed an unsuspected private apartment. Directly above it, also occupying a space twenty feet wide by sixty feet long, was the hidden studio of One Ton Radio, the self-styled *Last Of The Pirates*.

The rest of the upper two floors had been knocked into one vast room, which was sixty feet wide, one hundred and eighty feet long and twenty-one feet high. Heat pumps in the air-conditioning plants of neighbouring buildings kept the hangar-like space at a constant temperature. Robbijohn's studio was well insulated, lit by a heat-free lighting system and entered through a sequence of four air-locks. Once a large body of air has reached a fixed temperature, it tends to

become self-regulating. The studio needed very little topping up in cold weather, and hot spells in Hambourne rarely lasted long enough to require the use of its cooling system.

The tenants in the former offices on the fifth floor had moved out to a more modern building. A refurbishment plan had come to nothing due to high interest rates and lack of demand. One of the students in an aerobics class in the former dance studio had collapsed and died embarrassingly publicly. Others had quit in case they were overdoing things in a polluted city atmosphere. The studio's operators had been glad to sell out to a development company.

Ambitious plans for the building had come to nothing. All public records of the ownership of its upper floors came to dead ends overseas. The top two floors were listed on the council's computer system as empty and therefore rate-free. All power consumption was charged to the car park and the garden. Floors 5 and 6 had no administrative existence.

Robbijohn was using the draught-free studio as a development area for designs of super-light, elastic-powered, model aircraft. He was spending thousands of pounds on experimental plastic sheets that were just a few molecules thick, and carbon-fibre structural members.

His standard power plant was an elastic band 1 mm thick, 3 mm wide and 16 mm in diameter. His twin aims were to reduce the weight of a flyable aircraft to little more than the weight of the elastic band, and to achieve the flattest spiral and a flight of longest duration when the elastic unwound and the aircraft began a glide to the dust-free, polished floor.

There was a gallery at the occupied end of the studio. It ran at sixth-floor level along the windowless partition wall with One Ton Radio's studio complex. Three crash panels, for use only in the direst emergency, gave access to the gallery from One Ton's side. Stairs from the gallery led down

to the floor of Robbijohn's studio. Another staircase provided an emergency exit to the upper level of the car park.

Robbijohn used the gallery as the launching point for his experimental aircraft. He enjoyed the calm, low-echo atmosphere of the vast, enclosed space. At times, it was his private chunk of the universe. At others, it was a noisy pistol range in which his band of Vietnam survivors gathered to drink beer, smoke their *Hambourne Gold* and fire BB-guns at paper planes as a form of indoor skeet-shooting.

Robbijohn had connected himself up to his timer. Wires ran to metallized pads on the index finger and thumb of his plastic launching glove. When he completed a hand-launch by releasing his hold on the conducting strip on the aircraft's body, he broke a circuit and that action started the timer. A laser-tracker registered the shock when the aircraft made a thistledown impact on the floor, and stopped the timer.

A tension device adjusted the rudder and aileron controls so that the model followed approximately the same orbit both when it was being driven by the elastic band and also when it was decaying to the floor in its shallow but terminal, unpowered dive.

When his latest model was in the air, Robbijohn could open a can of beer from the gallery's fridge, drop onto one of the canvas director's chairs and enjoy the hypnotic swoops of the model as it advanced and retired on its looping flight. A wall switch allowed him to turn up a speaker connected to the One Ton output line.

The Russian accent following a John Lennon track came as no surprise. Gregor Maiskiy was one of two Russians who had travelled to Colombia on Robbijohn's expedition. Yevgeny had not come back. They had found their equivalent of Vietnam in Afghanistan while serving with the Soviet Special Forces on anti-Mujahaddin operations.

On three occasions, they had come within inches of capture and a slow, agonizing death.

They had effectively handed in their resignations in the fifth year of the war by disappearing while out on patrol. They had joined a West German news team, both spoke fairly fluent German, as experts on places from which the team could video the fighting in relative safety. They had left Afghanistan via Pakistan, travelling to Cyprus, West Germany and then the United States.

Robbijohn had met them at one of the many survivalist schools in Redneck country, USA.

Robbijohn smiled as Gregor Maiskiy introduced number five in his personal top ten of John Lennon's solo works. Hardly anyone in the Hambourne area believed that Maiskiy was a genuine Russian. Most people thought that he was a well-known local man, who put on the accent to avoid identification. Even members of the city council had been suggested as the man behind the voice.

A door opened below Robbijohn as the model aircraft was in its unpowered, descent phase. Derek padded across the floor and up the stairs to the gallery. He helped himself to a can of beer, then dropped onto a canvas chair. "Remember your brother?" he remarked.

"Vaguely," said Robbijohn. "Ken borrowed eight thousand quid off me three years ago. I haven't heard from him since."

"Sounds a pretty good deal," laughed Derek.

"So what about him?"

"The fuzz want to talk to him. As far as I can make out, he's not involved directly but he knows something. Only if he talks, he could end up in hospital. Or severely dead."

"How do you know all this?"

"Someone delivered a message to your official residence. Ken needs some cash to pay someone who's sheltering him,

and a secure place to hide for while. While he thinks what to do next."

"I suppose the best place for him is Carn nan Marbh. Scotland is the traditional place to hide then you're on the run."

"It didn't do him in the *Thirty-Nine Steps* much good."

"If it had, there wouldn't have been much of a story," Robbijohn pointed out.

"I guess not," Derek admitted. "Do you want me to arrange a pick-up and transport?"

John Lennon's nasal singing gave way to a Russian voice.

"Is that Gregor on One Ton again?" added Derek.

"He reckons it's the last place the KGB will look for him if they suspect he's still alive," said Robbijohn. "Yes, sort Ken out. And ask him when I get my eight grand back. Anything happening on the Susie front?"

"She's been asking your neighbours about you, according to an old girl who lives along the landing from you at Mossy Castle. I told her I'm watering your plants while you're away."

"What have the neighbours been saying about me?"

"It's so long since they last saw you, they've probably forgotten what you look like. That Mrs. Davis couldn't remember the last time she saw you."

"Have you thought of something drastic to do about Susie?"

"Still working on it. You could always move."

"I don't fancy being evicted by some woman who won't let go."

"Hardly evicted," scoffed Derek. "How much time do you actually spend there? When you've got all these other decent places to park yourself?"

"A modest hole-in-the-wall has its uses," said Robbijohn.

"Well, it's up to you. The plane's flying well."

"I got the shrinkage just right on this one. It's a real headache getting the fabric smooth and tight. You usually get wrinkles or it splits. Or it bends the framework out of shape."

"You're not bringing your brother here instead of sending him all the way to Scotland?"

"If he was right in the middle of a city, he wouldn't stay put. He'd be out looking for night life. He needs to be stuck miles from anywhere without a car to make him stay put."

"What if he walks down to the road and hitch-hikes down to Fort William?"

"Three-quarters of a mile of rugged, mountain track will put him off thoroughly."

"Right." Derek took another pull at his can, eyes fixed on the graceful circles of the almost invisible model aircraft.

Gregor Petrovich Maiskiy was a tough, lean, blue-eyed blond of Siberian stock. His senses missed nothing of what went on around him. Even when he was in a studio at One Ton Radio, wearing cans and with his back to the door, he always knew when someone came in, and he generally knew who it was.

John Lennon was singing *Happy Xmas (War is Over)* when Bruce Bruce entered the main studio, making no attempt to creep up on Gregor to give him a shock. It was not safe to try that on either the Vietnam Vets or Gregor. They were apt to cripple someone first and ask questions later.

Bruce Bruce believed that his father had been reading Catch 22 when a new arrival had required a name. Unlike the unfortunate Major Major Major, who had become a major in the USAF in Joseph Heller's book, Bruce's middle name was Cameron to give him a little variety. Gregor pushed the earphone off his right ear as Bruce sat down at the desk.

"A word wi' the great British public after Mr. Lennon," Bruce placed a newspaper cutting on a clipboard within easy reading range of the No. 2 microphone.

Gregor nodded in time to the music, performing a down-up slide on the faders when it ended. "John Lennon with end of one of many wars in world. And now, Comrades, special announcement from person of great importance."

Grinning, Bruce pushed his fader up. He came from Glasgow, so he put on an Edinburgh accent when broadcasting. "I just wanted to mention a piece of deliberate Government disinformation I found in my morning paper. The Department of Trade and Industry doesn't have much of a reputation left, I don't think I need do more than mention the Harrods fiasco and all the rest. But according to the papers, they've sent their inspectors here to shut down One Ton Radio because pirate radio stations cause interference.

"So what we're going to do about that is go off the air for thirty seconds. Which will give everyone a chance to listen carefully to see if they can hear anyone else broadcasting locally at one hundred megahertz. Here we go, off the air for thirty seconds."

The red light went out when the sweep second hand of the studio clock reached the vertical position. Bruce took a sip of water and checked his notes.

"Coming to you again," said a voice from the control room. "Four, three, two, one . . ." The red light came on again.

"Welcome back," said Bruce. "Anybody hear anyone else, by the way? Only if your radio is faulty and it's picking up adjacent frequencies. Another lie I'd like to nail is that we interfere with emergency services. Think about it. What are these emergency services that use a channel right in the middle of local and national radio frequencies? Have you

ever heard any of them?

"The truth is we use hole in the local VHF band. Just above Radio One's and well away from their local frequency. Which leads me to wonder why these mysterious emergency services don't get swamped by the BBC's mighty transmitters. So who does One Ton's purely local, fifty-watt signal interfere with?"

"NO ONE!" roared a chorus in the control room.

"And what does that make the DTI?" added Bruce.

"A BUNCH OF LYING *bleep-bleeps*!"

"We can't use that sort of language on the radio at this time of day," chuckled Bruce, "but you know what we mean. So why are the DTI lying about us? It must mean the Government is scared of One Ton Radio. Just think! Every time you tune to One Tone FM, you're frightening the life out of that mob in Whitehall!

"As Bob Dylan said, 'To live outside the law you must be honest.' That's where we are, and I'm sure you people out there know a porkie from the DTI when you hear one. And now back to Gregor Petrovich."

"Number two in GP Lennon top ten," said Gregor, "One Ton Radio plays *Imagine*." He did an up-down slide of the faders, then double-checked that he was off the air. "So enemy in town again?"

"And currently under surveillance," nodded Bruce. "We're standing by to give them a bit of aggro and some quick transmitter changes. Pity we can't let you and the Vets loose on them with Kalashnikovs or some M-sixteens."

Gregor shrugged. "Get into shooting war, they bring up tanks."

"The Hungarians did quite a bit of damage to expensive Russian tanks with cheap Molotov cocktails. But you're right. we don't want things to get too far out of hand. There's quite

a lot of difference between some legitimate self-defence and sending the DTI mob home in body bags. We don't want to give them anything they can prove we did. That way we can go on calling them liars and paranoids."

# NINE

## Sharing Good News & Forward Planning

The sun was beaming down from a vast expanse of blue sky, deepening the tans of the window cleaners as they worked their way along Wilmot Street. Terry Champion, in a teeshirt with a faded One Ton Radio logo, was whistling as he wiped the soapy mop along the ground-floor windows of a terrace. Barry was following him with the long squeegee. Ted and Ron were chasing up ladders to perform the same double act at first-floor level. It was Friday and their weekend started at lunchtime.

Terry's good name had been restored. A uniformed police inspector had visited Mossy Castle to tell him that there had been a mistake in identification. He was no longer suspected of being a flasher. Terry had accepted the apology graciously. Rob Formby of the Express had phoned to warn him not to ram the words back down the inspector's throat. Even if they would not admit it, the police owed him one now.

Naturally, the arrival of the police at Mossy Castle had set the neighbours wondering who was to be arrested. They had learned with a profound sense of shock why the inspector was there. They had been brought up to believe that all coppers are bastards. Some of them had *ACAB* tattooed on their knuckles. An apology from an inspector to one of their num-

ber struck at the very roots of their system of beliefs.

Even more pleasant had been a visit from the rather dowdy woman called Stella, who worked for Mr. Murdoch, who had used his influence as a mediator. Terry had signed a legal document to promise that he would not take legal action against Mrs. Berry, and he had received £500 as compensation for his embarrassment and inconvenience.

His mother had made him put £400 in his savings account but she had let him reserve £100 for having a good time to celebrate. Terry had plenty to whistle about. Rajid Shastri, the owner of the shop on the corner, was looking decidedly glum when he glanced toward the shadow on his window.

The Shastri family had settled uneasily into Wilmot Street. The previous owner of the shop had employed several local people as part-time assistants. Those employment opportunities had been claimed by the Shastris; father, mother and a son; all of whom lived nearby.

Terry Champion and his window-cleaning mates had wondered if the new Pakis [who were from India, in fact] would decide to clean their own windows. Rajid Shastri knew the value of reciprocity, however. If he was not their customer, he knew, the window cleaners would be unlikely to buy cigarettes, soft drinks and snacks at his shop.

Barry, still wearing his brown, woolly hat on a hot day, bought four cans of orange, four packets of crisps and two packets of cigarettes, blowing more than the cost of cleaning the windows. "You're looking a bit down, mate," he remarked to Shastri.

"So would you if you had kids making a nuisance of themselves in your shop, and banging on your door at night. And putting filth through the letterbox," said Shastri. He had the same accent as the window cleaner because he had arrived in England at an early age and grown up locally.

"You want to get in touch with the *A-Team*," grinned Barry.

"You don't know the phone number of the Los Angeles Underground?" sighed Shastri. He was a plump man of around fifty, whose younger son lived at home and was a fan of Hannibal Smith and his outfit.

"No, I mean the local mob," said Barry. "Did you hear about Terry's spot of bother?"

"That silly woman?"

"Terry had it sorted by a bloke called Murdoch. He left him a phone number. Want it?"

"How much does he charge, this Murdoch?"

"Nothing. My dad reckons he's going to stand for the council and he's looking for votes."

"Go on, then," said Shastri.

Barry called Terry into the shop. Rajid Shastri wrote a local number on the palm of his hand. He had until it smeared into illegibility to decide whether to use it.

A mile and three-quarters from the marina, by road rather than the river/ship canal combination, obsolete commercial premises had been levelled to serve modern leisure needs. One hundred and sixty-two acres of unwanted docklands had been transformed into a golf course. Sending a ball into the ship canal required a wood from the third green, or a really vicious slice from the fourth and fifth tees. Two sinuous lakes provided alternative watery traps on the course itself.

Lionel Dragoner had drowned a ball on the outward nine but he had wiped away the memory with an eagle three on the long, straight thirteenth, thanks to an iron shot to the green, which had dribbled back down a bank into the cup. He arrived at the clubhouse with 77 on his card, which was

quite acceptable to a six-handicap player. His playing partner, local businessman Ivan Kenton, played off the same handicap. Kenton had gone round in 78 on that Saturday morning.

When they arrived in the bar, Dragoner found that his future son-in-law had bought a round of drinks with the £10 note that he had stuffed into Clive Warner's pocket. Warner had also stacked the change neatly beside Dragoner's brandy glass. In a denim jacket, sweatshirt, jeans and trainers, and wearing a mop of over-long blond curls, Clive Warner looked like the sort of person normally excluded from the Dockland Golf Club. Major shareholder Lionel Dragoner had turned his authority up a notch to remind the staff that his guests were always *okay people*.

Warner's parents ran a hotel on the eastern side of Tor Bay, which made them fairly okay people, if not in the Dragoner league of wealth and influence. Their son was in his mid-twenties and a year older than Claire Dragoner, his fiancée. He worked as a recording engineer at a studio complex near the *HamEx* exhibition centre, which was a fairly okay career with reasonable prospects.

Dragoner wished that his daughter had chosen someone more in their social bracket – upwardly mobile with his head screwed on firmly – but he was rather relieved to get her off his hands. Claire had developed into quite a wild child in her late teens. Only some hasty and expensive PR work had prevented her expulsion from university for holding pot-parties. She had escaped ejection only because she had been giving the stuff away to her friends, not selling it.

There had been another scare about six months earlier, during the long Christmas break. A posse of policemen had turned up at Claire's flat to find the place full of friends sleeping off a binge and Claire in bed with her boyfriend.

Lionel Dragoner and a solicitor had arrived as the police were deciding that they had been misinformed about the drugs, and that a neighbour had probably made a call to the free *Hambourne Crime Line* instead of complaining about the noise. The boyfriend had become Claire's fiancé a week later. He would be lumbered with her before July was out.

"So, what do you reckon to golf now you've been in the trenches as an observer?" said Ivan Kenton after taking a long pull on a weak vodka and orange. He was approaching fifty and going quite prematurely bald under his white cap.

"Looks like it takes a long time to learn," Clive Warner said diplomatically. "Like knowing which club to use and how hard to hit the ball. And knowing how to allow for the wind to stop it blowing your ball into the canal."

"Anything worth doing takes a bit of effort," said Dragoner. "And there's an important social side to the game. You meet all sorts of useful people here."

Warner took a mouthful of icy lager to freeze a grin. There was no draught beer at the golf club, only lager-lout fodder. In the context of useful people, he had happened to overhear his future father-in-law assuring someone by telephone that there was absolutely no way the DTI was going to get Ivan Kenton, his golf partner, for insider trading, even if they investigated him from now until Doomsday.

It was an interesting definition of *useful*.

"The lad's not exactly overflowing with enthusiasm, Likey," remarked Kenton.

"Neither's his bank balance," Warner admitted. "Thousands of pounds for a set of clubs, membership, green fees, bar bills. And Claire nagging me about all the time I spend learning to play golf instead of with her. Golf looks like something that should wait until she starts handing me my coat and encouraging me to go out."

"About a week after you get back from the honeymoon?" laughed Kenton.

"Forward planning, that's what it's all about," said Dragoner. "By the time you can afford to do it properly, you should have learned how to do it reasonably well. Anyway, it's something for you to think about, young Clive. All sorts of deals are sorted out through a round of golf or over dinner in the clubhouse."

Clive Warner waited for the next hint on the list, but it was getting a rest on that particular Saturday. He enjoyed being a recording engineer. The only thing wrong with the studio was the way it attracted the colony of American survivors from the Vietnam War, who turned up with fistfuls of thousand-dollar bills, eager to get a new talent that they had discovered onto a CD. The only thing wrong with the Yanks was that they gave Claire flash-cured cannabis leaves which, she reckoned, gave the ultimate stone in the whole history of the universe.

Clive Warner knew that his future father-in-law was on the lookout for someone to take over Hambourne Risk Management. Twenty-year-old Andrew Dragoner was a dead loss in that department; the natural heir was a student in Los Angeles and he was going into the film industry when he graduated. Clive Warner was not the slightest bit interested in joining the insurance industry.

The only hope for a bit of peace, as far as Warner could tell, lay in giving in after a decent period of resistance, then hoping that Lionel croaked at an early age so that they could sell HRM and Clive Warner could get back into the recording business while he was still young enough to enjoy himself.

Breaking the engagement and calling off the wedding was not an alternative. He and Claire were thoroughly in love with each other, and her father's desire to see his only

daughter comfortable would give them a much higher standard of living than a newly married couple could expect otherwise.

Clive Warner was resigned to accepting the truth of his Uncle Sam's favourite saying. His mother's brother, who was reputed to have died in a Japanese brothel during an earthquake, had always told Clive: 'Life's a bit of a bastard, old son. About the best you can do is go along with it and try and sneak in a bit of fun around the edges.'

Faced with the prospect of several years, or even decades, in boring old insurance, the 'bit of a bastard' looked rather huge to Clive Warner.

# TEN

## Counter-Measures

Robbijohn was heading into Chinatown during the evening rush-hour when he met Ferenc Disch coming the other way. Disch was around forty, a couple of years younger than Robbijohn, and a couple of inches shorter than his benefactor's six feet. Both his blond hair and his blue eyes were darker than Robbijohn's. When he spoke, he seemed to communicate via an interplanetary link.

He spoke English fluently enough and at a normal speed, but he left pauses; as if he were translating everything to and from an obscure Eastern European language as a final check of accuracy before speaking.

Robbijohn had been planning a meal of Chinese dumplings. Disch diverted him and Robbijohn found himself tucking into a bowl of thick, spicy stew instead while a comedian told incomprehensible jokes to an appreciative audience of Eastern-European exiles. Robbijohn found it a good way to feel a stranger in his own country.

The club occupied a basement which had been the *Kardoma Café* in Robbijohn's teens. His mother had brought him and his brother here for ice cream milk-shakes when she had wanted a coffee break from shopping. There had always been a general scattering of parcels and shopping bags under

the table and the sighs of anticipation and relief when they sat.

Perhaps the furniture was the same, Robbijohn thought. He had a vague memory of white cloths and rather solid tables and chairs. If anyone started a fight in this place and hit someone with a chair, the victim would be dead long before the chair broke.

Disch gave a peace sign to the waiter, asking for two more glasses of the pale, slightly sweet beer. Then he dropped another handful of the thumbnail-size squares of thin, savoury pastry onto his stew. He crunched with relish and single-minded concentration. Companions had to put up with being ignored when Disch was engaged in serious eating.

The waiter swapped full for empty glasses, then inscribed more hieroglyphs on a white dripmat. He chose Robbijohn's, knowing that Disch rarely had any spare cash on him. Disch pushed his empty bowl away with a sign of contentment. His fellow countrymen were roaring with laughter at the comedian's latest sally. Disch always closed his ears when eating to avoid choking through simultaneous laughter.

Robbijohn was still working out from the edges toward the centre of his stew, which was reaching a comfortable eating temperature. Disch turned half round and stared at the man at the service counter. The latter ran a downward-pointing finger above a dessert cabinet. Disch nodded at the strategic moment. The waiter delivered a slice of something constructed from sponge cake and sliced fruit, and smothered in whipped cream.

Robbijohn's dripmat received another symbol.

"You're in trouble," Disch said as Robbijohn was finishing his stew. Disch licked his spoon to make sure that he had found every smear of cream.

"What, paying for this lot?" said Robbijohn.

Disch took a translation pause. "You know you've been telling people you're a big-time gambler? Which is why you buy your chips with thousand-dollar bills?"

"Doesn't everyone?"

. . . "You know that guy Wayne who hangs out in Merity's?"

"Big bloke with a short crewcut? Shane Wayne?"

. . . "Shaun. He reckons he's going to get violent with you if you don't tell him your system for the horses. He reckons it's greedy to keep it to yourself."

"It's not a system, its all down to studying form and the conditions. If you pick your races, you can spot some that have only one obvious winner. That's the one you back."

Disch seemed to process the information through his alien language a couple of times as an accuracy check. "Anyway, he wants your system. And he's not frightened of your friends. He reckons they're just a bunch of dope-smoking, no-hopers."

Robbijohn smiled. Shaun Wayne was a relative youngster in his late twenties, who hung around the gambling clubs in expensive suits, looking smart and trying to look dangerous. Wayne was trying to spread his wings. He wants to create a personal image of a man who could get things done and who commanded respect in the sense of the Mafia's definition of the word; compliance through fear of loss of property, severe personal injury, the deaths of loved ones or one's own death.

The Vietnam Vets used a different language of image – one which Wayne would never understand. No matter how much punishment Wayne had handed out in one-sided brawls, he had never ever fired a modern assault rifle on full automatic at another human being. He had never watched a life being scattered all over the immediate area by the

devastating impact of a dozen bullets striking flesh in just under one second. He had never shovelled a friend into a body bag because there was no other practical way of recovering for burial enough of the mush that the friend had become.

Shaun Wayne might think that Robbijohn and the Vets were beyond forty and over the hill. He had no idea that they could teach him meanings of the word 'ruthless' that would give him nightmares for the rest of his life; as their experiences had done to some of the Vets.

The stoned civilians could become again stone killers if the need arose. They also possessed the bizarre sense of humour that owning $1,000 bills by the thousand encouraged. If Wayne wanted to play games, then Robbijohn was prepared to accommodate him.

Wayne seemed to belong to the same breed as Susie Lymme. They though that they were entitled to exploit someone who was rich by unconventional means. Susie had a habit of picking the most expensive item on the menu when they dined out. She wanted to visit the more exclusive clubs and the most exotic venues, and she was always dropping hints about expensive presence which Robbijohn could buy for her.

Robbijohn's initial amusement had turned to irritation. He could afford to indulge several Susie Lymmes but he saw no point in doing so after the entertainment value ran out. Susie deserved a *Derek Special* as a pay-off. She owed Robbijohn the satisfaction of a small drama. Shaun Wayne was another matter entirely. If he saw himself as a coming man with a divine right to tax people like Lance Robbijohn, he needed lessons in both manners and target identification.

Ferenc Disch accepted one of Robbijohn's cigars and waved another peace sign at the waiter. The waiter

exchanged two more glasses for empties. Robbijohn dropped a £50 note onto the table when the waiter had loaded the dishes onto this tray. Disch made a grab for it, but the waiter was too quick for him. It there was anything left over when Disch's tab had been settled, it would be credited to his account.

"Zdravstvooitye!" said a familiar voice. Gregor Maiskiy arrived at the table carrying a half-full carafe of pinkish, pepper vodka and a shot glass.

"Zdravstviy, G.P. Kak dyela?" Robbijohn and Disch said together. Disch's time delay tended to shorten for no apparent reason when he was speaking to a fellow Eastern European. His native language was no more like Russian than English.

"Looking for a job as a bodyguard?" added Disch.

"Not for someone like you with no money," scoffed Maiskiy. "What did you do?"

"He reckons that tough-guy Shane Wayne wants my system for the horses," Robbijohn said while Disch was still translating mentally.

"Tell silly stories, trouble comes running," laughed Maiskiy. "Shall I get *Skorpion* out of armoury?"

"Hey, listen," Robbijohn said in an undertone, "no Czech zap-guns, no knives, no nothing. Got it?"

"Steel toecaps?" Maiskiy suggested. "Job is on?"

"Hang around, but not to close," surrendered Robbijohn. "I should think One Ton's long-suffering audience could do with a break from John Lennon and the Beatles for a while."

"Hang loose not to frighten fish?" said Maiskiy.

"Whatever," said Robbijohn.

Jenny Hobson was wearing her Hambourne Express identity card clipped to the lapel of a cream linen jacket. After trek-

king up and down Wilmot Street, she was more than ready for a drink and a smoke in the nearby *Red Admiral*. The pub was about fifteen years old, still slightly yuppified, but with the new edges knocked off.

It had been built to serve new housing developments in formerly blighted areas, and it attracted a number of people from the areas to the west, which would be flattened next. The long bar and a mirrored stock counter with three arches formed the partition between twin lounges. One was called 'the vault' because it contained a dartboard, but there was little to choose between them.

Hobson like the pub because she could order a spritzer without being frowned at. She picked a table well away from anyone else in a large, empty room. The pub had just opened its doors.

To her annoyance, a man came over and sat next to her, sliding along the bench seat on the wall to press against her. Hobson was about to become indignant, and possibly violent, when she recognized the aftershave.

"What are *you* doing here?" she asked with a frown instead of freezing the intruder with a cold stare.

Robin Formby moved away to give her drinking arm some elbow room. He had brought a half-pint to the table, which meant that he was driving. "Wasting time," he said with a shrug.

"Doing what?"

"Our esteemed editor wants to have a swipe at the council's Race Relations Unit. He doesn't think the wise guy they brought up from London at great expense is doing much. So I'm out interviewing people who've written to us recently complaining. Only my trip to the Asian community on Wilmot Street was a dead loss."

"That's where I've just been," said Hobson.

"Doing what?"

"More letters of complaint. Some company has bought up both sides of Wilmot Street between Leaf Street and Humberstone Avenue. They're supposed to be doing them up as the alternative to demolition. The tenants have got a whole list of repairs and decorating jobs they want doing.

"The company keeps telling them they're getting quotes for refurbishment. They've even sent men round to take measurements. But nothing ever gets done."

"Slow grinding wheels?"

"Dead stop rather than slow."

"Faceless financiers oppressing the people of our town?"

"Something like that. What's your dead loss?"

"Remember *Open All Hours* on the telly? Ronny Barker and David Jason? They've got one on Wilmot Street. The Shastris. It must have cost him a fortune in stamps, writing all his complaints. Now, he reckons he doesn't want to talk about it in case the little monsters who've got it in for him make his life even more of a misery."

"Sounds unfortunate but a fact of life."

"Yes, but he's lying to me. Shastri. I can tell."

"How?"

"Because he looked like someone trying to keep a Pools win from his brother-in-law."

"Has your dreaded brother-in-law come up with another brilliant idea?" laughed Hobson.

"I don't know why he bothers," Robin Formby said with a sigh. "Her bloody brother always makes sure Annie's out of the way when he tries to tap me up. It's a dead giveaway."

"Maybe you look like a soft touch, Rob."

"You reckon? Do I look like someone with six hundred and fifty quid to waste? On a sure-fire scheme that will bring in a guaranteed seventy to eighty quid a week."

"Not in that suit, you don't," laughed Hobson. "So what did you tell your Mr. Shastri?"

"I told him it makes him look like a time waster if he writes all those letters then turns down a chance to do something about it. And it devalues genuine complaints from fellow members of the Asian community."

"So he said that's just too bad? And gave you the bum's rush?"

"I wish I knew what he knows."

"Aren't you supposed to be an investigative reporter?"

"On our budget?" scoffed Formby.

"Are you sober enough to give me a lift back to the office, Rob?"

"I want to make a phone call first. Have you got a card?"

Jenny Hobson took the card from her wallet. A lift for free was too much to expect. Robin Formby headed for the payphones. He found Gavin Murdoch at the second number on his list.

"What can I do for you, Rob?" Murdoch sounded in a good mood.

"Has a bloke called Shastri been in touch?" said Formby. "About problems with his local hooligans?"

"Not with me, old son." Murdoch told the exact truth. Rajid Shastri had contacted Stella Cookson. "Why?"

"He looks like a bloke who's in range of a light at the end of his tunnel."

"Not an oncoming train?" chuckled Murdoch.

"He doesn't seem to think so. How about his near neighbours on Leaf Street and Humberstone Avenue? The ones who aren't owner-occupiers. Their problems with repairs."

"Yeah, I've looked into that for some of them. The thing is, they're in rent-controlled properties. There's almost nothing left over for repairs and redecoration after administration

and a bit of return. What it looks like is the only way they'll get any decorating done is as a job lot. All the houses the same colours because you get the biggest discount on a bulk order of paint."

"They're not going to like that."

"Maybe not, but the company isn't a charity. And what can they expect for what they're paying in rent? I mean, money doesn't just magically appear out of thin air, Rob, no matter what you Socialists might like to think."

"So Mr. Murdoch has no magical solution?"

"Only that people accept what's reasonable for the money they're paying. One solution is for the company to do repairs to the limit of their budget, and the tenants handle their own decorating."

"I can't see that going down very well at all."

"That's up to the tenants, Rob. But you must know labour is a huge part of the cost of these projects. I know it goes against Socialist principles to do a bunch of painters and decorators out of a job, but we're living in a cruel, hard, real world."

"Sink or swim, huh?"

"It's all a matter of choices. The tenants could get together, agree a priority list of repairs and sort out a big enough order for decorating materials to cop for a good discount at a warehouse. Or they could wait for their landlords to get absolute rock-bottom quotes for what needs doing."

"Or they could move. Or they could win the Pools."

"Or they could persuade the city council to buy up their street and do their houses out like proper little palaces."

"Oh, sure!" laughed Formby.

"Anyway, that's the score at the desperate end of town, old son. How are you getting on with the reverend gentleman?"

"I got a bit of a shook when I saw who visits his wife on his Wednesday nights out."

"You didn't know your editor was knocking off a vicar's missus?" laughed Murdoch. "You've got to admit, she's very tasty."

"Not something I can put on the computer at the Express without blowing a fuse, though."

"How are you getting on with the other end of it?"

"I know where the reverend gentleman goes. And I've had a few more surprises watching who goes in there as well. I assume it's more than just a knocking shop?"

"Hey, this boy's got a real reporter's instinct," laughed Murdoch. "Anyway, I've got to go, old son. Keep in touch."

Robin Formby removed the phonecard with just one unit left. He had a bit of a story to tell Jenny Hobson to deflect her moans about having to claim another on her expenses.

# ELEVEN

## Visiting Mossy Castle . . .

Susie Lymme climbed evil-smelling stairs at what was left of Mossy Castle as a tightly sprung ball of observation. She was alert for trouble from any direction, including overhead. She could hear the lift humming up and down but she had no intention of being trapped with some psychopathic mugger, pervert or murderer; assuming such people were out of bed at around eleven-thirty a.m. on a mid-July morning.

She was wearing flat-heeled shoes, which were firmly laced and double-knotted for speedy flight. She had shortened the strap on her bag and she was carrying it tucked up to her left armpit, pressed against her body with her upper arm. She had left her wallet, cheque book and credit cards at home.

The bag contained just a handful of coins and some bits and pieces of no great value. She had even left her watch at work after sneaking away for an ultra-early lunch. And if anyone tried to rape her as a substitute for robbery, she had a small can of pepper with a quick-release top.

Finding that one of Lance's windows had been broken and replaced with a sheet of synthetic board came as no surprise. In Susie's world-view, the neighbours in a flat complex like Mossy Castle were liable to nip in to nick anything not nailed

down if the tenant risked going down to the shops for a bottle of milk, which could not be delivered on account of muggings, especially on payment day.

She could imagine determined thieves abseiling down the back of the building, crashing SAS-style through rear windows and then lowering their loot to a stolen getaway car in the cradle that the window cleaners had abandoned years before, when the job had become too dangerous.

The council had not been prepared to post guards to prevent the inmates from untying or cutting the suspension ropes during working hours.

To her surprise, Susie heard a movement inside then she knocked on the door. She was nerving herself to face a thief with arms full of Lance's portable possessions when the door opened. "Oh, it's you." Susie tried not to let the words out in a rush of pent breath.

Derek smiled down at a shorter brunette woman of about his own age, noting the fear in her wide-open eyes.

"I suppose you're watering the plants again?" Susie added in a sceptical tone.

"Sweeping the glass up." Derek nodded to the window.

"Can I leave him a note?"

"You can leave it with the others."

Derek stood aside to let Susie go through to the gloomy living room. The light was on to make up for the sealed window. Three previous notes were still on the dining table. The pile of mail looked larger. Most of it was junk mail, small catalogues in plastic wrappers printed with extra-special offers. The direct marketing industry had been passing Mr. L. Smith's name around with reckless abandon.

Susie sat down and crumpled her previous efforts. She was still wondering what to write when the telephone in the kitchen area rang. Derek read the number off the dial.

"Police?" he said with a frown. "No, I'm a mate of his. I'm here to water his plants and fix up a window someone broke. No, I've not seen him for several days. Describe him? What for? How do I know you're really the fuzz? A road accident? Right, I'll do that."

Derek rang off, then he consulted directory inquiries for the number of police headquarters in Derby. He seemed quite surprised to be able to contact Sergeant Foster again.

"Six foot tall, ash-blond hair, blue eyes, about forty-three or four, a long surgical scar on the left side of his body at the front," said Derek. "No, I don't think his fingerprints are likely to be on your computer. Next of kin? Well, he's got a brother but I've not seen him for ages. No, I haven't got his address. I'll have to look for it. Right, I'll be in touch."

"Is he dead?" said Susie when Derek began to go through the drawers of a sideboard in the living room.

"I doubt it," Derek said with a shrug. "What they've got is a coach crash, some bodies and what they call detached possessions. He'll probably come rolling back and say he didn't notice he'd lost something in the excitement."

"You'll give me a ring when you hear something?" Susie smoothed a crumpled note and wrote a local number on the back. "That's my home phone number."

"Right." Derek continued to open drawers.

Half surprised that he could find anything in the drawers; that the unoccupied flat had not been stripped of furniture as well as small valuables; Susie let herself out and headed back to the stairs. She suspected that Lance had been avoiding her. That he might be dead had not crossed her mind.

She headed for the bus stop in a state of semi-numbed apprehension. She had not brought her car to the area for fear of having it looted, stolen or set on fire. The usual crowd of leering layabouts and sex-obsessed teenagers called the

usual insulting remarks to her. Susie heard none of them.

A dead ex-lover was infinitely preferable to one who had dumped her, she told herself, lost in her thoughts, navigating on autopilot around the bits of debris and split-open rubbish bags on the cracked concrete around the flat complex. She could draw some consolation from Lance taking the secrets of their intimate moments to the grave instead of swapping them with his friends. And yet, she knew that she might be doing him an injustice.

Lance might be unconscious in a hospital. Lance might be on his way back to her, ignorant of the heart-ache that he had caused. Susie had already made her mind up to risk enemy territory again to return to the flat. She could not trust that Derek to do something as simple as pick up a telephone.

Derek seemed disconnected from the world in some way. He had the cheek to smoke pot in someone else's flat. Susie had caught the hard edge of burning foliage the moment Derek had opened the door. Derek was unreliable. In fact, he was a bit of a Drek, as his nickname suggested.

As soon as the unwelcome visitor had gone, the bit of a Drek used his mobile phone to make a call. He wanted to use the scrambler for this call.

"Yeah, I want a pick-up at Base Three," he said when he got through. "The guy didn't make it out of the rat-trap."

"What did you do, waste him?" chuckled the authentic American voice of Steve Cann.

"Looks like he had a miocardial infarction."

"Yeah? What did you do, autopsy the sucker on the kitchen table?"

"Just an informed guess opinion based on the pop-eyes and the wide open mouth. He looks like a frog with a spike up its ass."

"So you want a big box?"

"One for the stereo tape-recorders should do it. Guess who turned up just after I got the window boarded up."

"Susie looking for her meal ticket?" chuckled Cann.

"Or some severance pay," chuckled Derek.

"So did you put your master plan into operation?"

"Yup." Derek gave nothing away. "Hurry up with the pick-up, hey?"

Derek took the butt of his joint into the bathroom and flushed it away. Then he poured himself a generous glass of Scotch from the concealed liquor store in the kitchen area of what was a compact, one-person flat in official language, tiny in real terms. There was a narrow hall behind the battered front door with its frosted glass and steel security grill. Visitors going straight on ended up in the bathroom. First right was the living room, second right the bedroom. And that was all there was.

Derek had hurried to the flat after the intruder alarm had gone off. Ten minutes after the break-in, at eleven-twenty in the morning, none of the neighbours had reported the sound of breaking glass and none was likely to. In that sort of neighbourhood, there were no points to be scored by being a concerned citizen. The people who did the break-ins had an uncanny knack of finding out who had squealed on them.

Derek had had time to drag the body into the bedroom, nail the board in place and make a start on collecting the surplus quills. Then Susie had turned up. Wherever he looked, Derek could see bamboo splinters. Some of them were still stuck in the carpet and the seats of chairs. Susie had either not seen them or ignored them.

Breaking the window had armed the quill-pack, which had appeared to be just an anonymous grey box on the wall of the kitchen area. When the intruder had reached the optimum target area, dozens of bamboo splinters had

erupted through the plastic-film front of the pack, spraying the room like the steel balls of a Claymore mine.

Barbs on the quills meant that they had to be removed surgically, like a fish hook. They were designed to deter future invasions of Robbijohn's territory and allow identification for retribution. The combination of shock and all-over agony had been too much for a tatty-looking, fiftyish man.

Derek had let himself into the flat to find the man in limbo. He was still warm. He could have been asleep or unconscious, breathing too shallowly for the rise and fall of his chest to be detected. He had been sprayed from the right. He had been turning toward the source of his agony when the second wave had hit him full in the face and chest.

A smashed eyeball had left a dark stain on the red carpet. There was very little blood. Shock had relaxed the man's thigh muscles, which had sucked his blood away from the surface. Derek had been able to get the burglar into a couple of plastic refuse bags before he had made too much of a mess. Susie had not given the floor a second glance. Entering in from daylight, she had found herself in a sort of luminous fog initially. Robbijohn's 60 Watt bulb was coming to the end of its useful life.

The stiff quills punched holes in the plastic bags. Derek had solved the problem of moving the corpse by rolling him onto his back on a draught-excluder rug and dragging him into the bedroom on the rug. He went back to collecting more quills between pulls on his glass of whisky and ginger ale.

Ex-Master-sergeant Oscar Stanton had been very proud of his low-tech version of the Claymore mine, which he had created in the Vietnamese jungle from the readily available materials that the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese Army

had used regularly on his countrymen.

Oscar had gained particular satisfaction from zapping Charlie and the NVA with their own level of nastiness. And that meant going as far as smearing the quills with excrement, the way the enemy did with their panji sticks, to make sure that wounds became infected. Total war meant the right to total the enemy in any way that he himself used.

Steve Cann arrived carrying the flattened carton; a large expanse of triple-skin cardboard. In his role of technical expert, Oscar Stanton had brought the staple-gun. They were reunited in the mystery of death in the bedroom. Collecting bodies from the battlefield was nothing new to them. They just shot staples into cardboard to reassemble the carton. Then they dumped the intruder inside and sealed him up.

Stanton had brought a set of PTFE skids, which allowed Cann to drag the carton to the lift unaided. Derek grinned to himself as he imagined what would happen if a local gang ambushed them and stole the box; the excitement of winning a valuable tape-recorder turned to dismay at finding a body instead; perhaps, even, the father of a gang member. The intruder looked about the right age to have set the next generation of hooligans well on their course to confrontation with society and eventual imprisonment.

Cann and Derek dragged the waist-high carton to a van. Ferenc Disch was standing guard beside it to make sure that the locals had no opportunity to rip off radio or wheels. Disch had been playing pool with the Vets in the *Service Club* when Derek's call had come through. Membership was free to former and serving members of any nation's armed forces, and unwilling conscripts to national service. Disch liked the *Service Club* because his line of credit remained open when everyone else had closed down on him.

Cann and Derek heaved the carton into the van then

followed it through the sliding, side door. Disch returned to the wheel.

"Let's go, Furry," Stanton said from the front passenger seat.

. . . "Go where?" Disch said as he reached the main road.

"Right," said Stanton, looking down at a street map. "We're going to the city dump to unload some garbage. Then left at the next junction."

Lost among thousands of other black plastic bags, the inconvenient body would be covered with earth in due course, and then the city council would transfer operations to another hole in the ground.

If the body was ever found, the Vets expected it to be as an archaeological exhibit of the future. By then, the soft tissue would have decayed and the cause of death would have become indeterminate. The many minor impact wounds to the bones, caused by the bamboo quills, would remain as a small puzzle far some lucky pathologist.

# TWELVE

## Merity's . . .

At first glance, *Merity's Club* looked like an indoor pavement café. The glass doors opened into an area with a simulated cobbled floor and apparently weather-resistant furniture. A constant, bright environment, with the sprinkler system providing the only threat of rain, meant that authenticity could be sacrificed for comfort in the chair department.

Time had no meaning at *Merity's*. The sun shone all day and there were always cheerful, bright flowers in the display tubs. Bronzed staff wore hooped pullovers and carried a white cloth over the left forearm for flicking crumbs off tables. They had been transplanted, apparently, from Nice or Cannes to the North-West of England. Some of them even managed a convincing French accent.

The café section at *Merity's* was a joke taken seriously, a fraud carried off with a straight face. Its prices placed it in the luxury category of tourist attraction, the café had received a lot of free publicity from local television programmes anxious for fillers on no-news days, but the management wanted to exclude riff-raff.

*Merity's* was an island of tranquillity, the only slow-food joint in the bustle of a pedestrian precinct packed with department stores. The service was speedy but the sur-

roundings encouraged customers to take their time.

Behind the café was the real money-making operation. There were no clocks in the casino. It was a bubble suspended forever at about midnight on a warm, summer evening. Food and drink were always available. Slot machines made clicking noises around the walls to tell punters that something was happening; such as the machines gobbling up their money.

Roulette and blackjack were available in the public rooms, and there were private rooms for poker parties and other forms of entertainment. The Inland Revenue and Customs & Excise both suspected that some sort of skimming operation went on to cream off profits, but they had never been able to prove any wrong-doing.

Robbijohn piloted Mi Tai across the café and through a door marked *MEMBERS ONLY*. He was wearing a dark suit, a white silk scarf and a trilby on a grey Thursday afternoon. Mi Tai had changed into a red Susi Wong dress with a triple row of pearls and a white cotton jacket. Robbijohn handed the white jacket, his scarf and the hat to the cloakroom attendant, a buxom blonde with a toothy grin, and put the ticket into his breast pocket.

The door on the opposite side of the anteroom opened as he and his companion approached. Anyone could pass through the *MEMBERS ONLY* door. Only those approved by the security guard at the television monitor were allowed into the casino area. On the way to the security cage, Robbijohn noted that Shaun Wayne was feeding one of the slot machines. Gregor Maiskiy and Ferenc Disch were there too, looking very smart in their double-breasted suits.

They had gone for a figure-hugging, tailored style rather than the baggy look, which made the wearer look as if he were wearing the garment for a bet.

Mi Tai dropped five $1,000 bills onto the turntable at the armour-glass cage. She counted the chips and change when the turntable revolved, making sure that she had not been ripped off too fiercely by the exchange rate. A waiter with champagne in tall flutes reached them as they arrived at the roulette table. Mi Tai watched the run of play for a few minutes, then she began to back red or black. Robbijohn sent signals to his satellites, who had drifted to another table.

It was a slightly complicated system. Disch either followed Mi Tai or bet against her. Maiskiy adjusted his bet so that the total stake on red matched the total stake on black. No one could win, but Mi Tai could appear to win or lose heavily when everyone knew that she was playing to Robbijohn's orders. Everyone had been allowed to hear that he was superstitious about actually handling chips.

Mi Tai's stock of chips dwindled. She was playing much too recklessly by design. When she was down to £100, Robbijohn could see Disch chewing his lower lip. He was allowed to keep a percentage of his winnings and he wanted Mi Tai to give up so that he could cash in and run.

Mi Tai looked up at Robbijohn. He shrugged. She tossed her last chip onto the numbered part of the table. One of the staff used his rake to move it to 18, her lucky number. She had landed at Heathrow with her stolen passport on July 18th. It was her goodbye to a losing streak gesture.

The croupier grinned when the ivory ball dropped into the slot eighteen red. Mi Tai collected her winnings and left the winning plaque pour les employés.

Robbijohn and Mi Tai crossed to the dining area. The waiter exchanged menus for chips, and brought £3,500 when he returned to take their orders, Shaun Wayne stopped by the table to put a white envelope on it when the waiter had done again. "Nice little stake for your next trip to the

racetrack," he remarked. "Do me a bit of good too, eh?"

Robbijohn glanced into the envelope – it contained ten £50 notes, then he handed it to Mi Tai for storage in her handbag. Wayne had gone already, supremely confident that Robbijohn would not dare fail to use his betting system to their mutual advantage. The wine waiter brought a bottle of red Burgundy for approval. Mission accomplished, Shaun Wayne was on his way out of the club. Robbijohn exchanged signals with Gregor Maiskiy, who headed for a poker game in one of the private rooms with his winnings.

Ferenc Disch carried on playing roulette until the waiter delivered a tray of food to Robbijohn's table. Disch collected a glass of champagne from a passing waiter and sipped at it over five non-playing minutes. Then he sauntered over to the security cage. He cashed his chips for the best part of £1,000; of which £200 was his.

After a quick feed at the free buffet, Disch headed for the exit. Midnight on a warm, summer evening became a grey Thursday afternoon again. He headed down through the precinct to the area into which motor vehicles were permitted. A ten minute walk brought him to the mouth of Queen Street. The *Service Club* lay in a cul-de-sac off the main road.

Steve Cann and Oscar Stanton had been playing pool since their morning expedition to Mossy Castle and the council's tip. Disch slipped a roll of notes to Cann while Stanton was clearing the table. The club offered full-size tables, not the sawn-off ones used in pubs, bringing the game much closer in scale to snooker.

"MT dropped a bundle?" Cann remarked after a glance at the denominations of Disch's offering.

. . . "Down to her last ton," Disch said after his customary pause. "Then eighteen came up for her."

"So you all came out ahead?"

. . . "Depends what Gregor does in the poker room."

The bartender gave Disch a flick-salute as he was leaving. The morning's driving job had settled his bar bill. Everyone expected him to be adding to another slate in the morning. Disch could never hang on to money for very long.

He hailed a taxi for a two-mile ride to the north. He lived in digs; one half of the attic of a widow, whose soldier husband had been blown up in Ulster. His landlady was making tea in the kitchen when he arrived. The man in the master bedroom ran some sort of data-processing business from his room and he required hourly transfusions of tea.

Veronica Mixton heard Disch enter the kitchen. She accepted a friendly squeeze and a kiss on the back of her neck. She and Disch were about the same age and they went out for the occasional drink together. Disch dropped a £50 note onto the worktop next to the teapot.

"Cor, look at you!" Mrs. Mixton looked him up and down. "Been out robbing banks again? Fancy a cuppa?"

. . . "Too full of champagne," Disch told her with a smile.

"Been to one of your posh clubs again?"

. . . "Very posh. I'm out for supper tonight."

"Surprise, surprise. I suppose you'll be broke tomorrow?"

. . . "Money is always there," Disch told her with a shrug. "You just have to be patient until it comes to you again."

"You meaning the poor widow who's waiting for her rent? Who doesn't get credit in the supermarket?"

. . . "If you want to kick me out, I shall take my overdraft elsewhere." Disch pretend to be offended.

"What, and take all the excitement out of my miserable life?" chuckled Mrs. Mixton. "Mind out. I've got to take his lordship his tea."

Disch took the hint and carried the tray up to the first-floor

front. He changed out of his suit in his half of the attic, which had the dormer window. The rest of the attic was used for storage. He had covered his walls with travel posters from mountainous regions. He especially liked pictures showing cable railways.

His parents had brought him to England in his early teens. Disch had fond memories of the Old Country: steep, pine-clad slopes under winter snow, skiing with their neighbours' children, always with an eye open for wolves. Just about every family had kept a wartime, German MP-40 sub-machine gun and a supply of 9 mm ammunition in case the wolves ran out of wild game.

A wildlife program on his portable television had told him that wolves do not attack humans. Disch had wanted to take the superior Yank home to the Old Country and leave him, weaponless, out in the wilds when the wolves were howling. Perhaps American and Canadian wolves are timid but Ferenc Disch had heard gunfire often enough in his early years.

His room was just a place to change his clothes and sleep occasionally, and it showed. Mrs. Mixton often remarked that it looked as if the *Invisible Man* lived there. Disch was no accumulator. He had a scattering of paperback books on his chest of drawers; all thick ones; which he started from time to time and abandoned. The bottles of spirits in a cupboard with a sliding door contained about a inch of liquid at most. Disch knew plenty of places to look for diversion on credit in Hambourne. Only illness kept him at home.

With any luck, he would be spending that night at Gemaigne's flat. The Vets were his major source of income and they tended to finance Disch's love life. He was just a buck-private in their private army. When they wanted some-one to do this, do that, go there and don't ask no questions,

they put Disch on the payroll. He would have loved to know what they had unloaded at the city dump with such casual secrecy, but he knew better than to try to find out.

Directly below Disch's attic, Frank Hogan was sitting in his room, half listening to One Ton Radio, making up his mind to open the manilla envelope on a square table beside his single armchair. Mrs. Mixton had pushed it under his door earlier in the morning. He had found it when he had decided that he could not put off starting another empty day.

He had been out until the early hours of the morning, and then he had been unable to sleep. He had spent most of the night listening to one of the corps of Vietnam Veterans on One Ton's nighttime service. Sleep had come finally a couple of hours after dawn and lasted until the afternoon.

Hogan had been awake for half an hour; time enough for a wash, a shave and a cup of tea. The envelope had arrived face down. He knew without turning it over that it would have a window and a red franking instead of a stamp. He had placed it, still face down, on his table to await his pleasure.

He was still thinking about the events of the night before when he heard the four o'clock afternoon pips on One Ton Radio. Someone delivered a tray to his neighbour across the landing. Then feet ascended the stairs to the attic and he heard sounds of movement overhead.

Hogan had known young Vic Teal for a long time. He had worked with Eddy, Vic's father, for sixteen years; until the explosion at work which had killed Eddy and left Hogan with a stiff left knee and 30% hearing loss in his left ear. Vic had just started coming to their local pub with his dad back then. Four years on, he was a big, muscular young man, who went weight training three times a week.

Vic usually hung around with Charlie, another weight-

trainer, and Otty, who was small, wiry, full of jokes and not at all interested in looking and living healthily. The previous night, Otty had been missing from the trio. He was dripping his way through a box of tissues at home in front of his television, according to Charlie.

Hogan was still not sure how he had been talked into the driving job. He had gone to the pub at about nine-thirty, intending to spin out a couple of half pints over an hour or so to get away from the four walls of his room for a while. He, Vic and Charlie had left the pub just after ten o'clock. Hogan had driven the van while two young, agile men half his age had intimidated and rounded up four members of a gang of what looked like school-age tearaways.

They had unloaded their human cargo in a field about five miles to the south of Hambourne. In the long, summer twilight, an hour and a half after sunset, Charlie's polished iron bar had been very visible. He had told the kids that he would break some kneecaps if their gang gave his friend Mr. Shastri got any more aggro. No matter who caused it, those four kids would get the blame. Then Vic had cut an irregular disc out of the right knee of each pair of jeans with a craft knife to drive home the message.

Hogan had stayed in the cab of the van, making sure that none of the kids caught a glimpse of him. At one level, he had been worried about being arrested for being involved in threatening violence to a bunch of kids. At another level, he had approved strongly of what his companions were doing.

In the end, the vigilantes had left the teenagers in the field to find their own way home. The van's next stop had been Vic's home. The place had been in darkness apart from the hall light. Vic's mother had gone to bed. The house was old enough to have a cellar, which had become Vic's private territory. He had his own television, a bar of sorts and the

inevitable collection of weights and implements of torture required for building bodies. Hogan had been to the house a few times with Vic's father but he had never visited the cellar.

Vic had handed out chilled cans of beer, then returned to the ground floor to make a phone call. Charlie had explained that someone would collect the van and deliver their payment. Hogan's social life had been extremely restricted since government cuts in the armaments industry had closed the local 'Dynamite Works', which had manufactured small-arms ammunition for the Ministry of Defence.

Hogan had lost touch with his former workmates. Staying out boozing with someone had become a novelty. The beer soon dissolved the awkwardness of doing it with two lads half his age.

Vic and Charlie had been doing their vigilante work for some time now, always with Otty until that particular evening, but they had no idea who gave them their orders or who paid them. They received instructions either by phone or by hand as detailed instructions bashed out by an impersonal dot-matrix printer. All they knew for sure was that they were performing a valuable social service and the pay was good.

They had dropped a few hints about past missions. Hogan had recognized one of them from the extensive coverage that it had received in the Hambourne Morning Express. A social worker had told an Express reporter than one a.m. is a good time to snatch children from their parents on care orders because it's a good time to find people at home. She had also insisted that she was caring for the children by destroying their original family and trying to build another for them by involuntary adoption.

One such case had gone spectacularly wrong. Two caring

parents had been subjected to the insolence of office and the law's delays for months on end.

Then, persons unknown had entered the social worker's house at one a.m., dragged her out of her bed and held her in fear of rape and murder until the next morning. At around dawn, she had been forced to watch a succession of people destroy her car in a disused quarry miles from anywhere. Angry men and women had smashed the windows, cut the tyres to shreds, slashed the upholstery and hammered the bodywork into the sort of shapeless mass that becomes art to the buyers for public galleries.

Finally, everyone had just melted into the early morning, leaving the social worker with the wreck. The car had been insured, of course, but the social, worker had been forced to suffer the inconvenience of waiting for the claim to be processed, and also the loss of her no-claims bonus. And she had learned a valuable lesson.

When bureaucrats take charge of the lives of others, even if they believe that they are doing a good job the best way that they can, their 'clients' will not necessarily appreciate their efforts. Indeed, the 'clients' might even take steps to make the bureaucrats personally accountable for distress caused by incompetence, neglect or sheer indifference.

An extensive police investigation had bogged down in total non-co-operation. Someone on One Ton Radio had suggested that if everyone behaved like Oliver Hardy and said, 'I have nothing to say,' when the police questioned them, the ends of justice would be best served.

Frank Hogan had enjoyed repeating the phrase when his turn had come round. He had suspected that the police had been working through a list of the local unemployed plus DSS 'clients', and perhaps some troublemakers on the local Special Branch files. He had enjoyed sharing a drink with

two of the men who had created that small rebellion.

Vic had heard the van drive away at about half-past midnight. He had collected a bulky envelope from the hall soon afterwards. Split three ways, each had collected £100 for a night's work. After another can to celebrate receiving their payment, Hogan and Charlie had gone home. The two lads had been planning to go out for a run the next morning to burn off the carbohydrates from the beer.

His capacity for alcohol reduced through lack of drinking practice, Hogan had arrived at his lodgings mobile but with his co-ordination impaired. He had gone to bed sober eventually, and he had woken the next afternoon to find his letter waiting.

Hogan felt trapped in an endless loop. He knew instinctively that his indifferent bureaucrat had more irrelevant questions for him. The strings of letters had the inevitability of hurricanes; they came out of nowhere, they raged furiously for a while, then they just ceased.

Unlike hurricanes, however, they covered exactly the same ground each time. They achieved nothing other than making the bureaucrat look busy.

To get away from the letter, he went downstairs to look at Mrs. Mixton's copy of the Hambourne Morning Express. The only job advertised in the Technical section was for someone with a minimum of two science A-levels, chemistry preferred, for a career in occupational hygiene at Hambourne Executive Facilities in the city centre.

Hogan knew that a man of forty-six with an honours degree in chemistry and twenty-four years' experience in the quality control of small-arms ammunition would be wasting a stamp if he applied. Just the same, if nothing else turned up, he would have to go through that motion to prove that he was actively seeking work and thus eligible for a free

National Insurance stamp.

The Government had put him out of a job by closing down the Hambourne Small Arms Company, which had been owned by the Ministry of Defence. The Warsaw Pact's collapse and scaling down of the British armed forces meant that lower stocks of ammunition were required. And as the bulk of it was unlikely to be needed before it reached its *fire-by* date, the Government had decided that it could afford to buy in cheap ammunition from abroad. Unspoken but implicit in the policy was that inferior ammunition might not work, but if it was never used, that didn't matter.

The same Government which had put him out of a job also wanted Frank Hogan to disappear into thin air so that he no longer cluttered up their unemployment statistics. And yet the staff at his local job centre freely admitted that they did not deal in jobs for people of his qualifications. It was Hogan's impression that they were under orders to harass their 'clients' to find out if they were 'disappear into thin air' material.

His current string of letters was part of one such campaign, an attempt to find out if Hogan's morale and resistance had dropped since the last campaign. Hogan still felt that a job centre should be on top of the majority of opportunities in the local employment market, a place where people went with a real expectation of finding something to do, not to be messed about by desk jockeys with nothing better to do.

Eventually, Hogan returned to his room and the letter, which he could afford to leave where it was until the next day. He realized that he could use his tax-free £100 from the previous night to send Vic or Charlie round to give his bureaucrat a good seeing to. Except that he wanted to confront his tormentor personally.

Hogan's frustration was multiplied by his not daring to

challenge the bureaucrat in case he became even more awkward. The question that Hogan would most like to put to a DSS official, but would never dare to, was: 'You seem to have an astonishing ability to draw conclusions without hiding behind facts. Do you find this an advantage in your job?'

On the other hand, Hogan realized, he could take the sort of anonymous revenge that had been meted out to the social worker. He had a name. It would not be too difficult to fit a face to that name.

Then he could watch the car park at knocking-off time to find out if his tormentor owned a car. He might even be able to find out his address. He knew from the previous night that the teenage tearaways had been cleaning the streets of dog-dirt and emptying their pooper-scooper through Mr. Shastri's letterbox. Maybe Hogan's bureaucrat deserved the same treatment. Maybe his car needed a good scratching.

Hogan looked at the letter with new interest. He would open it at eleven a.m. the next morning. If the contents upset him, he would take his revenge. It was all so impersonal. The decision was out of his hands. Some paperwork junkie on a fat civil service salary might just have put a gun to his own head. No doubt the police would bring out the list that they had used for the social worker in due course.

Frank Hogan had said, 'I have nothing to say,' with a completely clear conscience on that occasion. He wondered if he would be able to pull it off again without radiating guilt.

# THIRTEEN

## Orange Twilight

Sam Tadeusz was completely bald all over as a result of treatments to combat the cancers caused by exposure to *Agent Orange*, the defoliant chemical used by the tankerload to deprive the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese Army of jungle cover. He was forty-four years old and he had no guarantee of seeing out his fifth decade. The last scan had been clear but he still lived with a personal internal time bomb.

His friends called him *The Painter*. He lived in a blighted area of Hambourne's city centre. A strip of five shop units presented shutters covered with fly posters or wire-mesh grills on dirty windows to the street. The *To Let* signs were faded, cracked and comprehensively weathered.

The whole interior of the adjoining shops had been reconstructed to create a single wide-open space. It contained a vast swimming pool with waves and a beach of golden sand at one end, and a series of tropical-island huts for bathrooms, sleeping accommodation and private activities. The Painter had created his own version of a Pacific island complete with 'native servants'.

Batteries of lights kept the photosynthetic power-houses of the coconut palms and the banana and pineapple plants

throbbing during the day. They faded to romantic starlight at night. Tadeusz had dreamed of escaping to just such a refuge during his nights at war. Robbijohn's expedition to Colombia had allowed him to create the dream to a greater degree of perfection than Nature could offer.

Sam Tadeusz's name was already inscribed on the Vietnam War Memorial, that vast black-marble wedge in Washington, DC. He was still moving around but that war had killed him as surely as any bomb or bullet. He left his final refuge only to go to hospitals for check-ups or treatments.

Living with him were five Vietnamese girls. They wore a grass skirt with an optional tee-shirt in his world, and heavier, more conventional clothing when they visited chillier Hambourne. They had all been through an initial indoctrination course on Tahiti to teach them how to live as South Sea islanders. Their job would end when Tadeusz's life ended, when they would be provided with a passport and a residence permit for the country of their choice.

In the meantime, they were enjoying an undemanding and well-paid career in someone else's imagination.

The Painter's girls were all in their early twenties and *round-eyes*; daughters of GIs and Vietnamese good-time girls. Their fathers had no idea of their existence and their mothers had either been killed in the war or they had disappeared. Some had been killed by the victorious Communists, others were in hiding. The girls had all lived the early part of their lives in remote areas, sent away by their relatives as they are a potential source of trouble and a reminder of willing collaboration to the Communist rulers of a re-united Vietnam.

The girls had become Boat People, and they had been among the thirty-nine people saved by the crew as a cargo ship after their fishing boat had come under attack by

pirates. Luckily, the cargo vessel had made deliveries to states on the western side of the Persian Gulf during the Iran/Iraq war and it still had defensive weapons. One missile had been enough to sink the pirates, who had been allowed to drown.

The Vietnamese survivors had been refused permission to land at any port of call on the vessel's route but their plight had made the world's news services. The Painter and the engineer in charge of the vessel's missile battery had served together in the US forces in Vietnam. Tadeusz had agreed to take care of the five round-eye girls; as an acknowledgement of their rights as Vietnamese-Americans; and he had helped the rest of the party to find new homes in Canada.

Tadeusz amused himself by creating drawings in the style of deceased artists using authentic materials. He had stocks of paper up to 250 years old, and he had charcoal sticks made from lime or willow trees, which had been indexed by radio-carbon-dating age. He was also experimenting with pastels, particularly in the styles of Edgar Degas and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. He specialized in adding his own contributions to existing sequences of drawings by dead artists, aiming to create the impression that they were previously unknown works, which had been given to friends while the artist had been experimenting with a particular composition.

Another of the Painter's diversions was chess. He played against either a well-constructed computer program or one or other of the Eastern Europeans attached to the *Vet-Set*. He was locked in battle with Ferenc Disch when Robbijohn and Mi Tai arrived bearing a supply of pastel paper made in Paris in 1873. An agent had turned it up at a sale at a château near Bourges.

Disch and his girlfriend Gemaigne had invited themselves over for the weekend. Ms Purcel was a well-stacked blonde

in her mid-thirties. She had abandoned a husband and two ungrateful kids in her native Australia after years of feuding. Half-way round the world, she had her independence and a job as a computer operator in the city council's accounts department. She tried to do something unusual at least once a week as a way of repaying herself for all her wasted years.

Taking pot luck with Disch on one of his free-loading expeditions was usually unusual enough for her. Enjoying the seaside indoors and an 'outdoor' barbeque in wet old England with no risk of rain were her favourite free-loads.

The two guests had arrived in the back of a closed van wearing blindfolds and headphones playing One Ton Radio. They had no idea where the tropical paradise lay in relation to their homes to the north of Hambourne. They could live with their ignorance as long as the invitations to free week-ends continued.

The Painter examined the pastel paper through trans-parent inner wrapping, nodding approval. Mi Tai took the package to the storage hut on her way to shower and change into a bikini. She was not a naturally topless person in company.

Mi Tai sometimes claimed to be a GI-baby, and she was certainly old enough to be the daughter of one of the Marines sent to Vietnam by LBJ, but she was clearly from the north of Vietnam. She had almond eyes while the Painter's girls all had round, blue, Western eyes. And they were all taller than Mi Tai, who was much more at home in the British climate, which is very similar to North Vietnam's.

Robbijohn claimed a canvas beach chair and a joint from the silver dispenser. "Who's winning?" he remarked.

"It's debatable," Tadeusz said in the time that Disch took to work up to saying . . . "Me."

"Always the optimist, Furry," Robbijohn remarked.

. . . "My worst option is a draw," said Disch. "He could lose."

"Do you reckon there's something specially weird about the Eastern European mind that makes them so well suited to chess?" said Tadeusz.

"I reckon it was because they had bugger all else to do when the Commies were in power." said Robbijohn.

"So you reckon the final rusting of the Iron Curtain will lead to a fall in chess standards over there?" said Tadeusz.

. . . "Check," said Disch a good three seconds after moving his black bishop.

"I reckon they'll be devoting a lot more time to things they couldn't do when they had secret policemen looking over their shoulders," said Robbijohn.

. . . "Mate in three," added Disch. "That last move was a bad mistake."

"I was distracted," said Tadeusz. "Yeah, I see what you mean now." He toppled his king and heaved himself to his feet. He was five feet ten and a spare ten stones, which was quite heavy for him. "Why don't you give Lance some lessons while I check out what he's brought me."

Disch began to put the jet and ivory pieces into their box. The board was alternate squares of red and white gold. "Life isn't long enough for anyone to teach Lance chess," he said with a smile.

"The only thing I know about chess is there's something called a Sicilian Defence," said Robbijohn. "That's where the Mafia breaks your opponent's fingers so he can't move his pieces."

. . . "I heard a joke yesterday, but I don't know what it means," said Disch.

"If it was in your bloody club, I'm not surprised," laughed Robbijohn.

. . . "No this is in English. It goes: 'I used to dress off the peg but the neighbours keep a closer eye on their washing now."

Lying on hot sand ten yards away, feeling the hot artificial sun doing her a power of good, Gemaigne Purcel listened with her eyes closed as the ash-blond bloke with a local accent explained the relationship between off-the-peg clothes and the use of clothes pegs in connection with washing lines. The translation machine in Furry's head normally worked so well that it was a surprise when it ran aground at a common expression, which had not come to his attention before.

Gemaigne felt a little out of touch with the company, especially when everyone but Furry was speaking Vietnamese. The men were all up to ten years older than her, the women more than ten years younger. They had Vietnam and the American and British ways of life in common.

Australians had fought in that war but Gemaigne had been too busy learning about boys, getting married and producing two horrible brats to take much notice at the time.

When the men were speaking English, Gemaigne could understand their words and extract surface meaning but there were hidden depths; code signals and occasional obscurities. It all came down to the fact that she had not been forced to fight for her life; except once, when the husband she tried to forget had gone too far while drunk.

Big Mike had got back far more than he had bargained for, Gemaigne recalled with pleasure. He had never been quite sure how he had acquired the bruises. His memory tended to be hazy when he emerged from a drunken fog the next day. If he remembered falling down the stairs, he had no idea that he had been pushed.

One thing that Gemaigne Purcel had in common with everyone but Robbijohn was that she had found a new life a

long way from home. She had attached herself to Furry. He wasn't a member of the group who seemed to lead a regular millionaire lifestyle, but she had to admit that she was too old and from the wrong country to meet their tastes. Even so, poor old penniless Furry Disch could take her away for a weekend of sun, sea and barbies on the inland tropical island. And she was in no real danger of getting used to the 'island' and losing her appreciation of it.

Lying on the artificial beach, listening to the wave machine slosh slightly salty water at the tide-line, Gemaigne had achieved a state of perfect contentment. She could please herself now. She could lie there as long as she liked. She was in no danger of being dragged away to do shopping or cooking, or to wait on her pig of a husband and the brats.

The only items on her calendar were food, drink and Furry getting passionate with enough skill to suggest that be could have a promising career as a gigolo if he had the initiative to get himself organized. And the best part of it was that she could go back to the office on Monday completely ignorant about the weekend's local weather, television programmes and the local and national news, and with her tan reinforced. And then she could enjoy being mysterious about where she had been and with whom.

She opened her eyes briefly when someone else arrived. A tall, middle-age American with iron-grey hair and bright blue eyes stopped at the chess table to claim a chair and a joint. This one was called Ford T. Ford, which had to be an alias. He was known to his friends as *The Trader*. Gemaigne had the impression that he was as straight as a dog's hind leg. He certainly behaved as if he was eternally one jump ahead of the police.

In fact, Ford Ford enjoyed conspiracies. As a survivor of Robbijohn's Colombian Expedition, he was in business now

for fun rather than from a need to take a profit. He treated his deals as a branch of show business. He enjoyed pretending that legitimate goods had been acquired dishonestly. And passing them on for cash in great secrecy seemed to give the customers as big a thrill as himself.

Ford Ford had stripped down to a pair of pale yellow Bermuda shorts with red and green windmills. He was on his second can of beer by the time Tadeusz emerged from his paper-storage hut. Both hailed from Fort Lauderdale but they had met for the first time when Robbijohn had recruited them. Tadeusz was wearing a dark blue baseball cap and a one-piece, olive green overall with a mass of zipped pockets. He had pinned a sheet of the new paper to a drawing board and he had a row of porte-crayons in an unzipped breast pocket.

"You want me to do a deal for you," the Trader said as the Painter settled himself and looked for a subject.

"I need a machine to do my own carbon dating and someone to run it," said Tadeusz.

"And a lab?"

"And a communication link. A private-line videophone. What I need is some guy not known to the art world who could become my private expert."

"A guy who can tell you just how much investigation you'd need to tell one of your drawings from a real old one?" Ford said with a laugh.

"A guy interested in the pursuit of excellence," said Tadeusz loftily.

"Excellence in forgery," remarked Robbijohn.

"Alternative reality," said the Painter firmly.

"Okay, I'll see what I can do," Ford said.

# FOURTEEN

## Wrong Side of the Law

Billy Wilson was just a fraction of a second out. It took very fine judgement to release the jagged lump of stone at just the right moment. He let go too early. Instead of crashing against the wire-mesh grill over the driver's window of the speeding train, the missile thumped against the bodywork with a loud bang and flew clear of the track.

He heard the startled driver apply the brakes. What happened next wasn't part of the game. Wilson always legged it after dropping his bomb. As ever, he was sure that no one had seen him. The bridge offered a good field of view in both directions along the path. He had seen no one. Officially, he was supposed to be attacking flower beds in the park with a hoe as part of his work-training scheme. He had to take the occasional break from the boredom, however.

Wilson stopped to light a cigarette and catch his breath. Two joggers in blue tracksuits rounded a corner and plodded toward him. Wilson ignored them. For him, running was the way to get away from trouble. Anyone who did it for pleasure was an idiot; unless he was making money out of it.

The joggers were in their early twenties, a few years older than Wilson, pretty big and muscular characters, perhaps boxers out training. Wilson reached for his cigarettes. The

joggers slowed to a walk as they drew near to him. They were looking at a stopwatch, not him. Then there was a hiss as they drew level. Cold, heavy vapour made his senses swim. Wilson was unconscious before he hit the ground.

He woke in a small clearing in a wood, tied to a tree. He was sitting with his back to the tree, arms stretched behind him and tied at the wrists. Another man, smaller and wirier than the joggers, put a half-brick on the grass between his knees. Wilson discovered that his ankles had been fixed in place by hoops driven into the ground.

"Ever seen an aerosol can explode?" his tormentor asked.

Wilson just gaped at him.

"This one is supposed to be ozone-friendly," the man added. "It's got butane as the propellant. If you heat up a CFC aerosol, you just get bits of jagged metal flying all over the shop when it explodes. And maybe a bit of a flash if the other stuff in it is flammable. These things go off like a bomb with a bloody great fireball."

The man put the aerosol on the half brick, then rammed something else into the soft earth. "This is more butane. A blow-torch like plumbers use. Only we can switch it off by remote control. Depending what the wind's like, it takes three to seven minutes to heat the aerosol can up enough to make it explode.

"As this is the first time we've caught you, you're getting three and a half minutes. If you're still alive after this, and if you ever bomb a train again, you'll get five minutes. And if you do it again after that, we just leave the torch going for however long it takes."

Wilson started to scream when the man lit the butane torch and the flame reached out to the aerosol can, groping across a six-inch gap. His throat was going raw when Wilson fainted.

He woke to a liquid jet in his face. One of the joggers was peeing on him to wake him up. His arms and legs were free.

"You were bloody lucky, kid." The wiry man thrust a smoke-blackened aerosol in front of his face. "It would have taken just another few seconds to send it up. So think on. We've got your photograph now. Five minutes next time, and you're dead for sure the time after."

The men were long gone before Wilson dared to move. They had taken everything but the half brick. His throat hurt from the screaming and he stunk of piss. His pockets were empty. They had taken everything; cigarettes, lighter, money; everything.

Fluttering on the grass, held down by the half brick, was a newspaper cutting about a train driver, who had been killed by a lump of stone dropped from a bridge. And a Polaroid photograph of a smoke-blackened aerosol.

Kenneth Robbijohn had been hitch-hiking all day. He had called at his brother's flat at Moss Park but there had been no reply to his knocks. The people on either side knew nothing, not even their neighbour's name. Ken Robbijohn had walked closer to civilization to find a phone box so that he could use a number dredged out of his memory. He had found the right combination of digits at the fifth attempt. Someone with an American accent had directed him to a black boat called *Sigma 212* at the marina.

A tough-looking, dark-uniformed man at the entrance to the marina demanded identification Ken showed him a driving licence. "What's your mother's maiden name?" the security guard asked.

"You what?" said Ken.

"You heard," the man said in an uncompromising tone.

"Ashley."

"First name?"

"Sarah."

"Welcome to the marina, sir. You'll find Sigma 212 berthed at the second pier along in that direction."

"Right," said Ken, caught off guard by his sudden switch in status from intruder to welcome guest.

He found his brother dressed up in American gear; leather jacket, jeans and an *Oakland A's* baseball cap; and looking a bit glassy-eyed. The air-conditioning system had cleared the smell of cannabis. Through an open door, he could see a young, dark-haired woman in a figure-hugging outfit of pull-over and jeans. She was cooking something in the galley area.

"Well, well, look who's here." Lance Robbijohn poured water into another glass containing Pernod and ice cubes.

"Got anything to eat?" said Ken. "I'm starving."

"Don't tell me, you could eat a poorly monkey," laughed his brother. "Got poorly monkey on the menu, honey?" he called to the chef.

"Yo!" called Mi Tai. "Wash hands now."

Ken dumped his travelling bag and followed the direction of his brother's finger. The bathroom was compact but there were no sharp edges and no sense of being enclosed within a tiny space. Ken returned to a meal of stir-fried chicken and vegetables with noodles.

"No one else eating?" he remarked from the solitary place setting.

"We had a very late lunch; like in the middle of the afternoon," said his brother. "A business occasion."

"I like a bit of Chinese," said Ken ambiguously.

"Mi Tai is Vietnamese," said Lance.

"Didn't you get out there for a while? Vietnam?"

"For a while, yes."

"A souvenir? You must have been a bit young when he brought you back, love."

"Yo!" smiled Mi Tai.

"She got out under her own steam," said Lance. "The usual overland drag on the train through China, then a short boat ride to Hong Kong. She spent six months behind the wire on an island. Then she sneaked out, mugged a Jap tourist on the mainland, paid some fellow escapees to lock the Jap up for a couple of days and used her passport to hop a flight for the UK.

"I met her when she was hitch-hiking round the M25, conning meals out of blokes too unenterprising to get something in return. She got the shock of her life when she met someone who speaks Vietnamese."

"Well, us Brits don't, do we?" Ken said through a mouthful of noodles. "Speak foreign lingoes. Not worth it if everyone who counts learns English So what's the story on the boat?"

"I know one of the executives of the company that owns it. They were looking for someone to keep it tidy."

"Clean boat, make cold drink, cook good food, shag rabbit," Mi Tai listed confidently.

"Shag *like* rabbit," corrected Lance.

"Shag *like* rabbit," repeated Mi Tai. She took a clipboard from a drawer and began a stock-taking at the bar. "*Shag* like rabbit. Shag like *rabbit*." She muttered the lesson to herself, moving the stress around in a word game as she checked the bottles.

Ken had trouble concentrating on his meal with that litany in the background but he persevered nobly.

"She has low expectations, so keeping her happy by exceeding them isn't much trouble," Lance added. "And she's got one of the best addresses in town while she learns

English as a first step to becoming invisible."

"Pretty smart boat, this," said Ken.

"It's only an eco-miracle. The waste disposal system, for instance, is full of the piranha fish of the bacterial world. They destroy all organic matter within twelve hours. That includes bones and plastics. Human waste and food scraps disappear in twenty minutes. They also work the other way. We could even take in river water and make sterile, wholesome drinking water out of it. This boat has the ultimate in de-pollution equipment as well as non-pollution equipment."

"Bloody great topic while a bloke's having his dinner, Lance!"

"So tell me why the police are looking for you."

"I probably know too much."

Lance frowned. "What do you mean, probably?"

"I've been doing some discreet transport work for some people . . ."

"You mean smuggling?"

"More sort of semi-legal trading. I think I can give the police some information which is harmless by itself, but they can slot it into other bits and pieces they've got and build a case against some naughty businessmen."

"Who are liable to get violent to stay out of gaol?"

"They're seriously worried about having their bank accounts cleaned out and their houses sold out from under them as the proceeds of crime. They'll go a long way to keep the loot."

"Talking of loot, I don't suppose you've got that eight grand you borrowed on you?"

"You expected to see that again?" scoffed Ken.

Lance shrugged. His younger brother had a lot in common with Ferenc Disch. Both saw money as something to be

disposed off freely because there would be more along in the future.

Mi Tai added a reserve bottle of Pernod to the bar's stock, then she put the clipboard away. She sat down beside Lance and began to munch her way through a bag of bacon-flavoured crisps.

"Great grub, love," said Ken as he pushed away a cleared plate. "I'm going to enjoy staying on your boat."

"You've got to be kidding!" scoffed Lance. "What makes you think I've got that much pull with the company? I can just see one of the vice presidents turning up with some clients and finding my fugitive of a brother kipping all over the place."

"You don't mean I'll be stuck in your grotty flat?" protested Ken.

"Are you kidding? If you were idiot enough to chose the same alias surname as me, the police will make the connection too. Just how many Robbijohns do you think there are in the world, never mind in the UK? No, about five minutes from now, a car will arrive to take you to the airport. We're sending you to Scotland on a private plane."

"Great!" beamed Ken. "A bit of salmon fishing, or some deer-stalking. Or a tour of the distilleries. Great place to be, Scotland."

Lance Robbijohn smiled across the table at his brother. The man on the run would come down to earth with a bump when he reached the mountain retreat in the Highlands, but by then, it would be too late to complain. If Ken wanted to hide somewhere out of reach of the police, he was about to get his wish . . .

# FIFTEEN

## The Thudders' Club . . .

Robin Formby was normally an unheroic character. The Hambourne Express paid salaries which were incompatible with risking his life; or even taking a good thumping. As he entered the editor's public office, a glass cubicle in the 'news factory', his internal glow of achievement had faded almost completely. He had a gut feeling that he was on a loser.

He had climbed a shaky, cast-iron drainpipe to reach a rusty old fire escape. He had unlocked a third-floor window, using a hole broken by someone else, and entered a deserted shell of a building awaiting redevelopment. He had then turned himself into a contortionist to photograph people in the building opposite. He had performed the ritual eight times, all at different hours on different days of the week.

Formby had brought a sample of the full story. He was expecting to hear that the Express didn't handle that sort of trash and he was not prepared to be humiliated by revealing just how much work he had devoted to following the trail that Gavin Murdoch had shown to him.

Howard Hatcher, the editor of the Hambourne Express, was a whizz kid who was running out of youth. Now in his middle forties, he was a tall workaholic, who devoted most of his waking hours to the newspaper, either actively or

mulling things over in his subconscious. It was rumoured that every meal which he had eaten in the last ten years had been listed as expenses relevant to some business activity or other.

Formby dropped onto a chair as Hatcher completed one of his eternal round of telephone calls. In his office, the editor wore a headset of a single earphone with a stick microphone. He said it was convenient and comfortable, and it left his hands free. His staff wondered why he didn't wear a dark blue jacket with four gold rings on the cuffs to look even more like the captain of an airliner.

"Something, good, Bob?" said Hatcher, flicking a switch on his telephone complex to end the call.

"Very interesting in a *News of the World* sort of way," Formby said with a smile. He passed a transparent plastic wallet containing a typed sheet of notes across the desk. "Do you want me to follow it up?"

Hatcher's gaze flickered across the notes, taking them in at the accelerated rate of a trained high-speed reader. Then he pursed his lip and said, "Hmmm!"

Formby spotted a negative on the way.

"So you've found out the Reverend Tandy belongs to the Thudders' Club, have you, Rob?" Hatcher smiled, playing the part of a man who was tolerant of human frailty. "This isn't really news. It's quite well known that Jimmy likes to be dominated by a lady in black stockings and suspenders, and it gets Gwen's cleaning work done."

"It's not that well known," said Formby. "I've only just found out. I bet his congregation don't know."

"Some of them do, but Jimmy's a harmless bloke, so no one cares. And hasn't it been established that perversion and deviation shouldn't keep sincere Christians out of the pulpit?"

"I don't think that's generally accepted in the Church of England, Howard."

"Not that Jimmy Tandy's up to the standard of a mediaeval bishop in the days when they kept a harem of nuns, and even a humble vicar in the right crowd could get more oats than a herd of horses. It's all right for you to sit there looking like the chair of the Anti-Permissiveness Society, Robby, but it's a historical fact that there were times when a nun had to be bloody repulsive to stay a virgin."

"Times long gone by, though."

"You're joking! It's still happening in the States today. Look at all the TV evangelists. They make our dirty vicars look like choirboys. Live like millionaires, dip their wicks wherever and whenever they fancy. And when they get caught at it, oh, the crocodile tears, the wailing and gnashing of teeth, and the hypocritical breast-beating. Why me, oh Lord? Why did I have to get found out? Why did you lead me into temptation, you rotten sod."

"You're getting a bit chalk and cheeseish, Howard."

"Of course, it's all that power without responsibility that corrupts them. Anything that happens is always the fault of the bloke upstairs. Oh, dear! Did that thousand dollar bill drop out of my pocket while I was giving spiritual advice to that young lady? Never mind, there'll be another along in a minute when the next sucker coughs up."

"So we're not interested in exposing sado-masochism in the city centre? Plus a bit of routine prostitution?"

"They say that's the oldest profession, but it ain't by a long chalk. It's some con-man using psychological control by telling you he can make things right with the invisible bloke upstairs if you slip him a few bob; or a leg off the deer you just killed. That's what all those cave paintings are about. Some early con-man living off the backs of superstitious

hunters. In the days when you could bop a woman on the head with your club if she wouldn't give you a jump."

"Good job I didn't waste much time on this." Formby retrieved his notes from the paper-strewn desk.

"Full marks for effort, Rob, but the wrong direction. If you're going to bring me dirty vicar stories, make it someone who's a danger to the public, not a harmless thudder like Jimmy Tandy."

"What about the blackmail potential of people who belong to this Thudders' Club? Or Hambourne Executive Facilities, to use the name on the posh plaque on the door."

"If you have a *blackmail* story, that's news, Robby. But not if you're doing the blackmailing. And Gwen Newsom has a lot of friends who advertise in the paper that pays your wages."

"That's not supposed to matter to a true journalist."

"Except we're in the real world, Robby. If you're out to embarrass the members of the *Thudders' Club*, they're equally entitled to make you unemployable. If you find they're involved in something really illegal; kiddy-porn, or anything that doesn't involve the full and free co-operation of all parties involved; then we'll back you all the way."

"Crime, *si*; embarrassment, no?"

"*Crime* crimes, Robby, as opposed to technical offences brought in by the puritans. Anything evil, vicious, mean and nasty, as Steppenwolf say in *Don't Step On The Grass, Sam*. I suppose Steppenwolf are a bit before your time, though."

"They still get played on One Ton Radio. Especially *The Pusher*, *Don't Step On The Grass* and *Born To Be Wild* when they're playing the *Easy Rider* soundtrack album."

"I wish I had more time to listen to the radio," Hatcher said with a smile.

"It helps to keep you awake when you're driving around,

ferreting out evil, vicious, mean and nasty members of society." Formby noticed that three lights were burning on the editor's telephone complex, indicating calls stacked in the holding circuit. He had exhausted his five minutes.

Hatcher called him back as he reached the office door, slipping in the reporter's name while the first caller was speaking on the telephone headset. A message about an explosion on the edge of the city centre had appeared on the editor's VDU screen. Editorial fingers stabbed at the screen then walked away through the air to tell Formby that he was on this story and expected to keep his mind off thudders.

Formby told the 'pit boss' that he was off to cover the explosion on the editor's orders. Jayne Verity, a diminutive redhead in her late thirties, kept track of where roving reporters and photographers were so that they could be reassigned to cover an emergency.

The explosion had been reported in Queen Street, a cul-de-sac off the main road that ran in front of the Express building and less than two minutes' walk away. Formby found himself teamed with photographer Pauline King, an art school graduate of about his own age. She was hoping that her artistic photographs would make her rich and famous one day. In the meantime, the Express offered useful processing facilities when she was away from home.

There was a huge, red stain on the fly posters on a large sheet of board, which closed the main display window of an empty shop. There was a shape on the pavement under a sheet of blue plastic. Pauline King got busy with her number two camera. Formby homed in on a policeman friend, who had drunk the reporter's health on numerous occasions.

"What have we got, Ted?" he remarked.

"Bit of a puzzle," said the tall, heavyset constable. "A kid out spraying graffiti. His aerosol exploded."

"You mean that's only paint?"

"Disappointed?" chuckled the constable.

"So what happened to him?" Formby nodded to the shape on the pavement.

The constable shrugged. "Who knows? He's dead, but it's going to take a postmortem to say what did it."

"Any name, or anything?"

"Not yet. Nothing in his pockets in the way of ID. Just a kid, fifteen, sixteen, messing the place up with paint."

Pauline King returned to the Express with some pictures, which she knew would not be used. Formby telephoned in a brief report, then he hung about to await developments. His reporter's instinct was telling him to expect something interesting in the way of further developments.

Gavin Murdoch looked up sharply when someone pushed into his office at *Cairo's Club* unannounced. He had been expecting to see his unofficial election agent, Jack Stockton, who wanted to finalize some strategy for the election campaign: a personal letter asking for the support of selected voters plus a one-sheet, folded-A3 tabloid news-sheet in *Week 1* and a follow-up leaflet in *Week 2*.

Kathleen, Murdoch's semi-discarded wife, strolled toward the desk and dropped onto a chair beside it with a whoosh of expelled air. She looked at her husband, then snapped her fingers with an extravagant wave. Gavin Murdoch brought her a gin and tonic with ice.

"No kiss for wifey?" Kathleen asked with a smile.

"Want me to polish your shoes as well?" Gavin said on his way back to his chair. "I thought we'd given up all that."

"No chance of a quick one on the boss's desk either?"

"Have you been hitting the bottle on the way here, Kath?"

"First today. And it is five past one. A perfectly okay time

for a drink before luncheon. With my dear husband."

"Are you after something, Kath? Or is this just a routine visit to frighten everyone in Hambourne?"

"I won an open tournament in Yorkshire."

"You actually won a golf tournament? Straight up? And you didn't bribe the others to lose?"

"Straight up, no kidding Not bad for a woman of thirty-nine, eh?" Kathleen Murdoch had stopped counting her birthdays three years before. "So where are we going to celebrate?"

"How come you're celebrating with me? How come you're not doing it with your bit of stuff?"

"He's got flu and he's utterly miserable," laughed Kathleen. "Even you're better company than Ronny when he's ill. He's such a bloody wimp."

"Why don't you dump him and get someone who isn't?" Gavin craned over the desk to look his wife up and down. Given a change of diet and a few sessions at his health club, she would lose the double chin and a few surplus pounds

"What d'you reckon?" Kathleen lifted her chin and threw out her chest.

"You're not completely unshaggable yet." grinned Gavin.

"Oh, ta, very much!" scoffed Kathleen. "How are you getting on with your bit of stuff? Annie Bailey?"

"She's still desperate for it every time I turn up."

"I'll bet she is. Desperate to get it over and done with. So where are we going for luncheon? *Chez Michel*?"

"Funny you should ask. I've got a freebie lined up. They're hoping to sell me on the idea of getting a boat."

"Rowing? Cargo?"

"Cabin cruiser."

"You're not joining the *Marina Mafia*?" scoffed Kathleen.

"I think it might be an asset to the company. I suppose, as

my partner, you should have a look at it. I don't suppose you'll be wanting a time-share in it?"

"A bloody boat? You're kidding. Not unless it's on dry land. Mind you, the car got stuck in traffic on the bridge over the river on the way here and I saw a real smart black boat down in the marina. I wouldn't mind one of them."

"Funny you should say that," laughed Gavin Murdoch.

One of the reasons why he and his wife had called it a day was that their tastes were so similar. Each had found the other too predictable and therefore too boring.

Perhaps a black caravan was what his wife needed, Gavin told himself, as an alternative to hauling the cabin cruiser out of the river for her turns.

# SIXTEEN

## Business Affairs...

Pauline King found Robin Formby in the *Wheatsheaf* at lunchtime. He was dividing his attention between a steak sandwich and a pint of *Worthington E*. The ageing Tudor décor was a hollow sham but the food was good and the beer well kept. Pauline King settled for a salad and a glass of white wine of no particular origin.

"They're using one of my pics," she told Formby as he made room on his table by shifting an ashtray and an empty glass onto the window sill. "One that shows the splash of paint on the boarded up window."

"With a *Death of a Vandal* headline?"

"Did you find out something more?"

"I got near enough to hear a doctor tell one of the detectives *'don't quote me but it looks like a heart attack*'."

"The kid was a bit young for that."

"You can have a heart attack at any age, Pauline. Check that out with our medical correspondent if you can ever find her out of a freebie do. They found some pellets at the scene. They reckon three or four people with air guns walked past on the other side of the street and opened up on him. Maybe to teach him that vandalism isn't always fun."

"Oh, no!" groaned King. "Are you off on your vigilante

trip again?"

"Hey, think about if for a minute," protested Formby. "Queen Street is a no through road for vehicles, but there's a passage leading off to Lloyd Street at the far end. This kid was obviously planning to stroll up there, have a quick spray, then nip out into Lloyd Street and get lost.

"Two minutes, tops, for the spray job. Which means the guys with the air guns must have been tailing him to be there when he had the aerosol out. One of the pellets must have hit the can in a weak spot. There's a lot of pressure in those things. It would have ripped right open and the paint would have gone everywhere. I reckon the shock gave the kid his heart attack."

"I think I'll wait for the police press conference," said King.

"Knowing the police won't dare admit we have dangerous bands of vigilantes roaming the area, striking at wrong-doers?"

"You sound like a superhero comic," scoffed King. "Talking of that, have you finished messing about with that camera you borrowed? And the long lenses?"

"Which you wouldn't have lent me if you didn't fancy me something rotten?"

"I just like watching pushy journalists grovel. So, have you?"

"Finished with it? I guess so. That story is a bust."

"That was what Howard the Hatchet-Job was telling you this morning?"

"More or less," Formby said in resignation.

"Someone told me he's having an affair, Howard. But like I said, when's he going to find the time? He's busy twenty-five hours a day."

"So you're willing to put money on it that he isn't?"

"You mean you know something?"

"Only when, where and with whom," Formby said smugly.

"You're kidding! Tell me." Pauline King leaned closer

"Have you heard of HEF?" murmured Formby.

"The Executive Facilities place? Yes, Howard goes there to get his hair cut by a friendly young lady. And I've heard even bald men go there to get their scalps fondled by pretty girls in the private cubicles."

"It's also known as the *Thudders' Club*, according to Howard. You know, bondage, whips and chains, all that lot."

"You're kidding!" King whispered through a grin of pure delight. "Howard's into that?"

"I'm not saying that. But this vicar I've been watching is. I had to break into an empty factory across the road and get where I could see through gaps in HEF's curtains."

"You utter sleaze-ball!"

"Oh, well, if you don't want to hear any more..." Formby pretended to be deeply offended.

"I didn't mean it. Please, Robby, go on."

"Quite a few of the local prominenti enjoy the various facilities at HEF, from the faces I've been able to identify. Including this vicar. And while he's being dominated by this bint in a mask and what looks like black plastic armour . . ."

"What does she do?" interrupted King.

"It's a bit difficult to tell through a small gap in a curtain from across the street, but when they're at the other end of the room, I've seen him polishing the furniture while she stands over him with a whip."

"Does he get to polish her armour, too? That could be quite kinky if she's wearing it at the time."

"I don't know. I suppose someone has to. Anyway, what I was going to say is while this vicar's being dominated for a couple of hours, guess who's round his place knocking off

his missus?"

"You're kidding!"

"He always parks his car a couple of streets away and arrives on foot. Very discreet."

"*Editor In Kinky Vicar's Wife Adultery Scandal!* No wonder he told you to drop it," King added with a laugh. "Does he know you know about him? Howard?"

"I doubt it. I only found out by accident. The first time I tried to follow the vicar on a Wednesday, he must have left home early and I missed him. I was getting fed up of waiting outside, so I phoned the house. Mrs. Vicar told me he'd gone out. About ten minutes before I got there. So I was getting ready to shove off when Howard turned up. I didn't think anything of it at first. I was too busy following the vicar the week after to wait for Howard, but I did get back there ahead of the vicar. In nice time to see Howard sneaking away."

"Yeah, I guess that makes sense," King said with a nod. "Howard will think you were watching the vicar, not his wife. The vicar's the kinky one but you can't do an exposé on him without blowing what Howard's up to."

"He gave me some guff about not embarrassing our advertisers but he's behind me all the way if I turn up anything criminal."

"Isn't running an executive brothel a bit criminal?"

"He means *crime* crime, without the freely given consent of both parties."

"So what are you going to do about it?"

"File it. And when HEF gets busted, as these places always are eventually, you'll read all about it in the Express with my by-line."

"I wonder if both of them know what the other gets up to."

"Oh, the relief when you tell your partner you've been up to something dreadful and find out they're just as bad?"

"Wife of Bondage Vicar says she'll stand by him."

"Vicar shows true Christian forgiveness to erring wife."

"He'd be out of a job if he didn't," laughed King. "Can you imagine sitting through a sermon and all you can do is think about the vicar on his knees, polishing some old bag's black plastic armour?"

"She's not an old bag. Unless your pictures of her are all miracles of the retoucher's art. I had a look at the ones you took of Mrs. Gwen Newsom at the *Businesswoman of the Year* lunch last year."

"Oh, right, I remember her now. Mrs. HEF. Very tall and slim. I think she's the same height as Princess Di. A natural blonde and dresses like she owns the Royal Mint. Mind you, it's no wonder if she thuds vicars for a living. I wonder how he affords it on the miserable pittance the Church pays him."

"Maybe they call it quits if he polishes her furniture."

"Not to mention her armour," giggled King.

"That's really got to you, hasn't it, the armour?" laughed Formby.

"You sure you're not making all this up?"

"Want to see the lump where my wife hit me with the rolling pin? When I suggested she gets some armour."

"Ann's seen the pictures?"

"She sneaked in when I thought she was out. She nearly laughed herself into hysterics. Thank Christ the kids were playing next door. Can you imagine trying to explain to a five-year-old why mummy's rolling round on the floor, laughing herself sick?"

"Isn't it a shame you've got to sit on all this? But I suppose you don't want to risk becoming known as the man who burned his editor. Seeing editors are almost human. And no one would give you another job in case you did it to them."

"Not so much just sitting as hatching. It'll be a real piece of

polished prose when it all comes out," vowed Robin Formby.

"What for?" mocked Pauline King. "No one's going to give you a Pulitzer Prize for anything better than your normal limping prose."

Jenny Hobson noticed with interest that the editor's cologne seemed unusually powerful. She wondered what he had been eating or doing that required a chemical smoke screen. As usual, Howard Hatcher was talking to someone on his phone-headset; his broker from the trend of the conversation.

He was trying to make up his mind to buy something or other. Hobson parked herself at the editor's desk and stared vacantly through the window at the car park topped by a closed dance studio opposite. She was enjoying the chance to just sit and do nothing when Hatcher gave her his attention.

"This thing from the DTI, it's garbage, Howard," she said.

"Public relations, Jenny. Supporting the cause of law and order," Hatcher countered.

"And it's not even new garbage. They say One Ton Radio don't pay royalties, which is a lie. The performing rights people don't cash their cheques. They also say One Ton don't pay union rates and observe agreed manning levels. But agreed by whom? The BBC? ILR? The big independents? That's applying the rules for supermarkets to corner shops. It's a red herring made of chalk and cheese."

"No, it isn't, it's another lie," said Hatcher. "How do they *know* how much One Ton Radio pays or their manning levels if they don't know who works for them or where they operate from? And shouldn't that be *personning levels* these days?"

"You mean you're agreeing with me?" frowned Hobson.

"I know garbage when I see it, Jenny."

"So I don't need to go on to the lies about interference and

stealing news from big local radio stations?"

"I don't know where One Ton gets the scandal they call news, but I've never heard it on the official stations."

"So why did this end up in my in-tray?"

"I did a deal with one of the DTI men. If they come up with One Ton's studio, they're going to give us a ring so we can got some exclusive photos. In return, we give their noble work a plug. How they're making the airwaves safe for law-abiding citizens."

"And if they don't find the studio?"

"There's no story, is there?"

"So then I can rip this in to four pieces and hang it up on a piece of string in case we run out of soft toilet paper?" said Hobson.

A light blinked and a buzzer sounded insistently on the telephone complex. Hatcher flicked a switch and listened. A slow grin spread across a moderately handsome face, making him look quite fanciable to a female reporter who was anxious to make a good impression. She could understand why Hatcher might appeal to a vicar's wife whose husband was some sort of pervert; if photographer Pat King was to be believed.

Hatcher snapped his fingers again to catch her attention. "Hello, are you there, Jen? Can you scoot over to Cable Street? We've got our DTI story. But not the one they expected to give us."

# SEVENTEEN

## A Way Out . . .

Derek was looking forward to the end of a severe bout of earache. Susie had been counting the days since he had told her about the coach crash. Her score had reached eight. Derek's limited supply of sympathy had run out a long time before. He had told Susan Lymme quite plainly that the good times with Robbijohn were over.

Anyone with a scrap of self-esteem would have accepted the situation and dropped Robbijohn out of her life. Derek was beginning to wonder if Susie was hoping that she was mentioned in Lance's will.

Susie began to have her doubts about the *Silver Bangle Club* when she entered a side street off one of Hambourne's main arteries. The sign beside the entrance showed a bangle around a left female ankle. A young man with a body-builder's physique under his tee-shirt glanced at a list when she gave her first name and asked for Derek.

He told her to go down the stairs and turn right to the bar. His tone was flat, uninvolved, and his face remained blank.

There was no smile to say that he fancied her something rotten, even if it was only routine flirting. It was an entirely impersonal transaction.

At the foot of the stairs, with a view of the stage, Susie

realized that she should have guessed from the music what sort of a club it was. It was the sort of place where women degraded themselves for the lunchtime drinkers, mainly men, but there was a scattering of other women. The crowd was thinning as people went back to work.

Derek, wearing a black cowboy hat, was propping up the bar, watching a rather skinny young woman shimmer out of her scraps of glitter in what was supposed to be an artistic fashion.

"Did we have to meet here?" Susie demanded in an uncompromising tone.

Derek shrugged. "It was your choice. I told you I'm waiting for someone here. No one twisted your arm."

"What have you got to tell me?"

"It's tomorrow."

"What is?"

"What do you think?"

"The funeral?"

"It came as a bit of a shock to me, too. I thought the old sod was indestructible. But they got a positive ID on him eventually."

"Where is it? The funeral?" said Susie.

"A piece near Stafford. Friday morning. I'm still waiting for the full SP."

"How are you getting there?"

"Driving. It's about an hour if the motorway's okay. I'll pick you up on Oxford Street outside the *Odeon*. About nine." Derek assumed that Susie would have no trouble getting time off work to go to the funeral.

"They're sure it's him, Lance? If it took them a week to identify him, there must be room for doubt."

"That's why they took so long, I guess," said Derek with another shrug. "So now you've got to let go. Guys do get

killed in civilian life."

The stripper left the stage to patchy applause, having taken off her quota of glitter. Susie decided to leave too before Derek got from letting go to taking Lance's place. Peering out from under the brim of that ridiculous cowboy hat were the eyes of a man who was prepared to console a dead friend's girlfriend.

"I'll see you tomorrow morning, then?" Susie clutched her handbag tighter as a pair of tough-looking characters brushed past on their way to the stairs.

"'Kay, see you," nodded Derek.

Susan Lymme hurried out of the club, suspecting that Derek had dismissed her. She had been preparing herself for that news for a week. She had picked out the hat that she would need for the service. She would sneak out of work a little early to buy it. She would conduct herself with the dignity of a really special person in Lance's life at the funeral. She would not be put off by his weird friends from their last date together.

As the orange second hand of the studio clock headed for the vertical, Bruce Bruce cued up a cartridge, then set it playing. A recording of the time-signal pips ended precisely as the second hand reached 12.

"Time marches on!" said Bruce dramatically in his 'for broadcasting' Edinburgh accent. "Sixteen hundred hours on One Ton Radio and here's a news update at the start of our *Rush Hours* feature. Anyone who's been perceptive enough to invest in the best thirty-pence-worth in the city, what else but the Hambourne Evening Express, will know the story so far. Everyone else, I'm trusting you to dash out and buy a copy of the Express right away.

"The story so far.

"It seems our dear friends of the DTI have had a wee spot of bother. Someone – not us, I hasten to add, we've been too busy bringing you the best in music – but someone made a malicious phone call to send them to Cable Street. And while they were poking their noses into someone else's business, a heavy object fell from a great height onto their van.

"What we're going to play you now is an exclusive taped interview with Mr. Arthur Meecham, who's leading the DTI pirate hunt. I have to warn you the interview contains the f-word towards the end. If you object to that sort of language, don't call us, call the DTI to complain about their Mr. Meecham. That's M-E-E-C-H-A-M. And here's what he had to say for himself."

The ambience shifted from a quiet studio to a street with muffled traffic noises and voices in the distant background. "Can you tell me what happened, sir?" said a young, rather earnest voice. "Did you have explosives in the van?"

"Don't be daft, sonny," said a patronizing, elder voice. "Something fell on it, that's why the roof's pushed in. An internal explosion would have blown it outwards."

"What was it that fell on the van?"

"Looks like an old, cast iron safe..."

"And where were you at the time?"

"We were investigating what's clearly a dummy transmitter when we heard a loud bang. I suppose it did sound like a bomb went off. When we got down here, the van was like that. Completely wrecked. If anyone had been inside at the time, he would have stood no chance."

"But no one was in the van?"

"How were they to know that?"

"Maybe they looked first."

"I doubt it. If we'd been in that van, it would have been murder."

"And if it had fallen on a mother pushing her pram, just a bit off-target, I suppose it would have killed them instead?"

"Are you taking the piss?"

"What do you think? You were miles away when it happened. You said so yourself. Some near miss!"

"It's still serious criminal damage to government property."

"Who d'you reckon did it?"

"Isn't that obvious?"

"I can't see anything written on the safe."

"It was obviously done by your local radio pirates. From what we've heard, they've got so much money invested in their studio, they could never hope to replace it."

"You're saying One Ton Radio did this?"

"Who else?"

"Well, the DTI hasn't exactly covered itself with glory over the last few years, Mr. Meecham. You're a bit spoilt for choice looking for someone who'd want to make a laughing stock of you."

"We're not laughing, mate!"

"Why, did you sign for the van? Is it coming out of your salary?"

"We might have been under that lot."

"But, like you said, you were miles away at the time."

"Look, mate, why don't you just f*(eep)* off and stuff that notebook up your f*(eeeeep)*ing arse?"

"Thank you very much for those few, kind words, Mr. Arthur Meecham of the DTI."

"'Ere, you f*(eep)*ing b*(eeeeep)*, are you recording this? Stop him, someone!" Meecham' voice ended in a retreating shout.

"Luckily," said Bruce Bruce in the One Ton studio, "the bloke who recorded that was fleet of foot and on his toes. And there you have it, a piece of living news. And now on

with the music with a new release from *The Pretenders*. The travel news to follow."

"You know," remarked the engineer in the control room when Bruce was off the air, "we could be in a bit of technical trouble if we try to sue Meecham for libel for saying we pushed the safe onto him. You've actually published the libel by broadcasting that recording."

"We're not in the business of shoving money into lawyers' pockets," grinned Bruce, "but we can make the bastard sweat a wee bit by wi' the threat of a libel action."

After a relay from their travel news reporter, Bruce Bruce switched his microphone back on. "Here's another slant on the DTI disinformation that we don't pay royalties. The truth of that is we send out cheques but no one cashes them because they're dirty money. And you know who says that? Solicitors. Can you believe it? Solicitors turning away money?"

Bruce activated a tape machine.

"Yus, Guv," said a rough voice. "I've been mugging old age pensioners for years, so I've got enough cash to pay for the old defence, and it's not my fault if some of them died."

"So where does the money go?" Bruce demanded. "Straight into our friendly solicitor's pocket. Strange how the proceeds of crime are clean but royalties from an unofficial radio station are dirty. But before you start thinking the law's an ass, let us remember it's often administered by donkeys. Enough chat. More music from *Camel*, which, come to think of it, is just a donkey with a hump. See what brilliant links I give you? I ask myself, do these people *deserve* me?"

"No, they deserve something much better," the engineer said for the benefit of the presenter alone.

Bruce Bruce responded with an energetic V-sign.

# EIGHTEEN

## People In Circulation

Frank Hogan sneaked his comb out in the lift. He used a chromed panel as a distorting mirror for a quick tidying operation. He was straightening his already straight tie when the doors opened at the fourth floor. He stepped out into an empty corridor of an office building in the centre of Hambourne.

Four-thirty on a Thursday afternoon was an unusual time for a job interview but Hogan wasn't choosy. He had been rehearsing his life story during his two-mile hike into town, which had saved the outrageous price of the bus fare. He knew that he was wasting his time but it was a ritual which had to be played out to prove that he was actively seeking work when there was none available.

Nobody, it seemed, had a use locally for his experience with small-arms ammunition. There was some demand for experience in blowing thing up; which Hogan could not provide. He had replied to a science-based advertisement in Monday's Hambourne Evening Express even though he knew nothing about operating a carbon-fourteen dating system. It had given him an opportunity to add to his 'seeking work' correspondence file, which grew at an average rate of three copies of his letter to every reply.

He had been surprised to receive an invitation, by first class post that morning, to make an appointment for an interview. Getting it out of the way that same afternoon ended the speculation quickly. There would be little messing about and a spot of false hope. Maybe even his bus fares, pure profit, as a minor consolation prize.

Hogan tried to think himself into a calm, good-humoured frame of mind. He had sent his curriculum vitae along with the letter of application. Mr. Ford could hardly complain about his lack of experience of radiocarbon dating. Still not sure what he was doing there, Hogan checked the number then knocked on the office door. A man of about his own age and size let him into the office. It contained a business area with a desk, computer equipment and filing cabinets. In the other half were easy chairs around a low table and a jungle of potted plants.

"Ford," said the other man. He clasped Hogan's hand in a firm grip. "Have a seat, Mr. Hogan."

Hogan concealed his surprise well when he sat down at the low table. Spread on a square of lintless cloth were the parts of a self-loading pistol.

"I'm off to the gun club when I finish here," Ford told him with a smile. "You're familiar with this mark?"

"Looks like a NATO FN edition of the Browning GP3DA," Hogan said casually. "The FA version?"

"You know your guns," approved Ford. "Yes, this is the *Fast Action* version. I like to be sure everything's nice and clean inside before I use it. Do you have much experience of hand-loading ammunition?"

"Oh, yes. All the usual types for hand guns. Thirty-eight long and short. Magnum, forty-five, also thirty-two and twenty-two; and less usual calibres. All for trials against commercial batches."

"Special orders for competition?"

"Oh, yes. special batches for national teams. Although a lot of competitors prefer to do it themselves to be sure it's right."

"And you know how radiocarbon dating is done?"

"I'm not sure I see the connection," frowned Hogan.

"There isn't one," Ford said with a smile. He had decided that his interview technique would include putting the candidate off balance. Hogan had dealt with the pistol very well but he had actually handled handguns himself.

Ford T. Ford had been about to begin a checking process when Ferenc Disch had recognized the name of one of the initial applicants. Furry, of course, had been using the office telephone to make a free call to one of his mates. Frank Hogan's application had awakened old but fresh memories. Ford had extracted some details over a free drink.

Disch had told Ford that his downstairs neighbour had been out of a job for some time. Hogan seemed to be depressed about his employment prospects and thoroughly pissed off with the people who generated the statistics that their political masters fudged and lied about.

Hogan had enough money to be excluded by the benefit system but not enough to live on for any length of time, according to further research. He was in a negative income situation despite frugal living. He seemed ripe for a few outrageous suggestions.

"Radiocarbon dating." Hogan summoned up some quick research in the library during the afternoon. "You know that carbon has a radioactive isotope, and living creatures and plants exchange it with their environment? But when they die, that exchange stops, and as the radioactive isotope decays, the amount of carbon fourteen drops relative to stable carbon twelve."

"Oh, yes," said Ford airily.

"Well, essentially, the process consists of converting the carbon in a sample to carbon dioxide, gas instead of solid, then measuring the carbon dioxide in a mass spectrometer to determine the ratio of carbon twelve to fourteen."

"You think you could handle one of these mass spectrometers?"

"Actually operating them isn't that complicated. It's usually done by relatively junior staff. Who pass the results on for analysis. How old are the things you're interested in?"

"A few hundred years. What we're interested in is authenticating works of art. Charcoal drawings, pastels, chalks, that sort of thing. And not just by carbon dating. What we want to know is how much can be determined by non-destructive testing and how much extra information can be gotten out of small-scale sampling."

"I should think there's quite a large element of interpretation involved in that sort of work. The actual physics and chemistry, the testing, should be fairly straightforward. You want to keep the scope for errors creeping in as low as possible. Mind you, that won't stop experts claiming diametric opposites based on the same data."

"You reckon it's something you could do?"

Hogan realized that he had reached a crunch question. The American was reassembling the pistol, but it was evidently such a familiar task that he had to devote very little attention to it.

"I could operate the equipment, and given time to read up on the subject, get familiar with what's current and do some experiments, I could give reliable opinions."

"Good!" said Ford, slotting an empty magazine into the butt of the pistol. "Done any shooting recently?"

"Not since the British government decided to buy cheap ammunition from abroad instead of using reliable home-

produced stuff," Hogan said with a shrug of disgust.

"What say we continue this discussion at the club over a few magazines? Or do you have any plans?"

"Nothing for this evening."

"Good!" Ford passed the weapon across the table. He watched with approval as Hogan slid out the magazine to double check that it was empty then pulled back the slide to confirm that the chamber was also empty.

"An amazing number of people get shot with 'empty' guns," Hogan remarked. "This one's seen a fair amount of use."

"I carried a GP-35 as a back-up in 'Nam," said Ford. "The service Colt has a third as much again muzzle energy as a nine-millimetre, but these guys carry six more rounds per magazine. And they kill Charlie just as dead at close quarters."

"I've only ever shot at static targets or pictures of Russian soldiers."

"Lucky you."

"Did you have much trouble with misfires?"

"No more than a couple. The main problem was the extractor missing the case. But I had a gunsmith in Tokyo modify the piece to cure it."

"What did you do about ammunition?"

"Guess what? We used yours. A procurement guy at Burtonwood used to fly it back to the States, then on to Tokyo. The guys before us had done trials and Hambourne Small Arms came out top of the tree. We have to use German loads now. Or Belgian."

Hogan shrugged. "We've got a government that seems to be trying to disappear. If it can be done abroad cheaper, even if it's worse, they go for that. Then they shut down government research establishments and things like public health

laboratories and expect private industry to leap in to fill the gap. The way this government's going, everyone will end up out of work but the staff at the Houses of Parliament."

"So you'd rather have the other lot in?"

"That lot?" scoffed Hogan. "They moan about lack of investment but then they turn round and say investment income is unearned income and should be taxed out of existence. How do you choose between bad and worse?"

"One way is to get out of the system all together."

"Chance would be a fine thing," Hogan said with feeling.

Ford slotted the pistol into a box lined with lintless fabric, then locked the box in his briefcase. "Oh, yes, I've just remembered. We used to see two sets of initials on the check-slips in the ammo boxes. There was either FCH, which is you, and was it VLT?"

"Vic Teal. We had an explosion nine years ago. He got killed. He was standing right next to me. I came out of it with a stiff knee and I'm a bit deaf in the left ear."

"Weird thing, blast," nodded Ford. "It can pick one guy out of a line. Take him out like a tooth being pulled. How's your health otherwise?"

"Okay, apart from the usual colds and things. Certainly fit for active duty in a laboratory."

"Fine. Is there anything else we need to do here? Yes. Travelling expenses."

Hogan quoted the return bus fare for the two-mile journey. Money was money and he was there at Mr. Ford's invitation. Ford went over to the desk and took out a cashbox. He made a note in a small book, then took out a £10 note.

"You'll need a taxi home from the club. We can have some dinner and a couple of drinks on the firm, seeing it's business. There'll be a few more of the guys there. They'll get a real buzz out of meeting one of our ammo-testers."

"That really takes me back." Hogan tucked the note into his wallet. "I went to HSA straight from university with a brand new degree. And they put me on ammunition testing with Vic Teal right away."

"I got through college before they shipped me off to 'Nam," said Ford. "When I got there, I thought, if these bastards are going to get me killed, I'm going to get some fun in first. You must have been at HSA for a couple of years when we kinda 'met' through your testing certificates."

"I hardly ever met the customers. I mean, the people who actually shot the stuff. It's usually General Staff colonels or generals dropping in for drinks and lunch on the firm."

Ford collected his briefcase, then checked his pockets for car keys and the office keys. "Okay, let's saddle up."

Hogan watched him switch on the answering machine, switch off the lights and lock up. As they headed to the lift, Hogan struggled with a sense of unreality. Job interviews were a rarity but this one had to be unique. He had the distinct impression that his chances of getting this job, which would require a great deal of indulgence on the part of the employer initially, depended on his past services to the US Armed forces and how he performed on the pistol range twenty years later.

For the first time in a long time, he felt that he stood a real chance of getting back into circulation as someone with the dignity and purchasing power that go with a proper job.

Susan Lymme remained under the shelter of the *Odeon* cinema's awning and looked away when the small bus stopped and the driver hooted his horn. It was the only way to treat football hooligans or whatever they were. Then she heard a voice that she knew, an American voice.

"Come on, Doll, don't hang about!" Derek had rolled

down the driver's window to yell across the pavement at her.

Susie dashed into the rain, rounded the front of the box-shaped vehicle and leapt through the open door before a motorist sliding up to the red light twenty yards further on could run her down. The door hissed shut as she dropped onto a vacant seat. Derek reached the lights just as they were changing. He made a left turn and headed out of town, following the signs to the motorway.

Susie turned in her seat and looked toward the back of the bus. She was one of a dozen passengers. The men were all in their early forties, Lance's age. All of the women were Oriental and in their early twenties. The couple behind her were talking in a peculiar language. Most of the others were wearing headphones and watching a video on a screen behind the driver's compartment.

Clinging to the hand rails, Susie went forward to speak to the driver. "Who are all these people?" she demanded. "I was expecting to see you in a car."

"Friends," said Derek. "Got to give the guy a good send off."

"When is it, the funeral?"

"Quarter to eleven at the crematorium."

Susie looked at her watch. It was five past nine and Derek had said that the journey would take an hour. She went back to the vacant seat. The small bus headed out westward to the M6 then it turned south. In Susie's experience, the little buses on the streets in and around Hambourne tended to give a bumpy ride. This one seemed to travel quite smoothly on the motorway.

For want of something to do, Susie watched the screen but she decided against putting on her set of headphones. The video showed some sort of musical event. The cameras were roaming around a crowd of thousands upon thousands of

people dressed for warm, sunny weather. She recognized them as flower-power hippies. The music, she knew, would come from the Sixties or early Seventies. Lance had been stuck in that era. The setting was obviously somewhere in the United States. People would not have been allowed to wander around like that, stark naked, men and women, in England.

Derek slowed for a contraflow system on the approach to the services opposite Newcastle Under Lyme. He came to a halt so gradually that Susie was not aware of the bus stopping. It had been motionless for several minutes before an impatient horn took her eyes from the videoscreen.

"Hey, man, what gives?" an American voice called behind her.

"I'm tuned to Radio Stoke and I'm waiting to hear," called Derek.

Susie looked at her watch. Ten o'clock was approaching. Derek turned up his radio at the hour. A news bulletin ended with a warning to avoid the M6 between junctions 16 and 15 southbound because a lorry had jack-knifed in the contraflow section.

An ambulance dashed past on the other side of the road, lights flashing, siren blaring. Susie hoped that it contained the driver of the lorry and that he would spend a long time in hospital repenting his reckless driving. Derek lit a cigarette and settled back to wait. A genuine road accident had saved him the bother of staging a breakdown.

Half an hour later, Susie walked down the hard shoulder to remonstrate with the police officers, who were standing around the jack-knifed lorry doing nothing much. She returned to the bus fuming even more after being threatened with arrest for daring to walk on the sacred motorway.

The line of vehicles started moving at about the time when

the cremation was due to start. Susie told herself that it was still a good idea to go to the crematorium in case there had been a delay. The bus arrived at eleven fifteen. Another service had just started. Ten minutes later, Susie and Derek managed a quick word with the chaplain.

Nigel Lawrence Smith had gone up in smoke on schedule.

"I didn't know his name was Nigel," Susie remarked on the way back to the bus through thin drizzle.

"He didn't like it so he didn't use it," said Derek.

"There's nothing wrong with it as a name. It doesn't bother Nigel Mansell."

"He didn't like being called Nige."

"What, like Fat Nige, the ex-chancellor?"

"He didn't go a whole heap on Lawrence, either. That's why he shortened it to Lance."

Susie accepted the explanation. Derek was glad that a suitable Smith had turned up dead so conveniently. It had saved having to fake the burial of Lance Smith alias Robbijohn, who was among the mourners but heavily disguised. He had refused to miss his own funeral and the wake.

The others on the bus were Mi Tai, Gregor Maiskiy, Vets Steve Cann, Oscar Stanton and Ford Ford, and *The Painter's* five Vietnamese hand-maidens on leave from their inland desert island. Their next stop was a fake wake. Derek had hired a house and some actors as parents and assorted relatives. Robbijohn's 'death' was as good an excuse as any for a party.

# NINETEEN

## Convenient Accidents

Jenny Hobson spent her Friday morning at the court building, about a quarter of a mile in a straight line from her desk at the Hambourne Express. The morning edition with its mainly national and international news was out of the way. Hobson's report on the inquest would be featured in the earliest edition of the evening paper, which concentrated on local news.

When assigning a reporter to the inquest, Jayne Verity, the 'pit boss' of the evening edition of the Express, had been guided by an order from the editor. Howard Hatcher had sent an electronic note to her computer work station instructing her, 'Don't send Formby!'

The inquest concerned an armed robbery on a building society branch. A man with a sawn-off shotgun had taken a wrong turning in the side streets and found himself at a dead end. He had been menacing two unarmed police constables with his shotgun when a coping stone from the roof of a nearby building had landed on his head.

Robin Formby had tried to persuade his editor to let him suggest that a mysterious rooftop vigilante had taken a hand to save the constables from injury. No evidence had emerged that the stone had been pushed. Equally, there was none that

it had not. Howard Hatcher had decided to leave the matter up to the lottery of an inquest jury.

Her stint in court over, Jenny Hobson applied a final mental polish to her report as she walked briskly back to the Express building. She became aware of a familiar brand of aftershave as she tapped at her keyboard. Howard Hatcher waited for her to complete her first draft before interrupting her.

"Accident, eh?" he remarked when Hobson took her hands away from the keyboard.

"Not the verdict the family wanted," nodded Hobson.

"They wanted manslaughter by one of Robby's bloody vigilantes so they could claim from the Criminal Injuries Compensation Board."

"Instead, they'll be up against an insurance company which will deny negligence. And probably say someone had to push the stone to make it fall, no matter what the jury thought."

"The usual circular argument," nodded Hatcher.

"Even so, even if there's no evidence someone pushed the thing, it's amazingly convenient that this particular stone fell at that precise moment on someone who happened to be threatening two coppers with a gun. Even if you don't believe in vigilantes."

"I reckon it would be even more convenient to suppose a vigilante guessed the silly sod would run into that dead end and just happened to be on the right piece of roof at the right moment." Howard Hatcher's tone brought the matter to a close. "What's the score on Leaf Street and Humberstone Avenue and their refurbishment?"

Hobson shrugged. "It all seems to be collapsing into good sense. The management company had a meeting with a tenants' committee on Tuesday. They're going to spend the

whole maintenance budget, such as it is, on repairs and the tenants will be doing their own decorating. They're supposed to be getting some slaters in right away. I'm planning to go round there after lunch to check."

"While you're there, go round to Wilmot Street and have a word with Mr. Shastri."

"That's the bloke with the corner shop?"

"Someone tried to pour petrol through his letterbox and set fire to the place. Only they didn't get very far. And there are two young tearaways from the street next to Wilmot Street in hospital. They say the smell of petrol on their clothing comes from refuelling a motorbike, and they broke their right kneecaps falling off this famous motorbike. So the police are now looking for witnesses."

"If I didn't know better, I'd say that sounds exactly like the work of vigilantes," said Hobson.

Hatcher ignored the grin reflected in the monitor screen. "I reckon we should be very careful not to confuse individual acts of retribution, or specific actions, as part of an unofficial insurance policy or as part of an obscuring pattern of vigilantism. I think we'd do a lot better if we treated each case in isolation rather than as another piece of an overall action plan belonging to some sort of local anti-Mafia."

"That sounds like an official statement, Howard."

"But it's no less true for that, Jenny. Let's not stop looking closely at things just because they can be fitted into some grand conspiracy theory."

"Are you saying Mr. Shastri's bought protection from someone?"

"I'm not jumping to any conclusions, but the facts say he's either standing up for himself or he's got a fairy godmother looking out for him," said Hatcher. "Something for you to keep an eye on."

"Something else I've had my eye on is an advert from Hambourne Executive Facilities that we've been running. For people with science A-Levels."

"Oh?"

"They say it's for a career in occupational hygiene. I reckon they're looking for pretty girls to staff their massage parlour and the aromatherapy unit, and the acupuncture without needles thing, and so on."

"So?"

"So don't you think it's all a bit suspect?"

"Not necessarily. Some companies are enlightened enough to pay for their executives to have these treatments so they look good and feel good, and do their work better. Plus the recognized psychological stimulation of male-female interaction. No doubt they have some handsome young men for the female executives. Or whatever."

"Oh!" Jenny Hobson knew she was being discouraged.

Howard Hatcher took another look over her shoulder at the text on the screen. "There's only one 'u' in 'difficult'. Cut that down by about ten per cent and it should be okay."

"Yes, Howard." Jenny Hobson knew that her editor had a thing about reducing news reports to make them snappier. She suspected that everyone else inflated them slightly to make the cutting process easier and to ensure that no vital detail was lost. The task summed up a great deal of life; going round in useless circles.

After her second drink, Susan Lymme began to feel sleepy. A refill knocked her out completely. Derek and Robbijohn took her out to the bus, out of the way. The actors and the other guests continued to attack the food and drink. Mention of Lance ceased as they found other topics of conversation. After an hour, Derek paid off the actors, then he returned to

the small bus to drive it back to Hambourne.

He parked at Susie's flat and put her to bed with Robbijohn's help. His next stop was Tib Street and the rear entrance to the South Sea island. Sam Tadeusz shook Robbijohn's hand at the beach bar. The Painter's fingertips were dusted with charcoal.

"I guess this confirms you as another of us Draculas," he said with a smile. "One of the undead."

"I've never figured out how that guy manages when he wants a shave," laughed Robbijohn.

"One of the servants does it," said Derek. "He is a count, after all."

Tadeusz's girls changed from their street clothes to South Sea island grass skirts and optional tee-shirts. The others changed into beachwear. They were ready for more food after the long drive home. Tadeusz had started the barbeque half an hour earlier. It was just right for cooking.

Robbijohn and Mi Tai shared a monumental, Texas-size slab of steak, then they moved on to slices of fresh pineapple. Derek enjoyed his first drink of the day. The group spread out along the shoreline to soak up some rays, which contained no dangerous hard-ultraviolet wavelengths.

"You didn't have a funeral last time you cashed in your chips, Lance?" Tadeusz remarked from a beach chair adjacent to Mi Tai and Robbijohn's double lounger.

"I had to do some more serious convincing," said Robbijohn. "And the name I was born with is a lot less common than Smith."

"What was your business? Import and export?"

"Dealing in government surplus goods mainly, including your government. Buying large lots at ridiculously cheap prices and selling them on as smaller units. But I ran into a whole lot of trouble. Bad debts, people trying to steal the

stuff, others wanting protection money or they'd set fire to my warehouses, plus routine terrorism from the taxman and the VATman. You don't want to get involved with those guys," he added to his companion.

"Yo!" said Mi Tai, who had no idea what he was talking about.

"So you decided to get out," said Tadeusz. "With one final deal. The Odessa Caper." As a man with not much future, he enjoyed delving into past successes.

"Oh, there was a lot more to it than that," said Robbijohn. "I stripped all the assets. Sold off the warehouses and their contents while I kept up a pretence of moving to more modern premises. Then I paid redundancy money to all the honest employees. Plain, brown envelope and all that. Then I left the rest to fight over the bad debts with the Inland Revenue, the VATman, the local council and anyone else who thought they deserved a piece of me."

"Then you headed for the docks."

"That's right. The port of Liverpool and my freighter packed with obsolete technology that your government didn't want sold to the Eastern block."

"Cold War shadow boxing?"

"Right in one," said Robbijohn.

"Then you and I met in Catania, Sicily. Person to person for the first time. After three months of contacts by secure phones and messages through cut-outs. Just like real spies."

"Except our respective governments wouldn't have made an exchange deal for us, just like real spies, if the Italians had caught us out and shoved us in gaol," Robbijohn pointed out.

Tadeusz nodded thoughtfully. "I guess not. I guess I'd be dead now if we'd been busted in Sicily. That was my last caper before the cancers were diagnosed. Apart from the *Really Big One*. And there's not much to live for in gaol."

"You're another of the Undead Club," laughed Robbijohn. "A bit like the stowaway we found as we were getting the hell out of Sicily."

"That was a real sharp decision on the move. Was the old broad in the lifeboat for real? Were the Customs guys chasing us really Mafia guys after her? But I guess that was what tipped the balance. If they weren't for real, they were out to get her, not us, and they weren't expecting trouble."

"If the Customs guys had been for real, letting them board us wasn't a smart move. Even if our stowaway had promised us five million dollars for sorting them out."

"The lady didn't exactly look like she had five million bucks in her purse," laughed Tadeusz. "The *Contessa* didn't look like she had cab fare across town."

"She had a good story, though. She was over forty and not bad looking. Maybe she *had* been the mistress of one of the head honchos of the Sicilian Mafia. Maybe she *had* lived it up on his unaccountable income and sent the wop's heavies round to sort people out if they upset her."

"The trouble was, we didn't have time to check her out. She was dropping names all over the place. She seemed to know a hell of a lot about a respectable businessman with a big, fat wife and a tribe of kids at home."

"A pillar of the local community. Lots of donations to charity. A churchgoer who wasn't not too pious to swindle forty-six billion lire out of the Vatican Bank, which he hid in eighteen numbered accounts in five Swiss banks opened over a period of years. I was quite surprised to find all that was real, not just a silly story she was telling."

"Yep, you've gotta admire the old broad's style. The Mafia boss has a heart attack in bed with her, so she calls his bodyguards and says he was took ill. So they dress him, spirit him off to a private room at a local diner and call a doctor, who

gets there in time to certify him dead."

"And his mistress had already decided she didn't give a stuff for the fat wife and the kids," said Robbijohn. "So she legged it with his little black book of bank account details and let the other gang bosses look after the family. And she kept her head down for a couple of years. Then she couldn't resist starting to live it up on the forty-six billion lire. Only she got careless. She spilled her secret to some guy when she was drunk and he went to the Mafia."

"Trust the Eye-talians to come up with a good torture for her," said Tadeusz as one of his grass-skirted hand-maidens filled his glass with champagne.

Mi Tai dripped ice-cold beer onto Robbijohn's neck when she decided that he was taking too much interest in the other girl's breasts. Then she dashed out of range of retaliation, giggling in triumph. Robbijohn used a towel to wipe away the sticky fluid.

"Yep, must have been the spirit of the Borgias," added Tadeusz. "They dumped her in a cellar and pulled a fingernail off right away to show they meant business. Then they asked her for the number of one account. And when they'd spent what was in it, they came back for one more, dragging it out. So the old broad gave it to them to save the rest of her fingernails. You know, I don't know why I'm calling her an old broad. She can't have been more than forty-six, forty-seven? Hell, we're nearly that old now. Another three or four years."

"But she did look ancient," said Robbijohn. "Skinny; they hadn't been feeding her up in the cellar; pale and grimy, no anti-wrinkle cream, and her hair was a real mess. She looked like one of the witches in *Macbeth*; until you took a close look at her and saw she wasn't about ninety-nine years old."

"She wasn't exactly smart, though, Lance. She was down

to her last ten million bucks before she thought to offer one of her guards enough to get lost and stay lost on."

"But she was smart enough to shove him off a bridge when she was out and before he could talk to her about the rest of her loot."

"Natural low cunning," nodded Tadeusz. "Plus the tontine thing. Do you reckon she really believed they'd let her go with a million bucks if the fat old wife ate and drank herself to death before all the loot was gone?"

"You know what they say, a little hope goes a long way. The only alternative was to commit suicide and leave the family cursing because they didn't get all the account numbers out of her right away."

"I guess that's what you'd call a Pyrrhic victory."

"I'm amazed the Mafia bunch worried about that," nodded Robbijohn. "Unless they knew she was such a strong Catholic she'd never dare kill herself. She certainly gave us plenty to think about. About five minutes to tell her tale, and about the same to think it over while the Customs launch caught us up."

"The thing that made me suspicious was the shoes and the fit of the uniforms. No honest Customs guy can afford hand-made designer shoes. And they looked like they'd deliberately picked the worst fitting uniforms."

"Obviously a rush job."

"Just as well their uniforms didn't have to fit us when we went aboard the Customs launch to finish off the ones who'd stayed behind. And night coming on really helped."

"Then it was over the side with the lot of them and open the sea cocks to sink their boat," said Robbijohn. "And through the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus to the Black Sea and our date in Odessa."

"With a side trip to Athens by helicopter to pick up a pass-

port for the *Contessa* and some clothes and things. And to check up on our unexpected five million bucks. I think it was very noble of us, letting her keep the other five."

"I think we saw a kindred spirit. Especially when she'd had a good wash and a few decent meals, and dressed herself up in something decent."

"A fellow predator?" grinned Tadeusz.

"Something like that."

"And it was her five mil that changed everything for us. We did okay on the Odessa Caper, but the five mil really opened our eyes to what was possible. Plus it bought me some anti-cancer treatment that was good in theory but needed a lot more testing before it got a license."

Robbijohn nodded. "It made us realize what we could expect out of the Colombian Operation, the *Really Big One*. Although your island in the middle of my home town was a bit beyond our wildest dreams."

"But it got us used to spending a million dollars at a time."

"It educated us in the art of the possible." Robbijohn yawned. "I think I'll get my head down for a while. This being dead lark is a bit tiring."

"Not many guys get to wake up from the sleep of death," Tadeusz remarked sombrely.

# TWENTY

## Mutual Support . . .

Gavin Murdoch had seen the man's name before – as a by-line in *Sunshine News*, an underground newspaper which was directed at a section of Hambourne's population whose ancestors had arrived from sunnier climes. Murdoch had been surprised to find, from the business card that his secretary had brought him the previous week, that Darkus Tafrika was the editor in chief.

The office at Murdoch's gymnasium and health centre was a clearing house for his appointments and a place for first contacts. The premises occupied a first-floor corner of a landmark development in the city centre, and stood next to the main bus terminal. An efficient system of precipitators and scrubbers removed all noxious substances from the humidified air recycled to all of the rooms.

One advertising campaign had insisted, ambiguously, that there was no cleaner air in the country than the gym's. The healthy atmosphere was designed to warn strangers not to expect alcohol to be on offer, and that smoking was discouraged. Anyone worthy of encouragement usually received subsequent appointments at *Cairo's Club* or *Chez Michel*.

Murdoch was expecting the editor of an underground

paper to go for the ethnic look. Darkus Tafrika was short and slight. He had dressed for his Monday morning appointment in a somewhat crumpled business suit of very dark blue shot with strands of a lighter, brighter blue, a pale yellow shirt and a dark brown knitted tie. His shoes were black and highly polished, and he had a lot of very white teeth. The only odd thing about him was the contrast between bleached, corn-blond hair and skin the colour of a strong brew of coffee.

Murdoch offered a hand across the desk then he waved the visitor to a chair. "What can I do you, Mr. Tafrika?" he asked.

"I'd like to talk to you about advertising in Sunshine News, and maybe some sponsorship for our campaigns. One of the things you could advertise is your Moslem women's keep fit classes, and other activities for single-sex or special interest groups."

"They usually do quite well by word of mouth."

"Adverts also tell other people what you're doing. Raise your personal profile. So when your name comes up in some other context, you're not starting cold. They've got something positive to build on."

"How much are you hoping to screw out of me, son?" Murdoch was about seven or eight years older than his visitor, who was in his mid-thirties, but Darkus Tafrika had the image of someone with a youthful lack of pressing responsibilities.

"Five hundred would be a big help for a colour feature we're planning. On our community spokespersons."

"Is that supposed to be some sort of joke?" Murdoch said with a frown.

"Coloured people in colour?" grinned Tafrika. "No, it's a valid concept. A good-quality printing job will help people to identify the community's spokespersons and reduce the

barriers to speaking to them. They won't have to ask, 'Are you so and so?' They'll know."

"I'm not too thrilled with some of your community spokespersons, to be honest, Darkus. I grew up round here. So did you, if that accent is genuine."

"Mossy Castle, born and bred."

"So we both got out of there? So you'll be able to back me up on this. Most of these *community spokespersons* weren't born within a fifty-quid train ride of Hambourne."

"True, but the area's changing, Mr. Murdoch. I live in Beechley New Town now. Most people call it just Beechley these days because it's not been new for donkey's years."

"Less of a mouthful, I guess," Murdoch agreed. "But the point is, I still get the feeling some of these spokesmen have to talk standing up or their voice will come out muffled."

"And some of them are articulate and caring people, even if they do come from London. And they're doing a valuable job sorting out problems for people and generally defusing tensions by stopping frustration building up."

"So what you're saying is if I give you five hundred quid, there'll be no race riots and mobs of frustrated ethnic minorities burning the city to the ground?"

"I wouldn't cancel your fire insurance," laughed Tafrika. "But you might be keeping the premiums down."

"Shouldn't you be screwing cash out of me via the council? Creating jobs for local community facilitators and crap like that? And lawyers and the court system, of course?"

"Even the Loony Left have cash limits these days. And our quote 'tatty little rag' unquote doesn't always agree with the council line."

"I've often wondered how many people it takes to produce your paper."

"We've got a full-time staff of four, and about a dozen

unpaid part-timers who do what they can. Proof-readers for the non-English sections, artists, all very talented people."

"I'll be frank, Darkus, the spokesman who really gets up my nose is Mkembe. When you get past that accent of his, can you understand what he's saying half the time?"

Tafrika shrugged. "You get used to it."

"I wouldn't fancy having to. But the point is, he pretends our local police could give lessons in brutality to the KGB or the East German Stasi. I know coppers are no angels, but none of ours are as bad as he makes out, and it gets up a lot of noses. I'll be frank with you, Darkus, when Mkembe opens his mouth, everyone I know, and that includes blacks and Asians, they ask why he doesn't sod off back where he came from if things are so bad here."

"To be equally frank with you, Mr. Murdoch, there's a lot of applied psychology involved. Mkembe makes the police think before they act, and him being such an extremist makes everyone else look reasonable. He predisposes the police and the council to make a compromise with reasonable people."

"He's a part of your marketing operation, you mean?"

"Oh, yes," smiled Tafrika. "And talking about marketing," he reached for his briefcase, "I've brought some visuals for you to look at. I think you'll find our advertising rates are very cheap for what you get."

Murdoch looked at a range of display advertisements, sales samples and examples from campaigns in the newspaper, and made a decision. "Okay, I'll show these to my marketing people and let you know what they think."

"I think you'll find our paper penetrates regions that others don't. We'd be happy to carry advertising for your heavy metal festival too. A lot of our readers will be going to that."

Murdoch stood up and offered a hand across the desk. "I'll

be in touch in a week or so. How come I never heard of a Tafrika family at Mossy Castle, especially with a kid called Darkus?"

"I like to write under an eye-catching name," Tafrika said with a grin. "Do you ever see *Slow Train*, the unofficial rival to the Hambourne Express?"

"Occasionally."

"My name was Smorrals when I wrote a column for then. Lou Smorrals."

"I remember him," laughed Murdoch.

He watched through the open shutters on the glass wall of his gallery office as Darkus Tafrika followed the carpeted area around the perimeter of the training area. The editor waved and let on to eight or nine people of all races. He seemed to be a well-known figure.

Murdoch spotted one of the council's community liaison officers sitting at one of the machines, swinging her arms to and from her ample bosom, raising and lowering a massive stack of weights. Betty Vernon was in her early thirties, tall, blonde and heavy. She looked big enough and tough enough to give a Sumo wrestler a hard time, even the Hawaiian-born, five-hundred-pound *Dump Truck*.

Her official job was to prevent discrimination against women in the council's sphere of influence. She was also the unofficial chair of the Streetwalkers' Defence Association. Slow Train had run at length, what was purported to be the inside story of a battle between the SDA and a loose association of pimps, who had intimidated their girls with violence and spent most of their earnings on clothes and cars.

It was rumoured that two of the pimps had been spirited away to a people's prison in Mossy Castle. Slow Train was sure that two of the crushed and unidentified bodies found during the demolition work were missing pimps. If not, they

were still locked up somewhere. Betty Vernon, working her massive muscles, would know but Murdoch did not feel like questioning her when unescorted by a couple of big minders and a machine gun.

According to wandering, golfing Kathleen Murdoch, Betty Vernon was a rather pleasant, helpful sort of person. As far as Mrs. Murdoch's husband was concerned, a tame lioness and a wild one can look very alike from a distance. He was not interested in getting close enough to Betty Vernon to find out her category.

His next appointment was with Jack Strangford, his election advisor, who had proofs for him to check: the *Week 1* personal letter for selected voters and A4 newspaper; the *Week 2* follow-up leaflet and the *Week 3* leaflet; which would go to every voter on the Tuesday before election day.

"I'm still not convinced of the value of going out canvassing," Murdoch remarked as he glanced through the documents, which looked quite stark in black-and-white. "When someone comes to my door, I usually tell them to buzz off."

"That's what most people who've never done it say," Strangford said. "And it's what you'll get from most people. But you'll be doing *targetted* canvassing so I expect you to get a high percentage of people who'll want to bend your ear about a particular issue."

"That sounds as bad as being told to buzz off, Uncle Jack," Murdoch said with a laugh.

"Except, you can make a note of it and promise to look into the matter if you're elected."

"Look into it and find nothing can be done?"

"As long as you tell them that after the election. And it proves you're making an effort. Or your research staff is."

"Okay, I'll give it a go," Murdoch promised.

"And I'm sure you'll be willing to admit I know what I'm

doing by the end of the campaign," his agent added.

"Oh, I don't know if I'll ever go that far, Uncle Jack," Murdoch returned with a laugh. "What are we doing about my party colours? We can't use red, that's Labour. Blue's Tory and yellow or orange is a rat-fink coward or Trivial Democrats. And green is the Green party, which doesn't leave a lot over."

"Magenta? Cyan?"

"No, thanks," Murdoch said with a mock shudder.

"Well, as you said earlier, we could do things in black and white, like the proofs. A vote for Gavin Murdoch is a vote for straightforward politics with no party colouring. Or we could use a distinctive shade of one of the basic colours. I don't suppose you fancy brown or grey?"

"No, thanks."

"Okay, you could use purple or violet, or a yellow-green; a sort of apple-green. Or burgundy. Unless you're worried about being tarred with the EU brush."

"Better leave them out of it."

"Or you could go in for a rainbow emblem."

"Too naff."

"I agree. I think a combination of black and white for some material and apple-green for other stuff would work nicely."

"How about black and silver?"

"That's the SS," Strangford said firmly. "It's a great look but not a desirable association. Same with black and red. That's the Nazis. And black and yellow would make you look like the Wasp party."

"Black and blue would be the Boxing party, I suppose?"

"Possibly. I don't know who black and green would be."

"So we're talking white on black as a combination? And apple-green as my rosette colour?"

"Yes, we could work with that. I'll go and have words with

my designer and get some mock-ups done."

"Fine." Murdoch gave his attention to the proofs as Strangford left.

Ten minutes later, his secretary buzzed through on the intercom to remind Murdoch that his next appointment was at the riverside restaurant. Murdoch left the health centre by the rear entrance and walked to *Chez Michel*. He believed that there were too many cars in the city centre making unnecessary short journeys. His staff were under strict instructions not to add to them.

Stella Cookson was waiting in his office at the restaurant, looking like one of the invisible army of cleaners, whom the public took for granted. She was wearing a shapeless, pale-green linen dress and sandals. Her mousey hair was gathered into a straggling bun. She almost managed to look both rosy-cheeked and pale at the same time.

Coffee and some of the good china arrived promptly. Stella poured, then she helped herself to a chocolate cream cake. Murdoch chose a custard slice. It was a lunch-ruining snack but Murdoch saw nothing wrong with having another snack in the middle of the afternoon and forgetting about lunch completely.

"News?" said Murdoch when he had demolished half of his custard slice.

Stella licked chocolate from her lips, smiling. "Another step on the road to collecting the Asian vote. Mr. Shastri and three friends got together, and I fixed them up with a card for one of your cash and carries. They can get supermarket discounts for a bulk order now."

"Mutual back-scratching? Is he looking any less harassed?"

"I reckon the kids are leaving him alone; most of them. The message always takes time to filter through. The yobs are learning it's safer to go and bother someone else."

"Rather than behave themselves?"

"Maybe that message will get through in time," said Stella with a shrug. "How are you getting on with your boat?"

Murdoch took his coffee cup over to the window and looked down at the marina. Stella followed him with a plate bearing a coconut and cream cake. "I'm playing a bit hard to get at the moment," said Murdoch.

"To see what it does to the price?"

"Right in one."

"It really stands out, doesn't it? The black one?"

"It's going to look like the start of a private navy if there's two of them."

"Then there'll be a rush down to your cash-and-carry for black paint. Then it'll be different to have a white one."

"There's a Chinese girl looking after that black boat. I saw her in the Kung Fu class at the gym the other day. That's useful to keep undesirables off your boat."

"If they can get past the Wharf Rats." Stella watched one of the uniformed security guards strolling along the quay, chatting into his radio.

"I was thinking of taxmen and VAT inspectors, Stell. A quick chop to break their neck, then over the side to let them get stuck further down the river in a set of lock gates."

"Sounds like a dreadful tragedy for a respectable and hard-working member of the community."

"Chance would be a fine thing," laughed Murdoch. "Oh, yes, a guy from Sunshine News wants me to advertise in his rag. He reckons he used to live at Mossy Castle. But I don't remember anyone called Darkus Tafrika. Do you?"

"Freddy Cotton," Stella said at once. "I know Jill, his older sister," she added in response to Murdoch's frown. "She thinks his heart's in the right place even if his methods are a bit off at times."

"I still can't place him. Oh, well." Murdoch returned to his desk as a signal that they were back to business.

Stella finished her report and her snack. When she had gone, and the tray had been returned to the kitchen and the dish washer, Murdoch pondered his next move. He felt that a snack at about eleven-thirty gave him a jump on everyone else. His thoughts were on business while the others were thinking about lunch.

It was a good time to get things done unobtrusively.

He was planning to take drastic action against an old bloke on Leaf Street, who was making a nuisance of himself.

# TWENTY ONE

## The Genial Gumshoe

The sign on his office door had *SIMON JONES* printed above and *INVESTIGATOR* below the centrally placed magnifying glass. The tenant was also known as Shylock Jones because he had a secondary career as a six-for-five man. People who borrowed units of £5 from him one week had to pay back units of £6 the next.

On the surface, he was a pleasant, fortyish man with black curls, dark brown eyes surrounded by laugh-lines and a body that looked unusually wide for his just-above-average height. To anyone who knew him well, Jones was a paradox. On the one hand, he had a reputation for ruthless brutality. He was also known to be a sympathy junkie.

A good way to stay in his good books was to tell him that the world looked as if it had been arranged to his disadvantage. A certain way to drive him into a wild rage was to mention the commonly held opinion that if he lost both legs in an accident and had to have artificial ones fitted, then he would make sure one artificial leg was shorter than the other to give himself a limp.

Rapid mood changes from amused to annoyed and back in a matter of a couple of minutes made his six-for-five clients reluctant to push him too far. Jones was also highly

selective when it came to making loans. He chose only people whom he could dominate, and those with goods that he could claim in lieu of payment.

Jones was compiling a loan-shark's joke book on his office computer; a list of snappy counters to punters' complaints and pathetic excuses. He was longing for someone, borrowing from imported American television shows, to say, 'Give me a break, will ya?' So that Shylock Jones could reply, 'What would you like? An arm or a leg? Or maybe your nose?'

An irregular but continuing source of income for his investigation business was the insurance company Hambourne Risk Management. Burglars who had stolen items covered by HRM seemed to know that Jones was the man to approach if they were unable to sell their loot at a decent price. Jones assumed that a question of pride was involved.

The burglar knew that a fence makes a whole lot more out of a deal than whoever has taken the primary risk. The burglar preferred to take the insurance company's 10%, less 15% commission to Jones, and keep the loot available at the same address for another burglary in the future.

Simon Jones ran a family business. His sister Ruth, divorced to their mother's utter despair, personned the office during the day when he was out or asleep. Jobs for HRM generally came off in the small hours and Jones handled them in person. He quite enjoyed sitting at his desk in a silent office building at four o'clock a Tuesday morning. Lit by his desk lamp, the office was full of deep, secret shadows, which were tinted crimson by a neon sign across the street.

Jones sipped coffee flavoured heavily with whisky and puffed contentedly at his long-stemmed pipe. Heavy clouds kept the sky dark, shutting out summer twilight. He had a strong sense of being an essential part of a city left to night

watchmen, the police, ambulance crews and people up to no good. If it were not for them, the city had no point at night.

His watch began to chirp an alarm. Jones finished his coffee but spent a further two minutes with his pipe before he tapped it out into a metal ashtray. He liked to set alarms early so that he could ignore them for a short time.

Jones switched off his desk light and used his torch to guide his feet down the stairs from the first floor. A wide-angle spy-device in the solid front door let him check the doorway before he turned the twin locks. His office lay on the edge of a blighted area, which was why he could rent two large rooms, a smaller store room/emergency bedroom and a lavatory at a ridiculously cheap rate.

A ten-minute walk took him through the silent business and banking district, past the town hall, along the safe street containing A Division's police headquarters and to the ever-open, multi-storey car park opposite the city's 24-hour newspaper.

One Ton Radio murmured from the speakers in his car when he switched on the ignition. The night-time DJ was having a jazz festival, airing a concert-recording of someone playing a saxophone with a breathy, melodic style rather than the orgasmic squeaks which some musicians consider to be a display of technical excellence.

Jones drove out to dockland. He parked near the golf course and walked down to the ribbon of dark water. There was enough sodium light spilling in from nearby roads to guide his steps. There was a lot of nothing here – acres of cracked concrete and stub-walls beside the river, warehouses reduced to the empty space which they had once enclosed.

Jones knew that his client was somewhere hereabouts, making sure that Jones had arrived alone. The investigator moved to the vicinity of the boundary wall, the rear of a

warehouse that had been chopped off at first-floor level, and ambling along slowly. Jones saw a bright spot of red light; someone drawing on a cigarette. He stopped. A shapeless figure in a black tracksuit and matching balaclava brought a shopping bag over to him. Jones, as wide as one and a half normal people, was a distinctive enough landmark.

"Morning, Mr. X," remarked Jones. "Right on time."

"You come alone?" The other man was an effeminate character called Julian Clai or Julie for short. His brand of cologne was quite distinctive, even to a smoker.

"No, I've got the Seventh Cavalry in my hip pocket," scoffed Jones. "Are we going to get on with this?"

"You got the dossier?"

Jones took a wallet of photographs from his inside pocket. He was wearing a dark suit and a dark brown pullover. His tan helped to bridge the gap to his black curls. Julie took him over to a natural conversation pit: a hole in the concrete, which was about four feet deep and an easy scramble down an array of concrete blocks. Julie unpacked his shopping bag. Jones unpeeled dark red tissue paper, checked hallmarks and description against the information on the reverse of his photographs, and used a spring-scale to check weights.

"Did this lot go to Oily?" he remarked.

"Bastard," said Julie.

"Did he offer the bloke a good deal?"

"Not even the price of the metal, the bloke said." Julie had stolen the silver from a large house in Collinwood and he had tried to make a deal with a fence called Oliver Stamp, who was generally known as *Oily*. It was routine practice to pretend that he was just an intermediary for a third party.

"Right, Old Oily's a proper mean sod," chuckled Jones. "He only puts his false teeth in to lie through them, you know?"

Julie chuckled dutifully.

"He's got a size nine and a half mouth. You know, just right for his foot? Not that he ever says a bad word about anyone. He's always too busy talking about himself." Jones went through a routine from his joke book while he checked the collection of silver.

Julie, taut with nerves, desperately afraid that something would go wrong before he could get away with the insurance reward, was forced to pretend to be laughing himself sick; but very quietly.

"Right, it's all here." Jones replaced the last item in the shopping bag. He took a manilla envelope from the side pocket of his jacket. "Insured value fifty-one thousand, three hundred and fifty. You get ten per cent less my fifteen per cent of your take. Okay?"

Julie's nimble fingers riffled through bundles of £20 and £10 notes while Jones shone the torch on the envelope. Julie nodded when he had finished his count. There was no hand-shake and farewell. Julie just nipped up the concrete staircase to ground level and jogged away.

Jones took the shopping bag to his car. He parked in his usual space across the road from the Hambourne Express building, then he walked back toward his office on main roads, giving himself long lines of sight while he was carrying the shopping bag. He had a valid reason to be in possession of what was still stolen property, but he liked to wonder what would happen if a suspicious copper stopped him. Jones had a fantasy of being arrested, flung in a cell and then being able to sue the police for a bundle for false arrest.

He reached his front door after padding noiselessly along a grimy street. The council had much better things to spend its business rates on than keeping the streets clean. Jones took the shopping bag up to his office by torchlight. When he

had crammed it into the safe, he switched on the desk light and the electric kettle.

Soon, the smell of filtering coffee mingled with the pipe-smoke. Jones added supermarket own-blend whisky to his cup.

The sky was noticeably lighter as dawn approached beyond the clouds. He had been away for about an hour. Jones switched the radio on and put his feet on the desk. The jazz festival was over. Jones recognized a piece of Seventies soft rock but he was unable to put a name to the music.

"It's all right, Ma, I'm only bleeding," said one of the American DJs. "Roger McGuinn and a Dylan number. It's getting to that time of day with another number from the same album."

As Roger McGuinn launched into *The Ballad of Easy Rider*, Jones sipped his whisky-flavoured coffee and wondered if any of the Yanks on One Ton had ever been anywhere near Vietnam. He kept waiting for one of them to give in to an urge to yell, "Good morning, Haaam-*bourne*!" to his audience of early birds in the manner of the DJ in the film. This one sounded much too laid back ever to get mildly excited.

"One for all you easy riders," said the DJ. "This is One Ton Radio playing all over Hambourne and district on one hundred killer Hertz FM in glorious stereo. This is O for Oscar on the *Night Owl Beat* greeting another sunrise with our thought for the day.

"When that day starts with gunfire in a country they never even mentioned when you were in school, and there's no coffee and your water bottle for hooch is empty, and some guy yells: 'Incoming!' and you dive into your slit trench, trying to get there before the first round of mortar lands, what else is there to do but light up, turn on and hope you're still alive when the shooting stops for a while? This is One

Ton Radio taking you *Eight Miles High* with the fabulous *Byrds*."

Jones managed to puff out two smoke rings. He liked the *Byrds*. He also liked easy jobs. He could get his head down in the office for a few hours now. Ruth would call HRM in the morning to offer a code signal. HRM would send someone over to collect the silver. Jones would bank five hundred pounds and add thirteen pounds fifty to the petty cash.

Rounding Julie's share down to the nearest £10 unit left him with a spare two hundred and sixty-one pounds fifty in cash; his undeclared five percent to make up for valid business expenses, which had been disallowed by the Inland Revenue. Jones had no scruples about cheating an organization that refused to play fair with him.

Simon Jones had kept a routine lookout for people who might be following him or taking too much interest in his activities. He was not geared up to the level of sophistication of the surveillance that had kept track of him. A motion sensor clamped invisibly under his car had alerted the vigilante squad, which had been parked in a dark blue van with red-lead trim one floor higher at the car park.

Otty had followed Jones without relying on visual contact, taking directions from Vic and Charlie in the back of the van. They had remained beside the television monitor, watching an orange dot follow white roads on a green background until the investigator's car stopped.

Otty stayed with the van at the edge of the levelled area, watching Jones through a starsight, which turned gloomy night as bright as day on the image-tube. Vic and Charlie, the two heavyweights, moved along the golf course boundary, trying to keep parallel with Jones, following information radioed by Otty to their headsets.

Vic and Charlie took up ambush positions when Jones met his client. Lying flat on an irregular stretch of wall, just an extension of its dark shape, Otty reported on the meeting. He alerted the others when the client emerged from the conversation pit and started to jog back the way that he had come.

Otty used muted voice at first, then a code of clicks when Jones drew closer to him. The investigator kept his eyes open but Otty stayed still. He had been told that movement betrays position because the eye is tuned to changes in the incoming signals. 'Still is safe', he had been told.

Twenty-two-year-old Otty was certain that he could run faster than an old bloke of forty-odd, but the whole point of what they were doing was to get in and get out without being spotted.

Julie stepped nimbly onto a section of broken wall, then launched himself up and over, retracing his approach route. He was totally unprepared for the obstruction that caught him at the front of his ankle. He managed to twist in midair to land heavily on his left shoulder. He was thinking about picking himself up when an arm circled his neck from behind.

"One little squeak and you're dead," said a confident voice.

Julie went into panic mode. There was a graveyard beyond the golf course. His first thought was that he had been grabbed by some creature out of a horror film. When he tried to wriggle free, the arm tightened around his neck.

Brilliant yellow shapes exploded before his eyes. Julie tried to keep as still as trembling terror would allow. The pressure on his neck slackened slight.

"All clear," said another voice from an unseen source.

Otty had radioed to Vic that the private eye was out of the way.

Julie heard a vehicle start in the distance. He could smell cigarette smoke on the dark wool of his attacker's jersey. The phantoms were human, but no less dangerous than monsters.

Vic Teal moved round in front of Charlie's prisoner. He was just a dark shape with insect eyes in the gloom. Vic could see clearly enough thanks to his image-converter goggles and the battery-powered infra-red searchlight that flooded the area with dark light.

"Congratulations," Vic said to Julie, "We're having a crack-down on criminals. You're elected to take part in a random sentencing option. What we do is toss a special coin. This one. You can see it's luminous green on one side and orange on the other. If it comes down green, we let you go."

Julie watched the coin spin into the air, plummet, bounce on unseen irregularities in the uneven ground and land, as he knew it would, orange side up. The man behind him lifted him by his neck without apparent effort, and swung him almost causally. Julie heard a snap on the first swing as his neck broke. His body went horribly limp. He could feel nothing. Then the second swing switched everything off.

"One less burglar," remarked Vic. He gathered up the coin and the infra-red searchlight.

Charlie readjusted his grip to Julie's belt and carried him face down into the graveyard, draping the body across the waist-high stone boundary wall while he climbed over. The vigilantes looked for one of the flat, stone slabs that marked some of the graves. They took turns to lever the chosen slab up with a steel bar while the other worked a jack. Then they used folding spades to redistribute soil, creating a shallow depression with built-up sides.

Julian Clai, burglar, went to his final resting place. When the slab was lowered on top of him, there was no sign that it

had ever been disturbed. Charlie rubbed clayey soil onto the stone face that might carry chip-marks to cover up their handiwork.

Otty was sitting at the wheel of the van when Charlie and Vic returned with the two kitbags of tools, which they stowed in the lockers in the back. Otty drove four miles to the west, to an all-night café on the approach to the motorway. Their job lay well in their past now and it could be forgotten.

They played cards well into the night sometimes; three-card brag and knockout whist mainly. This was one of those nights, if anybody asked. The trip to the café for bacon sandwiches and coffee was a familiar break. When it was over, they would decide whether to go back to playing cards or go home for some kip.

There were three lorry drivers in the café, all middle-aged men in jeans and jumpers, talking about traffic conditions around an afternoon crash site, which was still a mess well into the night. They took no notice of the three youngsters.

The woman at the counter looked at the new arrivals suspiciously, weighing them up as potential trouble-makers before recognition confirmed her judgement. The lads gave their orders with their usual cheek. But they managed to sit at their table without making a lot of noise or throwing things at one another.

"Okay, what?" said Otty when Charlie and Vic directed relentless grins at him. He knew that the private eye had been making a pay-off. He knew that his companions had searched the burglar. There had been a lot of counting in the back of the van but no information on the amount.

"Fourteen hundred and fifty," Vic murmured through a smile.

"Phew!" whistled Otty.

"Each," grinned Charlie.

"You what!" gaped Otty.

"Plus ten quid for breakfast," added Vic.

"Bloody hell!"

"I fancy Spain," said Vic.

"What about . . . what we do?" said Charlie.

"Everyone's got a right to a holiday," said Vic.

"Maybe they'll get someone to fill in for us," said Otty.

"Maybe we're not the only ones anyway," said Vic.

"How long will a grand and a half last in Spain?" said Charlie. "We're going to have to watch out we don't get it nicked by a bunch of Spanish crooks."

"Maybe they'll get that mate of your dad's, Vic," said Otty. "The bloke that filled in for me when I had a cold."

"Might do," nodded Vic. "He needs the cash and he can keep his mouth shut."

# TWENTY TWO

## Big Secrets

A manilla envelope with a window arrived for Frank Hogan just after nine on Tuesday morning. The postman had been delivering at around noon the previous week. He had brought a similar envelope the previous Tuesday. Hogan was still in bed when he heard Mrs. Mixton, his landlady, climb the stairs to slide the envelope under his door on her way to deliver a tray of tea to the high-powered computer expert in the first-floor front.

Hogan lay in the gloom created by beige thermal curtains and wondered whether to leap out of bed to attend to his mail. The previous week's manilla envelope was still lying on his chest of drawers. Hogan had become quite skilled at opening them via a side seam, which allowed him to reseal the envelope if he didn't want to admit to knowing what was inside it. Not opening last week's envelope had made no difference at all to his life.

He had signed his name on Monday morning to prove to the Department of Employment that he was still there. For once, he had had details of a job interview to tell to one of the 'disappear into thin air' gang. He had not been surprised to receive a smile and nothing more from the girl as she recovered the form and her pen. There had been no request

for a detailed account of what he had been doing to be classed as actively looking for work. He had kept his tale to himself.

Perhaps the unknown bureaucrat, the sender of manilla envelopes, was in a state of shock because someone had ignored one of his pointless letters. Perhaps (s)he thought that it had gone astray in the post. Perhaps (s)he was giving Hogan the benefit of the doubt by sending another. Perhaps this windowed manilla envelope contained a duplicate of the previous week's effort. Perhaps there was an indignant threat of dire consequences if Frank Hogan failed to answer the pointless questions without delay.

He heard a phone ring downstairs. Without making any decision to get up, he rolled out of bed and began to get dressed. He was half-way decent when Mrs. Mixton knocked on his door. He thrust his feet, sockless, into his shoes and fought his way into a jersey on his way down to the hall. Perhaps the bureaucrat had discovered his telephone number, even though Hogan had always left that box on forms blank.

"Good morning to you. Ford here," said a voice with an American accent. "Still interested in the job?"

"Er, yes. Yes, of course." Hogan wondered what Ford was talking about; then he remembered that he had offered Ford expertise with small-arms ammunition as a qualification for a job in radio-carbon dating.

"Okay, can we get together to talk fine detail at eleven at my office?" said Ford. "Bring your passport."

"Eleven o'clock at your office. Yes, I'll be there. Thanks very much." Hogan realized that he ought to offer gratitude to someone who seemed intent on saving him from the faceless bureaucrats who were running his life.

Mrs. Mixton heard him hang up the phone. She opened the door from the dining and kitchen area. "Someone looking for

some breakfast, Frank?"

"I wouldn't say no to a bacon sandwich, thanks," said Hogan.

"With a fried egg and a grilled tomato? And tea?"

"Just the job."

"Ten minutes."

Hogan went back upstairs to have a wash and a shave, wondering why Ford wanted to see his passport. He trod on a manilla envelope when he returned to his room. He let the letter lie on the carpet. His mild glow of optimism lasted all the way to the centre of town. He was on his way down a main artery, which had been opened for a sewer repair, when he realized that he might be making a fool of himself.

Ford had not actually given him the job. This was a second interview to discuss fine detail. He could trip up here quite easily. True, he had read up a bit more on radio-carbon dating after the trip to the gun club, but he still had no practical experience. Some young punk of a lab assistant, who had actually operated the combustion and mass spectrometry system, could still nip in ahead of him.

When he shook Ford T. Ford's hand in the fourth-floor office, Hogan did so with an air of confidence, but he was girded for disappointment. Ford directed him to the conference area of the office, where a tray with cups, a silver coffee pot and the usual accessories waited on the low table.

"Okay, here's the deal," said Ford when each had a cup of excellent coffee. "The guy you'll be doing the carbon datings for is going to die of cancer in the next five years, ten years tops. He was exposed to Agent Orange in Vietnam. So that part of the job won't be there for ever. It's also something you can't talk about. Not something to put on your CV."

"Ah!" said Hogan, implying understanding but not having a clue what Ford was driving at.

"But the ammunition testing and so on for the gun club, hand-loading, that could be a bigger part of the job in time."

"And that could go on my CV?"

"Well, the thing of it is that my clients would prefer to have everything on an unofficial basis. They'd prefer to pay you a monthly retainer of two thousand pounds in cash for an initial five year contract, with options to renew on both sides."

Hogan's brain went into overdrive. Twenty-four thousand a year for five years, was the same as twelve thousand for ten years and came to one hundred and twenty thousand pounds. In cash. If he lived on, say, four thousand a year and invested twenty thousand even for five years, he would have enough to exist on for the rest of his life at his present rate of expenditure, unless interest rates did a nose-dive.

"It sounds a bit unusual," Hogan heard himself say when Ford left a gap for a response.

"And can you accept the challenge of the unusual?" Ford said with a smile.

"It's certainly an attractive proposition. What about inflation over the five years?"

"The two thousand pounds a month is the starting figure. It would go up by inflation plus two point five per cent in a year's time."

"It sounds great, especially if I can keep one jump ahead of the taxman. If I can drop out of sight without leaving a forwarding address."

"Have you got your passport?" said Ford.

Hogan took it out of his inside pocket.

"All we have to do is put in an entry stamp for, say, Ostend, Belgium. And then you're somewhere in Europe on the mainland. There are no identity checks going from Belgium to Holland, Germany or France. Or Luxembourg."

"And if I'm out of the country, I don't have to pay tax?" grinned Hogan.

"My clients don't want to get involved in filling out all the forms. The deal also includes an apartment on the third floor of this building. It looks like offices from the outside. Quite a few companies use them as an alternative to hotels for workaholics, or just somewhere private for hospitality."

"A flat, two thousand a month to start with, guaranteed for five years? In return for complete confidentiality about what I do?"

"That's about the size of it," Ford said with a nod. "Plus our private health plan."

"Where do I sign my name?"

"The deal goes through on a handshake." Ford offered his hand across the table.

Hogan took it and set himself on the road to a new life. He went back to Mrs. Mixton's on the bus. With a 50% advance on his first month's salary in his wallet, he could afford to be extravagant. He also had the keys to his new apartment. He trod on the letter again when he reached his first-floor room. Hogan put it on the chest of drawers beside the previous letter. Perhaps he could pay Mrs. Mixton a fiver a month to put his mail in a box, which he could collect for periodic inspections when he returned from trips 'abroad'

He would have to give her notice, but re-letting the room would be no problem. The tycoon across the landing had been making noises about expanding. He would have it full of computer equipment the instant Hogan vacated it. The two manilla envelopes could be the first contributions to his mail store. He remembered that he had another such envelope coming the next day; his girocheque.

He would cash that last giro and disappear. He would no longer be a burden on the taxpayer. He would no longer be

an unemployed person and an embarrassment to the poor old government. He would be abroad in the best possible way; without having to leave his native land and without having to learn a new language and new customs.

Almost two weeks had gone by since Robbijohn's last visit to the casino at *Merity's Club*. In his lightweight business suit and myrtle-green rollneck pullover, he looked in great shape for someone who had been dead for five days. Mi Tai, in another Susi Wong dress which shimmered in shades of yellow, green and blue, deflected attention from him as they crossed the indoor pavement café.

Mi Tai shed a black jacket in the anteroom while the unseen security guard scanned them. She was preparing to move from an English summer to the warmer climate of the casino. If she was from the south of Vietnam, as she claimed, she was used to humid conditions and an average annual temperature of around thirty degrees Centigrade. If she was from the north, as Robbijohn believed, she was used to a swing from below twenty to over forty degrees Centigrade, and a hell of a lot more rain that the traditional umbrella belt of England could offer. Robbijohn's observations had told him that the local climate seemed to suit Mi Tai well enough.

Ferenc Disch was already in the casino, free-loading at the buffet. He took his attention away from a plate of curried chicken with walnuts, which he was eating using tortilla chips, to give Mi Tai a long, lustful stare. Three thoughtful nods, apparently to himself in approval, were a warning that Shaun Wayne was in the casino.

Mi Tai dropped five $1,000 bill onto the turntable at the armour-glass security cage. She counted the stack of £100 plaques with her usual suspicion. A blonde of about her own age watched impassively from behind her clear, armoured

screen. The money moved in and the money moved out. It was just pieces of paper and plastic to the cashier.

Robbijohn and Mi Tai had a glass of champagne at the bar, waiting for Gregor Maiskiy and Oscar Stanton to show up. Mi Tai played roulette for forty minutes. Her stack of plaques dwindled and grew dramatically. Disch baled out with his winnings at one of the troughs, leaving Maiskiy and Stanton to take up the slack. Mi Tai retired to the buffet for a mid-afternoon snack with less than £1,000. She was the sort of customer the club's management preferred; someone who didn't mind throwing more money into a losing streak.

Shaun Wayne, six foot-two of blond, youthful elegance, dropped onto a spare chair at the table, facing Robbijohn, confident of his welcome.

Robbijohn tossed a sealed envelope onto the table. Wayne used a table knife to slit open the flap. He licked finger and thumb, then flicked through the notes.

"Where's the rest?" he said with a small frown.

"It's all there," said Robbijohn. "Your five hundred."

"Don't tell me you didn't get the message? I reckon you owe me at least two grand now."

"My senior partner doesn't agree. His computer cost a fortune. He's not willing to let anyone in if he didn't contribute to the development cost."

Wayne shrugged. "Okay, it'll just have to come out of your share. Nobody likes a greedy-guts, pal." Leaving the opened envelope on the table, he rose to his feet and drifted over to the bar.

"What happens now?" Mi Tai said in Vietnamese.

"He reckons he's got me taped now," said Robbijohn in the same language. "I'm an over-the-hill, dope-smoking no-hoper. And not only that, I only work for the real brains of the outfit, the man who programmed the computer to pick

the horses."

"What computer?" frowned Mi Tai.

"The imaginary one that picks the imaginary horses that win races and the thousand-dollar bills. We're playing a game, remember?"

"I never know what's a game and what isn't. I'm just a dumb gook from Vietnam."

"If you were a dumb gook, you'd still be in Vietnam. Or banged up on a refugee island off Hong Kong," Robbijohn added.

Mi Tai beamed her appreciation of the compliment. She liked to have her talents recognized. "So I've got to watch your back now? In case the big lunk teaches you to share your thousand-dollar bills with him?"

"I've got to get some return for your kung fu classes," Robbijohn said with a shrug.

According to the instructor at the city-centre gym and health club, Mi Tai was about half as good as she thought she was; which was still pretty good by any standards. She stood a good chance of taking Wayne by surprise and of getting in a couple of crippling kicks before he recognized a serious threat; not that Robbijohn was unskilled in the art of fighting dirty. He had saved his own life on several occasions without resorting to weapons.

"And anyway," Robbijohn added, "if I can't handle a caveman like Shane, I deserve to have a few of my arms broke."

Gregor Maiskiy headed for the poker room with his winnings. The Russian was still nominally on bodyguard duty, but there was no immediate threat to Robbijohn's soft tissues. Shaun Wayne would give him another chance to convert the hundreds of pounds to thousands.

Oscar Stanton had homed in on a dark-haired woman in her mid thirties. She was wearing a very sombre outfit and

she looked like a barrister, who was taking a break from earning a fortune at the courts.

Robbijohn and Mi Tai finished a snack that had cost them, apparently, over two thousand pounds. Using sleight of hand, Robbijohn exchanged the white envelope for an identical one. He had dusted the notes in the first envelope with a powerful laxative. Wayne, a finger-licking counter, would be feeling its effects in less than an hour. But if he suspected that he had been got at, the evidence had gone.

Leaving the club, Robbijohn used convenient mirrors to watch Shane Wayne intimidate the envelope away from a waiter, who wanted to take it into protective custody. The next step in the war of nerves was predictable.

Shane would want his cut whether or not Robbijohn had accepted his stake. Then there would be some argument, threats and the conclusion of the affair would depend on how confident Wayne felt about pushing his luck. Robbijohn knew now that Wayne was a consultant to HRM and deep in a lot of dodgy business. Wayne was a dangerous character. He was dangerous to cross and therefore interesting to upset.

A stroll of less than ten minutes brought Robbijohn and Mi Tai back to the marina. Robbijohn put his jacket on a hanger and sprawled with a joint. Mi Tai went through to her private cabin to change. She hung the dress in her wardrobe and zipped herself into a pair of jeans. Then she opened her personal safe. She placed her hand flat on a square of panelling and turned it slightly in a clockwise direction. Then she was able to push it back and down.

Her cashbox was wedged in the dead space between the vertical panelling and the curve of the boat's hull. She peeled off layers of bubble-plastic parcel-wrapping, then she used what looked like an ornamental gold key on a bracelet to unlock the cashbox.

Mi Tai was a refugee and she had a refugee's jaundiced view of permanence. She knew that Robbijohn would get tired of her eventually. In time, he would want someone younger, prettier and less Westernized to look after his boat, some dumb gook, who would remind him of his younger days in a far distant country.

Mi Tai knew that the separation lay some distance in the future. She could also hope that she would not be discarded completely. The men who had traded and fought in her country established enduring friendships and associations.

Ferenc Disch, for example, the strange man from somewhere in Eastern Europe with the time-delay built into his conversation, he had never been in Vietnam but he was an accepted part of the group. The rules for membership were loyalty and silence in the presence of outsiders. Once she could speak English fluently, Mi Tai would be an asset, even when she was old and ugly.

Even so, as an economic refugee from Vietnam, she had no intention of leaving her future entirely to the goodwill of the Vets. Robbijohn gave her plenty of money for expenses and wages. If she happened to be lucky at roulette, he let her keep her winnings. A cashier at the Chinese supermarket regularly changed bundles of notes of smaller denominations for £50 notes. An illegal immigrant always has a better chance if he or she can produce hard cash on demand.

Mi Tai's cashbox contained an emergency fund of £50 notes and $100 bills. It was all hers. She had had opportunities to steal much more, but she was following the Vets' rules. She was in a position of trust, which was not to be abused. Even so, as they had their secrets, so had she. The cashbox was her main secret.

"Dawn patrol tomorrow," Robbijohn remarked when Mi Tai returned to the main cabin, tugging a plain, fawn

pullover into place.

"Great!" Mi Tai poured gin into two glasses, then divided a bottle of tonic.

She liked helicopters. They had always been symbols of power to her. Dangerous or important people rode around in them, shooting at anything that took their fancy. There were no guns in the ones that the Vets hired at Barton airfield, of course, but Mi Tai could imagine that she had a personal M-60 machine gun as they stooged about the moors ten or so miles to the north of Hambourne in the early morning.

Most of the Vets were pilots, and balding Steve and Ford *The Trader* could fly helicopters too. They had let Mi Tai take the controls of all sorts of fixed-wing aircraft from a Cessna to Learjet and BAe-127 executive jets in the air. Derek, Robbijohn's fixer and another pilot, had told her that English is the language of the air. Mi Tai was hoping to learn to fly a helicopter when she was fluent in English.

If she could fly a helicopter, she would be even more part of the group. They might not want to take her to bed when she was thirty, but a helicopter pilot who knew all the rules, she felt, had a bright future.

Robbijohn took a last drag on the joint and dropped the butt into the disposal to destroy the evidence of illegality. Mi Tai realised that if he had smoked a whole joint, then she had spent quite a long time gloating over the notes in her cash-box. She put the two glasses on the table, then curled up on the bench seat beside Robbijohn.

"We'll only speak English tonight, okay?" she said carefully.

"Practising so you can marry your English lord?" said Robbijohn in Vietnamese.

"Lance!"

"Slapped wrist," laughed Robbijohn, switching to English. "What are we going to do to-night?" he added, spacing out the syllables.

"We will go to the pub and we will play darts."

"And we will go to bed early?"

"And we will go to sleep early too," grinned Mi Tai.

"Because we have to get up early."

"Lance, can a woman fly helicopters?"

"Only one at a time."

"What?"

"Yes, a woman can fly a helicopter. But not tomorrow. Flying a chopper is more difficult than a fixed-wing plane."

"I could learn. Does it cost much?"

"Join the Air Force. They'll teach you for free."

"Vietnamese Air Force, dummy?" said Mi Tai sarcastically.

"I guess it would cost you an arm and two legs to become a civilian pilot. Which would make flying kind of difficult because you need both hands to fly a chopper."

"What?"

"I guess you could have lessons, but the instructor would want you to speak good English."

"Steve or Ford could be my teacher."

"No way! They can fly, but they couldn't tell you how they do it. You'd need a trained instructor to teach you to do it properly."

"Next year, when I speak good English?"

"Gives you plenty of time to save up."

"We can have a pizza before we go to the pub."

"Yes, we haven't been to the *Real Pizza* joint for a while. Not that theirs are all that real. The real ones you see on TV always have a lot less trimmings. I bet Shane Wayne doesn't enjoy his dinner much tonight."

"What?" said Mi Tai.

"Nothing," grinned Robbijohn.

"Big secret from dumb gook?"

"Big secret from everyone but me."

"Okay." Mi Tai accepted the explanation. She lived in a world of secrets. If she had hers, then Robbijohn was entitled to his.

# TWENTY THREE

## Demolition Job/Dawn Patrol

Robin Formby was the first reporter on the scene. He had heard the news of the explosion on One Ton Radio. One of the victim's neighbours had been on the One Ton contact line, requesting at dedication, when she had heard the bang.

One Ton had alerted the emergency services while the woman had rushed out to take a look at what had happened. Her eye-witness report had set Formby rushing to Leaf Street.

His first thought was that a terrorist bomb had been abandoned there. The previously solid shape of a house had become a ragged hole in a terraced street. There were bricks, slates, chunks of timber, pieces of plaster with wallpaper on them, shreds of dusty cloth and possessions all over the place and all smothered with the same grey dust.

The house had been empty at the time. Someone had seen the tenant, a pensioner called Colin Smedley, getting a bus into the city centre for his weekly moan at the town hall.

Someone suggested that he had blown up his own house. Someone else wanted to know why he had not rescued his television and other valuables first. Formby tracked down the neighbours to ask them how it felt to be next door to an explosion. Next on his list was the woman who had been on

the phone to One Ton Radio. With any luck, he would have something for the first edition of the evening edition of the Express before the television mob's first local news spot at five to one.

A telephone call sent Stella Cookson to the scene of the explosion to do her good neighbour act. She learned that the houses on either side of the demolished one had been examined by Council experts and found to be unsafe for habitation. The occupants were being offered bed and breakfast accommodation until they could be rehoused.

Stella offered them storage space on Gavin Murdoch's behalf for any possessions which they could salvage from the wrecks. Murdoch knew that people, once settled in half-decent temporary accommodation, can become difficult to move. The goodwill dividend from storing possessions would outweigh the inconvenience.

Murdoch, in his office at the health centre, kept his radio tuned to One Ton, which seemed to be doing better than legitimate rivals at reporting the story. He heard the occupant of the demolished house complain that it had been his home for forty years. A fire brigade expert believed that a leak from an ancient gas cooker had been touched off by a pilot light on an equally ancient water heater.

Murdoch felt quite relaxed now that he had confirmation that nobody had been injured by the explosion or the blizzard of flying glass. Old Man Smedley had been a tough nut to crack. Years of living in a small, old-fashioned house at an unrealistic rent had given him delusions of ownership. Like the rest of the inhabitants of Leaf Street and Humberstone Avenue, he had been standing in the way of progress.

If anyone wondered why he had been at the end of the repair list, dozens of people would supply the answer. Colin Smedley had been a troublemaker through most of his sixty-

eight years. Trying to get council grants to which he was not entitled had been almost a hobby. So had trying to persuade his neighbours to take mass legal action against the firm that owned their streets.

Now that he was homeless, he was the council's responsibility. So were his neighbours. The three wrecked houses would generate some income from the insurance company and, together with empty neighbours to left and right, they would form a nucleus for clearing the site.

Murdoch hoped to redevelop the site currently occupied by the fourteen houses that formed a complete terraced block on the north side of Leaf Street, and the fourteen houses on the south side of Humberstone Avenue which were separated from them by a narrow alley.

That block of land represented an easily manageable place to start the redevelopment of the area.

"It's three forty-five on One Ton Radio," said the cheery, broadcasting-Edinburgh tones of Bruce Bruce. "Here's something interesting from a phone-in to another radio station."

"Is there another radio station?" said an English voice.

"Hard to believe, but we do have a few rivals," chuckled Bruce. "Anyway, it seems the DTI's team of *Pirate Crushers* was burgled recently, and an anonymous ex-radio-pirate rang the phone-in to ask him how he liked people strolling off with his possessions. If the Nazis were held accountable for their actions, the busted pirate said, why shouldn't the same justice apply to DTI men if they were just following orders too? An interesting thought to take us into the next track by a band called *JJ* or just *J* to their friends."

Murdoch realized that he was feeling quite thirsty. He risked a quick dash of vodka in his healthy orange juice. The afternoon was well advanced and he had something to celebrate. He took the glass over to a wall-mounted map of the

city and hummed along with the music from his radio while he gloated over the Leaf Street area. There was excellent access to the motorway going one way and the city centre going the other.

"A couple of quick plugs," said Bruce Bruce from the radio. "The boat show started at the *HamEx Centre* today, and runs to Saturday. And a week on Saturday, that's the fifth of August, we have the city's Heavy Metal Festival from eight till late. If you don't know where it is, look at the posters all over town. And if you don't know what heavy metal sounds like, here's some *Magnum*!"

Murdoch's gaze travelled over the map to the warehouse district. Persuading the council that there would be a sufficient degree of supervision at his heavy metal festival had been a major headache. Persuading the police that he would not let it become a bazaar for every drug pusher in the county had been equally difficult.

"If that's your kind of music," said Bruce Bruce on the radio, "you know where to go a week on Saturday. And I've been advised that the organizers have given twenty free tickets to the Drug Squad. So if you're planning to go, stay legal or take the consequences."

Murdoch smiled at his misty reflection in the glass covering the map. Dropping those twenty tickets onto Superintendent John Torkington's desk had been a dramatic but convincing proof that Murdoch was eager to help the forces of law and order keep his music event drug-free.

"I see the DTI's Radio Investigation Service have got a recruitment ad in today's paper," continued Bruce Bruce. "Their brief is simple; to keep the wavelengths clear of interference and illegal operators. Talking about interference, hasn't anyone told them about Radio One? They also tell you the Civil Service is an equal opportunities employer. Does

that mean they have to take people who aren't very good at their job too? Think about it while Bryan Adams takes us up to the news at four."

Murdoch switched off. He had nothing personal against Bryan Adams but he had tuned to One Ton only to hear the plug for his festival. Murdoch went over to his desk and turned over two pages in his diary. He was going to the boat show on Friday afternoon. He was looking forward to confirming the order for his black boat.

Murdoch enjoyed collecting status symbols. The only trouble about going out and acquiring them lay in his humble origins. He could always think of several dozen more sensible ways to spend the money.

He had to keep reminding himself that he could afford to divert a relatively small sum, in terms of his total wealth, from the task of making even more money.

Robbijohn telephoned the Weather Centre's information line when he had shaved. Mi Tai was filling large flasks with coffee. The forecast for that Thursday was a bright start with light winds, temperatures in the mid to high sixties during the afternoon, and some risk of showers in the late evening. It was a perfect day for a dawn patrol.

The sky was quite bright but street lights were on, and Robbijohn had to remember to switch on his own lights as he reached the car park's exit. The security man saluted when he had raised the barrier. Robbijohn was surprised to find him awake. The man looked like an old soldier with the traditional old soldier's talent for grabbing a nap when nothing was happening.

The marina area was quiet but there was some traffic on the roads. Robbijohn watched in his mirror as the crew of a cruising police patrol used their radio. He assumed that they

were checking his number through the computer for want of something better to do.

Mi Tai switched on the radio. Inevitably, it was tuned to One Ton. Oscar Stanton was well into his *Night Owl* slot from 2 a.m. to 6 a.m. He preferred to meet his dawns in the pirate radio station's secret studio. He had given up helicopters after Vietnam.

A black minibus overtook Robbijohn half way through the six-mile trip to Barton airfield. It was full of Sam Tadeusz and his Vietnamese hand-maidens. Mi Tai waved to the beaming faces in the back as the minibus took the lead. Two minutes later, Ford Ford's red Jaguar *XJS* tagged on behind Robbijohn.

The Vets operated six Bell UH-1 helicopters from the city's local airfield, using them as air taxis. The machines had the basic *Huey* airframe used in Vietnam, but they were fitted with a state-of-the-art Westland engine and an improved transmission. The pilots found them a delight to fly and they had more than enough power to get out of trouble fast.

The two pilots for the day, Steve Cann and Gregor Maiskiy, were already there, checking their machines, when the passengers crowded into the office of the air taxi firm. The airfield was as quiet as the marina otherwise. Ferenc Disch had brought his blonde, Australian girlfriend along for the ride. Gemaigne Purcel had a vaguely suspicious air, as if she was still not quite convinced that they were about to go for a dawn joy-ride.

Someone switched on the radio as the group was climbing into olive-green overalls. Regulars had their name above the left breast pocket, Disch and Gemaigne had unlabelled spares. There was an air of excitement in the office cum waiting room. The guests communicated something of the pre-combat mission tensions of wartime, but it was diluted

by the expectation of survival. Nobody expected to be shot at or down.

"O for Oscar on the One Ton *Night Owl* show," said a familiar voice from the radio. "Here's a track for everyone about to take *Dreams of the Delta* out on a dawn patrol. The guys who remember curtains of carmine fog in the gloomy jungle; thick jets of red, oozing mud from submerged mortar rounds; bullet scars on vegetation healed by almost visible growth; and the dead bodies, new and rotting. Home! Remember the Allman Brothers *Live at the Fillmore East*? Here's *Statesboro' Blues*."

"Okay, everyone, we go in ten minutes," said Ford T. Ford. "The john is over there. Go now while you have the chance."

The rule was ladies and visitors first.

"I wonder if anyone else out there knows what Oscar's quoting from," Tadeusz remarked as he settled his helmet onto his unnaturally bald head.

"I wonder if anyone out there is awake enough to care," laughed Robbijohn.

"Been to the boat show yet?" said Tadeusz.

"I've got a boat," said Robbijohn.

"You can always sneer at the competition," said Ford. "What's yours doing the week after next?"

"Don't tell me, you want to borrow it for a deal," said Robbijohn. "Or should I say a con-job"'

Ford gave him an enigmatic smile. The Trader, as he had been known in Vietnam, believed in the conspiracy theory of selling. He had found that he could sell more if he pretended that all of his deals were illegal, clandestine and one-off. If his customers wanted to think that his goods had fallen out of a container, that was their problem.

"Where are you having this famous meeting?" said Robbijohn. "Somewhere in the middle of the Atlantic?"

"Laxey Bay, Isle of Man," said Ford. "Two weeks from Friday. I'll want the boat from about Wednesday to Sunday."

"What about the boatkeeper?"

"Mi Tai will have to stay ashore. These guys don't want no dames in on the deal." Ford's accent migrated from Miami to Brooklyn. "Dames blab. Ya unnerstan' what I mean?"

"Does that mean Big Ed is back from vacation?" said Tadeusz.

"Next week," nodded Ford.

Paul 'Big Ed' Zelasky had lost his left leg to mid-thigh while serving with an armoured patrol boat on the Mekong River. A special order had been required from the Limb Replacement Centre at Norfolk, Virginia, for a man six feet-four tall. He captained *Sigma 212* when it left the marina.

"*Statesboro' Blues* from the Allman Brothers on One Ton Radio's *Night Owl* show," said Oscar Stanton on the radio. "Here's something interesting I found in the library a couple of days ago. Yes, fans, I can read. It's from the blurb on a book called *The Cultural Aspects of Climate* by J. Bentley Foster. Published by E.A.U.P in 1984, in case you want to track it down. Let me just read this:

"'The author believes that, as human culture groups became established in particular regions, their collective bio-active aura influences the local climate according to their collective expectations. As examples, he cites a number of distinct discontinuities in district rainfall patterns, and weather modifications in equivalent regions; one inhabited, the other not; for which meteorologists have no cogent explanation.'

"When you cut through all the double talk, what he seems to be saying is you get the weather you expect. So it's always raining in Hambourne because you guys out there expect it to. So shape up, Hambourne! Let's think positive thoughts,

and let's get some Mediterranean weather for August. Let's think *Sunshine! Of your love*. By *Cream*. Wow!"

"Hey, do you buy that?" laughed Tadeusz.

"Not for a second," laughed Ford.

"Sounds nutty enough to be true," said Robbijohn. "People round here do expect it to rain a lot."

"Shut the hell up, Lance," urged Ford, peering through the window. "You'll get the patrol scrubbed."

The sky remained an encouraging, lightening blue as the group in overalls and helmets boarded the two *Hueys*. Mi Tai claimed the seat next to Steve Cann so that she could watch the routine for starting the engine. As far as she was concerned, her pilot's course was up and running.

Flying in line astern, the *Hueys* headed west then north, following a corridor of very light population. After five minutes, they were out over moorland and flying along valleys gouged out by glaciers and weathered into smooth and jagged edges.

For those who had been to Vietnam, it was a staggering confrontation of past and present. Back then, the helicopters had been owned by Uncle Sam and they had had no say in where they were taken. Now, the survivors owned the helicopters and they could fly when they wanted and where they wanted; subject only to the whims of weather and civil aviation regulations.

A dawn patrol was a chance to be on their own with people of their choosing. It was a coffee break on a hill with a spectacular view, a first joint of the day, except for the pilots, far from those who sought to deny a basic freedom. It was a beach breakfast at The Painter's South Sea Island retreat before most people thought of getting up.

A dawn patrol said: 'Hey, we've made it. We can do what we like when we like, and to hell with everyone else.' It was

an important freedom to the survivors of the Vietnam War, the Odessa Caper, the Colombian Job and similar postwar adventures.

For the freeloading passengers, Disch and his blonde, Aussie girlfriend, the early morning expedition was a welcome change from normal routines, which proved that they were still young enough to be flexible.

# TWENTY FOUR

## Mutual Advantage

Stella Cookson was a natural early riser. She was adept at slipping out of bed without waking Hobby, her lodger. His real name was Bill Hobbs but no one used it. He had been known as Hobby for more than twenty of his thirty years and his landlady thought of him as her personal toy-boy.

At present, he was working for the local council as an Arts Liaison Officer. His function was to help local people to appreciate the Arts and to encourage them to take part in Arts-oriented events locally. His usual environment was projects designed to score points for the city council with the race relations lobby. His current assignment was a multi-cultural festival at the August Bank Holiday weekend.

Hobby was involved in the preparations in Chinatown. He was also receiving abundant time off to learn the language. His first major setback had come after eight months, when he had discovered that he was learning Mandarin when most of the inhabitants of Chinatown came from Hong Kong or Canton and spoke Cantonese.

Hobby had also discovered that the Chinese are quite capable of organizing themselves. But he had been able to teach them that the *Man From The Council* played a vital part in the process of getting hold of council grants. On Chinatown

days, Hobby tended to come home with an improved Cantonese vocabulary, a sense of frustration because his brilliant ideas were being ignored and a hangover from a combination of Chinese beer and monosodium glutamate.

He had a feeling that he was being paid a salary under false pretences, but he saw so many others on the same gravy train that he knew that if he stepped off, someone less deserving would take his place.

The morning flood to work was well established when Stella parked her modest *Metro* near the derelict shop that Betty Vernon had claimed as her office. Stella and her car were sufficiently well known around Hambourne to protect both from thieves and vandals. She was known to be one of the good guys, and several swift, sharp lessons had proved that she was not to be messed with.

The display window of the shop was painted dark green, like a bookmaker's, to stop people from looking in. A video camera covered the door. Someone inside opened the door as Stella approached, and locked it behind her. The interior was divided into five units with-shoulder-high privacy screens.

Betty Vernon was sitting on a black vinyl bench, which ran right along one side wall. She was massaging her weight-lifter's neck. Instead of meeting her shoulders at a neat right angle, a buttress of neck muscle spread the base with an uncompromising solidity. Stella could not understand how a woman who looked so tough could pretend to preserve her feminine frailty. Yet she had seen Vernon virtually flirting with council officials to persuade them to do her a favour.

She wondered if the men had perceived an alternative: Ms Nice Gal could be followed by violent Ms Nasty Gal if they failed to deliver. In any case, Betty Vernon had a talent for getting her own sweet way.

A tarty-looking woman of about forty was sitting on one of the blue chairs and looking very sorry for herself. She had a line of stitches on her left cheek and her bouffant hair style was just stubble on that side. Betty Vernon delivered final words of sympathy, then she abandoned her neck massage and took Stella to her office at the back of the shop unit. She poured coffee for two and sugared hers liberally.

"The Prossie Rollers are back in action," Vernon remarked when she was sitting by her table. She didn't believe in isolating herself behind a desk. Her chair stood on the left of a trestle table, which was at a convenient height for reading papers and writing notes.

"I thought you'd seen them off," said Stella.

"Well, it can't be the same team. The descriptions are of four young girls, two black, two white, age eighteen to twenty-four. But it's the same routine. Wait till the girls have done a full night-shift, then knock them down, cut them up and run off with their earnings."

"So you're having to put your patrols out again?"

"They will be tonight," nodded Vernon. "But that's not what I wanted to talk to you about. One of the girls is having trouble with a social worker."

"That's a job I wouldn't like," remarked Stella. "People either say they're there to make sure irresponsible people don't have to live with the consequences of what they do, or they accuse them of breaking up families because they're too lazy or badly trained to do the job they're paid for. What the Americans call a 'no-win situation'."

"It's breaking up families this time, Stell. One of my girls had her two kids round at granny's when they turned up at her place. They'd put the kids on the 'at risk' register and they wanted to take them into care. It's this bloody rubbish about Satanic child abuse."

"Someone's told them a silly story?"

"We're trying to find out who. Anyway, one of the neighbours phoned my girl at her mother's and she phoned me. We were able to get her and the kids away and a solicitor for Granny to stop them intimidating her."

"Nasty!" Stella wondered how old the 'girl' was. She had to be old enough to be a member of Betty Vernon's *Streetwalkers' Defence Association* and to have two children. "Puts you in a difficult position."

"Right," nodded Vernon. She worked for the council as a community liaison officer and she was opposing the council's Social Services department. "I can't be seen to be involved in this, or everything here blows up."

"How old are the kids?"

"Two and coming up for five."

"And what do you want, Bett?"

"Once these kids go into care, they won't see their mother for anything up to a year while this abuse nonsense grinds through the system. I know the mother, Stell. She's on the game, I know, but it provides a good home for the kids and she's a caring mother. Those kids want for nothing. It makes me really mad to think anyone would believe she's doing anything to harm them."

"Do you want me to try and find out who's accusing her?"

"I'm working on that," said Vernon grimly. "No, I've heard you have some useful connections, Stell. We're thinking of relocation. A new name and a new start in another large community where a family can disappear."

Stella sat back in her chair. "That's a tall order, Bett. I mean, there are still questions to be asked somewhere new. About basic things like registering the family with a doctor and a dentist, a school for the five-year-old . . ."

"We've got a whole list of things like that mapped out,"

interrupted Vernon. "The point is, will you help?"

"Of course, I'll do what I can. But I can't promise anything. Your girl won't be able to go back to . . . what she's doing at the moment. If she gets arrested, it's all over."

"Yes, we know that, Stell. But we can do a lot with the right help. If we can get it."

"All I can say is I'll do my best." Stella finished her coffee.

Betty Vernon saw her to the door. Stella headed back to her car with her mind in a whirl. If anything could be done for the distressed mother, it would be an enormous favour. On the other hand, enormous favours rendered commanded equally enormous favours in return.

As she started the engine, Stella told herself that it was a problem to dump in Gavin Murdoch's lap. He had the connections to make a new identity possible, if anyone had. It was up to him to decide whether he could make a profit on the deal.

Gavin Murdoch pushed his problems aside when he surrendered his complimentary ticket in the *HamEx Centre's* imposing entrance hall. The young ladies on duty at the door were wearing sailor suits with authentic, horizontal creases in the legs of their bell-bottom trousers. Murdoch spent half an hour making decreasing circles round the vast arena. He ended his tour at the Glasson Boat-Builders' stand.

Getting Murdoch's signature on a contract cost the firm a free lunch. Murdoch had decided to buy the boat anyway, but he saw no point in ignoring a vital stage of the negotiation process. The Glasson sales director left him enjoying a second cup of coffee at the rail of the gallery restaurant.

Murdoch looked down on the busy throng as he enjoyed the buzz that came after spending a lot of money. He had something to look forward to now – the delivery of his boat

to the marina the following week. The deal had given pleasure to him and relief to Glasson Boat-Builders.

The original client for the black boat had gone soft on them, Murdoch had discovered. After placing a firm order, the original client had found himself over-extended. Glasson had been able to give Murdoch a good deal because the original client's deposit had been non-returnable.

"Skiving, Gavin?" Ivan Kenton placed his glass on the table and dropped heavily into a chair. He was on brandy, too. He looked as if he was well ahead of Murdoch.

"Hello, Ivan." Murdoch smiled. "They've not locked you up yet?"

"You know all the details of my spot of trouble, of course?"

"And I can tell you you've got your message across very effectively. Hambourne Trading stopped doing so because the DTI and the police were making it impossible for you to operate, not because there was anything wrong with the firm."

Kenton shrugged. "The bastards have been chasing me for four months now. They must have read through my files half a dozen times without finding anything they can get me on. So they're just going to keep on harassing me until I quit, looks like."

"You sound ready to give up."

"You can only flog a dead horse so long, Gavin. Then you get tired. You remember Barbara? Used to run my office?"

"Brunette? Great pair of legs?"

"That's the one. She sold all the office furniture and equipment to herself as a parting bonus. For a purely nominal sum."

"Saves having to dig into your cash reserves to give her a leaving present."

"But the thing is, she didn't tell me first. She just did it and ran. This is what all the investigation is doing to me. Even people like Babs, who was with me for six years, they think I'm sunk."

"What you've got to do is let them find something."

"And go directly to gaol?" scoffed Kenton. "Thanks for the brilliant advice, Gav!"

"I didn't say something incriminating," laughed Murdoch. "But you need to define your problem. Which is that they're determined to find something against you and they're going to keep going till they do. So your only hope is to give them something. Lay a false trail. But wait till you're sober first."

"Sounds bloody dangerous."

"Anyone clever enough to dabble in insider trading should be clever enough to steer the DTI and the police down a blind alley," Murdoch told him with a shrug.

"Hmm," said Kenton, unconvinced. "I suppose you're here buying your boat?"

"And you're here skiving?"

"You're not skiving if you've got nothing else to do. I wouldn't mind a boat. But someone in my position can't afford to tie up liquid assets."

"Not after you've gone to so much trouble to shift them to a safe place? Are you going to get compensation for all the bother they've caused you?"

"My solicitor has already lodged a claim for one quarter's loss of income and projected earnings. And theirs has said there's no way they're going to pay anything. So we're going to court. My man reckons whether or not they find anything against me makes no difference. They're still responsible for preventing me from earning a living."

"You'll have a better case if you can prove them wrong." Murdoch's roving gaze stopped when the ash-blonde on the

stand next-but-one to Glasson Boat-Builders came into view.

"Looks okay from here," approved Kenton.

"Looks even better close to. She'd look perfect on a black boat."

"Thinking of giving Roxie the elbow, Gav?" chuckled Kenton. "Because she's a bit too calculating?"

"When you go to relax with your mistress, you don't want to see her thinking, 'Has he come to give me the bullet?' when she opens the door. I know it makes getting shot of her easy, but you want a better actress."

"I'll take your word for it, Gav. Maybe I'll get myself a boat *and* mistress if I ever get out from under all this lot. If I can find a way to hide her from the wife. The trouble is, Ellen is a vital part of my tax strategy. And she's not as understanding as Kath. Not brought your missus? I heard she was in town."

"A flying-visit. She's in Yorkshire now."

"Doing what, the usual?" Kenton meant playing golf.

"Educating the natives," grinned Murdoch. "Letting them know the standard of service a Lancashire lass expects when she goes abroad to the other side of the Pennines."

"Anyway," Kenton drained his balloon glass, "I think I'll go and sit by the river and think about what you said. About the false trail. See you, Gav."

"Watch yourself crossing the road," chuckled Murdoch as Kenton headed unsteadily for the exit. His acquaintance had never been much of a drinker. If he dived into the bottle in a serious way in his present state of frustration, Murdoch told himself, then Ivan Kenton was sunk.

Murdoch had another cup of coffee, which diluted both the smell and the effect of his brandy. Then he descended to the floor of the exhibition centre. The ash-blonde was called Sheila Avery, according to the name tag on her powder-blue

linen dress, which had the flavour of a summer uniform.

Her stand belonged to the firm that manufactured the marine diesel engines fitted in Murdoch's boat. He assumed that a tall, woman in her late twenties had been assigned to the stand because of her good looks. He was amazed to find that she could talk fluently and intelligently about the firm's products.

Dinner was out of the question that night because she would be too busy, but Ms Avery would be available on Saturday, after the show. She didn't work for the engine-builders. She was just a temp, engaged for the period of the exhibition, and she expected to be back on the dole the following week if nothing turned up in the next two days.

Two days later, on Saturday, Sheila Avery was impressed to find out that Murdoch owned the restaurant *Chez Michel*, and that he used his office as a private dining room.

Murdoch was amazed to learn that she had a degree in mechanical engineering. By the time they reached the pudding stage – chocolate concrete with custard for him, fruit and ice cream for her – they had reached an understanding.

Sheila was to become the engineer and boat-keeper of Murdoch's latest acquisition while she looked for a more permanent job. She was to become Murdoch's equivalent of the Chinese girl on the other black boat. She was unmarried and living in a small flat in Leeds. A boat with all modern comforts was a better proposition. Murdoch's generous salary was a whole lot better than the dole.

Sheila was unattached. Murdoch made sure that she saw the family photographs on his desk. Then he explained that he and his wife had been married for twenty-four years and they had run out of things to say to each other. They had agreed that they needed a change and they were having one;

which was why Mrs. Murdoch was in Yorkshire playing golf, and planning an extended trip to the United States for more of the same in August.

Murdoch and his mistress-to-be drank a toast to each other with the *Drambuie* that was served with their coffee. Sheila would be off to Yorkshire, too, in the morning. She would be moving from her small flat to an apartment in Hambourne until the boat was ready; after she had spent the night at Murdoch's house to get the relationship off to a good start. Both knew a mutually advantageous deal when they saw one.

Gavin Murdoch was in an unusually good mood for a Sunday when Stella Cookson called on him in the middle of the morning. His Saturday nights usually left him too worn out to make intelligent conversation until after his Sunday lunch.

Stella followed him through the house to the patio, carrying a leaflet that she had found in the letterbox. The various sections of *The Observer* and its colour supplement littered a table beside Murdoch's chair.

Mrs. Hoosak, the housekeeper, brought coffee and a plate of biscuits. She was an athletic woman in her mid-thirties with dark hair shot with silver strands. No one had ever heard or seen anything of a Mr. Hoosak. She was a keen member of the local canoe club, which used the cleaner stretches of the river, and she occasionally used the swimming pool at Murdoch's house to practise Eskimo rolls and manoeuvring in tight corners.

"Thanks, Adele," said Murdoch when the tray landed on another table.

"I'm off in ten minutes," said Mrs. Hoosak. "You're sure you don't want anything left ready for lunch?"

"No, thanks," smiled Murdoch. "Try not to drown yourself."

Mrs. Hoosak returned a patient smile. She was wearing a waterproof overall that looked like a designer tracksuit. As she headed back into the house, Murdoch could not avoid a quick comparison between his housekeeper and Stella Cookson. They were about the same age and height, but Adele Hoosak looked younger, fitter and all together much more beddable.

"I got one of these." Stella passed over the leaflet. "It was in your door."

"'Climate control by willpower,'" Murdoch read. "'A public meeting in Abbey Hey park to show Hambourne how to make August the sunniest month on record just by wanting it to be so. Come and be informed and entertained.' Sounds like a fairly harmless bunch of nut cases for a change."

"It'd be a laugh if it rained on them," chuckled Stella. "Have you thought about Betty Vernon's problem?"

"Some. I'm wondering if she's trying to start some sort of underground railway. Moving people around wholesale from areas where they're having that sort of problem."

"It's just one woman, Gavin."

"It's amazing how these things escalate, Stell. One success gives confidence for more."

"I think we can pull it off," said Stella confidently.

"Okay, I'll trust your judgement."

"Remember Katie Midland? Deserted wife, lost her benefit book because the DSS thought she's co-habiting because a bloke from the next street parks his van in front of her house overnight?"

"Your solution was to give her a few bob and give the DSS a lot of earache, right?" said Murdoch.

Stella nodded. "And it worked. She's got her book back, and they've paid her arrears. I told her to forget what we gave her."

"Generous of you, Stell."

"Now, after a bit of time's gone by, I want to do something about the woman who cut her off in the first place."

"Can you identify faceless bureaucrats?" Murdoch asked a rhetorical question. Stella wouldn't be earning as much as a cabinet minister if she couldn't.

"Mrs. Midland had to wait three weeks before they reversed the decision. Twenty-three days, to be exact. So I want to give Mrs. Sturrock, the bureaucrat, some aggro for the same length of time."

"How?"

"I want to put her under observation for twenty-three days. There are a lot of people with time on their hands around here. I want to pay some of them to watch her house when she's in, follow her when she goes out and generally keep an eye on her."

"Redundant private eyes, you mean?" frowned Murdoch.

"No, amateurs who'll do it for a tenner a day plus meals and petrol. I want her to know it's happening. And I don't want her to find out why."

"A spot of mental torture?"

"I want her to know what it feels like."

"What if she sets the police on your watchers?"

"Our people deny everything, knowing they'll get a bonus for doing it. We'll stop the operation, then start it again later. And keep going until she's had her full twenty-three days. At least."

"Okay, Stell, I'll trust your judgement."

"One more thing. The strike at Clayton Engineering. It's going into a fourth week. Do we want to keep up our

support for the pickets?"

"You don't think it's worth it?"

"I don't think they're going to get their union recognized. For wage bargaining, I mean."

"Well, we'll give it another week, see how it goes."

"Right." Stella nodded satisfaction. She had friends who worked at Clayton Engineering. She was glad of the opportunity to give them a helping hand.

"Right, is that the lot?" said Murdoch.

"Enough for one morning." Stella took the hint. She finished her coffee and made her fourth biscuit a shortbread finger. She polished it off on the way to the front door.

Murdoch returned to his newspaper. He knew that the strike was doomed. Clayton Engineering was the last twitch of a family firm that had become uncompetitive. Rivals with more modern equipment were undercutting their prices.

The union recognition issue would lead to pressure for increase wages, which would cut profits and drive the firm into the ground.

The strike had united the brother and sister who owned the firm. Jane and Bob Clayton were nerving themselves to close the business and sell up. Murdoch was planning to offer them a low price, in a depressed market, for the site of their factory with a guaranteed cash top-up under the table.

When the council finally demolished Mossy Castle, there would be a demand for building land in the immediate area to provide homes for people who didn't wish to leave Hambourne. Clayton Engineering was part of a Murdoch development plan that included Leaf Street and Humberstone Avenue. He was a local man with local knowledge, who intended to reshape his home town to his own requirements.

# TWENTY FIVE

## Dead Ends

Robbijohn was wearing mirror sunglasses when he drove south to the airport on Sunday morning. Money-grubbing air-traffic controllers in Spain and France had delayed a holiday flight by sixteen hours. Milly Tullough and her two sons were looking decidedly ragged when they trailed out of Customs with their luggage. Robbijohn took them straight to his car. Jack and Barry were asleep before he had finished putting the luggage in the boot.

"Little sods," said Milly affectionately as she fastened her seat belt. "They were running round the airport all night, and they wouldn't go to sleep on the plane. They were too busy fighting over the window seat."

Milly was another survivor of Mossy Castle; a year younger than Robbijohn, dark, of average height and build, and with a frown of worry etching itself permanently into her tanned face. As Milly Slaine, she had been early girl-friend, who had agreed to a mutual shedding of virginities and who had stayed a friend long after the romance had worn off.

Geoff Tullough, Milly's husband, was in gaol. Again. The four years between Jack and Harry were a result of his serving three years inside after remission. His latest sentence

was for armed robbery. Geoff and four others had held up a security van. One of the others had fired a sawn-off shotgun at a guard, wounding him in the leg, and let off the other barrel at a police car.

Geoff had got away with a quarter of a million pounds in used banknotes for just long enough to hide the loot. His twelve-year sentence was a consequence of his refusal to say where the money was. Two of the gang had received five-year sentences. Milly was starting to worry about what would happen when they got out.

Geoff had told no one else where the money was. It was his insurance against the others running away with it before he got out. Several fellow prisoners had warned him that things could get tough if he failed to share his windfall. Geoff had told them that he could arrange the painful execution of anyone who tried to injure himself or his family.

Even so, two psychopaths had attempted to intimidate Milly. Robbijohn and Steve Cann had taken them for a one-way helicopter ride to the middle of a stretch of the Irish Sea between the mainland and the Isle of Man. Their disappearance had deterred others.

Milly's other main worry was that she had worked out where her husband would take the money and she had actually found his stash. She had been converting it to gold coins, investment diamonds and other small valuables, which could be stored in a deposit box.

She was worried about a changes in the design of the currency, which would leave the family holding a lot of outdated paper eventually. The old, familiar, Duke of Wellington fiver had gone. Florence Nightingale and William Shakespeare were also history.

The problem was that £80,000 had gone. Milly had gambled most of it away. She had enjoyed small wins at first,

then she had hit a losing streak. Even bigger losses had piled up until she had realized that she had no hope of getting straight again. The rest had just disappeared on incidentals. Her investments did not cover the losses.

Milly had taken to competitions in a big way. Friends and neighbours saved labels for her to help her to earn luxuries for two growing boys whose father was in gaol. It had been easier to spend a little loot from the robbery to make a competition prize go further, or to invent a win. And the helpful friends had deserved something to show her appreciation.

The fortnight in Spain represented an imaginary pools win. Milly had not been greedy. She had announced her win after a coupon full of Australian draws had produced hundreds of first-dividend winners at £948 a time.

She had given a small party for her helpers; which had also encouraged one of the neighbours to water her plants and keep an eye on the house.

Milly was becoming as much a master of deception as her driver. The difference between them was that Robbijohn had stashed his share of the loot from his capers in safe places, and he didn't have a husband in gaol, who would question the investment plans closely when he got out.

"Oh, I'm dead, by the way," remarked Robbijohn as they were approaching the council estate half way between the airport and Hambourne.

"What of?" said Milly. "Anything disgusting?"

"Coach crash near Derby."

"So you've changed your name again?" Milly didn't ask the reason. It was none of her business.

"That's right, I'm Steve now. To the people who knew me at the flat at Mossy Castle."

"Steve what?"

"Robbijohn. I'm Lance's brother. That's why I look so

much like him."

"Oh!" laughed Milly. "Does your real brother know? What's his name again? It's years since I last saw him."

"Ken. He's in hiding. The police are after him."

"What's he done?"

"Nothing. He knows something about some people and the police want to know what he knows. Only the evil people will kill him if he talks."

"So he's in hiding. Can't he change his name?"

"I don't know if he can afford it. To do it properly."

"You're a proper family, Lance," chuckled Milly.

"Takes one to know one," said Robbijohn. "Are you going to the big show next weekend?"

"What's that?"

"The tower blocks in Ashford. They're knocking down another one next Sunday. There'll just be two of the original eight left after that."

"The boys won't let us miss that! Are you giving us a lift, Lance? Steve, I mean."

"If only to give you a bit of practice with my new name," said Robbijohn.

Susie Lymme had a sensation of floating as climbed a staircase at Mossy Castle. She had primed herself with several drinks, and the exercise seemed to speed the flow of alcohol into her bloodstream. As usual, she was wearing nothing of value and she had just a few pounds in coins in the pocket of a jacket which had seen better days. She was not sure why she was there.

Two weekends after the funeral, she wanted to visit Lance's flat again. She was not sure what she would find, she was half-certain that it had been cleared out, but she was hoping to collect a souvenir of some sort. If there was a new

tenant in place, she would just go. If Derek was there, she would ask if she had left something there; a book, a scarf, something, If there was no one in, she had a key.

A strange man opened the door as Susie was looking at the window, which was still boarded up. Susie assumed at first that someone else had moved in to the flat; a legitimate tenant or a squatter. There was something about the level gaze from the tall, overweight man's brown eyes that told Susie that he didn't belong there. He was about her age, intimidating and she didn't like fat men.

"Who are you?" said Susie.

"I was about to ask you that, Miss," said the stranger.

Susie knew at once that he was a copper. "I wanted to check if I left a scarf here," she remembered to say.

"You know Mr. Smith, Miss?"

"Knew." Susie corrected him automatically.

"Knew, Miss?" The policeman stepped back and to one side.

Susie found herself drawn into the flat. There was another man in the living room; shorter, slimmer, older, darker hair; picking through the contents of several black rubbish bags, which had been spilled onto the bare floor. Both men produced warrant cards. The older was Detective Inspector Forsight, the younger Detective Sergeant Michaels.

Susie gave her name and address, then produced the newspaper cutting with Lance Smith's obituary from her wallet. She kept it as a memorial to the big fish, who had got away.

When pressed, Susie found that she could remember surprisingly little of the journey to the crematorium, where the funeral had taken place or the details of the accident that had killed the Nigel Lawrence Smith of the obituary. She could say only that the arrangements had been made by Lance's

friend Derek. She had no idea where he lived.

"What are you doing here, anyway?" she added, looking around the empty flat.

"Does the name Kenneth Robbijohn mean anything you to you, Miss?" said Inspector Forsight, answering a question with another.

"No, nothing," said Susie. "Who is he?"

"Someone we want to talk to. He knows your Mr. Smith."

"Knew," said Susie automatically.

"As you say, Miss. Well, it looks like he won't be coming here."

"That stuff," Susie waved a hand to indicate the mess on the floor, "the other people will just have dumped it here. Lance told me they do that. In empty flats. They're too lazy to take it down to the dustbins."

"Did many people turn up at the funeral, Miss?" said Sergeant Michaels.

"Some Americans and some Chinese girls. I didn't know any of them," said Susie. "A dozen or so people. That I was with. As I said, we missed the main group because of the traffic."

"Well, your scarf doesn't seem to be here any more, Miss," said Sergeant Michaels. "Maybe this Derek has it. You'll let us know if you see him? And you'll find out his surname and where he lives? Here's my card."

Susie left the flat with the business card tucked away in her wallet, next to the obituary.

"Well, I wouldn't kick that out of bed," remarked Inspector Forsight. "Looks like this is a dead end."

"Was that a pun?" groaned Michaels.

"He was so popular," Forsight quoted, "three hundred people turned up at his funeral. just to dance on his grave."

"You reckon Smith was his real name?"

"It's so unoriginal, people tend not to use it as an alias any more. Then tend to be a bit more imaginative. Maybe he was buried under a false name so his accountant could pretend he's still alive to avoid death duties."

"Cremated."

"Huh?"

"He was cremated, Al."

"Even better," laughed Forsight. "They can't dig up an empty box if it is a fiddle."

"You reckon it is?" frowned Michaels.

"None of our business, Dave, We've got quite enough on own plate at the moment. What does count is we're not going to get friend Robbijohn hiding out here. So the next step is to get out of the stink of Mossy Castle and check out what could be the only other Robbijohn in the country."

"You reckon he's related to Ken?" said Michaels as he opened the front door for his boss.

"It's such an unusual name, it's a safe bet they're either closely related or they know each other," nodded Forsight.

The two detectives plodded down the stairs to ground level. They had picked up a uniformed officer on the way to Mossy Castle. He had stayed with the car to make sure that it wasn't stolen or assaulted while the detectives were away. Scratched paintwork, broken windows, slashed tyres, wheels stolen – all were natural hazards of a visit to Mossy Castle.

Michaels stopped the car half a mile from the flat complex to return the uniformed officer to his beat. Then he carried on to the city centre. He passed their destination on the way to the main police station.

It was current policy not to refund parking fines or money fed to parking meters in the course of duty. The detective force had responded by taking the additional time to park at the police headquarters, unless rain was coming down by the

ton, and walking to destinations in the city centre.

The caretaker, an elderly man with too much to say for himself, let the detectives into the office of Thorville Associates. He had a look around before Michaels could shoo him away. There was very little to see. The walls were plain, the emulsion paint scarred with ancient adhesive from the sticky tape used to mount posters. The furniture, a desk and four plastic chairs, was dust-free. The office contained no filing cabinets. An alcove contained an empty cupboard for coats and a drawer/bookcase unit beside it.

"What's the betting this place is as fingerprint-free as the flat?" remarked Sergeant Michaels as his boss was probing the lock on a desk drawer.

"No bet," said Inspector Forsight. "Come on, you bugger. Gotcha!"

The drawer contained some stationery; typing paper and envelopes printed with the *TA* logo and the company's address.

"No phone number," said Michaels over Forsight's shoulder. "No phone in here, either."

"Lucky sod," said Forsight. "He doesn't have to waste his life answering stupid questions. Not exactly overflowing with business, is he?" Forsight flicked through a slim folder of correspondence. "This seems to confirm the story he's a free-lance test pilot. Maybe his jobs are so dangerous, he doesn't have to do many of them."

"Interesting the way the carbon copies of his letters don't have the other firm's name on them, and the photocopies of the replies have got these black lines across them, as if he's blanked out the firm's name and details with a piece of paper and the black lines show where its edges were."

"Maybe he doesn't want burglars to find out who he does business with."

"Or the taxman."

"While it's not a criminal offence not to leave details of your life lying around," said Forsight, "or to live in a council flat like Mr. Smith, it's certainly suspicious."

"I wonder where he's living now, if he's killed off Smith?"

"You don't believe Lance Robbijohn's dead, Dave?"

"Brother Ken was involved with some pretty evil people. Maybe they've grabbed Lance. If they've killed him off as Smith, he's a non-person now. So they can do anything they want to him. And they can tell his brother that."

"Except they have to find Ken Robbijohn to tell him, and if they can do that, they don't need his brother. And we have no reason to think there's any great bond between them. If Ken swaps himself for his brother, he's committing suicide."

Michaels opened a small cupboard beside the coats cupboard. "Looks like someone used this place. There's jars of coffee, two sorts of tea and sugar in here. And spoons and half a dozen mugs."

"This is a real Chinese puzzle," said Forsight. "Whether we waste any more time on it depends on how keen the Super is to butter up the Cornish police. They're the ones who want Ken Robbijohn, not us."

"Maybe he's after a free holiday at a conference in Cornwall," said Sergeant Michaels cynically.

"Whatever, we won't be in on the freebie," laughed Inspector Forsight. "Right, let's lock up here and try and find out when the caretaker last saw friend Robbijohn. Then we can take a well-earned coffee break."

# TWENTY SIX

## Rope

Cairo's Club was receiving its daily wash and brush up before the doors opened for the lunchtime business trade. Stella Cookson arrived to a chorus of vacuum cleaners when she opened the door of Gavin Murdoch's office. He was sitting at the desk wearing a diabolical grin.

"Help yourself to the coffee while I finish this off," said Murdoch.

"You look pleased with yourself." Stella helped herself to two chocolate biscuits and two plain ones, then replaced the lid of the square tin.

"I've just had this." Murdoch showed her a printed form with lots of aggressive red on it.

"A reminder about your phone bill? You're laughing about that? Have you got a screw loose, Gav?"

"I'm laughing about this." Murdoch passed her a cheque.

"'Any attempt to cash this cheque to pay an account which had been cleared already will result in prosecution for fraud,'" Stella read. "This signature doesn't look right."

"Very observant," laughed Murdoch. "I've paid the bill and they've cashed the cheque. So I'm sending then another with the wrong signature to see what happens."

"Oh, well, if it keeps you amused." Stella plucked two

dead pages from the desk calendar to make it show *MONDAY July 31*, then she returned to her coffee and biscuits.

Murdoch sealed the cheque and bill in an envelope, which he tossed casually into his in tray. He topped up his cup with black coffee, then ostentatiously tipped clear liquid from a vodka miniature into the cup.

The bottle contained about 90% water, and did very little for the coffee, but it helped Murdoch's hard-boiled, hard-drinking image along. "Right, Stell, what can I do you for?" he smiled.

"I've got some info for you, on Mr. Darkus Tafrika's pal Mkembe."

"Nothing good, I hope?"

"Nelson Mkembe is an illegal immigrant. Originally from Houston, Texas, he spent some time in Jamaica. Long enough to get himself wanted on twelve counts of extortion. He also has two outstanding warrants for attempted murder, one in his real name of James Smithson, the other as Earl Fitzgerald."

"No surprises there. I always knew he was a wrong 'un."

"So are you going to have him arrested and make a hero out of him? Persecuted by the Immigration mob?"

"Information has its greatest value when you use it at the right time, Stell."

"So you're giving him some more rope?"

"How tall is he?"

"Six foot one. Why?"

"You've done a real thorough job, Stell," grinned Murdoch. "How much does he weigh?"

"Thirteen stone."

"Multiply by fourteen to get it into pounds, then divide that into a thousand." Murdoch tapped keys on his desk

calculator. "That means he needs five foot nine of rope to hang him."

"Where does his height come into it?"

"You need to know it so you know how to tie the rope up with bits of thread on the scaffold. So that the noose drops smoothly over his head."

"Where did you get all this from?" laughed Stella.

"It's all in a book one of the lads in the gym was reading. Written by a bloke who was a hangman."

"Charming! Oh, yes, I'm starting the aggro for the woman from the DSS tomorrow. The one who took Mrs. Midland's benefit book off her. I've sorted out some rough-looking blokes with a bit of low cunning about them."

"So they'll come the old innocent if she sets the cops on them?"

"Right. They haven't got a record, so the police won't be able to do anything with them. But the beauty of it is Mrs. Sturrock's going away for a week next week. And she should spend that week worrying if someone's going to break into her house."

"With another fortnight of aggro to come when she gets back?"

"That's it," Stella said with a smile.

"You're not worried you'll get her so shaken up she'll screw up even more people's lives?"

"If she does, we'll start a campaign to get her booted out with a black mark on her record. Then we've got a fifty-fifty chance of getting someone else who can do the job better."

"Always the optimist, Stell?" laughed Murdoch.

"No point in being miserable all the time." Stella Cookson finished her coffee. "Right, I'll get back to supporting the Clayton Engineering Wives' Strike Support Committee. There's a good mouthful for you!" She left crunching her

second chocolate biscuit.

Murdoch pulled his telephone closer and dialled the contact number of Sunshine News to invite Darkus Tafrika to get in touch. He had learned that Mkembe intended to stand at the next council elections. Murdoch proposed to give him indirect support via Sunshine News, then denounce him to the police just before the election.

When the police hauled Mkembe away in handcuffs to answer charges of attempted murder and extortion, Murdoch planned to slip in his own ethnic candidate at the last second. Shopkeeper Rajid Shastri was grateful enough to him to be a good prospect.

Murdoch also wanted to arrange a meeting between his own marketing director and one of the part-time designers for Sunshine News. The anonymous artist had a lot of natural talent, according to the marketing director, and he was someone well worth recruiting if that person looked like someone capable of fitting into the discipline of a marketing office. And if that person belonged to an ethnic minority, so much the better for the Murdoch organization's image as an equal opportunities employer.

Murdoch believed in extracting maximum advantage from every situation. He would be having lunch with one example of that philosophy shortly. Sheila Avery had completed her move from Leeds to Hambourne. She was getting to know the town and using her hotel as a base until the black boat was delivered the end of the week.

Frank Hogan had moved into his new apartment in the centre of Hambourne at the weekend. As expected, his neighbour had expanded his computer operation across the landing to Hogan's old room. Veronica Mixton had agreed to put his mail in an old shoebox in delivery order for an

honorarium of £10 per month. Hogan had been feeling generous and she had been paid for three months in advance.

As he prepared a solitary breakfast before reporting to Ford T. Ford on the floor above to begin his new career, Hogan thought about the last loose ends of his old life. The Department of Employment had changed from a simple piece of card to a long, fat booklet as the identifying document for the unemployed when they signed on. It was a typical excess of a government department.

Without thinking too deeply about what he was doing, Hogan took the booklet out of a drawer and ripped it into a lot of pieces. He dumped the remains in the waste bin. If anyone ever caught up with him to ask, he would say that he had put it in the post before going abroad. The shoulders of the Royal Mail were broad enough to accept one more piece of libel.

Any mail that he received at Mrs. Mixton's was likely to be from official sources: the DoE, the DSS, the Inland Revenue and similar sinister organizations, which had now lost the power to control him. He considered opening one letter from the accumulation at random; say, every month; and replying to it to confuse the issue further. But that sort of scheme depended on how busy his new job kept him.

He arrived at Ford T. Ford's office at five to nine. Ford extended a hand for a formal greeting. "Welcome to Belgium, M'sieu Hogan. Do you have your passport with you?"

"Er, yes. D'accord." Hogan took the crisp, burgundy Euro-passport from his inside pocket.

"Do you have anything to declare?" said Ford as he applied an entry stamp to a blank page.

"Only my genius," Hogan said with a smile.

"I think that's been done, sir. Okay, you're in with us now. Have a seat. You know the university?"

"I know where it is. I went to see the collection of Egyptian relics at an exhibition a couple of years ago."

"Good. That's where you'll be going, Professor Al Hazami of the Department of Antiquities has a radio-carbon dating set-up there. We've arranged for his assistant to give you a short course on running it. Afternoons this week from two to four-thirty. You'll spend the mornings at the gun club, okay?"

"Okay with me," nodded Hogan.

"These are the keys for your van. It's a green Bedford in bay sixteen in this building's parking level. It's taxed and insured through the gun club. Here are the university's parking stickers. You put the yellow one in the top right of the windshield, and the blue one in the bottom left, above the tax disc. Give them back to me when you finish your course."

"Right," said Hogan.

"Have you ever worn a moustache?"

"No. Well, I did have a beard for a while, years ago, one summer."

"A moustache would look very right on an English major called Hogan. If you ever have any questions, contact me, or anyone at the club who sounds like he was in Vietnam."

"Right." Frank Hogan opened the envelope containing the university parking discs.

"There's a map in there, and a photograph of the assistant, Dr. Nancy Corham. She's a bit of a doll but don't get your hopes up. She's from Cleveland and she doesn't go for men, if you get my drift."

"Strictly business," nodded Hogan, wondering if there was anything particularly homosexual about Cleveland or whether he had been given detailed information relevant

only to a single individual.

"Report to Oscar Stanton when you get to the gun club. He'll show you your office, the workshop, the security system and all. And familiarize you with the rules. El numero uno is no alcohol. Guns and booze don't mix. We enforce that one very strictly."

"I'm glad to hear it," said Hogan.

"Okay, Major, welcome aboard. I guess I'll see you at the club."

Hogan shook Ford's hand instead of saluting and took the lift to the basement. Numbers on the walls and support pillars guided him to a year-old Bedford van large enough to carry half a dozen people comfortably in the back. Hogan applied the university parking stickers, then carried out a quick check of brakes, lights and steering.

Everything seemed in order. The engine sounded healthy enough, the tank was three-quarters full of petrol. He manoeuvred cautiously to the ramp up to ground level, taking his time to get used to a different vehicle.

He felt a sense of liberation as he burst into the summer sunshine on the first day of August. He had recovered control of his own life. He had money, transport, a career of sorts and a place of his own to live. It was more than enough to be going on with.

Gavin Murdoch kept his development plan in a locked room next to his office at *Cairo's Club*. He had a model on a large, square table and his artist's impressions pinned up around the room.

Robert Clayton of the engineering works had made an unexpected approach to him that morning, as if Clayton had decided to clear the decks as the strike entered a new month.

Clayton was fifty-one and his sister was three years older.

They had reached the point of crisis between the pride of continuing a family tradition and the stress of struggling to make a living in a competitive business when their workforce had unrealistic expectations.

They knew nothing specific of Murdoch's plans for Hambourne. But they did know of him as a man who looked after the interests of the area where he had been born and brought up. Bob Clayton considered him the most likely prospect to know a potential developer.

Murdoch was having lunch with both Claytons, at their expense, at the grill of the *Majestic Hotel*, a monument to the Edwardian era on the edge of the city centre. They were to hold preliminary discussions on how much the Claytons needed to retire somewhere warmer and quieter.

Murdoch had given them a little hope and a little encouragement. The Claytons could see a possible way out of their black hole.

In fact, the model on the table was two models in one. Murdoch had a collection off other buildings in boxes on a shelf under the table. He could create any combination of existing and planned buildings; subject to the pieces fitting together. The music on the radio ended as he was swapping Clayton Engineering for a housing estate on the two and a half acre site. Inevitable, Murdoch was tuned to One Ton, Hambourne's own illegitimate radio station.

Murdoch stopped to listen to Polly Roil's voice. He had never met her, but he held a mental image of a thirtyish Northern belle. Polly Roil had a warm, pleasant voice with no shrill edges. She sounded an extremely organized person and well worth getting to know.

"That was *The Prisoner* from *Iron Maiden*," said Polly Roil. "All the way from 1982. And now, a few words from someone most of my audience won't know. Mainly because

they're still asleep when he's on the air. This is O for Oscar."

"Greetings, creatures of the late morning," said Oscar Stanton. "Last Thursday, I read part of the blurb for a book called *The Cultural Aspects of Climate* on the air. Put into plain English, the author reckons the type of weather people get is what they expect. In other words, it's always raining here because you natives of Hambourne expect it to."

"What's the weather like in Seattle, where you're from?"

"Pretty much like it is here; which makes us as big a bunch of sad sacks as you lot," said Stanton. "But the point is, it hasn't rained once since last Thursday, when I asked for a big effort from you people out there in radioland. And I've had a letter, thank-you Julie Saxman, saying independent research in Hambourne has confirmed J. Bentley Foster's theory."

"First I've heard of it," Polly Roil put on a sceptical tone.

"Julie says there have been people out there on the streets with clipboards asking people what the weather will do later in the day, and they have a good correlation with the majority opinion, to quote the lady herself. So, you people out there, keep up the positive vibes and maybe we'll get a summer around here for once."

"The weather forecast says rain tonight, Oscar."

"Do we have to be ruled by weather forecasts from guys in London? Let's keep that sun shining, guys."

"Let's see if we can do it with the next piece of music," said Polly Roil. "A demo from up-and-coming local band The *Fairweather Four*. This is *Lazy Sunshine Haze*. I think. Because the label's come off the cassette box."

Murdoch positioned his housing estate to the background of acoustic guitars and several voices singing more or less together.

It would be very useful to clear part of Leaf Street in the

near future to provide room to bring in heavy equipment. There were two intact houses between the three destroyed by the previous week's gas explosion and the end of the terrace. The tenants had some of the characteristics of old Smedley, whose house had been the source of the explosion.

They were old, long term residents with delusions of ownership. They would need some energetic winkling-out.

As a good guy, whose ownership of the street was buried in holding companies, Murdoch was reluctant to use conventional winkling tactics. Noisy yobs and filth through the letter-box were too crude.

Even so, Murdoch felt entitled to do something about the Leaf Street subsidy junkies, who were people who thought that everything should be done for them. And he had come across a very sinister way of making life uncomfortable for awkward tenants; or one of his staff had.

A waitress in the health centre's canteen had come back from a short holiday in her native Sunderland with a story that had been circulating in the area. It involved two couples in a semi-detached house, which had been divided into upstairs and ground-floor flats.

The people upstairs were a pair of comedians, who had made a career out of practical jokes and poking fun at their neighbours.

The down-trodden, ground-floor couple had got their own back by wedging large, bass speakers against their ceiling and projecting subsonic vibrations into the flat above to get the jokers climbing the walls with severe anxiety attacks.

They had also drilled a hole to allow them to pump vast quantities of carbon dioxide into the jokers' bedroom at night to make them wake up with a major headache, figuring that no one feels like making jokes with a large hammer pounding their brain.

Murdoch had his doubts about chemical warfare if it needed holes in ceilings and tubes to convey fairly safe war gases, but electronic warfare via unsettling, low frequency vibrations seemed to have distinct possibilities . . .

# TWENTY SEVEN

## The People's Justice

Official lighting-up time was almost an hour after sunset, but thick clouds blowing in from the Irish Sea had persuaded most motorists to see and be seen at about nine-fifteen. Robin Formby had parked his car at *The Greyhound* pub half a mile from Mossy Castle. There were people about there, whose presence would discourage vandals. It was a warm if dark night, and a fair crowd had chosen to do their drinking out of doors.

As he approached the mighty ramparts of Mossy Castle, Formby told himself that it wouldn't matter if the whole thing was a set-up. He was wearing old clothes, he had about £3 in change in his pockets and his digital watch with a back-light had cost all of £2.99.

If it was all a plot to rob a rich journalist, his only worry was whether the thieves would give him a good kicking if he failed to give them a satisfactory haul.

The opportunity to view one of the famous people's prisons in the flat complex was too good to miss. He had received his invitation in a plain, brown envelope, which had been delivered by hand to the reception desk at the Hambourne Express; or rather, left there when the receptionist's

attention had been diverted for a few moments.

Formby climbed four flights of stairs then he walked along a deck, counting front doors. He knocked on a door with an unpainted wooden panel instead of a pane of frosted glass. A man with a dark face let him into an unlit hall. Formby ended up in thick gloom in a rear room full of masked men. It was a very alarming experience.

One of the men spoke in soft tones – an effective way to disguise his voice, which added intimidating, sinister overtones. Formby submitted to a search for a tape recorder or a transmitter. Then he allowed them to put a bag over his head. He was locked in blackness.

The men took him back to the long landing and along to a lift, which worked. They seemed to go up four floors. When they put him on a skateboard and shoved him to another lift at a fair speed. Formby tried to keep track of changes of level, direction and distances. He was hopelessly lost after the fourth lift journey, which was a descent.

"Okay, listen up," said a male voice. "You're about to enter the people's prison and we'd like you to bear these things in mind. One: crime is the responsibility of the community. If we show criminals we won't stand for their presence, they'll soon get the message. There are plenty of precedents for people running undesirables out of town.

"Two: the people's prison is for thugs and vandals. They're kept locked up on basic diet for one week if they behave themselves. Cheek and attempted violence earn extra time.

"Three: people with the least to lose have the fewest inhibitions about taking direct personal action against someone who tries to take away the little they have left. Of course, the rich do the same, but they strike back through an intermediary. But if you can't afford third parties, the bolt from the blue is risky but satisfying.

"So we strike at random, sometimes against a criminal's property, sometimes against the criminal himself or herself.

"The people you are about to see are all criminals, who have been punished at random; in the way that they strike randomly at their victims."

Formby had a sense that the man was reading from a script. Then he was into the disorientation of being able to see again. Dim light made him blink in a room with a solid panel of chipboard over the window.

There were two prisoners on show, both gagged and handcuffed to what looked like a scaffolding tube, which ran from one side of the narrow room to the other. Formby tried to record details in his mind. Both men were young, twenty to twenty-five, scruffy, emaciated, and they had too-long dark hair and untidy beards.

In a similar adjoining room, lit by a very dim bulb, were two women. One was around thirty, a few years older than reporter. The other was a good ten years older. The skinny condition of the younger, blonde woman suggested that the older redhead had been on an involuntary diet to bring her down to the right sort of weight for her height.

As before, the spokesman of the hooded group recited name, crime and sentence in his soft, unemotional voice. Then the darkness descended again as the bag enveloped Formby's head.

As he moved from lift to lift, held upright on the skateboard by two of the five men, Formby reflected that no one in Mossy Castle would find the sight unusual. It was a place for minding one's own business. If a group of men, perhaps no longer masked, wanted to wheel another man around on a skateboard with a bag over his head, that was their business.

The bag came off in one of the tunnels that gave access to

the inner courtyard. Formby found himself alone again. His tour guides had not stopped to say goodbye. Formby fumbled through his pockets in search of a notebook and a ballpoint. Standing in the wide, square, evil-smelling tunnel, he wrote down the names, crimes and sentences before he forgot them.

He ran through what had happened in his mind during the seven-minute walk to *The Greyhound*. He sat in his car in the car park writing notes for half an hour. Then he felt like a drink. Knowing that one would not be enough, he left the pub and drove home with unusual care. He felt shaken, like a man who had been led, blindfold and innocent, through a cage of lions and then had the danger of his daring deed pointed out when it was over and he was safe.

Cowardice, Ernest Hemingway had written, more or less, results from an inability to suspend the functioning of the imagination. Formby had deliberately closed his mind to the perils of putting himself into the hands of the sort of dangerous characters who ran a people's prison in Mossy Castle.

Safe afterwards, he could not help but die a few deaths, as Shakespeare had put it, more or less, as he battled against thinking about what might have been.

If he had recognized one of them, and there are many ways of identifying a masked man, such as distinctive patches on clothing, or artistically ripped jeans, then he would have been in dead trouble. He might have been caught in the trap, retained in the people's prison rather than released after the guided tour. It didn't bear thinking about.

He arrived home just before eleven p.m. It was too late to do anything other than complete his notes. Formby drank a shot-glass of his malt whisky while he added further recollections and printed translations above pieces of scribble while he still remembered what they meant.

In the morning, he contacted his tame detective in the local CID, who gave him good and bad news. The police had files on the two men and two women in the people's prison. All had been arrested numerous times for the sort of trivial (in police terms) crimes against the person and property that cause maximum distress to the general public.

Formby was able to pick out mug-shots of the four from a random selection of other photographs. Then came the bucket of cold water at the moment of greatest excitement. None of the four had been reported missing. No one would be sorry to see the back of any of them, especially the hard-pressed Hambourne police force. And if they were really handcuffed to scaffolding poles somewhere in Mossy Castle, there was no way that the police could persuade a magistrate to sign a warrant to search the entire structure.

The local force would have to call in officers from every surrounding county to make the search effective, and the bill for the operation would run into seven figures at the most conservative estimate. The four alleged prisoners were just not worth such an expenditure of police person-power and resources.

Feeling dented, Formby took the story to his editor. To his surprise, Howard Hatcher was in an exceptionally good mood. The editor had won the Pools, if only in a modest way. He had found enough points for several minor dividends when he had checked his copy coupon. With just ten score draws available, he was expecting a cheque for at least £100, and possibly more, the next morning. Hatcher was making plans to spend it on a combination of necessities and frivolities.

"Vigilantes, eh?" The editor smiled across his overflowing desk at his reporter. "Proof positive of an actual people's prison in Mossy Castle? An eye-witness report from your

intrepid reporter? Only the police aren't interested?"

"I can ask around their usual haunts," said Formby. "Find out when these people were last seen."

"Sounds a good way to get your head kicked in, Robby. Just a minute." Grinning, Hatcher settled his single earphone headset more comfortably, brought the stick microphone in front of his mouth and dabbed at a button that was flashing a light on his intercom complex.

Formby sat back in his chair and watched the ageing whizz kid in action. Hatcher held a brief phone conversation with someone while flicking through the rest of Formby's notes.

"Okay," said Hatcher when he had finished the call. "Ask around. If they have gone missing, we might do a piece without names. You can describe the people you saw, and give details of their alleged crimes and sentences. I see none of them are due to be let out much before Christmas, so there's no rush. And watch your back when you're doing your probing background stuff on these characters. I don't want to be paying your hospital bills."

"Right, I'll get on it." Formby scooped, up his notes before the editor could change his mind.

Jayne Verity, the diminutive pit boss of the newsroom, trapped him in his alcove, which was formed by two desks and a section of wall. "Climate control by willpower, Rob," the redhead told Formby in an uncompromising tone. "There's a public meeting in Albert Gardens at lunchtime. One-fifteen kick off and you will be there to cover it."

"That's a joke, Jayne," protested Formby.

"I don't care," said Verity. "We've had a lot of readers' letters about it and people want to be informed, even if it's just so they can laugh louder. So someone has to report the meeting. You're elected."

Formby released a deep, shuddering groan around the word 'arse', in the manner of John Sparks in his senile delinquent character on the TV show *Naked Video*. Verity was unable to restrain a smile. She too was a fan of that brand of television humour. Formby dropped onto his chair and made a note of his lunchtime appointment. "Working lunch on the firm, then," he remarked, half to himself.

"Anything more than a burger and a can of Coke on your expense account will be viewed with suspicion," Verity said before slinking off to harass another innocent reporter.

Planning his day, Formby realized that he had two or two and a half hours free for chasing up acquaintances of the people's prisoners. He needed some sort of tale to tell them. Perhaps the safest was the truth. The initial reaction to telling someone that a local thief had been kidnapped would be a laugh. Then he could go on to establish when the person in question had been seen last. Thereafter, he could busk it.

Something was going on in the square of garden at the heart of the city. Robbijohn heard laughter and cheers around a booming voice over a public address system. He and Mi Tai were walking along one side of the square. His Vietnamese companion wanted to buy a box of Thornton's *Special Toffee*.

Shaun Wayne watched from a distance as they settled down at a table in *Merity's* indoor/outdoor café. A bronzed waiter in a red-hooped pullover arrived promptly with menus. He had a smile for regular customers who tipped generously if they received good service.

Wayne, lounging elegantly at a table that was screened on two sides by displays of summer flowers was feeling powerful. His latest recruit to Hambourne Risk Management's Assessment Team had earned him a big bonus. Piet van den Viet, a Dutchman who spoke perfect English, had spotted an

unappreciated gem of a painting.

The insurance company's client collected pottery but she had a few paintings on areas of wall near doors, places which she considered to be too dangerous for showing off plates. Van den Viet had admired the frame while checking over the house's areas of weak security. The owner had mentioned that the picture was just something to go in a nice frame.

Her burglary had been traumatic, but not excessively so. The thieves had taken several pieces of replaceable china, and the painting in the nice frame, from the walls, but they had triggered one of the alarm systems within a few minutes of entering the house. Lionel Dragoner had arrived at nine o'clock the next morning, while the police where still dusting for fingerprints.

His reassuring pep talk had reminded his client of the effectiveness of her security precautions. Nothing valuable had gone. If the police failed to recover the stolen items in one month, she would be paid the full replacement value; unless she chose to wait a little longer to see if they turned up. The decision was hers.

Dragoner had left his client feeling relieved that she had given her insurance business to HRM. She felt that she had received exactly the service for which she had contracted, and there had been no hiding behind small print. Dragoner had returned to his car with the inner glow of a man who had acquired, a seaside landscape worth at least £20,000 for the cost of the frame, which was worth about £30 on a good day.

Even better, he could return the frame in due course and tell the client that it had been spotted by one of his agents in a junk shop. HRM, of course, would make no charge for the frame, using it to buy a little more goodwill. The shop, of course, would prove to be a dead end if the police ever tried

to track down the person who had sold the frame.

Shaun Wayne had received his bonus that morning. He had quadrupled it by following someone else's winning streak on the craps table, and he had baled out just before the streak had ended. He was feeling rich and powerful.

Robbijohn's presence in the same part of town with his bit of foreign crumpet was a distinct provocation.

Shaun Wayne didn't approve of greed in others. He was taller, heavier, younger, fitter and better looking than Robbijohn. He had been very patient with a creep. He suspected that Robbijohn was also a wise guy, responsible for his fierce attack of the runs the week before, even though he had no idea how it had been done; *if* it had been done. Just the same, he intended to deliver one more warning.

Shaun Wayne was nothing if not fair; and if the final warning was ignored, then the real trouble would start.

Unaware of the hostile gaze, filtered by flowers, of his young enemy, Robbijohn gave his attention to the salmon salad and his share of a half-bottle of slightly sparkling rosé wine. Mi Tai ate with her usual healthy appetite. She still had the refugee mentality. She believed in stoking up in case she had to wait a few days for her next meal.

Robbijohn had spotted Derek on the other side of the room. His special agent had a deeply tanned blonde with him. They looked like a couple just off a Californian beach; except that Drek had the right accent but the blonde would be a local. Drek, in expensive summer casual gear, and the blonde in a print dress disappeared through the 'MEMBERS ONLY' door as the waiter delivered coffee to Robbijohn and Mi Tai.

Ferenc Disch had arrived in the last few minutes. He was wolfing down a steak sandwich with plenty of trimmings. He, too, had learnt never to leave food lying around in case

someone else grabbed it. According to the plan, Gregor Maiskiy was already inside the casino. Another episode of the image game was about to begin.

Mi Tai had a losing day. She changed $5,000 into chips and lost the lot in half an hour. Derek and Gregor Maiskiy were behind him and out of sight at other tables, but Robbijohn could see Ferenc Disch expanding with joy as his stack of chips grew before him.

Her last £100 disappeared when 18 red failed to come up. Mi Tai changed two more $1,000 bills. When she was down to £300, she tossed a £50 chip up the table, pour les employés, and retired to the bar, defeated. She and Robbijohn drank consolation glasses of champagne, cashed in the remaining chips and watched the action on the craps table for a while.

The casino was hardly packed, but there were enough people in the Hambourne area who wanted to gamble at lunchtime to make opening on weekdays a worthwhile proposition. Disch was assaulting the free buffet as Robbijohn and Mi Tai headed for the chicane of slot machines that would take them to the main exit. Shaun Wayne stepped into their path with a smile.

"Okay, you piece of shit," he said to Robbijohn in a low voice, "time to stop pissing about and share your system."

Robbijohn sighed heavily and put on a frown. "Is that any way to behave in public? And does your mother know you use language like that? Teach him some manners, M.T."

Robbijohn knew that Gregor Maiskiy was close behind them. It was a safe opportunity for Mi Tai to try out her Kung Fu. The attack was over in two seconds, silent, deadly. Before Wayne could react, Mi Tai kicked his right knee, stepped in to deliver a solid punch just below his ribs, then smashed an elbow into the region of his right kidney as he doubled up over a slot machine.

Wayne's suffering was more shock and loss of dignity than extreme pain. His first concern, when he had unsprawled himself from the fruit machine, was to make sure that there had been no witnesses to his disgrace. Nobody seemed to be looking at him in astonishment. If someone ducked out of sight at a fruit machine, Wayne told himself, it was to pick up a dropped chip or to collect their winnings. It was not because he had been clobbered by some Chinese floozie.

Wayne dropped a coin into an electronic fruit machine and pressed the release button. As an ironic, distorted reflection of his luck, he hit a winning line. Refusing to rub his injuries, he took his winnings to the bar. He needed a drink and a sit down on one of the high stools.

Shaun Wayne was in the process of spreading his wings. He wanted to create an image for himself of a man who could get things done and someone who commanded respect. Of course, he subscribed to the Mafia's definition of *respect*: compliance through fear of loss of property, injury, death of a loved one or personal death. He wanted to be known as a dangerous man to cross; not as a thug who would smash someone's teeth in as soon as look at them, but as a person of importance, whose enemies suffered unfortunate accidents that could not be traced back to Shaun Wayne.

He wanted to be known as a man of influence. The trouble was, he had yet to gather a collection of satellites, who would avenge him without question and without thought for their own personal safety. Any revenge would have to be on a do-it-himself basis. And revenge there would be.

Robbijohn needed to become an example. The revenge would be devastating, sudden and there would be not the slightest suspicion of a connection to Shaun Wayne. He felt confident that he was more than clever enough to keep himself off the list of suspects.

# TWENTY EIGHT

## A Touch Of Pragmatism . . .

Rain forecast the night before had failed to arrive. The greenkeeper at the golf course in the former dockland area had turned his sprinklers on by remote control an hour before dawn to give the grass a drink. Dry weather was all very well for the comfort and convenience of the members, but they were sure to complain loudly if the grass turned yellow and the greens started to crack.

Lionel Dragoner preferred to conduct certain business deals out in the open, away from casual eavesdroppers. The potential client had said that he was from Brazil. He had offered a business card with an address in Manaus. Dragoner had busked initially – until he had been able to sneak a look in his atlas to learn that the city lay at the heart of Brazil's northern plain, about half way along the Amazon river.

Luis Carazon looked like a tanned European, a descendant of Conquistadores rather than South American Indians. He was short and plump, and he could get a hell of a lot of power into a drive. Dragoner was keeping on level terms with him through superior putting.

Carazon wanted to buy antique arms and armour. Dragoner suspected that he was Colombian rather than Brazilian, that his English had a Spanish-American accent

rather than a Portuguese-American accent, and that Carazon was looking for a way to launder drug money. But Lionel Dragoner was a realist. Money was money, and the proceeds of crimes already committed were destined to flow into somebody's pocket. That which had been done would not be undone and Dragoner saw no point in sending loose cash elsewhere.

He had collected together a decent supply of bits and pieces from various sources. Some of the items were genuine, some fakes passed off as genuine, some acknowledged reproductions and some genuine items which had been 'extended'. The extended items included partial suits of armour, which had been completed with modern spares, swords that had been divided into a blade and a hilt, and then extended into a pair of matching weapons, firearms similarly treated, and clubs, flails and similar implements of destruction of doubtful authenticity.

Dragoner had provided Carazon with as much provenance as he thought he could get away with. He had been honest about the dodgy ancestry of some of the items. Carazon was deeply interested in the possibilities of duplicate documentation of the sort used to export valuable antiques as modern reproductions of no great historical significance.

Such items, of course, would recover their true identity when they were safely abroad. Dragoner saw no moral dilemma in exchanging illegitimate goods accompanied by illegitimate documents for illegitimate cash.

As they talked, Dragoner realized that he was being probed for information about a particular type of person. His suspected Colombian contact was interested in the area's high fliers, the people who kept expensive boats at the marina, owned their own aircraft and helicopters, enjoyed big-time gambling, the company of glamorous young

women and all the other trappings of guiltless success.

Dragoner had kept himself well separated from the local drugs trade as an act of deliberate policy. He was not entirely sure whether the alleged Brazilian was looking into the possibility of direct, international deals with suppliers in an area who had excellent transport links with other regions of the UK. Happy enough with his deal for arms and armour of doubtful pedigree, Dragoner decided to introduce the visitor to the likes of Gavin Murdoch and Ivan Kenton, give him a tour of the marina and then take a back seat.

Luis Carazon was about 90% genuine. He was Brazilian-born and he had been running a business in Manaus for nearly thirty of his fifty years. He was acting as the agent in Europe of a leading member of Colombian drug cartel, who was building himself a fourteenth-century, European-style castle as a home for his dynasty. Carazon was also keeping his eyes and ears open on behalf of one of the two surviving top men of the Bugamenia Cartel.

Honour, revenge and millions of dollars were tied up in the hunt for a group of mercenaries, number and nationality unknown, who had wiped out the rest of the cartel along with the compound in which they had lived. Carazon would become richer by one million dollars, in cash, if he could supply the right sort of information.

He was looking for men of a certain age, who had money without an explanation. These men were not used to living with huge amounts of available cash. They would give themselves away by their lavish enjoyment of it. Of course, there were many recently rich men around, who had acquired their wealth from sources other than a devastating commando-style assault on the Bugamenia Cartel. Many had become rich from drug dealing, fraud or other areas of crime.

Carazon felt that he could make his reports with a clear

conscience. If anything happened to his nominees during an investigation process, it was probably something that they deserved, and they would have enjoyed a taste of the good life before everything came to a full stop.

The ultimate conscience-clearer was the million dollars. Luis Carazon was quite willing to gamble the lives of a few foreigners against the prospect of a life of luxury for himself.

Roxanne Chantelle was history. She had been eased out of her luxury apartment and into a job at a leisure centre near Sittingbourne. She was a pretty face with some administrative experience. Her circumstances had been reduced but she was in prime recruitment territory for another short service contract with a Kentish version of Gavin Murdoch.

She arrived at her new temporary home with a good wardrobe, some good jewellery and her savings and her end-of-contract bonus from Murdoch safely invested. There was no point in getting bent out of shape over being replaced, she told herself firmly. She had not been the first of Murdoch's mistresses, and the latest would be replaced in her turn.

The most sensible thing to do was to dig herself in at her new post and keep her eyes open for the best prospect. She had assets that decayed with time, like a footballer's. If she kept her head, she would be financially independent by the time she slipped out of the top division. She would be able to afford to give the likes of Gavin Murdoch dinner in his expensive restaurant; and then take someone else home.

It was time to forget Hambourne for the moment, however. She had to get to know the layout and routines of new territory, which included a marina. When she thought of boats, she could not help wondering if Murdoch had bought a black one, and what sort of a mistress went with it. Obviously, a former beauty queen with hair the colour of

spun Aztec gold was the wrong choice. A good sailor with a polishing fetish seemed most likely.

Three hundred miles away, most of them to the north, Gavin Murdoch watched proudly as the crane transferred his black boat from a low-loader to the river in the marina area. It was a day of brilliant summer sunshine, which sparkled from the hull and brass fittings of the new boat. It had been waiting in storage for an owner for two years but it was still classed as new.

Lionel Dragoner, as head of the consortium that operated the marina, had opened a bottle of decent champagne to welcome a new owner and his crew. All three had enjoyed an early lunch while the low-loader had been completing the last stretch of its journey. Dragoner had approved of Roxanne Chantelle. He approved even more strongly of Sheila Avery.

As for the boat, it reminded him of the *Lotus* Formula One racing car in its *John Player Special* livery. Murdoch, he knew, would not be amused to hear that his new toy looked like a floating cigarette advertisement. Dragoner noticed that the new arrival was named *Sigma 211*, which turned the marina's original black resident, *Sigma 212*, into a copy-cat.

Sheila Avery leapt athletically aboard when the boat was in the water and the suspension slings went slack, taking formal possession of her charge. She deployed fenders and supervised the removal of the slings and the mooring operation.

"She certainly looks good on a boat," remarked Dragoner.

"She's got an honours degree in mechanical engineering, too," Murdoch said with a smile of conspicuous satisfaction. "And she knows one end of a diesel engine from the other."

"Where the hell did you find her?"

"Wasting her time at the boat show. Doing a P.R. job for

the duration. I was amazed to hear they hadn't given a permanent job to someone with her looks and her brains."

"So you did?"

"I know quality when I see it," Murdoch said smugly. "Is this the eighty-four?"

"Yes, we've still got a few bottles left." Dragoner topped up the champagne glasses. "Nice day for it. Did you hear that thing on the radio this morning? The attack on the weather centre?"

"I thought that was a joke at first. I mean, I had a leaflet through the door at home about the Hambourne Climate Initiative, but trying to set fire to the weather centre because they makes it rain! I ask you."

"They reckon that whole block at the top end of Crust Street could have gone if the fire had got a good hold. All the shops, the offices, the theatre, everything."

"Only if the fire brigade had stood by and just watched," scoffed Murdoch.

"Yes, I suppose they were inflating things a bit," Dragoner admitted. "But it makes you think. People actually pursuing a dotty idea like controlling the weather by thinking about. And choosing to do it by burning down the local weather centre. Makes you wonder how their minds work. And I hear there have even been fights in pubs over it."

"Probably football hooligans looking for something to scrap about until the new season starts."

"Oh, yes," Dragoner said casually, "did Senhor Carazon get in touch with you?"

"The Brazilian with the investment capital? Yes, he gave me a ring yesterday. He said he'd been playing golf with you the day before. He's giving me lunch at *Merity's* on Monday."

"You told him you're busy this weekend?"

"Got a new toy to play with." Murdoch grinned in the direction of both his black boat and ash-blonde Sheila Avery. "Where do you think this investment capital comes from?"

"The money I've seen looks clean enough, Gavin." Dragoner answered the real question.

"Yes, I suppose that's what it comes down to. You get your experts to take a good look at it, and if they can't see anything wrong, you go ahead with a clear conscience."

"What's it like inside?" Dragoner brought the conversation back to a safe topic. "You haven't had much time to get your boat customized, as it were."

"I bought a classic design. Lots of walnut veneer. Simple but very elegant. It doesn't need anything doing to it. It would be like buying a Constable then putting a few more trees on it. Come and have a look."

The black cabin cruiser was tied up at its berth. Sheila Avery had checked the hull for damage during transportation before the vessel had been lifted off its low-loader. A small crowd was admiring both her and the new addition to the marina – including the Chinese girl from *Sigma 212*, the other black boat. Murdoch had noticed her straight away.

Sheila was loading gear into a locker at the aft end of the deck as Murdoch and Dragoner went into the cabin, which looked like a lot of money well spent. Dragoner was forced to agree that change was unnecessary. He suspected that the black boat had been custom built and that the original client had been forced to pull out of the deal.

Murdoch, he assumed, had made a good bargain for goods left on the shelf. Even so, the boat had cost him at least as much as a good-size house. Even so, he had got quality for his money.

"Of course, there's about ten tons of stuff to go aboard yet." Murdoch flicked open cupboard doors, sliding them

smoothly on low-friction runners. "I can't even offer to top up your drink till the wine merchant delivers."

"Has your boat's crew had much sailing experience?"

"She's going to take lessons. Her degree's in engineering, so she's well up on the theory after doing some reading." Murdoch mentioned Sheila Avery's qualifications again to remove her from the 'strictly decorative' category. She looked good but she was functional too.

"I'd get the marina staff to advise you on stowing gear to start off with," said Dragoner. "If you intend doing any ocean sailing. You don't want to find yourself up to your knees in broken glass and good wine if it blows up a bit."

"Good point. I suppose everyone will be eager to give good advice to a novice like me. Most of it contradictory."

"Anything the staff tells you had better be right," chuckled Dragoner. "Or they get the boot. Anyway, welcome again to the Marina Set. You held out a bit longer than most people expected but you had to see the advantages in the end."

"Actually being on your own boat is the best argument," said Murdoch. "Except you don't get there until you've made the decision to join. Bit of a circular bugger, really."

"That's life all over," chuckled Dragoner. "Okay, I'll leave you to it." He took the empty glasses back to the management area of the Marina, having done his bit to welcome another customer, who could be relied on to spend freely.

Murdoch clicked a switch; and found that the radio had been pre-tuned to One Ton Radio. Polly Roil was on the air. Murdoch recognized her voice as soon as a pre-recorded station identification ended.

"There's an interesting story in the Express as a follow up to the article on Wednesday about the people's prison," Polly Roil told her listeners. "There's a guy claiming it was all a hoax and the people the Express reporter claimed were

locked up have been seen in circulation.

"But the Express says they didn't give any names in the article, which is true, so how does saying you've seen Joe Soap recently prove anything? Speaking personally, I want to believe that the rotten sod who banged up my poor old car's bumper last week could end up in a people's prison in Mossy Castle as a random victim of the reverse of crime.

"Here's *Hung Up In Chains* by *Insert A Tulip*, which is what the bumper-basher should be."

Murdoch clicked the switch again. He liked listening to Polly Roil's voice but her taste in music put him right off.

Arriving at the marina in the early evening, Robbijohn dropped his jaw and sucked in his cheeks as he walked past the other black boat. It was conspicuously on his route from the marina's main entrance to his own mooring. He felt honour bound not to react to the twin of his own vessel, hence the rigid control of his facial muscles. The significance of the name dawned on him when he was a couple of strides past the rival. *Sigma 211* made *him* the copycat.

He allowed his pent smile to explode when he reached his own black boat. Mi Tai, busy with her version of Lancashire Hotpot, didn't see the joke. The ash-blonde in charge of *Sigma 211* had been trying to pick her brains about *Sigma 212's* power plant. The only thing Mi Tai knew about marine diesel engines was the telephone number of the mechanic who helped out Paul 'Big Ed' Zelasky when he was in service-mode. Her inferiority complex was showing.

Robbijohn cooled her down by explaining that the very best people enjoy the benefit of gadgets while hiring others to operate and repair them. Mi Tai wasn't the sort of person who felt obliged to get her hands dirty. She was too well brought up to deprive a man of the fun of messing about

with bits of mucky metal. Almost convinced, Mi Tai returned to slicing up vegetables for a stir-fry.

Robbijohn mentioned a trip to Scotland. He had a business meeting arranged and he wanted to find out what his brother was up to. Ken had been ominously silent at a time when brother Lance had been expecting indignant telephone calls about the lack of things to do north of the border.

Mi Tai decided that she would go along to the trip to the foreign country in the north. She liked travelling, especially by air, and there would be a final leg by helicopter to Robbijohn's mountain retreat. It was much quicker to fly to the top of the mountain and descend rather than use a four-wheel-drive vehicle over roads that were rugged at best. She would also have further opportunities to observe a pilot in action and to learn more of the routines of helicopter flying.

Gavin Murdoch pressed the connect key on his mobile phone after breathing a curse. One of the disadvantages of being permanently in touch was that it was difficult to slip out of touch again. This call was worth taking, however.

"Happy about it?" said a vaguely familiar voice.

"About what, my boat?" said Murdoch.

"Mkembe," said the voice in a 'you idiot' tone.

"Can we start this again?" Murdoch said impatiently. "Either you make sense right away or I ring off. Who are you and what are you calling about?"

"It's Darkus Tafrika, mate. I suppose you're celebrating now Mkembe's been arrested?"

"He's been what?"

"You didn't know?" Tafrika sensed in Murdoch's tone almost a feeling of outrage that the arrest had been made without his direct permission.

"What's he done? Hit a copper on a demo?"

"Someone recognized him. From Jamaica. He's supposed to be wanted for murder and half a dozen other things. He reckons it's a case of mistaken identity. There's a bunch of brothers wanting to form a defence league to fight his extradition."

"You among them?"

"I have this feeling that when they compare his fingerprints with the ones from Jamaica, a lot of people could end up with a whole load of egg on their faces."

"So you're on the fence at the moment?"

"Inactive solidarity, you could call it," Tafrika admitted.

"Shit! What's this going to do for the people who invested in your paper via adverts?"

"We're going into damage limitation mode," said Tafrika in a confident tone. "Any mud flying won't come near you."

"It better hadn't."

"I hear one of our people is working for you now."

"Oh, doing what?" Murdoch played dumb.

"One of the designers for Sunshine News. You've poached him."

"What, me personally?" said Murdoch.

"Yeah, right," Tafrika admitted. "You don't do all the hiring and firing personally in your business empire. I suppose we should be chuffed one of the large employers in the area recognizes talent when it comes from an ethnic minority."

"We don't believe in that crap," Murdoch told him firmly. "We don't try to create an ethnic mix. We discriminate by ability and only by ability. So you're looking out for a new community spokesperson now? Preferably a black, Jewish woman in a wheelchair? And a lesbian?"

"You've got one in mind?" said Tafrika in a mocking tone.

"Not off-hand. But if I think of someone, I'll let you know.

I'll hold you to that promise to keep me mud-free about the Mkembe business."

The conversation finished with Darkus Tafrika offering assurances that a valued advertiser would not be embarrassed. Murdoch took the time to call Stella Cookson to ask her how things were going with regard to getting Rajid Shastri into the coming election in Mkembe's place. Stella assured him that the plan was going to schedule.

Duty done, Murdoch returned to enjoying his new toy. A man who worked as hard as he did, he reminded himself, needed his leisure.

# TWENTY NINE

## Movie Set . . .

Jim Jones had been involved in the drug business in Hambourne for sixteen of his twenty-two years. He had been junior messenger, lookout and package courier in his time. Now, finally, he was operating on his own account on a decent scale. He now employed his own team of younger members of the lawless fringe.

His territory was a council estate, which had been allowed to decay as a propaganda measure against a past Tory government. He did his selling on Mission Street, at the mouth of an alley half-way along the western side of a double row of semi-detached houses. He had a team of lookouts covering all approaches, a handy drain as a dumping ground in a dire emergency and a barrel of water waiting to flush any packets deeper into the drain to break the chain of evidence.

His four lookouts were placed at either end of the street, at the far end of the alley and at his selling position, the last acting as a bodyguard if any of the punters gave him trouble. Jones dressed in street clothes when he was working; trainers and a baggy, tracksuit-like garment in that season's colours.

His business had provided him with a big car, in which he drove home to a large, comfortable flat, where he kept an extensive wardrobe.

He lived a long way from his origins and his customers, and he was clever enough to let the neighbours believe that everything belonged to a rich uncle. Jim Jones was too smart to let anyone outside his immediate circle know that he was extremely wealthy.

Friday evening was a good time for business. Some customers wanted something to make the evening go with a bang, others were just getting ahead of their daily requirements so that they could get into Saturday at a relaxed pace. Jim Jones was quite happy to work and make money outside normal business hours. He considered flexibility an essential element of the leisure pharmaceuticals industry.

He checked out everyone passing along the fairly busy street. Everyone was a potential customer, even the two schoolgirls, who had to have taken some sort of diversion if they were on their way home at about half past six in the evening. Jones recognized the school's uniform. Most of his girlfriends in his teens had attended that school. The girls were black, like him, with their hair tied up in short pigtails. They looked about fourteen – well into his customer bracket.

"Hey, girls, how you doing?" he called in a fake American West-Coast accent as the schoolgirls reached the mouth of his alley.

"Doing what?" called one of the girls.

Her companion dissolved into a fit of the giggles.

"You wanna go out with me tonight?" Jones displayed his perfect teeth in a big grin. "Bring your big sister?"

A van stopped at northern end of the street. Hacker, the close lookout/bodyguard, automatically turned his head that way to look for a danger signal from the sentry down there.

"Move and you're dead," one of the 'girls' said in a flat, hard voice.

Shudders of panic and fear coursed through Jim Jones and

Hacker. Each girl had a hand in her school backpack. The thin material would offer no resistance to the compact submachine guns concealed inside.

"I'm warning you, we won't hesitate to blow you away." The 'schoolgirl' gained a lot of years in a few moments.

Another dark green van stopped at the end of the street. Both vehicles were the size of a Royal Mail delivery van. A man walking in the direction of the lookout at that point took a pistol out of his pocket. He fired four shots in rapid succession; two bursts of two. Then he put the pistol back into his anorak pocket and walked on.

Tone, the lookout, had been thrown back against a bushy hedge by the bullet impacts. As he completed a boneless slither to the pavement, a Transit-size van pulled up beside him, smoothly but rapidly. Two men jumped out of the back, gathered up the body and threw it inside. Then the van moved off, speeding past Jim Jones and his group.

A man with a loudhailer appeared out of nowhere in the middle of the roadway. "Okay, people, that looked very good," he bellowed. "Okay for you, Camera One?"

An aide, standing beside him with a walkie-talkie pressed to his ear, raised a thumb.

"Camera Two?" bellowed the loudhailer. The aide raised his thumb again.

"Okay, everyone, let's wrap it up," bellowed the loudhailer.

Life on the street had frozen. People began to move again. One of the film crew threw a bucket of water onto the streak of blood left by the dead lookout. One of the large, green vans pulled up at Jim Jones' selling position.

"Reckon you can run faster than a bullet?" one of the 'girls' asked Hacker, the 'close' lookout. "Try it."

Hacker sprinted down the alley, dodging from side to side

in the hope of evading a burst from the submachine gun.

"In the van, you arse-dropping," the other 'girl' told Jim Jones.

The lookout at the southern end of the street looked on helplessly as the van cruised past him. The drama had taken just three minutes to unfold. Five minutes later, Hacker and the alley-lookout joined the surviving Mission Street lookout; having checked the area carefully for people who looked as if they were armed.

Hacker and the alley lookout had circled the block. Two customers were standing at the mouth of the alley, asking each other where Jim-boy had got to. Neither assumed that he had been busted. Jim-boy was supposed to have a solid relationship with the local police. The customers assumed that he had gone to relieve himself, or to grab a cup of coffee. They were still discussing whether to wait or come back later as Hacker and the two surviving lookouts drifted aimlessly away. They had not the slightest idea what was going on.

Jenny Hobson had taken the call. The man on the phone had given what was clearly an identifying codeword after asking for Rob Formby. He had sounded important enough to be put through to someone else. The switchboard staff, and everyone else in the Hambourne Express buildings, knew that Rob Formby was unobtainable. His mishap had been on television.

Formby had been covering a city-centre demonstration by pensioners about the shocking state of Hambourne's pavements. A motorist driving past the group of yelling *Grey Panthers* had been too busy shouting insults back at them to watch where he was going. He had clipped a parked vehicle, which had leapt forward to fell Robin Formby and two others. Formby had been detained overnight in hospital for observation. Concussion was suspected.

The caller with the codeword had sounded in a hurry to hang up by the time he had reached Jenny Hobson. He gave the impression that he had no intention of hanging around while someone traced the call. The man had read out a time and a meeting place, then asked Hobson if she had taken the information down. He had then repeated his details and rung off without another word.

When the masked men approached her, Jenny Hobson began to regret not taking Formby's dark mutterings about 'things going on' more serious. But by then, it was too late to run. She had walked to the rendezvous – it was just a five-minute stroll from the Express building. She was still within screaming distance of a main road but in complex of alleys, which serviced warehouses; some still in business, others rotting shells.

The masks were flesh-coloured and detectable only at close range. The three men stopped about a yard away. Hobson mentioned the codeword into a growing silence.

"Press card?" said one of the men.

They were dressed identically in blue jeans and dark blue, RAF-surplus pullovers. Two had dark hair, one a lighter, mousier shade. Hobson took her press card out of her handbag. The spokesman nodded. To Hobson's surprise, one of the group opened what looked like a solidly bolted and locked door of scarred, red-painted wood.

All four entered a loading bay. They scrambled up to a ledge that was littered with empty cardboard boxes, and moved deeper into the silent building. One of the masked group flicked on a torch. Hobson found that it made navigation more difficult for her. As her eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, the torch beam caught her face and filled her vision with obscuring after-images.

"I'm going to have to search you," said a female voice.

"What for?" Hobson had not realized that at least one of the masked group was a woman.

"Recorders, transmitters. You can look, but that's all."

"Okay." Hobson submitted to a rapid but thorough patting down. Her handbag received a quick rummage.

"Right," said the woman.

The group climbed stairs. Hobson noted a figure '4' built into the tiles on the wall when they left the staircase and moved into a large, dusty room. A double row of pillars, each about a dozen feet from its neighbours, marched down to the far end of the room. Despite the filthy windows, the room seemed well lit after the gloom of the ground floor and the stairs.

"Is it all right to smoke?" said Hobson.

"They're your lungs, love," said the spokesman. "This way."

He led the way to a table in a corner. There were two chairs. He and Hobson sat with their backs to the windows. Hobson noticed that the other two masked people had gone. Then her attention focussed on the table top.

On the green baize of the card table was a house brick, on which was a round biscuit tin lid, on which were small, white oblong blocks and half a dozen self-sealing plastic bags. The clear plastic bags, each about two inches square, contained a generous helping of an off-white powder.

Jenny Hobson had actually seen a packet of brown heroin once. That street deal had contained just a fraction of the amount of powder in the ones before her.

Her sense of unease multiplied.

She felt that she was in no direct danger. She had been summoned to the meeting to witness something, as Rob Formby had witnessed the fate of the prisoners in the people's prison. She was aware that she could be involved in

an unfunny hoax. But there was an air of grim determination about the three masked individuals, who had brought her to the warehouse.

The two absentees returned with someone else – a dark-faced man in a baggy, rose and powder blue tracksuit. Each of the masked people was gripping the prisoner by the upper arm. His hands seemed to be tied behind his back. Hobson noted automatically that the man was in his early twenties, not bad looking in an insolent sort of way and putting on a display of defiance.

"You know what this is?" the man beside her asked, pointing to the plastic bags.

"Heroin?" said Hobson.

"Street grade. And this character makes a living out of selling it. What do you think of that?"

"If that's true, I think he belongs in gaol," said Hobson.

"The problem is getting the evidence on him. And all the expense of a trial and locking him up for a few years. Move away from the table."

Hobson retreated as the man waved her back. She stopped when he held his palm up vertically. He struck a match and held it to the oblong white blocks. They began to burn. Hobson realized that they were firelighters.

"This scum would have made a few thousand out of this," said the spokesman, stepping out of range of fumes from the burning heroin. "Did you know, he had sixty thousand pounds, in cash, hidden in his flat?"

"You fuckin' bastards!" yelled the prisoner. "What right you got to turn my place over?"

"He's upset because we had to do some demolition work to find it," laughed the spokesman. "Unfortunately, we don't have the facilities to lock this scum up for a few years. So now, we'll just have to show him out."

The spokesman nodded to the other two. One of them, Hobson thought it was the woman, reached between the prisoner's legs from behind and grabbed a handful of crotch. The prisoner went up on his toes with a squeal. The rest was over almost before Hobson could take it in.

She had a brief impression of the prisoner running on tiptoe to relieve the pressure on his genitals. Then there was a crash as he disappeared through a window. When she stopped staring at the smashed glass, Hobson found that the other three had gone.

She went over to the window. Cautiously, she put her head through the gaping hole and looked down. She saw a shape on the pavement; then she pulled back quickly as she felt giddiness overwhelming her. The word *defenestration* kept running around and around – unstoppably, insanely – inside her head.

There was a good blaze going on the biscuit tin lid. Jenny Hobson walked to the stairs, plodded down to ground level, scrambled down from the raised level to the floor of the loading bay and left of the building.

The figure in the baggy tracksuit lay face down on the dusty tarmac, hands tied behind the back, ominously quite still. A trickle of his blood was disappearing between shards of glass.

Hobson thought about checking for a pulse, or even making sure that she was not looking at a convincing dummy, but she could not force herself to approach the body. She was not feeling sick; she was quite proud of feeling no impulse to retch into the gutter; but she saw no point in pushing her luck.

She headed back to the sound of traffic. The noise of the breaking window, and the wet splat of a body coming to a sudden stop after falling forty-odd feet, had failed to register

on the city. It was after seven p.m. on a Friday night and there was nothing of interest in these alleys.

Hobson almost stepped into the path of a woman in a raincoat when she hurried out of the long, curving alley. The cravat of black and white squares said *policewoman*.

"Quick," said Hobson.

"What?" the off-duty WPC asked with a frown.

"Hobson, the Express, you've got to see this." Hobson put such a note of urgency into her voice that she and the WPC reached the body at a dead run. Jenny Hobson was surprised to find that the alley had not been cleaned up in her absence, the body removed, the broken window glass retrieved, the blood washed away and a layer of dust applied to make the scene look undisturbed.

She looked on with a sense of detachment, thinking *defenestration*, as the WPC crunched carefully over the scattering of broken glass to make sure that the sprawled figure was human and to check for signs of life. Then she lit a cigarette and stood guard over what had been confirmed as a corpse while the WPC went back to the main road in search of a telephone. Off duty, she wasn't wearing a radio.

*Defenestration*, Hobson thought.

Minutes later, Jenny Hobson had been gobbled up by police routine. She told her story over and over, she walked through her journey up to the fourth floor to point out the charred heroin sprinkled around the spaces where the consumed fire lighters had been, she told her story again and again. *Defenestration*.

She started to cadge cigarettes in the police station. She wanted to be sure that she didn't run out during the endless round of questions. Two poached eggs on toast in a police canteen was hardly her idea of a good dinner on a Friday night.

In the lulls between questions, she remembered to polish her story for the moment when the detectives left her alone with a telephone. She knew that the radio and television stations in Hambourne had the story but she was the only reporter in town with an exclusive, eye-witness account of the execution of a pusher by defenestration. The masked assassins had given her a glorious opportunity to make her name even better known in the business.

*Defenestration.*

She could dream of getting down to London to work on one of the nationals, or even gaining a toe-hold in television. She was quite prepared to work in regional television for a while to store up a little practical experience in the slightly different techniques of the television journalist.

*Defenestration.*

And even if nothing ever came of her hopes, she would have the pleasure of the dream, the warm embrace of an illusion.

*Defenestration*.

The word was stuck in her mind.

# THIRTY

## Flying . . .

Gavin Murdoch frowned at the report of the flying drug-dealer in his morning edition of the Hambourne Express. He felt that he had a copyright on *punitive defenestration*, as his solicitor had called it in his hearing.

As far as Murdoch knew, his personal team of vigilantes had sneaked off to Spain for a holiday and they had not yet run out of cash. The lack of direct contact between them meant that Murdoch had learned of their defection a couple of days after the event.

He had been irrationally indignant at first. He felt a sense of ownership over Charlie, Vic and Otty if he was paying them well for their services. Then he had reminded himself that even if the trio of vigilantes had been required to fill in a form requesting leave, they had no idea where to send it.

On reflection, Murdoch admitted that a break in their activities had been a good idea. The police were being forced to take more notice of the vigilante stories now that a rash of imitators was springing out of nowhere. Murdoch had heard, through golf club channels, that the police had dismissed as a hoax, reporter Robin Formby's adventure in Mossy Castle, where he had been shown an apparently well-populated 'people's prison'.

The latest demonstration of public indignation had supplied the police with a dead body – that of a known drug dealer. A full-scale murder inquiry was now in progress. Golf club circles hinted that the local force saw little hope of getting anywhere; unless one of the assassins came forward to confess, or one of them talked in his or her sleep while in bed with a petty criminal who needed a favour from the police.

Murdoch stopped reading when the music on his radio ended. He had the volume turned down because One Ton was playing brain-paralyzing stuff. He was listening because the radio pirate was plugging his Heavy Metal Festival, which was his sole property. Even though Murdoch had delegated extensively, he intended to claim the full credit for entertaining the younger citizens of Hambourne and district. Those who had done most of the work would have to be content with making a good bit of money out of the event.

"Thash all from them for the moment. Whoops, they've shaken my teeth loose. Hang on, I'll just stick them back."

Hammering noises emerged from the radio.

"That's better. This is Morning Mitch on One Ton Radio, and that was *The Screaming Toads*, who sent us their demo disc under a plain wrapper. And after seeing what's on the label, I'm not surprised. Anyone who wants to find out what I mean can buy a copy at today's Heavy Metal Extravaganza, which features the *Toads*, and this band: *Insert A Tulip*."

Murdoch returned to his tabloid newspaper as the music took off again at a frenetic pace. One of the pages scanned during the next four minutes carried a detailed feature on leisure activities available in the Hambourne area; more or less an advertising feature dressed up as editorial.

Murdoch made sure that his companies received a decent mention.

"Okay, One Ton Radio," Morning Mitch resumed, "and that was *Ghost Walker* from *Insert a Tulip*, who are on second-up at the Hambourne Heavy Metal Extravaganza. Which kicks off at two this afternoon in Grosvenor Park. Eight bands, *Metal Dawn* headlining and only a fiver to get in. Brilliant value! One word of warning, watch out for the marchers. The local trade unionists are messing everyone about this afternoon. And now, here's *Jefferson Airplane* with *Lather*. Why? Because I think it's weird!"

Murdoch kept listening. He had been a fan of Grace Slick and her bands for as long as he had been interested in music. High-voltage heavy metal gave him a headache if he was exposed to too much of it. He would have preferred to put on a festival of more melodious rock but the market research had said heavy metal and that was what the punters would get in abundance in a few hours' time.

Murdoch's fortune was founded on giving people what they would pay for, and he was sure that he would attract more people than a march in support of the strikers at Clayton Engineering.

When his sedative wore off, Robin Formby woke up to find a policeman sitting by his bed reading a copy of the Hambourne Express. Through a brief spell of panic, he realized almost at once that he was in hospital. He had no memory of committing a crime worthy of such an on-waking interview, and yet there was a copper by his bed.

Formby thought about going back to sleep. The policemen happened to look at him while his eyes were still open.

"Morning!" said the copper briskly.

"Is it?" Formby was deliberately vague. He could afford to be if he was in hospital for some reason.

"How are you feeling?"

"I'll tell you when I wake up out of this dream. What's going on?"

"Some idiot drove straight into a parked car and it jumped forward and smacked into you and a couple of other blokes. You're in hospital, mate, with suspected concussion. Only the doctor doesn't reckon you've got it after all."

"Right." Formby tried to adjust to the information. "And you think I can tell you something about what happened?"

"No, mate. My boss wants me to ask you a couple of questions about your experiences with the vigilantes."

"Oh?" said Formby cautiously.

"First off is the code word *Thunderbolt*. Have you come across that one before?"

"New one on me."

"Has anyone used anything like it?"

"Hang on a minute." Formby rubbed his eyes, then yawned.

"Take your time, sir."

"The thing is, I don't get regular messages from some sort of local organisation of vigilantes with a set-up like a bunch of Irish terrorists. The only time I've met anyone who claimed to be a vigilante was when I went to Mossy Castle. And that invitation came in a plain brown envelope, delivered by hand to our reception."

"What was the code word on that occasion?"

"There wasn't one."

"So *Thunderbolt* means nothing to you?"

"It sounds like someone pissing about, to me."

"My bosses don't think so. This is a murder inquiry."

"You what?" gaped Formby.

The constable gave him a quick summary of the events of the previous night. He left while Formby was cursing his luck. The indisputably genuine vigilante story had broken

while the man who had made the Express vigilante-aware was stuck in hospital. There was no justice. Unfortunately, the latest episode had no connection with anything that Formby had turned up earlier, as far as he could tell.

Formby switched from cursing his luck to cursing himself. If he had had his wits about him, he would have been vague. That way, the police would have brought details of the new case to him to see if they matched his previous experiences. The careless driver, who had shunted him into hospital, had also deprived him of a story that would have made his name.

When the doctor came round to find out if Robin Formby was in a fit condition to be discharged, she found him in a thoroughly depressed state of mind.

The helicopter pilot was doubtful, almost reluctant, when he dropped his passengers on a rugged Scottish peak and took to the clear, Saturday morning air again. He had not made the run out to Robbijohn's mountain refuge before and, as far as he could tell, there was absolutely nowhere in sight for the travellers to take their luggage. If they had not brought a modern-miracle of a lightweight tent, the pilot concluded, they looked doomed to an uncomfortable time until their pick-up at eleven o'clock the next morning.

A side-shoot from the path down from the mountain top became a staircase with a non-slip pattern cut into the solid rock of the mountain and non-slip hand-rails. Ken Robbijohn knew from the cabin's surveillance system that he was about to have company. He was looking extremely guilty when he opened the main entrance door to his approaching brother.

Lance Robbijohn and Mi Tai dumped their travelling bags in the hallway and began to soak in the interior heat. The Scottish Saturday morning outside was bright and sunny, but a strong wind blowing from the north was stripping all

warmth from the day.

"Hi, you must be Lance," said an unexpected female voice with an Australian accent.

Lance Robbijohn glanced at his brother, who was looking even more guilty, then he stepped all the way in to the main room. The reason for his brother's silence was immediately obvious. He had guests. Two of them. Both female, thirty-ish and wearing shorts and tee-shirts, both attractive enough to keep a man from pestering his brother on the phone.

"Stella and Camille," said Ken Robbijohn.

"Hi, nice to meet you," said Camille, proving that she was Australian, too

"They've been using the place as a base of operations while they're back-packing in the area," Ken added. "This is Lance and Mi Tai."

"Oh, well, I suppose it's a bit more comfortable than a youth hostel," said Lance. "If less easy to get to."

"We love your view," said Camille, who wore her black hair in an almost military crewcut.

"You should see it in a serious storm," said Lance.

The cabin had been built on the side of mountain and it boasted a triple-glazed picture window, which looked out over a glen. It was a favourite retreat of the Vietnam veterans when they need solitude and *the* place to be during a storm.

Lance Robbijohn never tired of sitting at the window watching Nature running riot through a good display of lightning with accompanying thunder.

"Here for long?" said Ken, dropping a heavy hint.

"Until tomorrow," said Lance. "I've got a meeting tomorrow morning and this is a good place to park in the meantime."

"A meeting on a Sunday?" said Stella with a frown.

"Best day to meet some people," said Lance. "And there's

nothing much else to do in Scotland on a Sunday, anyway."

«Is your kid brother going to offer us some coffee, do you think?» Mi Tai asked Lance Robbijohn in Vietnamese.

"Doubt it," said Lance.

"Hey, is that Vietnamese?" said Camille. "My uncle was there during the war. He taught us some of the language but I've forgotten most of it."

"We were just wondering when our host is going to offer us some coffee," Lance explained, looking at his brother.

"Coffee. Right," said Ken.

"So you are from Vietnam?" Stella asked Mi Tai.

"Right," she said. "I was Boat Person. Attacked by pirates at sea and saved by Yanks on cargo ship."

"Oh, my!" said Camille, looking very impressed.

"So whereabouts are you from in Australia?" said Lance, sparing Mi Ti further interrogation. "The tropical north or the frozen south?"

"You know Oz?" said Camille.

Lance nodded. "I've been to Darwin a few times. Usually when it was raining."

"We're from Brisbane. Sort of half-way down on the east coast?" said Stella.

"And what brings you half-way round the world? A bit far to go for a weekend break."

"We're working at Aberdeen. For one of the oil companies. And we just got off a train somewhere that looked unspoilt."

"Yes, we do pretty good on unspoilt here," laughed Lance. "Apart from the in-comers building all over the mountains."

"We got quite a surprise when we met Ken strolling about on your mountain," said Camille. "No pack, no big boots. And he had to show us the 'cabin' before we'd believe it existed. You'd never find it if you didn't know it's there."

"That's the secret of success, these days," said Lance. "Not

being found by people you'd rather not meet."

"I was thinking about a trip to Australia," Ken said as he emerged from the kitchen with a tray. "What d'you reckon, Lance?"

"Probably a good place to be if you don't want to run into anyone you know," said Lance.

"Know any good travel agents?" Ken added.

"I dare way we can come up with a bucket shop that'll give you a good deal." Lance Robbijohn smiled at his brother, telling him that he had made a wise choice of semi-permanent hiding place.

# THIRTY ONE

## Demolition

Grosvenor Park, two miles from the city centre of Hambourne, offered a natural amphitheatre, which some residents insisted on believing had been caused by the impact of a giant meteorite. They liked to believe that it had crashed to earth at about the time of the extinction of the dinosaurs.

The local 'experts' closed their ears when anyone tried to tell them that Ice Ages over the intervening 65 million years would have applied the grinding force of rocks embedded in glaciers to any such surface features, obliterating them totally. The romantics preferred the myth to reason.

The Grosvenor Bowl occupied four acres of the park, and it was fenced off to control admission via four gates. Some thirty thousand heavy metal fans trooped into the bowl during the afternoon, spent a fortune on soft drinks and cans of beer and lager, which the burning August sun boiled out of them in an invisible cloud of sweat, and bopped till they dropped to the high-wattage, high-energy rock music that battered them from a huge stack of speakers.

Gavin Murdoch's staff had produced a programme that was worth keeping as a souvenir, posters, tee-shirts, commemorative mugs and car stickers for the occasion. Each of

the pieces of merchandise carried as a logo the full name of *Gavin Murdoch Enterprises*, giving Murdoch awareness in the Hambourne area a satisfying boost.

The police made six arrests – two for possession of drugs, four for anti-social drunkenness. The coppers on the ground found that they had little to do in the main. The Murdoch Organization had provided enough stewards to deal with trouble at an early stage. The image-building exercise also rubbed off on the Hambourne police force, which was seen to be maintaining order with just the right level of official presence.

Pronounced fit for duty, Robin Formby spent part of the afternoon in the backstage area, dodging radio and TV reporters and trying to interview members of the eight bands for a feature in the Express. He felt that it was a better assignment than covering the trade unionists' solidarity march through the centre of Hambourne, even after One-Ton Radio announced that the whole thing had descended into farce.

Counter-demonstrators had gained access to the upper floors of several office buildings and heaved balloons full of water into the ranks of marchers. And some had chosen to deliver less pleasant fluids. The march had become a shambles and the police were not optimistic about catching those responsible for the chaos.

Robin Formby realized that he had been replaced as the resident vigilante expert when he switched on his radio after a late start to Sunday morning. Ann Formby was still in bed. Her husband had won the privilege of making breakfast.

"Coming up to the hour and here's some local news," said one of the One Ton Yanks. "The weather is great, if you like sun and the roads are clear all the way to the coast. So if you're into paddling in raw sewage, go for it!

"There was a piece of either high drama or pure comedy on the eight twenty-seven train into Hambourne Central last night. Two stops down the line, at Southgate, the campaign to force them to put some decent rolling stock on that route struck again. Here's an eye-witness report."

"Well," said a female voice, which Formby categorized as thirtyish, round and blonde, "the door stuck, and some people couldn't get out. You know what rotten old trains they keep giving us. Well, all of a sudden, when people were moving to other doors, these two men went up to the stuck door. Then one of them shouted, 'Clear!' and there was a bang. Well, the door just shot off its hinges and crashed onto the platform."

"Interesting, huh?" said the American DJ. "The police want to talk to two explosives experts, and they want more witnesses. Pick up that phone and get dialling, guys."

Formby turned the volume down while he phoned the Hambourne Express newsroom. Jenny Hobson had covered the incident on the train while Formby and his wife had been lapping up the post-concert hospitality in Grosvenor Park. She had taken over the role of resident vigilante expert. Life was a conspiracy and Robin Formby was its main victim.

To be fair, Jenny Hobson had been covering the campaign to put modern rolling stock on the local railway lines that had not yet been brought into the Metro tram system. About all that had been achieved was agreement from the train operators that the 1960s diesel units had been on their last legs for a decade, but the lines weren't generating enough income to replace them.

People using explosives, and not declaring any sort of connection with the rolling stock campaign, put the story well inside Formby's territory. It was time for the tough to get going to re-establish himself.

Formby decided that he would have to do a lot more listening to his radio scanner. The Home Office had moved police radio traffic off the VHF band to make more room for local radio stations; mainly ones in the commercial sector, which had to pay a licence fee.

The police were now broadcasting on UHF using electronically scrambled signals, which forced an eavesdropper to make an investment in a £350 decoder if he wanted to listen in. It was still illegal to listen in on the transmissions, but Robin Formby was a journalist and that made a difference.

The public's right-to-know was involved. And so, incidentally, was Robin Formby's career.

Lance Robbijohn pressed the *cancel* key on his mobile phone. He remained standing at a window, frowning through triple glazing at a heather-clad hillside.

"Don't tell me," sighed his brother, reading body language. "Australia. It's all fallen through."

"No, it's nothing to do with you. Or maybe it might be," Lance Robbijohn added thoughtfully. "That was Furry Disch on the line. Someone's just blown up a black boat at the marina. Blown the bleedin' stern into the next county."

"And you reckon it's someone catching up with *you*?" said Ken Robbijohn. "Or getting at you to make you tell him where I am?"

"That's the trouble with having so many bastards after you," said Lance, still frowning.

"So what are you going to do about it?"

"Leave it to the guys on the spot."

"It's obviously some sort of warning," said Ken. "They want you alive. Or they would have blown the boat up when you were aboard."

A crash whipped their heads round. Mi Tai had dropped

a tray with cups and a coffee pot at the doorway. Lance Robbijohn clutched his chest.

"Don't *do* that!" he gasped. "I don't need any more shocks today."

«Someone's blown up our boat?» Mi Tai asked in Vietnamese for greater clarity.

«Furry says the marina's full of cops and fire engines,» said Robbijohn.

«Our boat?» said Mi Tai helplessly.

Robbijohn put an arm round her shoulders and steered her to a settee. His brother went to the kitchen for a cloth. The polished wooden floor was swimming with coffee streaked with cream. Mi Tai sat automatically. Robbijohn fetched her a glass of brandy and made her sip it slowly.

«It's okay,» he said in an encouraging tone. «Everything's insured. It gives you an excuse to buy some new things. You didn't have anything really valuable aboard, did you? You said you weren't able to bring anything from home when you left Hong Kong.»

«No.»

«You're going to be okay. I'm not going to tell you to get lost now there's no boat for you to look after. You're on the team, kiddo. You're going to be my personal helicopter pilot, remember?»

Mi Tai responded to another friendly squeeze with a thin smile. In apparently settled surroundings, she still had a refugee mentality. She had squirrelled away thousands of pounds in large notes – her roulette winnings – treating the black boat as her personal piggy bank.

If her cash box had survived an explosion and a fire, she expected it to be stolen by someone picking over the wreckage. It was true that she was still part of the team, but she had lost the sense of independence that went with her secret

stash. She would have to start all over again.

The decision to leave Vietnam for prosperity in the West via Hong Kong had tested her courage to the limits. Escaping from the awfulness of a refugee camp full of unwanted immigrants had been equally nerve-racking. Yet another fresh start was a daunting prospect. She knew that Robbijohn would give her many more opportunities to rebuild her insurance fund, but she could not help but wonder if it would all disappear in another disaster.

Hambourne was full of statistical anomalies. Robin Formby had decided to make a collection of them as proof that there was something going on in the city. The published figures were readily available to a journalist and even a non-expert like himself could see that successful and attempted suicides by jumping from car-park buildings and the upper floors of high rise flats had risen dramatically over the last few months. Hit and run incidents were also statistically much too high for the area.

Formby was sure that he could build a convincing case for intervention by vigilantes if he could only get hold of more detailed information on the suicide figures. If the vigilantes were offering offenders the brief terror of defenestration as an alternative to the being handed over to the police, there had to be a direct link between the floor from which an unsuccessful suicide attempt had been made and the criminal history of the jumper.

Petty criminals would be delivered out of ground- or first-floor windows. The incorrigibles would be launched from higher and higher windows. It was the same with the hit-and-runs: the more serious the victims's criminal record, the less chance of survival he or she would have.

The case of the police *Shop-A-Mugger* 0800 hotline was

another example of increased resistance to the criminals. The local force had been obliged increase the number of lines from three to five to meet periodic rushes of calls on all crime topics from shop-lifting to drug dealing. That information was clearly documented in the records of the council's Police Committee.

In fact, Formby had been told, the free-call number was so popular that the police got people ringing them just to have a chat with someone. And when they realized that the caller was a time-waster, the police officers on duty usually pressed a button to deliver a series of buzzes and clicks down the line to simulate a fault. Or they pretend that they couldn't hear the caller any more and hung up.

Formby had even heard talk of the creation of an American military-style *Tee Kay Zee* – a Total Kill Zone – in the most crime-ridden parts of the city; a zone in which all those who preyed on their fellow citizens would be liable to be killed as an ultimate deterrent to re-offending.

A message flashed up on Formby's computer screen to tell him that he had a message in his electronic in-tray. Its effect was to release his attention into the wider world. Sounds flooded in through the shreds of his shell of concentration to remind him that he was sitting at his desk in the comparative quiet of a Sunday morning in the newsroom.

'Crime story for you,' read the pop-up message when Formby looked at his computer's in-tray. 'Check it out. The prize bingo run in the HamM [the *Express's* jargon for the Hambourne Mail, a local free paper] has had two winning tickets handed in. One's a forgery and they say they can prove it. One winner is the advertising manager's cousin and the other is a 64-yr-old grandmother.'

"Oh, my God! Major crime!" scoffed Formby.

His phone began to ring. Formby snatched it up.

"Right, I'm on it, or I will be when I get off the phone," he said, expecting to be lectured about the bingo story.

"You've heard?" said Jane Verity's voice.

"Hang on, are we talking about the same thing?" Formby caught a note of doubt in her voice.

"I'm talking about the bomb at the marina. And you getting down there right away," said Verity.

"I'm just leaving the building," said Formby, wrestling to get his jacket off the back of his chair.

The most that he had been expecting for that Sunday morning had been a big pile-up on the motorway. But an actual bomb! That was something well worth his time.

The telephone began to chirp for attention again ten minutes after the call from Ferenc Disch. Ken Robbijohn had cleaned up the mess and made more coffee. He had started the filter machine gurgling before locating the mopping up cloth. He had a well developed sense of priorities and timing. Mi Tai was no lounger interested in coffee. She was still in shock.

"Zdravstviy," said a male voice with a Russian accent. "We heard news on One Ton, so we came to marina."

"Who's we?" Lance Robbijohn asked Gregor Maiskiy.

"Big Ed with me. He wanted to see your boat."

"What sort of shape is it in? Does it still look like a boat, or is it just a heap of melted fibreglass?"

"Your boat is okay. It was other black boat that blew up."

"You what!" gasped Robbijohn.

"It was new black boat that blew up, not your boat," Maiskiy repeated.

"Just a minute, I'm going to put Mi Tai on. Say that again."

Patiently, Maiskiy repeated his message. He waited out a torrent of Vietnamese. Then Mi Tai remembered that the Russian member of the team had been spared a posting to

her homeland. "Our boat okay?" she added in English.

"It looks okay from distance," said Maiskiy. "We used binoculars. Police say no one can go in marina in case of more bombs. Your boat was well sheltered from blast."

"The boat, it's okay." Mi Tai beamed at Robbijohn.

"I know, he told me." Robbijohn held out a hand for the receiver. "Is Ed there?" he said to Gregor Maiskiy.

"Hi, Lance," said the bass rumble of Big Ed Zelasky, who had lost his left leg to mid thigh while serving on an armoured patrol boat on the Mekong River. "This here joint is really jumpin'."

"Any idea what happened? Was it a fuel-vapour explosion?"

"No one knows for sure, but I'd say it's unlikely. That boat's straight out of the factory and the little girl the guy had looking after it knows her stuff. She's got herself a B.S. in engineering, for chrise sakes. She knows all about how heavy vapours can build up, they've got an extraction system and she does a daily test of the bilge atmosphere as well."

"So you're saying one of that Murdoch guy's enemies put a bomb aboard?"

"I ain't saying nuthin'," chuckled Big Ed. "'Cause I don't know nuthin'.

"But you reckon our boat is okay?"

"As much as you can tell from a hundred yards away. It's in the next pen and out of the blast-cone. There may be a few bits of junk on the deck, but I cain't see no broken windows or like that. I don't reckon I'll be able to get near it till the morning. The fuzz are still looking for more bombs."

"And they're reserving their options?"

"If you mean they ain't sayin' nuthin' too, you're right. I checked in with them and they say they'll call me on the mobile phone when they reckon it's safe to go aboard."

"Where are you staying in the meantime'"

"Your skeet-shooting range. I got some sheets of a new molecular plastic from a French guy. I'm going to see if I can beat your world record for an elastic-powered aircraft."

"Bastard!"

"I reckon I've got you whupped now, Lance."

"Just watch what you do with the nitrile-resin glues," warned Robbijohn. "I don't want any more cups and cans stuck to my tables."

"Hey, don't panic," chuckled Zelasky. "What time do you get in tomorrow?"

"About half-past ten at the airport tomorrow night."

"We'll be in your hanger or here. See you then," said Zelasky.

Mi Tai took the telephone from Robbijohn's hand and returned it to its usual place on the window ledge. She was looking very cheerful, as if she had just heard that she had won the pools. Ken Robbijohn found that his coffee had cooled to a drinkable temperature. He grinned at his brother from the depths of an armchair in *Black Watch* tartan.

"So you can't stick an inflated bill to your insurance company?" he said with a laugh.

"You can't get lucky every day," said Lance Robbijohn. «Well, some of us can,» he added to Mi Tai in Vietnamese.

She frowned incomprehension at him.

«Whose secret bank didn't get blown up?» Robbijohn added.

«What secret bank?» Mi Tai returned with a frown.

«You've got that secret panel in your cabin. Or haven't you found it yet?»

«You looked in there?»

«No, but I assume you keep your secret bankroll in there?»

«You know about it?» Mi Tai said incredulously.

«I haven't been in there to count it or anything, but it seems the most likely place for you to keep your spare cash. Maybe you should think of somewhere a bit safer now.»

"Yeah!" Mi Tai returned to the settee and picked up her almost untouched glass of brandy.

"I understood one word of that conversation," remarked Ken Robbijohn. "The last one. I suppose you were talking about me again? Mi Tai was agreeing how devastatingly attractive I am?"

"Something like that," his brother said with a patient smile.

Behind the smile, Lance Robbijohn was calculating. He and the Vietnam Vets had made powerful enemies in two regions of the world which were threaded with organized crime. If there were two black boats in a marina, and one was blown up, the owner of the other had to worry a little. Robbijohn had left *Sigma 212* in safe hands, however.

The Vets were armed, dangerous and careful. And they knew that their enemies were the same.

# THIRTY TWO

## Casting Some Light

The bomb-at-the-marina story had been good for a big headline and a prominent reporter's by-line in the Monday lunchtime edition of the Hambourne Express, but there had been nothing much to report other than the bald facts.

If they knew any details of method and motive, the police were keeping them to themselves. Gavin Murdoch was convinced that he was the victim of an incompetent bomber, who had struck at the wrong target, and there was nothing available in the way of evidence, or even convincing gossip, to suggest that he was wrong.

As far as Robin Formby was concerned, it was a time for keeping a close eye on his police contact for signs that he might be getting somewhere and avoiding irritating him by harping on about the lack of visible progress.

One useful spin-off from the event was that his police contact was more talkative about matters not related to the bomb. Formby's research into the vigilante question had told him that there had been a recent lull in their activities. Formby had no idea that Murdoch's team had decided to take a quick holiday in Spain but he could detect their absence.

Asking Detective Constable Mike Teller if he had noticed

a drop in crimes against criminals gave Formby a chance to mention the affair of Jim Jones, the defenestrated drug dealer.

Teller took another swallow from his pint of lager, which Formby had bought for him. "You know my boss would blow up if I admit I believe in vigilantes?" he remarked.

"Hypothetically speaking," said Formby.

"Hypothetically speaking, the whole thing's full of holes. We get a phone call to say someone's been kidnapped off the street. We make inquires but no one knows anything at all and no one's seen anything; which is pretty standard for the area . . ."

"*Wouldn't wee on a copper if he was on fire* country."

"Exactly. Then someone asks if we mean the film company because we're too dense to know they must have applied for a licence to shoot some street scenes. Only there's no record of any film company ever applying for a licence to work in the area. Even so, other people outside the immediate area saw vehicles with cameras. And one bloke in the area actually saw guys with hand-held cameras."

"No descriptions, of course."

"Male, probably, and breathing, probably."

"So it's either an outfit that's not too bothered about the rules or X. X being another word for the one we daren't say."

"Vigilantes?"

"That word, yes. Another?" Formby waved a signal to the barman without waiting for a reply. "You know what my editor thinks? He reckons it was the drug squad taking direct action against someone they can't nick?"

"Like it!" laughed Teller. "The DI's satisfied Jim Jones was taken out by rivals in the drugs trade."

"But he doesn't know who did it, so he doesn't know it wasn't vigilantes who took Jones out of circulation."

"Vigilantes, Rob?" said his contact with a look of surprise, as if he had never heard the term before in his life.

"Rob Formby, dead horses flogged while you wait," said the reporter, realizing that there was no way that he was going to provoke the local force into starting a serious hunt for Jim Jones' killers.

"Rob, old son," the detective drove the point home relentlessly, "we don't have so little to do that we can start a full-scale hunt for your vigilantes with no leads to follow. Cheers!"

"Cheers!" Formby took the top off his new pint and tried another tack. "You know this business about the *Mail's* forged bingo ticket? Are you doing anything about it?"

"No mate. It turns out the lady's grandson was behind the forgery, and she was able to get her hands on the ticket and eat it when he got found out. So she didn't actually make a claim for the prize and there was no crime."

"That's handy. How did he work it, the grandson?"

"He managed to erase the one wrong number and reprint the ticket with a winning one."

"What, and they did some brilliant forensic test to prove it had been re-printed?"

"No, they just stuck it under a UV lamp. The paper was printed with an invisible pattern of fluorescent tracers and they could see big gaps where the kid had done his erasing."

"So the advertising manager's cousin got the prize."

"The ad manager's second-cousin once removed, who has never met the ad manager and has no contact with that part of their extended family."

"That sounded like a quote, Mike," laughed Formby.

"It was, mate. The ad man's threatening to sue anyone who says their prizes only go to relatives of people who work on the *Mail*."

"Have you seen that new underground paper that was launched this morning?"

"I've heard about it but I've not seen it yet."

"It's called *Crime News* . . ."

"Snappy title."

"And it contains names, photos and addresses of criminals, and details of the number of houses they've burgled or the number of cars they've broken into. The implied message is that these people are now fair game for some grief."

"Oh, shit!" sighed Teller. "I can just see us getting a rush of complaints from criminals about their homes being done over, bricks through windows, tyres slashed or car windows or lights shattered."

"They might even have their cars stolen by joyriders. And the graffiti merchants might find people have sprayed all over where they live. Maybe we'll even end up with some criminals afraid to leave their homes in case someone breaks in while they're out. Or something happens to them."

"You're really enjoying this little fantasy, aren't you?" laughed Teller.

"I can see you coppers really enjoying being unsympathetic to criminals when they come to the cop shop to report some outrage."

"No, mate," said Teller. "I bet my bosses would prefer that revenge crimes don't get reported. Bad effect on the crime statistics."

"Yes, I can believe that," nodded Formby.

"Let us not forget, Rob, that these people have paid their debt to society."

"That's bollocks!" laughed Formby. "They've had a slap on the wrist that bears no relation to the misery they've created. And before you get on to their human rights, criminals are no longer entitled to have any. And that's by their own

choice. They chose to steal and destroy other people's lives and property."

"But even so, the law has taken its course, Rob."

"The law isn't being administered by the right people if they make such a bog of it."

"Are you advocating a vigilante society, Mr. Formby?"

"There's a lot to be said for people keeping their eyes on what social rejects are up to."

"Maybe you should have been a copper, Rob."

"No chance. They get even less respect than reporters," Formby said with a laugh.

Most of the buildings in Hambourne's business district were either new or they had new interiors in façades of cleaned Victorian or Edwardian sandstone. The empty office occupied by Thorville Associates lay on the second floor of Gordon House, one of the latest developments. Robbijohn looked on that office as his front door.

Gordon House was owned by a company that Robbijohn and the Vets controlled from a distance. The building's list of tenants included Hambourne Risk Management on the windowless sixth floor, several legal firms, two firms of stockbrokers, an architectural partnership, a dentist with an exclusive private practice and a consulting surgeon, who performed discreet plastic surgery on the fourth floor in his custom-built, sterile area.

None of the tenants suspected that the whole building existed for the convenience of the people who used a single, unimpressive, one-room office in the lower, cheaper half of the building.

Subtle curves in the lines of the interior reconstruction had created a void, which did not exist officially. This hidden apartment attracted no electricity or water charges because

it sucked its services parasitically from the general supply. Business rates, VAT and other revenue-raising devices had no meaning here.

Efficient sound-proofing meant that the occupant could hold wild parties undetected, if he chose. His television was licence-free because there was no address to put on an application form. Windows were impossible, but the apartment had substitutes – poster-size exterior views of Hambourne in window-like frames of white uPCV.

Mi Tai had learned to control her reactions to strange events. When Robbijohn opened a section of an apparently solid wall, she just followed him through from an unremarkable, small office to new territory. Robbijohn had driven straight to the building's underground car park from the airport. There had been two cardboard cartons for office equipment waiting on a two-wheeled trolley. He had put their suitcases in the cartons before pushing the trolley to the lift.

Two men had joined them in the lift at the first floor – middle-aged, dark suits, balding, carrying a briefcase and a plastic wallet containing a perfect-bound business presentation. They barely glanced at Robbijohn, the delivery man with the trolley. Both had an eyeful of Mi Tai, wondering whose secretary she was.

Big Ed Zelasky was waiting in the concealed apartment. He had filled the air with the smell of fresh coffee and a hint of cannabis behind tobacco. Mi Tai followed the smell of coffee across the banana-shaped lounge to an elliptical kitchen, trailing a greeting to Big Ed.

"Gregor's on the boat," she heard Big Ed tell Robbijohn as he recovered their cases from the cartons.

The kitchen was a little claustrophobia-generating, but there was more room to move than in *Sigma 212's* galley.

"The police are out of the marina now?" said Robbijohn.

"At last," nodded Big Ed. "They wanted to search all the boats thoroughly. Until some of the owners started asking about warrants."

"Which made them even more keen?" chuckled Robbijohn.

"Only the guys making the noises were pretty heavy dudes," chuckled Big Ed. "Lawyers, a judge, the top Two Hundred of Hambourne Society. Those guys. So they just went round with sniffer dogs in the end."

"What sort of a bomb was it?"

"Nothing very clever. Just ordinary, quarry-grade gelignite, plain azide detonator and a combustion fuse. Light, and retire immediately."

"Not plastic explosive with an electronic timer?"

"Nothing your average mechanic, or even your average terrorist, would be seen dead with," said Big Ed. "Our tame fuzz said it was a very low-level revenge job. So this guy Murdoch is being harassed by the fuzz about who's got it in for him."

Mi Tai emerged from the kitchen with mugs for herself and Lance Robbijohn.

"Like this place?" said Zelasky.

"It's weird," said Mi Tai.

"I guess you have to get used to the shapes of the rooms," grinned Zelasky. "Heard any more ghost stories, Lance?"

"Nothing recently," said Robbijohn.

He had three more ways into and out of the hidden apartment. There were stories in circulation of people being seen going into areas of the building with no other exit and never coming out again.

The building was old enough to support apparently authentic rumours of a ghost, who followed the old interior layout. There were tales of disembodied legs protruding from ceilings as their feet tramped along floors of the past,

which had been ripped out in the great renovation campaign.

"How do you feel about living here for a while, honey?" Zelasky added to Mi Tai.

"It's different." Mi Tai threw off a practised bon mot.

"What's your timetable?" said Robbijohn.

"As soon as your little lady packs what she needs on the boat, we're out of here. Down to the coast as fast as the canal police will let us," said Zelasky.

"Any whispers about the bomber?" said Robbijohn.

"Plenty about who's looking for him. No one seems to know anything, despite a lot of shaking. The word out on the street is he'd be sensible to turn himself in to the fuzz right away. If some of the other guys looking get their hands on him, he's liable to become pieces very slowly."

"Any evidence he went for the wrong black boat? Not thinking there might be two?"

Zelasky shrugged. "Who knows? That's why we're being so careful, ain't it?"

Gavin Murdoch found some of his wife's home visits slightly strange experiences. When she thought that she was in the company of people who didn't know them, and she thought that she could get away with it, Kathleen called herself Lady Fremont. She had attended Fremont Primary School, in the area of the same name on the fringes of Hambourne, some thirty years in the distant past.

Kathleen felt that the name had a ring of authenticity. No longer wearing a wedding ring, she gave the impression that her marriage had ended in widowhood rather than divorce. Those who knew that she had been married to Gavin Murdoch assumed that she had traded up to Lord Fremont after dumping her childhood sweetheart.

The police had hauled away the wreckage of *Sigma 211* for

detailed study by forensic scientists. Gavin Murdoch was left with just a receipt for the wreck. The visitors to the marina on Monday morning had nothing much to gawp at other than an empty berth.

Kathleen Murdoch's visit to express sympathy for his loss was well-intentioned. She had not come to mock. She had been planning to claim her share of the use of the black boat. She had also turned up for a look at her husband's latest mistress. She had heard that Roxanne had received the bullet in favour of a blonde. Kathleen believed that she could spot a mistress at fifty paces. She had seen one or two obvious mistress types at the Marina, but no blondes. Sheila Avery had been aboard the other black boat, out of sight.

Kathleen Murdoch viewed the empty space in her own and her husband's life, then she headed toward the marina restaurant for coffee and a snack. She stopped at the other black boat to ask if they crew knew anything. The uncommunicative Oriental woman, who acted as a boatsitter, had packed up and gone. *Sigma 212* was about to go down-river in the hands of a genuine seadog with a Russian name and a helper with a Russian accent. They seemed to be hired hands, who had only just arrived at the marina to move the boat.

A breeze blew a tempting smell of frying after her as Kathleen continued on to the restaurant. Also aboard *Sigma 212* were another Eastern European type with a satellite-style time-lag in his speech, Furry Disch's Australian girlfriend, who was called Gemaigne, Claire Dragoner, the daughter of one of the marina's owners, and Sheila Avery.

Disch had made some chips in the deep-frier in the galley while grilling a mountain of very superior sausages. It was just after eleven o'clock in the morning; very early for lunch as far as Gemaigne was concerned but her hosts seemed

ready for a meal. Sheila Avery restricted herself to a sausage sandwich with wholemeal bread and a cup of coffee instead of a can of beer.

She found herself enjoying the undemanding company. Most of the marina's patrons were very image-conscious. They had spent a lot of money to acquire a floating status symbol. Some treated it as an aquatic caravan, which they had driven about by a marine chauffeur. Others tried to give the impression of being an expert on boats, engines and sailing.

Big Ed had been messing about in boats for the best part of forty years. He was the resident expert. His given name was Paul and Sheila had asked one of his friends how they had got to Ed. "You've seen the size of him?" one of the Yanks had said. "It's short for *Edifice*. They had to fell half a rain forest to make his wooden leg."

Gregor, the Russian, knew a lot about diesel engines. Sheila Avery had gained the impression that his experience was mainly of tank engines. Both Gregor and Big Ed looked like ex-soldiers. Like Furry and his girlfriend, they were there for a good time and they made no attempt to impress anyone.

Claire Dragoner was something of an oddball too. She was in her early twenties, about five years younger than Sheila Avery and ten to twenty years younger than the others. She seemed to have struck up a genuine friendship with the patrons of *Sigma 212*.

Arriving at the marina to deliver a negative progress report on his hunt for the bomber, Shaun Wayne noticed the daughter of the boss of Hambourne Risk Management aboard *Sigma 212*, apparently as a welcome guest. He also noticed several regular customers of *Merity's Casino* – including a Russian, who looked as if he would cut his

mother's throat without a second thought if she got in his way.

The last thing that Wayne wanted to do was make an enemy out of Lionel Dragoner. He suspected that Dragoner had the power to order the disappearance of inconvenient people. Someone like himself, who knew much about the illegal side of Hambourne Risk Management, had to watch his step. Profit and danger walked side by side in Wayne's line of work.

Reluctantly, Wayne decided to give up his pursuit of Robbijohn, the man with the effective computer system for picking winning racehorses. He congratulated himself on bailing out before matters went too far. Even so, he felt that he had to teach Robbijohn a lesson to save face. And there was a way to inconvenience his enemy safely. All that was needed was a simple, anonymous phone call.

In the meantime, Lionel Dragoner was extremely anxious to account for the person who had bombed a boat in his marina. There would be a bonus for whoever identified the danger to public safety and the insurance company's coffers.

Wayne was wondering if he could find a sucker. It would put a nice bonus in his pocket if he could plant some evidence on someone. On someone who, still protesting his innocence, would be wiped out when Dragoner lost patience.

It would be nice in other ways, too, but Wayne preferred not to think about them. It was much safer for himself if he refrained from thinking along certain lines.

# THIRTY THREE

## Agenda For Co-operation

Luis Carazon had found *Merity's Casino* a good place to pick up a woman for a night out. He wasn't interested in professionals. He wanted to meet enthusiastic amateurs, who were looking for a one-night diversion from the routines of their lives. The first person to approach him when he found a seat at the bar, however, was a man.

The two were similar types – Latin, short and plump with greying dark hair. Carazon, at fifty, was about five years older than Riccardo Mundoro and his hair contained more grey. Otherwise, the men were fairly interchangeable. They were dressed expensively if conservatively, and they had the same confident air of men who knew what they wanted out of life and who could afford to pay for it if they didn't just take it as of right.

"¡Hola!" said Mundoro, offering a Spanish greeting in a Southern-Italian accent. "¿Qué tal?"

"Bueno. ¿Y Usted?" said Carazon.

"Terrific!" Mundoro switched to English with a mixed Italian and American accent. "You looking for a date?"

"Crossed my mind," Carazon said in the same language.

"I've got my eye on a couple of gals at table four. If they lose much more, they'll be looking for a cheap night."

"Yeah? Which ones?"

"The blonde in green. She's mine. The brunette right next to her is available."

"You been there before?"

"And back. That brunette's a nice mover, as the Limeys say, but I want a change. So that's why I'm going for the blonde."

"Okay, I'm interested," said Carazon. "You been here long? If you know the layout so well?"

"Two weeks already," sighed Mundoro. He glanced around automatically to check for eavesdroppers, then he lowered his voice. "One of our couriers disappeared here three weeks ago with four keys of merchandise."

Luis Carazon whistled softly. He and Mundoro were in the same business; investing drug money in decent antiques. His investment capital came from Colombian cocaine. Riccardo Mundoro converted cash from an Italian syndicate's sales of heroin. The loss of four kilograms of the drug was not something that his organization could afford to ignore; but on prestige grounds rather than the cash value of the shipment.

"And the thing of it is," added Mundoro, "we don't know if the guy ran into some of the famous vigilantes around here. You've heard of them?"

Carazon nodded and pulled a face. "They chuck guys out of windows, I heard."

"Right. So did they off our courier? Or did he just walk out of his hotel room with the goods, leaving his suitcase and everything behind, and split?"

"A real headache."

"The guy I'm working for is about seventy per cent sure the courier ran into some of the local vigilantes, but he's still suspicious, you know? He's got guys testing samples bought on the street for the exact same chemical composition as the

shipment. Just in case the courier is alive and getting rich somewhere."

"You reckon he's still here? If he is alive?"

Mundoro shrugged. "If he has gone independent, maybe he figures the last place we'd look for him is right here. And the local dealers don't seem to be running short. Maybe someone's selling our four keys to the street dealers at distributor prices, instead of at wholesale prices to distributors."

"He'll make a lot more green stuff out of it," nodded Carazon. "For a longer period of risk."

"So anyway, I'm looking at some eighteenth century English silver while I'm checking round. How about you?"

"Arms and armour."

"For the guy from Bugamenia?"

"Could be."

"And looking to pick up his million bucks?"

"Could be," repeated Carazon.

"You know my guys have got the same offer open? The bunch they're looking for only stung them for a lousy ten million bucks, not the sixty-two mil your bunch got off the Bugamenias, but there's a lot of pride involved. That's why they've put up a million for the bodies. They don't care about the ten mil. They want blood and respect."

"The Bugamenias want their sixty-two mil back too; or as much as is left. They want blood, respect and cash."

"Maybe we can do each other a bit of good?" Mundoro suggested. "Trade information? And split anything we get? Two shots at half a mil is better than one shot at a million."

"Maybe." Carazon nodded. He trusted the Italian about as much as Mundoro trusted him, but there were possibilities in wary co-operation.

"Hey, look, the gals are giving up," grinned Mundoro. "Let's go and buy them a drink."

"Okay," approved Carazon, eager to begin the socializing. "There's some Yanks about town I'd like to get a line on," Mundoro added as they moved to intercept the two women. "Right age to have been in Vietnam and learn about killing and covert operations. They come in here with plenty of ready cash. Maybe we can put the arm on one of them."

"Take him somewhere quiet and see what he knows," nodded Carazon. "Maybe."

The female targets for the night were both thirtyish, well dressed and attractive. The brunette spotted Mundoro and waved a greeting. The men changed course slightly, as if they had been heading for another part of the club, and closed in wearing pleasant smiles rather than predatory grins. They were Latin gentlemen, who could rise above their sordid business affairs when there was a lady to be entertained.

The two visitors to Hambourne had a lot of competitors; men who where doing business in large towns and cities around the world and nosing around on the off-chance of picking up useful information. They were working from several descriptions which could fit a multitude of middle-aged men.

Their chief guides were all about personal characteristics and lifestyle. They knew that their fugitives were interested in boats and helicopters, and that they had lots of money. Money speaks to those who know it. Men with a great deal of money look and live differently from the herd to the trained eye. They might as well carry a neon sign.

Mundoro knew that the Americans owned a distinctive boat, which was berthed in the local marina. He had not yet discovered that they ran a charter and self-fly firm from a local airfield, but gaining that knowledge was just a matter of looking and listening and asking more questions. He had

become used to checking for familiar names and patterns of behaviour. The big prize was there for the taking.

As part of his economy campaign, Ivan Kenton had given up his elegant office on the fourth floor of Gordon House in the centre of Hambourne. He saw no point in paying rent if the Department of Trade was preventing Hambourne Trading from doing any business. He had moved some personal items of office furniture, and the collection of plants, into his own home. He had held his last meeting with DTI inspectors on the staircase there.

Arriving on the dot of ten-thirty on a Wednesday morning, the two men in dark grey suits had found themselves parked on hard, wooden chairs in the garage for this meeting. Ivan Kenton had kept them waiting for twenty minutes while he answered a string of phone calls before they were able to resume their interrogation discussion of Kenton through his solicitor.

"The usual question first, gentlemen," said solicitor Pierre McAinsley, who had a cushion on his chair. "Have you completed your survey of Mr. Kenton's records? Which you have had for five months and eighteen days already."

"The same answer, Mr McAinsley," said Hilary St. Vernon, an Eton and Oxford type with a regimental tie. He was in his mid-forties but he managed to look ten years younger. His air of smooth confidence was an oily sheath. "We are still not satisfied with your client's explanations of how he came to enter several transactions."

"After further discussions with my client, we have decided to disclose further information," said the solicitor. "Of course, this is without prejudice to outstanding legal actions against your Department. But first, we require a signature on a confidentiality agreement. Perhaps not quite at ministerial

level, but at the level of your head of department, Mr. St. Vernon, at the very least."

"Is this an attempt to make a deal?" frowned St. Vernon. "An immunity from prosecution in return for information which closes a loophole?"

"Certainly not!" McAinsley said indignantly. "My client requires iron-clad guarantees of confidentiality concerning commercial information of an unusual nature."

"I don't follow," frowned St. Vernon.

"My client is prepared to disclose his method of acquiring commercial information on the understanding he does so without prejudice to actions pending for recovery of compensation for unreasonable interference with his legitimate business activities. Nothing criminal is involved and therefore immunity from prosecution does not come into the question."

"Well, . . ." St. Vernon exchanged doubtful glances with his silent colleague, a more robust type who looked as if he was there to deal with clients who turned violent.

"The alternative is for Mr. Kenton to make the information public during the course of a court action; which will certainly embarrass both your department and the government. My client has shown extraordinary patience thus far. But enough is enough, gentlemen."

St. Vernon frowned. "Why didn't he mention any of this sooner?"

"When I see the signature on this agreement," McAinsley took a bulky document out of his briefcase, "all will be made clear. But I must insist on a decision by the end of this week. Noon on Friday, gentlemen. And for the benefit of the taped record of this meeting, which will be made public if you choose not to meet our terms, the gentlemen to whom I am speaking are Mr. Hilary St. Vernon and Mr. David Grouty of

the Department of Trade and Industry, Commercial Section."

"I detect a whiff of blackmail, Mr. McAinsley," St. Vernon protested.

"I detect more than a whiff of blackmail and intimidation in your department's intransigent attitude over the last six months or so, Mr. St. Vernon," the solicitor returned coolly. "You have tried to find evidence of criminal conduct by my client. Your failure has been as complete as your refusal to admit that you have made a serious error of judgement."

"Just a moment . . ." protested St. Vernon.

"I think you've had more than enough moments, Mr. St. Vernon," said Ivan Kenton. "Any competent investigator would have found out if any dodgy dealing was going on by now. You're well into the realm of either malice or incompetence now. So okay, you're forcing me to reveal highly confidential information. But only if I get a guarantee of continuing confidentiality. And you can tell your boss, if any of this information leaks out, I will sue him personally, and you personally, and your silent partner, Mr. Grouty, personally for everything you've got. You've kept me out of action for far too long while you've been faffing around. Enough is plenty."

"Naturally, I'll have to speak to my HoD," said St. Vernon.

"I suggest you get right on with it," Pierre McAinsley told him with a shark-like smile. "You have approximately two days and one hour to reach your decision."

"We don't respond well to threats, Mr. McAinsley," said St. Vernon.

Kenton shrugged. "So you'll end up wiping egg off your face. I'm not happy about disclosing this information but Mr. McAinsley has persuaded me to. I'm trying to keep the number of people in the know to a minimum, But if I have to go public, the waves of derision are going to swamp you. You'll

get laughed out of existence, at the very least."

"Really?" said St. Vernon frostily.

"Yes, really," nodded Kenton. "So I suggest you and your mate get on your bikes and get your signature. This meeting terminated at ten fifty-eight hours on Wednesday, the ninth of August."

Kenton stood up, took the cushion from his chair and folded the chair up as a further sign that he had finished contributing to the meeting. Pierre McAinsley did the same. Kenton took the two chairs over to hooks on the garage wall and hung them out of the way. St. Vernon put the agreement in his briefcase. McAinsley saw the two DoT inspectors to their car. He returned to the garage to find Kenton looking quietly confident.

They went into the house and headed for a clear space among the office plants in the sitting room. Kenton poured coffee from a fresh brew before helping himself to a modest measure of champagne brandy. McAinsley never drank during business hours.

"I hope you know what you're doing, Ivan," sighed the solicitor. "These people play for keeps."

Kenton shrugged. "We've agreed they're not going to let go now. They're determined to get me for insider trading. So all I have left is the truth. They won't like it but that's just too bad."

"And I'm not to get a preview just yet?"

"I need to work out how to present it because it's a bit incredible . . . No, it's a lot incredible. But it works for me. I've only held out so long because they're going to laugh at first. But they won't be laughing when they get the proof."

"Well, I hope you know what you're doing," McAinsley repeated.

Ivan Kenton smiled with a lot more confidence than he

felt. He had taken Gavin Murdoch's advice. He was giving the Department of Trade inspectors something to sink their teeth into. It was a wild yet almost plausible story, which had been inspired, in part, by the strange but growing local cult that trying to control Hambourne's climate by will-power. Kenton had decided to outweird the weirdos.

His solicitor left with the look of a man who doubted his client's sanity, but who was being paid more than enough to persuade him to persevere.

Free of distractions, Kenton returned to the spare bedroom, which had become his office. He had one of the most important presentations of his life to sort out.

*The Arches* was an area of the city that went its own way. It was almost a self-contained village of do-it-yourself shells in the arches of a railway viaduct on one side, and run-down shops and abandoned warehouses on the canal side. There was a strong tradition in that part of Hambourne of using the Armed Forces to escape to a better life. Returned ex-servicemen formed a significant part of The Arches' population.

Some ran unlicensed clubs behind the front of a shop. Half of the shops rarely opened their doors to the public. They did a thriving trade in militaria from all historical ages and all parts of the world. Smuggling was a popular pastime among men who had learned to become self-reliant and comfortable with making their own rules. Duty-free and VAT-free goods regularly travelled up the river for distribution from the warehouses that posed as wholesale garment factories.

The police and Customs & Excise officials made occasional forays into the district. They seldom achieved a worthwhile level of success. Gung-Ho Alley, as American visitors called it, had a strong sense of community and efficient warning systems. The inhabitants were more than willing to whisk

contraband swiftly to neighbouring premises, for which a search warrant had not been issued, or even right out of the area.

As they strolled along Conduit Street, Luis Carazon and Riccardo Mundoro knew that they had found the right place to hold a suspect for interrogation. There were buildings that looked untouched for years, decaying quietly under a thickening shell of grime. A quick job on a couple of locks would open up one of them. Driving a van or a car in out of sight would take less than a couple of minutes. Stopping at a display of Army surplus gear, Carazon and Mundoro used the grimy window as a mirror to inspect a former garage opposite, which had claimed two railway arches.

"Looks right for the job," murmured the Italian. "We ain't gonna call in no help?"

"How many more ways do you want to split the million?" said his fifty-year-old companion, taking the question as a comment on his physical fitness.

"Yeah," said Mundoro doubtfully.

"We show him a gun, tell him to get into the vehicle and put a bag over his head. Then we tie his hands and feet. If he won't do it, we shoot him right there and then. The English police will think it was just another street robbery. Then we go after another."

"Yeah, sounds okay." It was a matter of pride for Mundoro not to tell the Colombian that he had little or no experience of firearms. He acted tough and he talked tough, but he was just someone who laundered hot cash. "You want me to drive and you open the place up?"

"Sure," It was a matter of pride for Carazon not to admit that he knew nothing about picking locks.

There was a peeling estate agent's sign on the building. When he had got rid of the Italian, he would get hold of a set

of keys. He would be able to spin a convincing enough tale to the estate agent. He imagined that the firm would be so eager to unload the wreck that a bribe would not be necessary when he asked to borrow the keys to view the place out of office hours with his business partner.

"I'll check out renting a van." Mundoro was on familiar ground when it came to hiring vehicles. "No windows in back, huh?"

"Right. No windows. I'll meet you at your hotel at six tonight. I want to check this place out some more."

"Okay," said Mundoro.

Carazon remained in front of the window displaying Army surplus equipment until his ally turned a corner. Then he took out his *A to Z* of Hambourne to work out a route to the estate agent's office. Like Mundoro, he was not a man of action. But like Mundoro, he was prepared to become one for a half share in a million dollars.

Carazon reminded himself that he would have to order a firearm. He was not the sort of man who felt a need to travel armed. The possibility that the American might resist being kidnapped alarmed him but it stiffened his resolve to shoot at the slightest sign of trouble. He and his ally would have to act quickly and forcefully. They would have to leave no opportunity for resistance, or for witnesses to get a good look at them.

If things went badly wrong, Luis Carazon assured himself, his organization could whisk him out of the country at once. He felt sure that he could go through with killing the American. His younger, macho colleagues spoke casually about the men and women whom they had wiped out. Indeed, they asserted that killing an American is ecologically sound as Americans are the greatest polluters of the planet.

Carazon knew the right attitudes to strike. He knew that

he had to match the Italian for courage and daring. It was a matter of pride; and also a matter of half a million dollars.

He walked briskly to the end of Conduit Street and turned left into a more typical area of the city. A broad road of shops, offices and department stores was turning into an avenue as the city council turned side streets into pedestrian access only and planted trees at the mouth. Carazon waved down a taxi for a journey to the other side of the city centre. A bright young woman in the estate agent's office realized that the deposit offered on the keys was likely to be unreturned.

Another taxi took Carazon back to Conduit Street. Carazon bought a small can of sewing machine oil, which he squirted into the locks before trying the two keys. The door resisted his push, even with both locks released. Carazon gave it a kick, then squirted the hinges liberally with his oil.

There was a damp smell in the former garage and an undertone of something sharp and chemical. Carazon closed the street door and plunged himself into thick gloom. He clicked a splintered switch by the door. Nothing happened. He had to go back to the shop which had sold him the oil to buy a torch.

The lack of light was a good thing. If daylight was unable to penetrate the gloomy cavern, nobody outside would be able to look in on the interrogation. Carazon had never attended the questioning of one of the cartel's enemies, but he had heard many lurid stories of mutilation and torture designed to make the victim part with every scrap of knowledge in exchange for release through immediate death. He knew the theory of the process. Honour demanded that he convince the Italian that he knew all about the practice.

Standing a couple of yards inside the door, he passed the torch beam over the anonymous junk on the floor. He made

a mental note to buy an overall and a hat as protection against the filth and the dust-fluffed cobwebs. He picked a path to a bench against the back wall.

As far as he could tell, the garage occupied half of the archway, which was a monumental, Victorian structure that rose a full forty feet above his head. A wall of slightly paler bricks divided the garage from its neighbour on the other side of the arch. The building had a wooden roof, which sloped gently toward the street side.

The workbench was massive and bolted to the floor. The prisoner could be tied to it, Carazon told himself. With one arm free to write down answers to the questions. That would solve the problem of screaming and provide a permanent record of what was revealed.

If they tied the prisoner face down on the workbench, he would be able to see what he was writing, with the aid of a battery-powered lamp, and he would have to deal with the uncertainty of not knowing what his interrogators were doing behind him. The idea sounded good in theory.

Carazon began to commit to memory a list of essentials. He would need the lamp, a clipboard, a pen, ropes, duplicates of the keys, steel bars about two feet long for beating the prisoner, perhaps a blowlamp, and certainly a firearm with a silencer. Whether or not he provided the information that would lead to a million-dollar pay-out, the prisoner could not be allowed to live.

# THIRTY FOUR

## Brush Off

Stella Cookson was feeling pleased with herself. The arrest of Nelson Mkembe had sent a violent shockwave through the race relations industry in Hambourne. Many of those who made a living, or a hobby, out of attempting to impose minority standards on the majority were confused. They needed Mkembe's innocence as an article of faith. They wanted him to be a victim of the white man's persecution.

Unfortunately, the two Jamaican detectives sent to escort him home after the extradition proceedings were black, self-assured and totally convinced that Mkembe was a piece of sub-human filth, whatever the colour of his skin.

Acting as a friend of the family, and offering an outsider's perspective, Stella had been able to convince Rajid Shastri that he was the right sort of person to become the replacement spokesman for the non-white community. After all, Asians were perceived as industrious and useful members of society. Shastri was a successful businessman and he had an independence that the likes of Mkembe, living on state and council hand-outs, would never achieve.

Shastri would add welcome dignity and respect to a post that Mkembe had sullied. He would also dilute the influence of a rather poisonous local pressure group called the *Black*

*Persons' Coalition*, which Mkembe had founded. Shastri felt that Asians have a completely separate identity from Afro-Caribbean people and that lumping the two together was in the interests of neither grouping.

Skilful spadework, building up the chosen one's reputation and undermining potential rivals, had brought Gavin Murdoch's plan close to fruition. Shastri had not been bought but he had been brought into an environment of mutual assistance. If he was wise enough to recognize the benefits of co-operation, he could do very well for himself. If not, he could be discarded in favour of someone better able to take care of himself and his friends.

It was a hot, sunny, August afternoon. Stella had taken a day off to do some shopping. She felt that she owed herself a treat in anticipation of a good-performance bonus from Gavin Murdoch. She also knew that she would be kept very busy over the next three weeks. The local by-elections would be held on the last Thursday of the month and Gavin Murdoch and his Uncle Jack had her on the list of volunteers who would stuff election literature through selected letterboxes.

Stella was wondering how long the major parties would take to realize that they had a fight on their hands. Usually, they made little effort to persuade uncommitted voters to rush to the polling stations. Personal letters, like the ones which Gavin Murdoch has spent ages 'topping and tailing' were unheard of. When one of them fell into the hands of one of the major parties, there could be a minor panic. Alternatively, Jack Strangford hoped, the letters would be dismissed as a mere gimmick and ignored until it was too late to respond.

Laden with carrier bags, Stella turned into the café section of *Merity's* for an extra special treat: a cup of their powerful Gaelic coffee and a cream bun with a sinful chocolate top-

ping. *Merity's* was doing good business of a summery afternoon. Stella parked her bags at a table occupied by a pale woman with a cheerless expression, avoiding eye contact. The woman was wearing a silver chain carrying **Sue** in thick script around her neck. She was looking at an inside page of a newspaper. She seemed to be scanning the same area over and over again, as if none of the content was registering.

Stella made herself comfortable in a decently upholstered chair. The waiter brought her order, putting an extra touch of warmth in his smile for a regular customer. Stella used the knife to cut her cream bun into delicate slices, which would prolong the pleasure. Then she tasted the alcoholic coffee. It was just perfect. As ever, *Merity's* gave her a sense of affordable decadence if she took it in small quantities.

The other woman gasped. Her cup clattered onto the table from limp fingers, spilling a small thread of pale tea. Stella looked up from her cream bun, prepared to take evasive action if necessary. The woman was staring past her, frozen with her mouth half open. Stella turned round in her seat. She could see nothing dramatic and no one else was staring in that direction.

"You do see him?" said Susie Bryant.

"You what, love?" Stella turned back to the table.

"Him over there. Very pale blond hair, black leather coat, standing talking to the couple at that table."

Stella looked again. "Someone you know, love?"

"He looks just like someone I used to know."

"Maybe it's him?"

"Can't be. I was at his funeral a fortnight ago."

"Maybe he's a relative, if he's from around here," Stella said helpfully. "No, you would have seen him at the funeral."

"No, I didn't . . ." Susie stopped short, not wanting to get

into a long explanation of how she had not actually made it to the funeral itself.

"Perhaps he couldn't make it," Stella added, locked in consolation mode. "He might have been abroad and only just got here."

"Would you do me a favour? Would you ask him if he knows Lance Smith?" Susie's tone was doubtful.

Stella smiled at her, always ready to do someone a favour. While Susie dabbed automatically at the dribble of spilled tea with a paper napkin, Stella set an interception course for the mystery man.

Robbijohn, on his way to the casino, had stopped at one of the tables to exchange words with fellow members of the Marina Set. Howard and Amelia Beckett were sail fanatics, who tried never to use their yacht's engine once it was clear of the river's confines.

They seemed able to take a fortnight off whenever the lure of the sea became irresistible. He was a financial expert from Hambourne's business district. She was an interior designer. They were in their early forties, like Robbijohn, and enjoying to the full the advantages of a large double income and no kids or other expensive distractions from enjoying themselves.

As he moved away from the table, Robbijohn found himself doing a dance with a plump housewife. She looked like an archetypal wife and mother; the complete opposite of slim, elegant Amelia Beckett.

"Excuse me," said Stella.

"I tell you what," said Robbijohn, "I'll stand still and you pick which way you want to go."

"No, I want to ask you something. Do you know Lance Smith?"

"Why, do you?" Robbijohn said with a frown.

"No, it's the young lady over there." Stella glanced at her table. "She thinks you look so much like this Lance Smith, you might be a relative."

Robbijohn took pride in his failure to react when he spotted Susie Bryant staring at him. His evil half took control. He decided to push his luck and see how far he could go. "She used to know Lance?"

"It's all right, she knows he's passed away." Stella dropped automatically into the role of compassionate intermediary. "Are you his twin brother?"

"Not by a couple of years."

"What's your name, love?"

"Steve."

Robbijohn allowed himself to be piloted over to the table and introduced to Susie Bryant. Doing the decent thing, Stella rushed the rest of her treat, gathered up her carrier bags and left the couple alone.

"I can't get over how much you look like him," marvelled Susie, aware that she was repeating herself like an idiot.

"It's the hair," said Robbijohn. "If you cover it up on photos, you can see a lot of differences in our faces. But the hair makes people think you've bleached it, so that's all they look at."

"Yes, it must be." Susie examined his face. "I think your eyes are a darker blue." A waiter arrived to clear the table. "Can we have a drink together?" Susie added.

"Somewhere cheaper than here, then," said Robbijohn. "I'm totally strapped for cash at the moment. Unless you're rolling in it?"

"Not exactly." Susie wished the waiter would get on with it and leave them to talk in peace.

"Okay, there's a place round the corner." Robbijohn rose to his feet. Susie hurried after him.

They turned into a side street, walked past a row of stalls selling fruit arid vegetables and entered a dingy pub. To Susie's jaundiced eye, it looked like a haunt of muggers and pushers.

"What are you having?" she said brightly to end a pause at the bar.

"A pint of bitter, please. And a packet of those prawn flavour crisps," Robbijohn added to the barman. "So you didn't get to the funeral?"

"No, we were held up by a traffic accident on the motorway." Susie ordered herself a ladylike gin and tonic, and received depressingly little change from a £5 note.

Robbijohn had his foot on the brass rail along the bar. He was demolishing the crisps with single-minded determination, as if he had not eaten for several days. "You didn't get to the booze-up afterwards?"

"Yes, but I didn't see you there."

"My bad luck," Robbijohn said with a predatory smile. "It was a really good do. Mind you, Nige always had lots of cash."

"I thought Lance didn't like being called that? Nige?"

"Right," grinned Robbijohn. "But what's the point of having a brother if you can't get up his nose?"

"He used to have a jacket like yours."

"Fits pretty well, doesn't it? This is about all I copped off him that's decent."

"He left the rest of his estate to others in your family?"

"Ha!" scoffed Robbijohn. "We reckon he must have took it with him. All we ever found was some gear and a couple of grand in a savings account. And that went on the funeral and the booze-up. He didn't tell you about a will, or anything?"

"No, nothing like that."

"Safety deposit-box keys? Bank account numbers with a password?"

"No."

"Shit! Looks like some greasy banker is going to cop for the lot." Robbijohn drained his pint glass. "Are you fit for the other half?"

Susie looked quickly at the clock behind the bar. "Oh, no, I can't. I have an appointment at two forty-five."

"We'll have to meet up again. Have another chat. See if you can remember any numbers he might have dropped."

"Yes, we must." Susie took a ballpoint from her handbag and scribbled a number on a beer mat. "Nice to have met you, Steve, but I really must rush."

Robbijohn glanced at the telephone number as Susie Bryant headed for the door. He awarded her an *I* for initiative. She had transposed two digits in the area code and put a pair of false digits in the number. Lance Smith's sponger of a brother had just been given the brush-off.

# THIRTY FIVE

## Extra Special Coffee . . .

Robin Formby had been passed as fit and completely recovered from his accident, which failed to explain his persistent mild headache. The headache had begun during the afternoon of his first day back at work. Aspirins wouldn't touch it.

His headache seemed to come and go inexplicable, returning whenever he tried to concentrate on something or go to sleep.

"God, you look rough! Got yourself run over again?" Jayne Verity grinned at the reporter as she dropped an assignment sheet onto his desk.

"Remind me to be cheerful next time you're feeling rough. What's this crap?"

"A crime story," Verity said dramatically.

"You what?" Formby looked pleased but suspicious.

"Someone's nicked the mayoral chain of office from the town hall. Just strolled up, unlocked the case and put a notice inside saying: 'Removed for cleaning'."

"Cheeky sods!"

"Quite. So do you reckon you can handle it in your present damaged condition?"

"Sure. What sort of spin do you want on it?"

"Well, we don't want a vigilante angle for a start. This is just straight crime, Robin. You know, greed? You've got, I want, I take?"

"So you've not read it, then?"

"Read what?" frowned Verity.

"That paperback on the psychology of crime that's been floating round the office for ages. For instance, did you know a Russian worker at a Soviet nuclear plant stole thirty grams of plutonium powder in 1971?"

"No, but so what?" Jayne Verity's tone told Formby that he was wasting her time.

"This is relevant," he told her with a grin. "They ruled him insane at his trial. I mean, what can you do with a bottle of the deadliest element going? If you don't make a bomb out of it?"

"Surprise me," sighed Verity.

"This bloke told the KGB he just wanted to have something that no one else had."

"You're trying to say the mayoral chain was stolen by some mad collector who wants it because it's unique? And this character isn't planning to melt it down? Bollocks!"

"It would make an interesting story, the collector theory."

"Can we have the straight facts first, Robin?" said Verity patiently. "And some nice quotes from embarrassed town hall staff?"

"Okay." Formby picked up the assignment sheet. "When did all this happen?"

"Sometime between about twelve and one. We got our tip-off a quarter of an hour ago, so they must have realized it had gone at about half-two."

"Right. Oh, yes, you remember the guys who were trying to tell us the people's prison in Mossy Castle is all a hoax?"

"Yes?" said Verity warily.

"Someone mentioned to me, not long afterwards, that anyone who gets on the wrong side of the vigilantes has to take out an involuntary subscription to the Express. They're forced to buy it regularly in case there's a personal message ordering them to report somewhere for an inspection by the vigilantes to make sure they're not indulging in anti-social criminal behaviour."

"Life's too short to have to listen to tripe like that, Rob. On your bike."

"Thought you'd like it." Grinning to himself, Rob Formby checked the state of the batteries in his pocket cassette recorder, then he climbed into his jacket.

Wearing his sunglasses, he cut across a busy main road and threaded a passage through side streets. The spacious, cobbled square in front of the town hall was empty, apart from a few pigeons. The only people in view were moving about beyond the traffic on the perimeter roadways.

As usual, Formby felt slightly guilty about striding through the massive entrance hall. He always had the feeling of trespassing into some plutocrat's grand home.

A uniformed constable was hanging around near the reception area. Formby noticed at once that there was a golden chain in the armoured-glass display case. His first thought was that he had been the victim of a prank by a public servant with too much time on his hands. It was before his time, but someone had once phoned the Express to report that the town hall clock had been stolen. Perhaps somebody else had poured down one too many at a leaving party or similar celebration.

Formby opened a door to a narrow corridor, entering the service space between the public rooms of the huge building. A small man with a round face answered a Morse Code 'V' tapped on an office door's frosted glass pane.

"Afternoon, Edward, any coffee going?" Formby asked.

"Special brew for you, sir," one of the maintenance staff told him with a smile of welcome. "Come about our robbery?"

Formby sat at a battered table and took two £10 notes from his wallet. *Ordinary* coffee cost £10 per cup. "The robbery that never was, you mean? I saw the chain on display just now."

"That's just them." Eddy jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Trying not to look like a bunch of dozy sods."

"What, you mean they've bunged a replica on show to make us think the real one didn't take a walk?"

"If you think that, you might need a cup of my extra special coffee, Mr. F.," Eddy chuckled as he poured water from a steaming kettle into mugs containing instant coffee.

Formby took another £10 note from his wallet. "This had better be worth it."

Eddy Collins joined him at the table after pouring milk from a bottle into the mugs. He was just over five feet tall, around fifty and he had been working at the town hall since the age of thirteen. He was the fourth generation of his family to look after the building. His son was one of the staff electricians.

"They had a closed meeting about a fortnight back," said Eddy. "The mayoral chain is just an unrealized asset. Something they can sell to put the money to good use."

"What, typical Looney Left-type wastes of our money?"

"There's some good people on this council, Mr. F."

"Outnumbered by the ones with no sense of responsibility with other people's money. But you reckon they were going to sell the chain?"

"They even had a bloke in to value it. To tell them if they'd get more selling it as a piece of jewellery, like, with a history.

You know, a museum piece, instead of weighing it in for scrap."

Formby put on a frown. "So what are you telling me? That someone got a look at the valuation report and decided to nick the chain before the council could flog it?"

"Oh, it's a lot better than that," laughed Eddy. He dropped his voice to an intimate murmur and began to unfold his £30 story.

Later in the day, at about the time the evening editions of the Hambourne Express appeared, bringing Rob Formby's story to the citizens of his local area, One Ton Radio went into one of the dramatic burst of music which heralded a big deal.

"Breaking news, breaking news," said Andy, a DJ with a phoney-as-hell West-coast American accent overlaid on a local accent. "Everyone thinks the mayoral chain is now on pretty much permanent display in town hall as we have the Looney Left in power at the minute and they've abolished the office of mayor.

"What hardly anyone knows is that a group of public-spirited citizens heard that the council was planning to sell the chain. So they decided to take it into protective custody to put a stop to that particular scheme.

"Of course, when the chain went missing at lunchtime today, the council said the sale story is rubbish and the chain's still on show. That was then. Their story now is that the chain on show is a replica as the original is being cleaned. Not that they're saying who's got the cleaning contract. In other words, it's not been stolen. All very suspicious, really.

"For more details, check out this evening's *Express* as Rob Formby, their crime correspondent, has been digging into this story too. Only he's worried about being sued for libel, or his editor is, and he can't do more than drop hints. But we

can tell it like it is.

"Okay, back to the music and here's two for the price of one. *Triad* by David Crosby. First the original version by the *Byrds* and featuring Crosby, which you'll find on the *Notorious* album and CD. And then the version *Jefferson Airplane* did, which first came out on the album *Crown of Creation* and which is also available on the *Journey* best-of CD."

At his office at the town hall, Eddy Collins let his attention drift away from the small FM radio on his desk and back to the electrical maintenance schedule which he was reviewing. The music that One Ton played was rarely to his taste but he felt that they had an unbeatable knack of finding out exactly what was going happening in Hambourne and telling all as indiscreetly as possible.

It was nice to know that his customers for expensive cups of coffee were working to bring his inside information to the widest possible audience.

# THIRTY SIX

## Big Bang, Small Bomb . . .

As bombs go, it was quite a small one; certainly smaller than the device that had demolished Gavin Murdoch's black boat. A combination of timing and novelty factor made it a big story in Hambourne. A Friday lunchtime explosion in the area of the city where the major banks had their head-quarters could not be overlooked.

Jenny Hobson found herself where the action was quite by accident. She was there on an assignment which she expected to be a complete waste of time. She knew that there was no way that she would get to see Lionel Dragoner. And if she did, there was no way that he would give her a reaction to the allegations that he was involved with local businessman Ivan Kenton in insider trading or some other doubtful method of making money from the stock market.

She was heading for Gordon House because it was her job to go where she was sent in search of news, even if she was wasting her time. Jayne Verity, who had sent her out of the Express building into a sticky, August afternoon, knew that the mission would be unproductive. At the same time, it would be Hobson's fault if she came back with nothing.

Reaching the end of a side street that led off the town hall square, she ran into a flood of people coming the other way.

Making forward progress was like trying to go the wrong way at the start of the Hambourne Marathon.

Hobson stepped off the pavement into the space between two parked cars to avoid the rush. The police were gathering without a rush of sirens. They were clearing the area at the top of King Street around Gordon House. Hobson managed to cross the street and duck into a side entrance of the stock exchange building, which faced Gordon House.

She hurried up to the first floor and followed two middle-aged women into a toilet at the front corner of the building, letting them unlock the door as she made a ritual fumble in her handbag for a non-existent key.

"It can't have been a very big bomb," remarked one of the women as they made their way to adjoining stalls. "I never heard it."

"1 heard it's a false alarm," said her colleague.

"Oh, no, you can see a broken window on the fourth floor if you know where to look."

"Just the one window? It must have been a really small bomb. Who's on four?"

"HRM, Mr. Arthur said. He thought an insurance company getting bombed makes a weird sort of sense. Almost a sort of justice."

"Well, he had all that trouble with his patio."

"Apparently, Ned . . . You know Ned?"

"Oh, yes, I know Ned!"

"Well, Mr. Arthur said Ned was actually on the phone to someone at HRM when it went off. He reckons he actually heard it. Then there was a sort of stunned silence."

"Sorry about that but someone has just blown our office up?" laughed the other woman.

"Something like that. Apparently, it was in the corridor, outside the offices. The wall sort of bulged and a filing

cabinet went flying right across the room and smashed through a glass door."

"Anyone hurt? Apart from a nasty shock."

"I don't thing so. But imagine it happening here!"

"Doesn't bear thinking about."

Jenny Hobson climbed down from her perch on a wash basin and pressed the *off* switch on her pocket recorder when the women switched to matters that were more personal and nothing to do with the bomb.

She had been looking out onto King Street. There was no traffic on what was normally a busy road and the only people visible were wearing police uniforms. HRM's broken window was either on another side of the tall building or out of her line of sight.

Hobson hurried down to the public telephones on the ground floor to make a first contact with the news room. Quite by accident, she had tripped over the sort of story that Robin Formby would kill to cover. When she had made her report, she returned to the side streets in search of comment from the police and the staff of Hambourne Risk Management.

Jenny Hobson felt that it was a day when the luck was running with her. It was almost conceivable that she would run into Lionel Dragoner and he would give her something printable about both the bomb and his alleged financial adventures. Hobson was not to have her wish, however. Lionel Dragoner was inaccessible to the press by virtue of being in an office which was forty-five feet above ground level. He was also isolated by a police cordon.

Hambourne Risk Management, as Dragoner was pointing out to a doubting police inspector, was in the security business as well as the insurance business. He knew that there were no bombs inside the HRM offices because his security

monitoring systems told him so. Which meant that the HRM offices were a perfectly safe place to be while the police carried out their duty and made a totally unnecessary search of the rest of the building for further devices.

Dragoner would not believe that the amateurish bomber had planted a second device and his staff felt emotionally blackmailed to stay at their posts if the boss remained at his. A couple of hours outside the building, waiting for the police to complete their search, would have provided them with a nice diversion on a sunny afternoon. So would the chance to do some unscheduled shopping. But, as the boss kept pointing out to the uniformed inspector, the business did not run itself and the staff had to be at their desks to make the money that paid their salaries.

As far as Dragoner could tell from an inspection of the cracked and crazed corridor, the bomb had been placed inside one of the metal tubes topped with sand trays for cigarettes.

It had done no damage to the fabric of the building. The blast had punched out a window across the corridor and bulged the brick curtain wall on the inward side. The damage was largely cosmetic, something to be sorted out over the weekend if part of the brick wall had to be rebuilt.

While a nervous police inspector used a miniature tank-like robot fitted with a TV camera and an infra-red remote controller to knock over the metal-tube ashtrays on other floors, Dragoner doodled on a notepad and considered who might have planted the bomb. While the inspector made a lot of mess, spilling sand, ash and dog-ends onto the grey carpets of Gordon House. Dragoner created a complex maze of flowing, interlocking shapes.

He believed in connections between similar events, which meant that his explosion was connected with any other loud

bangs in the area. His list acquired just two other items: a gas explosion on Leaf Street, which had demolished one decaying house and caused terminal damage to its neighbours, and a bomb at the marina.

The gas explosion had been blamed on a leak. The gas company had blamed the leak on abnormal corrosion of a pipe. The precise reason for the accelerated corrosion was a matter of dispute, but it was recognized that the poor condition of the building had been a contributory factor. Dragoner suspected that the troublesome old sod of a tenant of the low-rent property had been mucking about with the supply to get some, or even all, of his gas for free.

The explosion that had shattered *Sigma 211* at the marina had been no accident. Dragoner wondered if Gavin Murdoch had repaid the compliment as a protest against poor security at the marina; not that Dragoner admitted that his security was bad. He was convinced that the explosion had been an inside job because there were no signs that HRM's perimeter had been breached by an outsider.

The obvious suspects were the bunch of Americans who owned the other black boat. Dragoner knew, from their talk, that some or all of them had been in Vietnam. They might look like middle-aged hippies, but they had become killers in their late teens. They were the sort of men who had followed the orders of officers a few years older than themselves when massacre had been the business of the day.

They were the sort of dope-smoking apologies for soldiers who had *fragged* unpopular officers – which involved slipping a fragmentation grenade under the offending officer's bed and sending him home in a box with his spine blown through his chest.

They were certainly the sort of men to whom Murdoch might turn – neighbours and fellow boat owners, who might

be resentful of the recent increase in mooring fees that had been necessary to keep the marina profitable and therefore available to them. Men who had learned to survive beyond the confines and protections of civilized life. Men who knew all about bullets and bangs.

The Vietnam Vets were an unknown element and therefore a potential threat. They were also a bad influence on his daughter. No matter how thin his certain knowledge of the Americans was, Dragoner was positive that they encouraged Claire to smoke marijuana.

Lionel Dragoner was in the business of risk management to the extent that luck played a very small part in his success. Seeing off a bunch of drug-dealing Americans could be a small risk if undertaken in the right way.

Extreme lawlessness was becoming the norm in Hambourne. One more bomb, placed on the Americans' black boat and detonated when they were having a party, would be extremely difficult to trace. The police would just assume that the bomber had got it right this time.

Shaun Wayne was the man for that job. His hands were dirty enough already. Extermination of undesirables was a small extra step for him to take. He had the nerve and he was careful. If he could count on a solid alibi arranged by his boss, then he would take on the challenge eagerly.

Having reached a decision on his future direction of action, Dragoner set it aside for the moment. He could let it stew in his subconscious for a day or so.

At the outset, his reasoning looked flawless. The Americans looked the likeliest source of the bomb at HRM, and even if they were innocent of that particular crime, they were certainly guilty of others.

Theirs would not be innocent deaths.

Rob Formby had become used to getting strange phone calls. In time, he believe, he would develop a radar which would tell him which were genuine and which were hoaxes. He dialled 1471 after such a call at the end of Sunday morning. He learned that the caller had withheld his number, which told him that he was not dealing with an idiot.

It was his day off but he had nothing particularly urgent to do. And he wasn't feeling like lunch after a late start to the day. Following what was now standard practice for the news team, he phoned the messaging number at the Hambourne Express office and told the recording machine what he was going to do about the strange call. Then he got into his car and drove to the rendezvous point.

The cash and carry had a vast car park and there were a lot of people about. Formby spotted the yellow-striped white van and parked beside it, noticing on his approach that the number plate at the back was too mud-smeared to read. The Volkswagen van's side door slid open. Formby was inside in response to a beckoning hand before he spotted that the two men were wearing black ski-masks.

"You heard about the mayor's chain?" one of them said.

"Which one?" said Formby. "The plastic replica on show in the town hall or the real one, which is being cleaned?"

"Yeah, right," said the other man. "What we got on Thursday is another fake."

"Sounds difficult to prove," said Formby.

"Not really." The larger of the two men handed him a large padded envelope containing a heavy object. "There it is. Fresh from the display case at the town hall. We took it to a friend in the jewellery business. He reckon's it's just gold-plated brass with no great scrap value."

"No, I mean difficult for you to prove you haven't still got the real one, if it actually was nicked from the town hall, and

you've not swapped it for this." Formby looked at the mayoral chain inside the padded envelope. In the gloomy interior of the rear-windowless van, it looked real enough.

"That's what . . ." The smaller of the masked men had clearly been going to say, 'That's what (somebody) said', but he had stopped himself in time to avoid uttering the name. "Except if it's gone to be cleaned, why have they got another replica made of gold-plated brass as well as the plastic one?"

"And you're saying this is definitely what was on show at the town hall?" Formby asked. "It really was nicked?"

"Right. And we're want to turn it over to the custody of the Express. To prove what those thieving bastards on the council have done and to show they're a bunch of liars."

"Except they'll sue our arses off if we call them that."

"Not if you report a quote by one of the people who tried to take a bit of the city's heritage into safe custody."

"But wasn't quick enough."

"Right. So anyway, what you tell the police is someone rang your doorbell and you found this on the doorstep. Then you got a phone call to tell you where it came from. Okay?"

Rob Formby put on a thoughtful expression. "I suppose it means being economical with the truth. But if you're right and the council have disposed of the real chain, all I could tell them was two blokes in a van in a cash-and-carry car park. Which won't take them too far towards tracking you down."

"So why not tell our version?" said the smaller masked man.

"Why not indeed?" said Formby. "Okay, is that it?"

"Councillor Ray Terry. That's who we reckon was behind selling off the gold chain. Okay, that's it now."

Formby nodded. "Ray Terry? That I can believe. Okay, I'll get on with doing something about this."

Rob Formby returned to his car. He considered driving out of the car park, waiting for the van to appear and then tailing it. Then he realized that the chain vigilantes knew who he was and there might be more of them, watching him to see what he did next. The safest thing to do was to drive into town and take the chain to the Hambourne Express offices.

Howard Hatcher, the paper's workaholic editor, was more than eager to talk local news. He was at home but he had a room equipped with video-conferencing equipment. Formby had decided that he would lose less of his day off if he called the editor from the Express offices rather than going round to Hatcher's home.

"So that's it? The stolen chain that's a fake?" Hatcher asked as Formby held the chain, now transferred to a strong clear plastic bag, closer to the camera mounted on top of a PC monitor. "It certainly looks real enough at this range. And I suppose it would work in a display case."

"On the way over here, I was wondering how they'd have got such an accurate replica made in the time," Formby said. "They've only had it two days."

"Unless they borrowed it some time ago; say, overnight to make casts and moulds and things," said Hatcher. "The security on it wasn't up to Fort Knox standards by any manner of means."

"Right." Formby acknowledged that his idea had been shot down in flames.

"And if it was gold and worth a lot of money for the value of the metal alone, all the more incentive to plan carefully to assure success."

The editor followed his chain of thought through to a finishing point.

"Talking about being devious and planning things carefully, they did mention the name Ray Terry in

connection with whoever on the council made the chain disappear."

"Which could just be clever psychology, Rob. Think of the bloke who's the most corkscrewed of a bad bunch and his name comes out of the hat first."

"Just because he's the obvious suspect, that's no guarantee he's innocent."

"Than could almost be me talking then," laughed the editor. "Can you see anything that doesn't look right about the chain?"

"I don't really know it well enough to spot anything wrong about it, Howard. I've seen it in its display case but I've not really looked at it, if you see what I mean."

"Right. You and everyone else who walks past it. What about your source at the town hall?"

"What about him?"

"What about getting him in to look at it?"

"He's going to want paying for working on a Sunday."

"Not a problem if he's prepared to be reasonable. But you can let him know that being greedy will leave him with nothing. Get him to the office. I've got something at the edge of my mind on this. I just need to get it into focus."

"Okay, Howard." Formby could see his Sunday going up in smoke. His editor had got his teeth into something and he wasn't about to let go until he had explored every possibility.

Eddy Collins asked for two hundred pounds and settled for forty-five. Rob Formby had two slices of pizza and a cup of coffee from a nearby café for his lunch. When he arrived back at the newspaper's offices with Collins in tow, Howard Hatcher was there. The editor had a friend called Stan with him. Stan was a collector of antique jewellery; rather than mayoral chains; but he was the best precious metals expert that the

editor could get at short notice.

Stan was well past sixty and he had small stains of red paint on his white hair and the back of his right hand. He examined the chain with a powerful magnifying glass, leaving it in the plastic bag but spreading the mouth of the bag so that he could see the metal clearly. Eventually, he shook his head.

"Looks authentic?" said Howard Hatcher.

"It doesn't look unauthentic in any way," Stan countered.

"That's what I reckon," Eddy Collins added.

"So if someone showed that to you and said it's the chain that was nicked on Thursday, you'd believe them?" said Formby.

"Oh, yes," said Stan.

"Right. Why wouldn't you?" said Collins.

"You'd believe that's the Hambourne mayoral chain." said Hatcher.

"You mean the actual chain, not a replica?" Stan put on a faint smile.

"Well, yes," Hatcher said cautiously, sensing that his expert was about to make a telling point.

"I wouldn't believe it's the real mayoral chain." said Stan.

"Why not, Stan?" Hatcher gave his expert the expected cue for his moment of triumph. "We're talking about just looking at it without checking the weight."

"Just looking, I noticed fairly quickly that it hasn't got any hallmarks. Each individual link of the real chain, as well as the other detachable bits and pieces, will be hallmarked. But as this is just a gold-plated brass chain, it would be a criminal offence to put hallmarks on it."

"So you're saying this was made as a replica."

"Well, yes."

"Hang about," said Formby. "If someone had made

moulds from the original gold chain, and if that someone was trying to pass off an exact replica as the real thing, why would he leave the hallmarks off?"

"Why indeed?" said Stan. "Unless this replica was made officially for the council by some firm of replica mayoral chain manufacturers, who wouldn't put any hallmarks on something made of base metal."

"Hang on," said the editor, "let's get this clear. If Rob's civic minded citizens had stolen the real chain on Thursday and made a copy of it, there would be hallmarks on their replica?"

"Right," said Stan. "If they'd copied the genuine chain."

"But if there are no hallmarks on it, that suggests they stole a replica made by someone in the trade on council orders?"

"Correct. And if these people had found they'd stolen a fake, there would be no reason for not giving it back. There's certainly no reason for them to hand over their copy rather than what they actually stole. If they had a second copy, that would be clear proof that they were up to no good."

"If they'd borrowed the chain that was on display, intending make a copy before nicking it," said Formby, "wouldn't they have spotted they hadn't borrowed the real thing?"

"Unless the real thing was on display when they borrowed it and the switch was made later," said Stan. "We don't know when they borrowed it to make their copy. Or *if* they ever borrowed it to make a copy."

"But one thing we can be sure of, no matter what the scenario, having this chain here proves something was stolen on Thursday?" said Hatcher. "And if this chain hasn't got any hallmarks, it's the one that was stolen on Thursday?"

"Fingerprints," said Eddy Collins.

"What?" said Hatcher.

"If that's the one from the town hall, it'll have the cleaner's fingerprints on it," Collins said with a smile of satisfaction at being able to provide personal expert knowledge. "She's supposed to wear gloves when she handles it but she usually just runs a duster over it and I've seen her putting it back in place when she moves it. You know, moving it back into place with her bare hands."

"So if this chain has got her fingerprints on, it's definitely the one that was nicked from the town hall on Thursday?" said Hatcher.

"Unless the cleaner's in on the plot to steal the gold chain and she put some fingerprints on the fake chain the vigilantes are passing off as the one they stole," said Formby.

"Okay," laughed Howard Hatcher, "when we get reduced to arguments like that, it's time to call it a day. And it's time to bring the police in on this. We have clear proof now that something was stolen from the town hall. And if it's got the cleaner's fingerprints on it, we need to know why that bunch at the town hall are lying about nothing being stolen, how many replica chains there are and where the real one is."

Rob Formby kissed goodbye to the rest of his Sunday afternoon; but he felt that he was losing it in a good cause. Eddy Collins left the building with three £20 notes in his pocket. The editor had awarded him an extra bonus for his fingerprint idea.

Soon after the two 'experts' had gone, the police arrived. By then, the process of giving the citizens of Hambourne an exciting headline for their Monday morning edition of the *Express* was well under way.

# THIRTY SEVEN

## Disappearance And Detection

Derek dealt out the final cards of stud poker hands. He had nothing showing on the table and the jack of diamonds face down. The ten of diamonds did nothing for a rubbish hand. His other three cards were black. Gregor Maiskiy got nothing to support his pair of nines, which probably became three with his hole card. He tossed two green chips into the pot.

Robbijohn had either a club flush or a lot of nerve. He matched the bet. A Falklands veteran called Woody, because he had an artificial leg, gathered up his cards and turned them face down. The rest looked at Steve Cann, the only other active player. He had nothing showing but he could have had a higher pair than Gregor Maiskiy's.

"Decisions, decisions," sighed Cann as he poured himself another glass of *Southern Comfort*.

"Let us know when you make one." Derek added his own cards to the discard pile and pushed away from the table. He headed across a spacious room to the buffet.

The game had been changing cast for almost two days now. It had begun on Saturday afternoon in a second-floor room on Conduit Street. Thick curtains shut out the rest of the world and the clock over the door had been set to Tokio time. The changing six players had provided entertainment

for anything up to fifteen spectators. Midway through Monday afternoon, there were eight people lounging in the chairs beyond the barrier of red silk rope around the playing area.

"You dropping out, mate?" said one of the spectators.

"Help yourself," Derek told him with a shrug.

Twin extractor fans in the ceiling attracted smoke before it could contaminate the food. Derek loaded ham, mustard, tomato and pickles into a long, fluffy roll. He needed a £200 appetite to break even. He was about that much down and he had paid an admission fee of £25 at the door.

"Do us a favour, mate," called Woody.

Derek packed corned beef into another roll and dripped on plenty of tomato ketchup. The ex-soldier had simple tastes. Robbijohn was smiling when Derek returned to the table with Woody's sandwich. Derek knew then that his old friend Lance had nothing but he was carrying on making bets out of sheer awkwardness because neither Maiskiy nor Cann could call a halt with a third player still active.

"We know what you're doing," Cann said when Robbijohn threw still more chips into a pot he could never win.

"You do?" Robbijohn sounded surprised.

"Sure, we do," said Cann confidently.

"In that case, sod you." Robbijohn retrieved his last offering of chips. "I'm stacking."

"In that case, what you got, Gregor Petrovich?" Cann placed a neat stack of chips beside the pot.

"Nines," said the Russian.

"How many?"

"All you can see."

"In that case, my jacks win." Cann turned over his hole card and raked in the pot.

"I knew you had another one," remarked Robbijohn.

"You lying bastard, Lance!" scoffed Cann.

"Are we playing proper poker or are we playing silly buggers?" said the new player impatiently.

"Dealer's choice," said Cann.

"*Silly buggers* is game where all cards are wild?" Gregor Maiskiy asked with a frown.

"You've got to watch these Russians. They're always taking the piss," laughed Robbijohn. "Get 'em dealt, sunshine."

"We play *Kiev Stud Rules*," said Maiskiy as he dealt cards face down then face up. "Treys and One-Eyed Grand Dukes wild."

"Come again?" frowned the new player.

"Straight stud," said Woody. "He's only trying to put us off."

Robbijohn won the next hand, then he got stuck with a run of bad cards. He dropped out to join Derek at the buffet. Ford Ford was there too but he was asleep in an armchair, recharging his batteries. A hollow feeling inside kept reminding Robbijohn that he had had nothing to eat since a late breakfast. He helped himself to a pork pie and a cup of black coffee.

Carol Browning, the wife of the man who had organized the game, arrived to check on the buffet. She and her husband ran a computer repair and trouble-shooting business on the ground floor of an ancient building in a run-down area. They used the first-floor as living space and they rented out the top floor for private meetings. Carol shook her head then she saw Robbijohn enjoying his pie.

"Digging your grave with your teeth, Lance," she sighed.

"And enjoying every bite," Robbijohn said guiltlessly. "It's all right for bloody women, existing on cucumber sandwiches and a few lettuce leaves but we men need something

to stick to our ribs when we're engaged in illegal gambling."

"Right," agreed Derek. "What if we got raided? How could we hold our heads up in court if it came out we'd had quiche and crispbreads for the buffet? Your Mike would get laughed out of town."

"Talking about Mike, have you seen him recently?" said Carol.

"He went down to the supermarket to get some more beer," said Robbijohn. "I think he expects the game to keep going right through to the next weekend."

"You're like a bunch of bloody kids, you men," sighed Carol, a sturdy brunette in her middle thirties. "You don't get women queueing up to waste their money like this. Staying up all weekend."

"Mainly because women don't know how to enjoy themselves," laughed Derek.

"You call this enjoying yourself?"

"You bet!"

Carol noted that the buffet was running short of chicken and corned beef. She headed for the kitchen carrying the bin of empty cans.

"I hear you ran into Susie again," Derek remarked. "I've just thought of someone who'd love to play your downtrodden wife."

Robbijohn shrugged. "I'm going off that idea. She's the sort of leech who deserves razzing up but is she worth the time and trouble?"

Derek nodded. "Yeah, if you're enjoying yourself."

"True, but there's the drag of setting up a home for Steve, a real tatty place, with a dragged down wife and a couple of really *evil* kids. So she feels lucky to get out alive when they walk in on us."

"What about stringing her along with the hunt for the

number of your Swiss bank account?"

"It would be interesting to see if she'd spring for the price of a couple of flights to Switzerland," Robbijohn admitted.

"Or even the train fare," grinned Derek.

"If I had an evil twin, it'd be you," laughed Robbijohn.

"That's what life's all about, Lance, making it interesting. Think about it. I'll see you later. I want to find out if it's night or day out there."

"Who cares?" Robbijohn called after him.

Derek stepped out of a door into brilliant sunlight. He had to stop to put on his sunglasses before he headed for his car. He was still dazzled when he passed two men; ageing, plump and counting a wad of notes as if working out whether they could afford to buy into their way into the poker game.

Luis Carazon and Riccardo Mundoro had fixed a magnetic homing device to the wheel arch of Derek's car. They had been walking through the piece of waste ground where it was parked every two hours on that Monday morning, partly to stretch their legs and partly to make sure that a constant signal meant that the car was still there. Good luck had brought them back as their target was leaving the poker game.

As Derek paused them, fumbling in a pocket for his keys, Carazon looked one way and Mundoro looked the other. Carazon tapped his colleague on the arm to signal 'all clear'. Mundoro swung the blackjack in and up, catching Derek behind the right ear. The blow contained a lot of frustration at being kept hanging about all weekend. Derek crumpled straight down to the hard-packed rubble. Bundling him into the van took just a few moments.

Carazon had to restrain himself as he pressed down on the accelerator. The van bumped onto a street which ran parallel

to Conduit Street moving just too fast. Its tyres screeched a protest. Carazon drove out of the area, giving Mundoro plenty of time to finish binding and gagging the prisoner.

After two runs past The Arches, moving fairly slowly and making sure that no one had their improvised prison under surveillance, Carazon turned off the main road and into the derelict garage. His heart seemed to beat even faster when the door closed behind him and the throbbing of the van's engine died. The plan had worked. They had a prisoner to interrogate and they were hot on the trail of one, maybe even two million dollars.

Mike Browning recruited a couple of volunteers to help with bringing more beer up the stairs. Steve Cann and Woody dropped out to let a couple of restless spectators try their luck. Robbijohn decided to have another pork pie while he thought about what Derek had said.

Taking Susie Lymme to a tatty home created for the occasion, perhaps with photographs of a wife and two grotty kids rather than actual people in the flesh, and giving her a frugal time had possibilities. So had a campaign of relentless questioning about secret bank accounts, possibly in Switzerland. But Robbijohn was not sure that he was quite so desperate for entertainment.

Eventually, Gregor Maiskiy decided that he had had enough and he left the table. Another spectator took his place. The original cast had been replaced completely but the game went on. The group left by the back entrance, emerging into daylight in a litter-strewn alley. Ford Ford was still looking half asleep.

"That car. Is Drek's?" Gregor Maiskiy pointed to a parking area across the alley. The building which had occupied the space had been demolished after a fire.

"Looks like it." Robbijohn glanced at his watch. "He left over two hours ago. What's his car doing here?"

Maiskiy strolled ahead to investigate. He spotted a set of car keys on the hard-packed rubble and reached under the car to retrieve them. The keys unlocked the door.

"This is strange," said Steve Cann.

"Maybe he's gone shopping or he's gone off with some woman," Ford said through a yawn.

"And leave keys?" said Maiskiy.

"This looks serious," said Robbijohn. "Let's make some phone calls."

Half an hour later, Robbijohn had established that none of their friends had seen Derek in the last couple of hours. He was not at home and he had not been home. The group on the gallery overlooking Robbijohn's studio were all wearing serious expressions by now.

"Where would anyone take someone if they grabbed him?" said Steve Cann, putting words to their thoughts.

"Where would *you* take someone if you'd grabbed them?" said Robbijohn.

"Easy. Mossy Castle," said Cann.

"What if you're an outsider?" said Ford. "It's not something you can do with a hotel room, use it as a prison."

"Depends how cheeky you are," said Robbijohn. "Going from where Drek's car is, what about The Arches? They're about a couple of hundred yards away."

"Let's check it out," said Ford.

Their black boat was still on charter with Big Ed in charge but the marina was still home to Mi Tai and she liked to practise her English on a Chinese girl who worked in the coffee shop. She noticed at a sub-conscious level when a couple got out of a car as she approached the marina's main

entrance at about lunchtime, but she was on familiar territory and not expecting trouble.

The man showed her an official identity card and said something about immigration. The woman grabbed her arm in case Mi Tai was planning to run for it. Mi Tai considered flattening the pair of them, which she knew that she could do, then she remembered that Lance and his friends would not appreciate a scene at the marina.

The immigration officials were following up a tip-off from Shaun Wayne. Their initial investigation had not thrown up any evidence that Mi Tai was in the country legally, which made her fair game. Her lack of resistance suggested Oriental resignation to her fate.

The immigration officials took Mi Tai to the city's central police station. She was asking for her statutory phone call as soon as she realized that she had arrived at a police station. The custody sergeant made a note of her emergency number and the name of the solicitor.

Mi Tai looked on suspiciously as the sergeant made the call on her behalf. Neither of the immigration officials spoke Vietnamese and they did not trust Mi Tai. Then the prisoner was consigned to the cells to await her solicitor and an interview when the Vietnamese translator arrived.

Wearing overalls, overshoes, hats and gloves, Luis Carazon and Riccardo Mundoro chained their prisoner to the remains of a filthy, greasy work-bench. Then they hurried over to the door to look out through its cracks onto the street outside. Life in that area of Hambourne was continuing without them.

Behind them, Derek lay still; unconscious and bleeding quietly inside his skull.

"Okay, let's get started," said Mundoro. The Italian had no

experience of interrogating prisoners but he had no intention of admitting it.

Carazon prodded the prisoner's leg with a screwdriver. The man ignored him. Carazon pushed harder. To his alarm, the blade-like tip rushed into the flesh. He pulled it out quickly.

"The guy should have come round by now," Mundoro said.

"I don't guess he's faking," said the Colombian. "Okay, we'll have to wait a little longer. We should have got some coffee."

"Or some beers."

"Coffee now, beers later," Carazon said firmly. "There's a café along the road a piece. Ten minutes."

"He should be awake by then," said Mundoro with false confidence.

Carazon stopped at the door to peer through a vertical split in the wood. There was no one watching the garage; not that he was expecting to see anyone. He let himself out and made sure that the door was closed. He checked to make sure that he had the key as he moved along the street.

Mundoro had his hand in his pocket when the Colombian returned with two plastic cups of coffee in a paper carrier. Carazon realized that his associate was carrying a gun, which was a bad idea in England. Mundoro glanced at the prisoner then shook his head. They took their coffee to the van so that they would have somewhere clean and comfortable to sit. Carazon offered cigars.

A quarter of an hour later, Mundoro went over to the prisoner to have a look at him. He rushed back to the van.

"I don't think the guy's breathing," he reported.

Carazon dashed over to the prisoner. He checked for a pulse and breath-sounds. Then he rechecked. "I guess you

hit him too hard." The Colombian kept accusation out of his voice, remembering that his companion was carrying a gun.

Mundoro uttered a combined oath and prayer in Italian.

"Okay," said Carazon, forcing himself to think logically, "what do we do now? Split? Just leave him here?"

"Torch the place?" said Mundoro.

"No, we don't want to attract attention. There's nothing to connect us with this guy and the longer he stays here and no one finds him, the better it is for us."

"Okay."

"No one's going to look for him here. And I don't guess anyone's going to be coming here, looking to buy this place, in the near future."

Mundoro nodded. "I guess so."

"So okay. We check the place over to make sure we've not left anything . . ."

"We'd better untie the guy and take the chains with us."

"Good thinking. Okay, we do that, and then we just drive out of here and lose the van. Then we carry on with business for a couple of days. This is nothing to do with us, so it has no effect on our plans."

"Okay. What about this guy's pals?"

"If they get lost in a hurry, we know for sure we've got the right bunch. If not, we just check them out in the routine ways. And maybe grab another of them."

"And hope we get lucky?"

Carazon shrugged. "Someone's got to. Why not us?"

Ferenc Disch had the videocamera running as The Arches came into sight. His instructions were simple: to capture all movements of people and vehicles along the sweep of the enclosed arches of the railway bridge. He was doing the job as a favour to Lance Robbijohn but there was also a clear

understanding that he would be paid.

When he had found a suitable parking place on the other side of the road from the railway bridge, he made a small adjustment to the box on the dashboard containing the camera and dropped into character.

He was a sales representative who had stopped at the side of the road to write up a few reports, have a cup of coffee and make a few calls on his mobile phone. He was a man who was totally involved in his own affairs and not at all interested in what was happening outside his car. It was all a rush job, but Disch felt more than capable of tackling it.

The constable on duty at the front desk of the Hambourne's central police station recognized the woman as a solicitor the moment she stepped through the front door. She offered a business card as a proof of identity.

"I'm Claire Buckingham; representing Mrs. Carmody," she announced.

"Yes, madam." The constable contacted the custody area. Then he put on a frown. "Sorry, Madam. Mrs. Carmody?"

"Yes," said the solicitor.

The constable repeated the name into the phone. "We don't seem to have a Mrs. Carmody, madam."

"Oh! Do you have a Sergeant James on duty, who's a bit of a joker? Someone who likes to waste a solicitor's time?"

"It *is* Sergeant James on duty, madam . . ."

"In that case, perhaps you'd care to ask him why he called my offices an hour or so ago. I received a message that Mrs. Carmody has been detained on an immigration issue."

The constable relayed the information via the phone. Then he listened, smiling uncertainly at the solicitor through the pause. "Right, Sarge." The constable replaced the receiver. "We've informed the immigration people and they'll be right

along to see you. Would you care to sit down over there?"

Claire Buckingham retired to the bench seat, showing the constable that she looked just as expensively dressed from the back. No more than five minutes later, a man and a woman emerged from the secure zone of the police station.

"Barry Tabor, Immigration Service," he man announced. "And this is my colleague June Glass. I think we need to have a word. In here?"

June Glass opened the door of an interview room. Claire Buckingham took her time about settling herself at the table.

"We've taken a Vietnamese woman into custody as a suspected illegal immigrant," Tabor announced. "But according to our information, her name is Mi Tai."

Claire Buckingham opened her briefcase. "According to my information, my client has a British father, who served with the Australian forces in Vietnam, and a Vietnamese mother. She married my client, Mr. Carmody, also a British citizen, in Toronto last year. I have a photograph of her here. Perhaps we should be sure we're both talking about the same person."

Tabor studied the photograph for a few moments then passed it to his colleague. "Yes, that's almost certainly her."

"Yes," said Glass.

"Pity she didn't mention any of this sooner," Tabor added.

"My client is an intelligent and articulate woman in her native Vietnamese," said Buckingham. "I take it neither of you speaks the language?"

"We were waiting for a translator," Tabor admitted.

"I hope we don't have too long to wait," Buckingham told him with a smile.

Barry Tabor shifted uneasily in his chair. He could see a clear threat of someone being sued for racial harassment in the air.

"Perhaps you would care to verify these documents in the meantime," Buckingham added. "We had certified copies of my client's birth and marriage certificates on file."

"Yes, that would save a bit of time," Tabor said. He could recognize a lost cause. He realized that his department had been fed lies by someone with a grudge against the Anglo-Vietnamese woman in the cells. It was time to clear things up as quickly as possible and move on.

Ford Ford walked along the row of walled-in archways, looking for anything out of place. At a garage-workshop that was up for sale, he found fresh tyre tracks and scrapes on the ground which suggested that the main door had been opened recently to admit a vehicle. The twin locks on the door surrendered to an expert. Ford was inside as quickly as anyone with the keys.

Ford spent less than a minute in the workshop before he crossed to where Ferenc Disch was sitting in his car, sipping coffee, toying with a clipboard and ignoring the rest of the world. Ford let himself in to the car and pointed across the road. "Anyone go in there."

. . . "Not that I saw," Disch told him after his usual pause.

"Okay, change the tape."

Disch replaced the tape in his camera, switched the camera on again and put it back in the box. Ford took the tape over to his van and fed it into the videoplayer in the back. The action came right at the start of the tape. Ford reached for his mobile phone.

"Lance?" he reported. "I've found him. Dead."

"How?" said Robbijohn.

"Someone hit him over the head and hit him too hard. He was tied up and gagged, but he isn't now. I can see rope marks and residue from gaffer tape on his face. He's also

been stabbed in the leg. It looks like someone was trying to get him to talk and he upped and died on them."

"Did Furry get anything?"

"He's got a shot of a van driving out of there just as he was getting here. And a guy closing the door before he gets into the van. It's going to need enhancing, but we've got the guy on tape out in the open."

"Right, get on the enhancing and tell Furry he can split."

"Okay. What about Drek? Are you going to call the cops?"

"I'm just thinking what to do. Yes, there's been a murder and we want to put some independent heat on these guys to keep them from getting too cocky."

"So call the cops and tell them what?"

"That there's a dead guy there. I'll call the police crime hotline and say the place was unlocked and I had a look inside and found the body. But I don't want to get involved so I'm not giving them my name."

"Okay, that would work. We're going to get these guys, Lance."

"Oh, yes, you can count on that," said Robbijohn.

# THIRTY EIGHT

## Searching...

Mi Tai returned to her lost space in a state of high excitement. Robbijohn had explained his scheme for turning her into a legal resident of the British Isles but she had never really expected it to work. She wanted to talk to someone about her experience but Lance and his friends were nowhere around. In search of an audience, Mi Tai headed for The Painter's indoor South Sea island.

Mike Browning had the computer hardware and software necessary for enhancing pictures on a videotape. He was surprised by the sudden return of Lance Robbijohn and Ford Ford but was soon devoting his full attention to a paid job. Robbijohn left Browning's workshop with a clear picture of the man who had closed the workshop's door and a not so good picture of the man at the wheel of the van.

"What's the next move?" said Ford as they were crossing the alley to his car.

"Show the pictures to everyone we know in case they've seen these guys hanging around," said Robbijohn. "If they've not, we go looking for them."

"They're the needles and the haystack is Hambourne?"

"Except that we can cut the size of the haystack down. If these guys are Colombians or Italians who know about us,

they have to be connected. And if they are, they're not going to be living in a back-street flop-house. They're going to have a fairly high profile."

"I guess," nodded Ford.

"Okay, we'd better meet at Thorville Associates for a planning session," Robbijohn added.

When they arrived at the lost space at Gordon House, Robbijohn was surprised to find that Mi Tai was out. She was not usually given to wandering around the city on her own. Then a crowd arrived and he went into planning mode.

None of the early arrivals recognized the men in the enhanced pictures from the videotape. And then Ferenc Disch arrived. Disch felt reasonably sure that he had seen the man who had locked the door but he could not remember where. Robbijohn gave him some cash and sent him out to make a circuit of his usual haunts in search of inspiration.

Robbijohn had decided to hunt carefully. It would not be a good idea, he realized, to show the pictures to outsiders and ask if they had seen the men before. If someone talked out of turn, it would warn the two strangers to get out of town in a hurry; if they were not already running.

His friends were comfortable with a campaign of lurking and looking initially. But if that didn't work, they reserved the right to go for something more positive. Robbijohn began to draw up a list of places where their suspects were likely to be found. The list was starting to get quite unwieldy by the time he received a phone call from Ferenc Dish.

Disch had remembered where he had seen the man on the videotape. He was almost certain that he had seen the man in the casino at *Merrity's*. Steve Cann headed across the city centre to negotiate for the chance to view some security videotapes leaving Robbijohn revising his plans to concentrate on a stake-out at *Merrity's*.

"What are we going to do with these guys when we catch up with them?" said Ford Ford as he poured out more coffee.

"The options are an accident, probably fatal, or we stitch them up good and proper and get them arrested and slung in gaol for a long time," said Robbijohn.

"A fatal accident would be nice," said Ford.

"Gaol lasts longer and we can arrange accident when they come out," Gregor Maiskiy remarked.

"I guess it's all going to come down to how pissed off we feel when we know who they are and where we can find them," said Robbijohn. "And speaking personally, I'm pretty damn pissed off right now. Drek was a good mate. He didn't deserve to die like that."

The phone began to ring. Robbijohn answered it.

"Where are you?" said Mi Tai's voice.

"Gordon House," said Robbijohn. "Where are you?"

"On Painter's island. Guess what? I get busted at marina."

"For what?"

"Illegal immigrant."

"Oh, great! But you got out all right?"

"Give cops phone number, cavalry come. Mrs. Carmody let out with no apology."

"So you're okay?"

"Very okay." Mi Tai giggled. "Painter get champagne out."

"Oh, right, I thought you sounded a bit relaxed. Stay where you are for the moment."

"Okay. See you," Mi Tai added cheerfully.

"Trouble?" said Ford.

"Mi Tai got busted as an illegal immigrant," said Robbijohn. "At the marina."

"So we've got to bust her out of some holding facility?"

"No, we had an emergency plan worked out."

"Is big coincidence," Maiskiy remarked. "Mi Tai and Drek

on same day."

"You're dam' right it's a big coincidence," said Ford.

"I guess we've got some hard choices to make about the future," said Robbijohn. "Maybe we're too comfortable here."

The story in Monday's *Hambourne Express* carried the headline *Mayoral Chain Mystery*. Controlled leaks had ensured that the chain saga became the main talking point of the day on the local television services. The radio stations with local coverage had a busy time when they began their phone-in programmes. The 'mystery' was still seen as the lead news item a day later.

The people who had kidnapped the mayoral chain had shown it to a volunteer reporter for a new underground newspaper called Crime News. The reporter had examined the chain closely and seen a spot where the gold coating had worn off to reveal underlying brass. Crime News provided independent confirmation that the original chain had not been on display the previous week.

In response to persistent questions about where the genuine mayoral chain was, the town hall's spokesperson had changed her tune. The official line was now that the chain's kidnappers had swapped it for the replica, which the thieves had knocked up over the weekend to confuse the issue. The police were keeping quiet about their fingerprint tests until they received some results.

On Tuesday afternoon, One Ton Radio broadcast an interview with former council employee, whose voice had been disguised electronically to avoid reprisals. Gavin Murdoch listened to the interview partly because the subject interested him and partly because it was on Polly Roil's show.

"So, Mr. X, you know what happened to the original gold

chain?" a roving reporter's voice said. Her voice was clear and it had a faint Scottish accent.

"That's right, Jane," said a male voice with a certain science-fiction quality. "The Socialist group on the council got rid of the original chain years ago."

"In that case, what was on show when the trouble started?"

"Just what it said in the two local papers. What was stolen was a copy made of gold-plated brass. And what went on show next was another copy in gold-coloured plastic. They had that one made because the mayors complained the metal ones were too heavy to wear for any length of time. I thought everyone knew that."

"Obviously not. So what happened to the original?"

"Your guess is as good as mine, love. But my best guess is that if it's not been weighed in for scrap, someone's put it somewhere safe hoping it'll be written off as lost."

"You mean, it might not have been actually stolen but someone might be planning to, well, inherit it if they think they can get away with it?"

"The people on that council have got away with much bigger swindles than that, I can tell you."

"Well," said Peggy Roil, "this sounds like one that's going to run and run. Who's got the mayor's chain. Answers on a postcard to the usual address. And while we're thinking about it, let's go for a *Moonlight Drive* with *The Doors*."

Murdoch used his remote control to turn the music down. According to Stella, his woman who knew everything, the police were investigating the fate of the missing mayoral chain and resignations, and even prosecutions, were on the cards if the chain, or a satisfactory account of its fate, was not forthcoming. It was all good political ammunition for a man who was going to fight an election on an independent ticket.

Robin Formby caught up with Detective Constable Mike Teller at his usual lunchtime watering hole. Teller put on a pained expression when Formby produced his cassette recorder.

"Any progress on the body under The Arches?" Formby asked.

"Nothing to add to the earlier statement," Teller replied. "We believe it was a vehicle theft that went wrong. We still haven't found the victim's car, which was expensive and of the sort that's usually stolen to order."

The police did not know that Derek's friends had put his car in a safe place and they had made what seemed like a reasonable assumption about the circumstances of Derek's death. Luis Carazon and Riccardo Mundoro had followed reports of the police investigation with keen attention.

They were now certain that they had got away with killing Derek and they were planning a new attempt to gain information which might provide them with two million dollars.

"Nothing in his past to suggest a motive for murder?"

"We still don't know all that much about him."

"So there might be a motive that you haven't found yet?"

"Is this our fearless crime reporter trying to invent a story and pretend some gullible plod gave it to him?" Teller said loudly into the cassette recorder's microphone.

"I can always edit that bit out," Formby pointed out.

"You'd do something like that to me, Rob?" Teller sounded comically disappointed.

"All right." Formby tried a new tack. "I've heard a pretty strong rumour about Jim Jones, the drug-dealer who was kidnapped and defenestrated. I've heard it was arranged by a rival drug dealer. The weapons, the sub-machine guns and the pistols, they were replicas. And J.J.'s lookout was quote killed unquote for show and paid off from with money from

a stash in J.J.'s flat. Then he left town. It was all routine elimination of a competitor made to look like the work of vigilantes."

"Pardon me for stating the obvious, old son, but that's what I told you at the time. It was a rival, not vigilantes."

"I notice you didn't leap in to correct the people who said it was down to vigilantes," Formby pointed out.

"Yeah, well, people don't always listen when you tell them something they don't want to hear. So you sometimes think you'll save your breath. Not that our fearless reporter was too keen to hear anything other than vigilante stories."

"And knowing it was a rival drug dealer, I notice you didn't rush out and arrest anyone, either."

Teller shrugged. "No leads. Are you telling me you've got one, Rob?"

"Albert, J.J.'s lookout, who's supposed to be dead? Would it surprise you to know he's living in Mossy Castle next door to Packer Todd? The guy you'd *love* to bust for handling stolen goods but never quite manage it."

"Is that straight up, Rob?"

"Straight from a normally reliable source, namely Packer's brother. He wants J.J. out of there but he daren't do anything about it in case he brings the police round at an awkward time for Packer. Like when he's loaded up with loot."

"I'll look into it," said the detective. "And if it works out, you get the first phone call."

Steve Cann was starting to appreciate what being square-eyed was all about by the time he had finished viewing surveillance tapes at *Merrity's*. He emerged from his marathon session with four pictures taken from the tapes: one of the man who had locked the workshop containing Derek's body, a better picture of the driver of the van and pictures of two

of the local good-time girls, whom he had seen with the killers on the tapes from three separate night.

The security staff at *Merrity's* knew that the blonde was called Wendy and the brunette's name was Jan or Jen. They had the women marked down as a potential source of trouble but neither had misbehaved herself on the club's premises and they encouraged their male pick-ups to spend freely.

Wendy was more memorable and easier to track down, although Cann found himself looking at the right face with the wrong hair colour when he found the hairdresser's where she worked. Wendy was a brunette during her working life and the wig came out only when she was looking for fun.

Cann drew her into a conspiracy; and found that she was eager to go with him. When he told her that he was a private investigator on a messy divorce case, Wendy was fascinated. When he told her that her co-operation was worth money, Wendy gave him her complete attention.

Wendy knew that one of the men in Cann's pictures, Luis, the driver of the van, was from South American and the other, Ricky, was Italian. She even knew where the names of their hotels, having been to their room with each of them, their surnames, which credit cards they held and their line of business.

Cann interrogated Wendy thoroughly, then he drove her to Jenny's flat. Jenny was unable to provide anything new in the way of hard information but the bogus private detective made copious notes anyway. Then he asked the ladies where they wanted to go as there was a holiday on offer as a reward. Jenny suggested Mallorca but Wendy wanted a ride on the *Orient Express*.

Cann made some phone calls. Jenny forgot about the Spanish island when she realized that she could be on her

way to a holiday of a lifetime with generous spending money right away. Getting time off work without notice was no problem for either of them.

When Steve Cann joined Robbijohn and the others in the lost space at Gordon House, his two informants were on a train for London and escaping from Hambourne for at least two weeks.

"Okay, so we know who these guys are, where they are and what they say they're doing here," said Robbijohn.

"They're still at the same hotels?" said Ford Ford.

Cann nodded. "I checked. Which makes a certain sense. If you've killed someone, it's usually a good idea not to do anything. People remember you doing things, so not making any changes to your life doesn't attract attention."

"Something else I saw on the security tapes was your pal Shaun Wayne talking to these guys at *Merrity's*," Cann added.

"I wonder if he's been talking to the Immigration mob, too," said Robbijohn. "Maybe it's time to have a word with him."

"Is this *have a word* on a permanent basis?" said Ford.

"Accidents are easy to have," rumbled Gregor Maiskiy.

"Quite a lot of people just disappear in South America," said Ford. "But it wouldn't be a good idea for our guys. The ones who killed Drek."

"I agree," said Robbijohn. "Although we can afford to take one of them out in circumstances that point away from us."

"The easiest thing to do," said Cann, "would be to fly him over to Ireland, shoot him in the back of the neck and leave him in a bog to be found or not, according to his luck."

"Make it look like the IRA did him in?" said Robbijohn.

"Or Irish crooks, who robbed him and made it look like the work of the IRA," said Ford.

"Simple, direct, eye-for-an-eye, uncomplicated and very do-able" said Robbijohn. "What about the other guy."

"We need to think of something Italian man would most hate to happen to him," said Maiskiy.

# THIRTY NINE

## Revelation . . .

There were crowds, police vehicles, the fire brigade and a forlorn ambulance grouped in the courtyard at Mossy Castle. It was a hot day despite the hazy sunshine. The crowd was all around a dark blue BMW on the ground and hanging off every balcony along with press reporters, photographers and camera crews.

An eight-foot icicle, like a fat spear, had cleaved through the roof of the car. It was an impossible miracle on a mid-August day. The icicle had pierced the driver from crown to seat. The ambulance crew was a little glad that the man was obviously dead as it was plain that he could not survive attempts to free him and get him to a hospital.

There was a lot of discussion on how to free the man. Some favoured letting the ice melt naturally. Others had suggested chipping the man out with a fireman's axe, or using a blow-lamp. One thing was for certain: there was no remotely dignified way of getting him out of the car with any sort of speed.

The reporters in the crowd were drawing parallels with the American Mafia boss, who had been blasted in his car by an assassin's shotgun and just left there to, uncovered, to be photographed by still and video cameras, to the indignation

of his family, with his mouth wide open in a final, hopeless death scream.

As they snapped away, the photographers just knew that none of their pictures would appear on a British newspaper's pages; but they had other outlets for images of violent death.

Just about everyone at Mossy Castle knew the victim of the icicle assault. They knew that he was a money-lender with a bad reputation and worse business morals, and that he was said to be paying off the local police to stay in business.

Some people were wondering if the dead man had been killed by accident, perhaps by an ice bomb dropping from the toilet of Jumbo jet. There was also a rumour going round that the ice was cold enough to burn flesh.

One police officer was said to have lost all the skin from his fingertips, which put the likely temperature of the icicle at around -30°C, which could be achieved only by artificial cooling.

Another rumour insisted that there was a target drawn on car's roof to aid the aim of the icicle-bomber.

As he watched the story unfolding on the local channel on the TV set in his workshop, Frank Hogan dared to wonder if other icicles would drop out of the sky onto people who deserved them: such as the DSS officials who had made a good living out of his unemployment.

One of the members knocked then put his head round the door. "Morning, Major. I'd like to make a booking for the two-two target range this afternoon."

"Right, I'll be with you in a moment." Hogan had been quite surprised at how easily Ford Ford's idea of calling him 'Major Hogan' had caught on. He was certainly the right age to have held that rank during an army career and he felt that it suited him.

Ivan Kenton's Friday deadline for a decision from the DTI had come and gone but there had been a great deal of negotiation and manoeuvring conducted in the seven days since Hilary St. Vernon and his colleague Paul Grouty had last visited Kenton's garage.

They arrived punctually at ten-thirty on another Wednesday morning and found themselves being offered the same hard, wooden chairs in vehicle-less expanse of Ivan Kenton's garage. Kenton's solicitor, Pierre McAinsley, was also there and looking as keen as anyone to learn his client's secret.

St. Vernon offered documents to the solicitor, who scanned them thoroughly while Kenton finished off a mug of coffee. Refreshments for the visitors were not on the menu.

"Looks in order, Ivan," McAinsley said at last.

"Okay," said Kenton, making sure that the reels of the cassette in his recorder were turning, "under the terms of the confidentiality agreement which the DTI's representatives have handed to my solicitor, I'm about to disclose my defence to your allegations of insider trading."

Kenton paused to look at St. Vernon, who was wearing a *Get on with it!* expression.

"It's all done by a combination of Chinese divination procedures, precision astrology and dowsing," Kenton said quite slowly, making every attempt to be clear for his audience. "It's never been practical to use this method before because of all the calculations you have to make and all the factors that have to be taken into consideration. Not to mention getting all the information in the first place.

"The only people who were ever able to make it work before modern, fast computers came along were people with one of these idiot mathematicians for an assistant. You know what I mean. Someone who can multiply two ten-figure

numbers in their head but can't tie their own shoelaces."

Kenton smiled at the visitors. St. Vernon was wearing a mild frown, as if wondering whether Kenton was winding him up before he got down to the real details. Grouty was wearing a sceptical smile.

"The method tells you when the participants in a take-over are in harmony with themselves and each other," Kenton added, "and when they aren't. So you know when the people are likely to make their bids and if they'll succeed. And a sensitive can also pick out shares that will move by casting with a dowsing pendulum over a page of share prices."

"How does that work?" St. Vernon almost managed to sound as if he was taking Kenton seriously.

"By colour divination. It's the same principle as water and mineral divining. You take hold of different sectors of an indicator disk and the response of the pendulum tells you if the shares are going to go up or down, and if it's a long- or short-term movement. It's a well-tried and tested technique in these other areas."

Kenton smiled at the DTI investigators, who were clearly struggling for an appropriate response to his story. While it was illegal to give investment counselling advice based on inside information, the rules had nothing to say about information obtained by dowsing and similar mystical methods.

"I'm still experimenting with the technique," Kenton continued, "but it seems to be highly successful, judging from the level of interest from your department. The only snag is that if the method is disclosed, that could cause havoc in the City and make government of the country very difficult.

"It would rock the financial markets if it got out that sensitive people like myself can forecast what they're going to be doing with very high accuracy. All the dealers and the major financial institutions are busy gambling away while

I'm following scientifically researched information to its inevitable conclusion.

"If we ever get to the worst case scenario, I can see financial confidence going and the world's financial services could end on their knees in weeks or months."

Kenton stopped talking and looked at his audience. His solicitor had the look of a man who was in the presence of a dangerous lunatic.

Hilary St. Vernon still looked as if he had missed the punch-line or it had not yet been delivered.

Paul Grouty clearly thought that Kenton had been backed into a corner and he was having a bit of a joke before he threw himself on the mercy of the DTI.

"Of course, I don't expect you to take my word for it," Kenton said with a smile. "Not without some proof. I've had my computer crunching numbers all night and I can announce that things are looking very bright for a certain retailer firm. Their shares are going to move up within the next few days – at least a pound within a week at the most."

"And this is your proof?" St. Vernon said eventually.

"Well, I can also show you the divination equipment and what comes out of the computer," Kenton told him. "But the exact details are classed as commercial secrets and I won't be divulging them."

"Not good enough," said St. Vernon.

"Okay, what about this?" Kenton handed him a floppy disc. "The identity of the company is on this along with a program that will release the information ten days from now."

"Well," said solicitor Pierre McAinsley in response to a nudge from his client, "there you have it, gentlemen. The secret of my client's success. And also a means of testing him. And if you choose not to believe him, I think the onus

is now on you to prove that he's getting his information any other way."

Paul Grouty made a noise which could have been a cough or a sneer.

"Bearing in mind, of course," the solicitor added, "that my client will be seeking damages for the interruption to his business and for damage to his business reputation. And that the amount of the damages can only grow, the longer you keep him on the sidelines and under suspicion."

"We'll have to consult . . . ," St. Vernon began.

"The more time you spend doing that, the more it's going to cost you in damages," Kenton interrupted. "I suggest you get on with it right away."

The DTI inspectors collected up their briefcases and returned to their car. They were used to being practically thrown off the premises by Ivan Kenton but they had not learned to like it.

"Well, spit the bones out of that!" McAinsley said when his client returned to the garage.

"Yeah, you don't believe it works either, do you?" laughed Kenton. "That's the beauty of it. Nobody thinks my method could possibly work and so there's no competition. Well, there are other financial advisors but they're still stuck with the usual mixture of judgement and sheer guesswork."

"You're saying these shares are definitely going up, Ivan?"

"I'm saying, me old Pierre, if you've got any sense, you'll be on the old dog-and-bone to your stockbroker the first chance you get. I know, I've gone as deep as I can on Dorman-James. You'd be well advised to do the same. Like I told you, they'll take a dip and then they'll shoot up."

"I've just had a thought about that. You know you gave them a floppy with a program on it to unlock your prediction after ten days?"

"Yes."

"How's the program going to know the date?"

Kenton shrugged. "It'll get it from the PC's internal clock."

"But what if they reset the internal clock to ten days from now then put your disk in it?"

"They'll know right away instead of in ten days' time."

"But . . ." said the solicitor.

"But what?" Kenton said. "The shares are going to go up and them knowing about it now or later isn't going to affect anything. They're at four-thirteen today, they'll be over five quid in a matter of days. And if they do unlock my file early, they might even make a few bob out of it. Which will convince them all the more that my method works."

"Calling your plan a stroke of genius would be something of an understatement," the solicitor admitted.

# FORTY

## Shockers

Gavin Murdoch was less than pleased when his team of vigilantes reported for work again after their trip to Spain. They had returned happy but dead broke. Their absence had left a vacuum into which imitators had rushed. Murdoch gave them some money and sent Vic, Charlie and Otty back onto the streets of Hambourne to get on with Murdoch's agenda for bringing retribution to deserving anti-social elements.

The good news of the day was that strike at Clayton Engineering had collapsed finally. Jane and Bob Clayton had accepted Murdoch's offer, plus the under-the-table sweetener, and they had left Hambourne forever. Murdoch was going into asset-stripping mode.

He had given one of the senior managers the task of completing the outstanding orders and selling off the outdated equipment to a Third World country. Most of the staff were laid off and Murdoch was planning to keep on a skeleton workforce of non-militants.

A significant nucleus of the employees had refused to go on strike out of loyalty to the Claytons. Murdoch was planning to reward them and retain that goodwill factor. He also intended to see if he could find alternative employment for

those who had leapt out on strike, using the gesture as a means of showing them that he was a fair man and it was a good idea to keep in with him.

In the meantime, the factory could offer a large building close to the main gate. That building, after clearing out and a bit of cleaning and polishing, would be ideal for Murdoch's next-but-one music event. Following the success of his heavy metal festival at Grosvenor Park, he was planning another event on a smaller scale inside the city. And as part of his research for the project, he was listening to One Ton Radio to find out which local bands were hot.

As he looked over a site plan of Clayton Engineering and thought of temporary uses before the works was integrated into his master plan for the area, Murdoch tuned out the music on his radio and tuned in the voices when the DJ came back on the air.

The Thursday morning show was being hosted by someone called Kris (with a K) Tyrant, whose name was a joke for a reason which Murdoch was unable to fathom.

"Okay," said Kris in his totally laid-back voice, "that was a track called *Shot Through And Through* from the début cassette album of a band with a name I'll have to be very careful with at this time of day. *Cockswain Crunt*. I thought that's usually spelled with an *x*, not a *ck*, guys?"

"We're using the original fifteenth century spelling," said a voice which sounded younger than Kris's to Murdoch. "According to the dictionary, a cock used to be a ship's boat."

"With a swain in charge of it," said another young voice.

"You filthy swain, you!," said a third young voice.

"You've just heard Pete One, Skull and Pete Two, in that order," said Kris. "So how did you come up with a name like that?"

"We did a lot of market research to find a name with the right heavy metal credibility," said Pete One. "That was the one that scored the most points."

"Really? Market research?" said Kris.

"Right. Skull's Dad's in that field, so he was a lot of help there."

"That doesn't sound very heavy metal, guys!," laughed Kris. "Getting your *Dad* to do your market research for you. Whatever happened to rebellion and everyone over thirty is the enemy and brain-dead?"

"This is a business we're in, right?" said Pete One. "Like this radio station."

"Yeah, well, that's debatable," Kris said with a laugh. "But for the sake of argument . . ."

"So you need the right people to set it up, like you need a sound engineer and a producer and the sales staff for your advertising and the money men backing you. All the hype doesn't happen by accident, you know."

"Sounds pretty radical to me!" laughed Kris. "Organized heavy metal. How much market research did you do for your cassette album, *The Intended Victim?"*

"Again, we researched the themes with the most heavy metal credibility."

"Which they are?

"Death, decay, degradation," listed Pete Two.

"Kinky or unnatural sex, or excessive sex, perversion," added Skull.

"Violence in all forms, both physical and mental and emotional," added Pete One.

"The more cheerful things in life, in fact?" said Kris.

"Motorbikes, helicopter gunships, death-mobiles, basically speed for its own sake, power and destructive capacity," added Skull.

"And not forgetting Satanism and alternative religions that preach excesses, voodoo, black magic generally, the extreme occult, and like that," said Pete One.

"Sounds like you've left yourself plenty of scope for your song-writing," said Kris. "Let's have another track. This one's called *Billet In The Brain*. What's that all about?"

"Basically, it's isolation, self-sufficiency and what you can do without needing other people getting in the way," said Skull.

"Okay! Here we go, *Billet In The Brain* from the album *The Intended Victim* from *Cockswain Crunt*," said Kris.

Murdoch wrote *Cock N Cr* on the current page of his desk planner as he mentally tuned out the racket which the band called music. They sounded like a bunch of organized lads who were exploiting their music genre with quite amusing cynicism. And the news that one of them had persuading his dad to do some market research for the band suggested to Murdoch that they deserved encouragement; perhaps in the form of a booking for this next-but-one music event.

Murdoch's next music event was due to take place in a theatre, which was about to be refurbished from the walls out. Murdoch was planning to fill an empty building with wall-to-wall heavy-metal music fans while enforcing strict rules. Wanton destruction of facilities will result in pain, fines and expulsion in a suitably chastened state.

In contrast to Acid House parties, the event would be properly organized. There was some second-hand value in the seats and other fittings, so Murdoch wanted to discourage the vandals among the ranks of music fans from slashing the seats with craft knives as a means of self-expression.

The same applied to the plumbing. It was all coming out, but Murdoch believed that if you let kids start demolishing

something, they might just progress to bringing the whole building crashing down, which was going a bit far and not likely to encourage the council to provide licences for further music events, which were highly profitable, in Murdoch's experience, in terms of generating cash and goodwill.

"Okay!" said Kris Tyrant. "That was *Billet In The Brain* from *Cockswain Crunt*."

Murdoch gave his attention back to the radio.

"Before we carry on talking to the band, here's an interesting item from our newsroom," said Kris. "About a month ago, a thieving little scroat reached into a car stopped at some traffic lights and grabbed a mobile phone. Which blew up and shredded his hand as he was running away. The police are now saying there's been a sharp drop in thefts of mobile phones following a second incident with the same bad result for the thief. How do you guys feel about mobile phones?"

"We've got a gadget that makes the noise of a mobile phone ringing to drive all the pretentious gits in the audience mad; wondering who's getting a call if it's not them," said Pete Two.

"Like it," laughed Kris. "Can't stand them, myself."

Murdoch tuned the radio out completely and wondered if he could come up with a scheme similar to the exploding mobile phones for this own team of vigilantes.

In the meantime, he had some canvassing to do. As Uncle Jack, his unofficial election agent had promised, he was getting some very interesting feed-back at the doorstep by visiting the right sort of people.

Robbijohn had found out by accident that his phone at the flat at Mossy Castle was being tapped by the police. As well as giving them access to the phone line, the device also acted

as a bug in the flat, relaying any conversations to a monitoring station. Robbijohn had assumed that the bug had been planted by some national police squad which was looking for information on his brother by all possible means.

Not wanting to waste the opportunity, Robbijohn had started to plan an elaborate imaginary robbery with two imaginary mates. He had reduced the cast of his play-for-the-police to just himself by going to the flat and pretending to receive calls on a mobile phone. He created the appropriate ringing sounds by playing parts of a pre-recorded cassette and he gave the police just his side of the conversation.

The plan was having many setbacks along the way. Robbijohn had not decided for how much longer he would keep it up but he had an ending in mind. He would say into his mythical mobile phone something like: *Benny the Fish wants to play pool* in a significant tone and leave the national police squad to draw its own conclusions.

Robbijohn was heading for the lift and the ground floor after another exercise in making life interesting for the police when he met Milly Tullough. Milly had a strange look on her face. Robbijohn decided that she looked as if she had receive both good and bad news about the same thing, and she had no idea what to believe.

"Hello, Lance. No, I forgot, it's Steve." Milly looked around quickly but there was no one near enough to have heard her slip. "I've just been visiting Brenda, poor thing. Her Malcolm's bad again."

"Oh, right. Sounds bad," said Robbijohn, who had no idea who Brenda and Malcolm were.

"Have you heard about Geoff?"

"Geoff as in your husband? No. Why?"

"They found him dead in the prison this morning. In the workshop. Electrocuted, they said."

"What, accidentally? Or deliberately?"

"They don't know."

"You reckon someone was trying to get him to talk? About where he left the loot?" Robbijohn murmured, checking that there was no one nearby.

"I don't know, Lance. It could just have been an accident."

"Still, it solves your problem about the big hole in his loot."

The lift arrived. Milly put on a faint smile as they entered it. "This must sound terrible, but that was one of the first things I thought when the coppers arrived to tell me the news."

"So what's happening now?"

"They said they'd need me to identify him. Probably late on this afternoon. So I dumped the kids on Carol next door and came out to have a think. I've not told them yet. I don't know what to tell them."

"The truth is probably best. He was working and there was an accident."

"Yes, that's what Brenda said."

"Do I see signs you're not exactly heartbroken about it?"

"Probably. I mean, I wouldn't have wished anything like this on him, Lance, but I was getting a bit bloody fed up of being left on my own all the time."

"If he was going to lead a life of crime, the least he could do was avoid being caught?"

"Something like that. Does that sound terrible?"

"People change. And sometimes, it's not for the better."

"You haven't changed all that much, Lance."

"Oh, I don't know."

"I mean, deep down, you're still the same person I used to live next door to. What was it? Twenty-odd years ago? If I ask you for help, you're always there. No excuses, no

questions, no messing about. You're there."

"Wow, sounds like I'm a really great guy," laughed Robbijohn. "Have you got a solicitor lined up, by the way?"

"A solicitor? For what? Oh, God! I bet Geoff's not left a will."

"I was thinking more of the compensation. For what happened to him in the prison. It was either murder by guys trying to find out where he's got his quarter of a million stashed. You've not had anyone coming round bothering you again, by the way?"

"Not recently. No. I must look like I have to work for a living."

"Good. Anyway, if it wasn't murder, Geoff's death is down to negligence by the prison. Dangerous machinery in the workshop and the government's to blame. Either way, you've got some compensation coming."

"It's a bit early to be thinking of that, Lance."

"Any solicitor will tell you to get your claim in as soon as possible. And if you get a few bob out of the government that way, you'll be okay for enjoying the rest of Geoff's loot."

"I hadn't thought of that. Good job I ran into you, Lance."

The lift doors opened. Two teenage boys barged in without letting the occupants out first.

"Give you a lift anywhere?" said Robbijohn.

"I'd better head home, I think," said Millie. "I'm starting to think straight again. Oh, I was sorry to hear about Derek. That was terrible. We saw it on the news."

"The police reckon it was a gang stealing flash cars like his and they hit him a bit too hard."

"I hope some of the vigilantes catch up with the bastards."

"I don't think anything nice is going to happen to the guys who killed him," Robbijohn said with conviction.

As far as the Italian, Ricky, was concerned, the group had

decided to set him up convincingly and let the police arrest him for a crime which had nothing at all to do with Derek's death.

Robbijohn was sure that there was nothing an Italian would hate more than being locked up for years in an English gaol and all that went with imprisonment in England, including such joys as slopping out. He was also thinking about getting some mates of Milly's husband to give Ricky a hard time in prison for good measure.

The plan also involved dropping clues that would make Ricky think that the Colombian, Luis, had latched on to a really hot lead and shopped him so that he would get his hands on one-hundred per cent of the reward.

As for the Colombian, he was destined for a bullet in the back of the neck and a last trip to an Irish peat bog.

# FORTY ONE

## The V-Word

Robin Formby was enjoying writing up his notes on a story with a vigilante angle; although he was careful not to mention the *V-word*. A gang of thieves had been set up by someone who seemed to have studied their movements and tastes. They tried to steal the wheels from a luxury-bracket Jaguar and they had been sprayed with a combination of a bright yellow dye and a chemical with a disgusting smell.

According to the hospital report; one of the gang had fallen and cut himself badly while running away; the dye would keep the man a bright yellow for two to three weeks and the stinking smell would hang around for three to five days.

The story was writing itself apart from one small detail. Formby had been told that the Jaguar's wheels were worth £500. He had an idea that they were supposed to be worth that much *each* but the figure seemed so incredible that he was going to check it when the flow of inspiration ran thin.

"Rob, get a photographer and hit the streets." Jane Verity, the 'pit boss' of the Hambourne Express leaned over to speak to him in a low voice. "We've got a sensitive one."

"Race-wise?" Formby asked with a frown

"Good-taste-wise. So handle it carefully."

"Right." Formby finished his piece and priced the Jaguar

wheels at £500 each. If he had time to check the figure, he would. If not, well, today's Express was always just the outer, thermal-insulation layer of fish-and-chip suppers the next day.

When he reached the scene of the incident, Formby found that there was nothing much to see. According to what he had been told, one of the insurance assessors for Hambourne Risk Management had been found hanging by the neck under a canal bridge with his pockets full of stones.

The body was still in place but the unco-operative police had erected a screen of blue plastic sheets around the site, they had closed the canal tow path and they were keeping everyone well back.

Formby went in search of eye-witnesses. There was usually someone hanging around, not talking to the police but waiting to see if he or she could sell pictures and a story to a reporter. Even though his editor would never admit it, Formby knew that the vigilante awareness had done wonders for the sale of simple disposable cameras, which could be stowed in a pocket, ready for use if something dramatic happened.

Formby's eyes made contact with a woman in her early twenties. She looked like a recently graduated student. The woman looked at him, looked away towards the canal bridge, looked back at him again and smiled.

"Jacko, the girl in the girl in the green anorak with the white stripes," Formby said to his photographer.

"Right," said Jacko Greve. "I ran into her a while back with Bill Closters. She had good pictures."

"Let's see what sort of a deal she's wants," said Formby.

"You're Rob something, aren't you?" the young woman said when the reporters reached her. "I've seen your picture in the Express."

"Rob Formby. You've got some pictures?"

"Can we go somewhere else? I don't want some copper grabbing them."

"Right. What do I call you?"

"Angela."

"Okay, Angela, we'll go and sit in the car. What did you see?"

"I was walking past when this bloke came rushing up from the canal bank and asked me where there's a phone box. So I pointed to the pub down the way and he shot off in that direction. So I went down to the canal. And there he was. A bloke, youngish, quite a posh suit, just strung up from the bridge. All limp and not moving, and all these loose stones on the ground and his pockets bulging out of shape."

"So you took some pictures?"

"Just with one of these pocket cameras, but I did the whole film so there must be something. Some from in front and some from behind him."

Formby noticed that Jacko was looking quite comically shocked at the woman's cold-blooded professionalism. "Okay, the best thing to do is for you to head back to the Express with Jacko and get your film processed. If it comes out all right, we'll make you an offer for it. You know the police will want to talk to you at some stage?"

"I know," said Angela. "But I didn't see anything that will help them, so there's no rush."

"Okay." Formby handed the car keys to Jacko. "And I'll want to talk to you again, Angela."

"Yeah, I've done this before so I know what's what," Angela told him with a confident smile.

Detective Constable Mike Teller could recognize bullshit when he heard it. He could also accept it when it was part of

a trade of information. Jacko Greve, the Hambourne Express photographer, had supervised the processing of Angela's negatives. He had then scanned the pictures into a computer.

After blowing them up on a 21-inch monitor, he had noticed a figure in the background of two of the pictures. Some computer enhancement had produced a pair of fairly good pictures of the same man, who had been sitting in a car, looking at the body under the bridge.

On hearing about the new witness, Rob Formby had asked for a meeting with DC Teller. He had provided the detective with a pint of lager and he had placed postcard-size prints of the man in the car – standard prints from the negatives showing the position of the car and enhanced close ups of the man – on a dry part of the pub table.

"Someone been concealing evidence?" Teller remarked. He could tell at a glance where the pictures had been taken.

Rob Formby shrugged. "The person who took the pictures suddenly got nervous and started to wonder if the killer was still around, still watching the scene. Which is why that person brought them to us. As a buffer layer between the person and the law, meaning you lot. The person felt safer letting us give the pictures to you."

"That's bullshit," said Teller.

"Yeah, but it could happen," Formby protested. "And we've saved you the cost of processing the film and making the prints."

"For which we shall be eternally grateful, sir. I suppose you want a quid pro quo?"

"Two quid, if it's going."

"And you'll tell me where to find this witness?"

"I'll tell you where to find someone who happened to be on the scene after the crime was perpetrated and who may just have snapped some passing ghoul, not the perpetrator

enjoying his work."

"Woman, is it?"

"Might be."

"And what's all this about a crime? How do you know it wasn't suicide?"

"Because this is too good a story to be just a suicide. And you recognized the bloke in the blow-ups."

"What, me, gov?" protested DC Teller.

"Your poker face needs some work, Mike. So what's the story on this guy?"

"I'm reminded of a case that gave us a whole lot of aggro a few months back. This bloke had left a spare set of keys locked in the dashboard of his car. And some thieves lifted up the back end of the vehicle and towed it away."

"What, like your lot do to cars that are dangerously parked? Or just parked where you don't like them to be?"

"Right out in the open with people walking past, they just hitched it up to their tow truck and strolled off with it. We assume they did it for the car originally. They were planning to change it a bit and sell it on."

"Only?" Formby prompted.

"Only they found the keys and some bits and pieces that told them who the owner was and the address of his shop. Which they visited, using the keys. They stole some of the stock and set fire to the place on the way out. I guess they wanted to confuse the issue."

"Nice bunch."

"Oh, it gets better. The bloke had an insurance policy which covered him against forced entry."

"I bet it was with HRM."

"A bet you wouldn't lose, me old Rob. And they refused to pay out as keys had been used to gain entry to the shop, not force, and the bloke had chosen not to take out a more

expensive all-risks policy."

"Bastards! These insurance companies."

"The courts didn't agree. The judge ruled that if the entry wasn't forced, the policy didn't apply. And the consequences of taking out this type of policy were fully explained to the client in copies of the letters they exchanged while he and HRM were setting up the policy. So, in theory, the guy knew exactly what he was, and wasn't, insured for."

"Has he got a name, this guy?"

"Probably," the detective said unhelpfully.

"I can easily find out, you know," Formby protested.

"So when you *do* find out the name, you can put your hand on your heart and swear it was all your own work? Sounds good to me, Rob."

"Talking about bastards . . . "

"But before you get too enthusiastic about this, I'd say the bloke in the picture commissioned the crime rather than did it himself. If he's there, it's because he couldn't resist the temptation to enjoy getting his own back on the HRM assessor who set up his policy."

"You know that for sure? The guy hanging under the bridge did the risk assessment job?"

"No, that's just an assumption. Yet to be confirmed. So who knows about the guy in the car?"

"You, me and one of our photographers. The guy who did the prints."

"What about herself? The woman who took the pictures?"

"We told her the pictures came out okay and she's seen some of the prints. But she didn't get to see the close-ups. All she was interested in really was getting some cash for the pictures. She signed a standard contract for the rights and she buggered off with a cheque at high speed. Oh, yes, and she left a phone number, which I told her I'd have to pass on

to the police." Formby passed over the bottom half of a notebook page, on which a mobile phone number was written in blue ballpoint.

"We'll definitely want to talk to her. But not as a matter of urgency."

"Keeping it at a low-key level?"

"Right."

"Are you going to speculate for me? Give me an idea of the shape of the story when it comes out?"

The detective smiled a lazy smile. "Okay, imagine we're talking about the plot of a TV movie. This guy gets his car nicked and before he notices it's gone, his shop gets done over. And the insurance company won't pay out. But he's not any old guy, he's the brother of a pretty violent gangster."

"Who?"

"I'll give you a clue, Rob. When you find out the name of the bloke in the picture, his brother's got the same surname. And he's been written up in your rag a few times."

"Very helpful," sighed Formby. "So the gangster brother thinks the insurance company isn't showing his family the proper amount of respect, i.e. fear, and he hangs one of the assessors under a canal bridge with his pocket full of stones. Possibly the bloke involved in setting up the policy? And hey, there was that bomb at HRM. And another bomb at the marina . . ."

"Don't forget the assassination of JFK," laughed Teller.

"And did they ever find out why the Hindenburg blew up?"

"Wasn't that static electricity on the metallic paint on the outside? There was a programme about it on the telly."

"Sounds like this TV movie is going to be great when someone gets round to writing the scenario."

"Yeah, well, don't hold your breath, Rob. There's still a hell of a long distance between having a viable suspect and being able to prove anything in court."

"Yeah, especially if you're dealing with a gangster. Those guys can always afford the smartest lawyers."

"And even worse," the detective added, "there's not a single vigilante to be seen."

Formby made the sign of the Cross with his index fingers. "Don't look now but someone just said the *V-word*," he remarked.

# FORTY TWO

## Disclosure

Solicitor Pierre McAinsley did not need to ask his client Ivan Kenton why he was telephoning him. McAinsley had seen copies of Friday's national daily newspapers. The only slight mystery was why Kenton was calling in the early afternoon rather than first thing in the morning.

None of the stories named Ivan Kenton but the reporters had dropped coy hints about an investment counsellor in the Hambourne area, suggesting that they knew who he was but they had curbed an instinct to print the name.

Some of the papers had included a picture of actor dowsing over their financial pages with a crystal pendulum and holding a credit card instead of a card with coloured sectors. All of the articles had a strong silly-season flavour.

"I phoned Mr. St. Vernon as soon as I got in to the office this morning," McAinsley reported. "He was expecting my call. And he denied any involvement."

"Well, he would, wouldn't he?" growled Kenton. "But where else is it going to come from?"

"I did mention that to him, Ivan. And he, in turn, protested his innocence quite vigorously."

"Well, that's the end of any co-operation."

"I think Mr. St. Vernon would argue he's not had all that

much in the first place, Ivan."

"It's not my job to put bullets in his gun, Pierre."

"I see the shares you tipped have gone down twenty-four pence."

"I told you that would happen. A dip, which would be the time to buy them, then up they go."

"I was just wondering if Mr. St. Vernon unlocked your prediction, bought some shares then watched them go down. And got a bit peevish."

"Yes, you could be right," Kenton said thoughtfully. "I just included the expected rise. I didn't give him all the detail. You think the bastard reckons I've set him up and he's getting his own back?"

"It could be his co-worker, Mr. Grouty."

"Whoever it is, I want this leak included in the claim for compensation, Pierre. I think a court will accept it shows shocking bad faith on the part of the DTI and a clear attempt to blacken my character."

"Yes, I think you could well be right there, Ivan," said McAinsley. "One thing that could do with some adjustment, by the way, is your attitude to the press."

"That bunch of . . ."

"Ivan, that 'bunch of' needs some cultivating," McAinsley interrupted, "if you're going to get some positive spin put on your case."

"Bunch of parasites."

"If you feel uncomfortable about talking to them, give them a 'no comment' and refer them to me. But it doesn't help your case any if you tell them you don't *care* what they print in their poxy rags and they can just sod off. This is just basic crisis management strategy, Ivan."

"I know, you're right. But they get me totally pissed off with their slimy questions after all the messing about I've

been through."

"After all the messing about you've been through, it makes no sense to blow it all with public displays of a bad attitude. Cathartic as it may be."

"Yeah, okay. You've got your shares?"

"I bought them at three-eighty-eight, as you said."

"Okay, I'll be in touch to tell you when to sell," Kenton said. "If not before," he added, an ominous note in his voice.

Jenny Hobson had left at least a dozen messages through the day in her attempts to contact Hambourne's self-styled *Queen of the Witches*, who enjoyed a certain local celebrity. She was always good for a filler article for the Saturday edition of the Express.

An amusing follow-up to story of the Hambourne-based investment counsellor who used divination was her natural territory and Howard Hatcher, the editor, liked to encourage local characters.

Kayleigh; she had just the one name; was an ancient, hippy type who lived in an ordinary semi-detached house in an ordinary suburb rather than a rude hut in the woods. She dressed in clothes that were fringed and embroidered and strewn with flashing symbols of her art picked out in bright beads and metallic threads.

On their first meeting, Jenny Hobson had decided that if the *Queen of the Witches* combed her hair and put on a top and a pair of jeans, she would look quite indistinguishable from her neighbours. She was not inclined to revise her opinion on this August Friday evening.

Kayleigh took her visitor to her Consulting Room, which looked like the interior of a fairground gypsy fortune-teller's tent. The walls were hung with fabrics bearing arcane designs and the curves of the material stretched between the

central light fitting and the walls created a rather tent-like impression.

"Hobson – that's not a very lucky name, dear," Kayleigh remarked when they were sitting facing each other across her working table. There was a melon-size crystal ball parked within easy reach.

"You don't have to tell me that," Hobson returned, refusing to acknowledge that she was told the same thing at every meeting. "I never have much luck. But what's it got to do with my name?" she added, completing the ritual formula.

"Don't you know Hob is one of the names for the Devil? Hobson. Hob's son."

"Except I'm nobody's son."

"Your father is. And these things come down the male line."

*So that's what they mean by talking utter bollocks!* Hobson told herself. She put on an encouraging smile. "So, Kayleigh, what do you think of your rival, the man who was in the papers this morning."

"Is this a proper consultation, dear?" Kayleigh glanced at the cassette recorder, which Hobson had parked unobtrusively beside her crystal ball.

"Yes, of course." Hobson surrendered a cash-point-crisp £10 note.

"Divination has a long an honourable history, dear. I've used it myself for such things as telling the sex of an unborn baby. My success rate is over ninety per cent."

"There's a bit of a difference between male or female for a baby and knowing which way stocks and shares are going to go, surely?"

"Just one of degree, dear." Kayleigh took a sip from her glass of medium-sweet white wine. Hobson had brought

along a bottle of *Barsac* as another part of the fee.

Hobson took a sip of her own wine, which was very pleasant with an ice cube in it to chill it slightly, and settled back to wait out the lecture. When it came to magic and any of the ancient arts, Kayleigh knew her stuff and she could be relied on to provide more than enough for an entertaining and editor-pleasing, topical filler article.

Saturday's main news in the Hambourne Express was crime- rather than magic-related. Soon after dawn, the police had been directed to the shell of a ruined factory building in one of the 'development zones', which seemed destined to remain forever in limbo. There, in a ravaged toilet, from which all metal piping had been stripped, they had found a corpse.

The man had been perched on a filthy lavatory pan with his nether garments around his ankles. Beside him, hung from a rusty nail, had been a wad of banknotes, which had been threaded onto a piece of string after someone had torn off the serial numbers to make them worthless.

An examination of the body at the scene had turned up no obvious signs of violence and no clear cause of death. The police had been forced to wait for a pathologist's report from a post-mortem examination to learn whether their suspicious death was a case of murder or mistreatment of someone who had died of natural causes.

When he learned that the man had been a money-lender with a reputation for violence, Rob Formby made an instant connection to the money-lender who had been found impaled with a giant icicle three days before. When he pointed out the link to his editor, Howard Hatcher glared at his reporter and dared him to mention the word *vigilante*.

"Coincidence or some sort of turf war developing in the

ranks of the local money lenders," Formby said, half to himself, refusing to give his editor the satisfaction of hearing the *V-word* and the chance to have a go at him.

"I think we'll do a straight write-up on this and leave the conspiracy theories alone for the moment, Rob," his editor said.

"What, just the news and no side? Nothing about everyone who lends his mate a fiver in a pub is now at risk and the whole city is terrified?"

"Once is once, twice is a coincidence and three times is a chain."

"That sounds almost like an invitation to go out and murder a loan-shark, Howard," Formby said with a smile.

"Somehow, I don't think that will be necessary."

"So you go along with the turf war idea? You think there'll be more bizarre deaths?"

"I can see something very nasty going on," the editor said. "Behind all the jolly fun of dropping icicles on people in cars and leaving others in a bog with useless banknotes for toilet paper."

"Yes," Formby said with a thoughtful nod. "It's bad enough being dead, but being publicly humiliated into the bargain suggests there's a lot of bad feeling behind it. And a lot more ugliness to come. All of which will sell papers."

"Spoken like a true newspaperman," laughed the editor.

It came to no surprise to Ivan Kenton to discover, on the Tuesday of the following week, that the shares of the retailers Dorman-James had reached 538 pence. In addition to his solicitor, Kenton had tipped off a number of friends and helpful associates about his 'good thing'.

Their purchases had helped to give an extra push to the illegal manipulations of Kenton's co-conspirators.

The shares dipped the next day as sales by profit-takers reached equilibrium with additional purchases as speculators placed their bets on a rising star. Hilary St. Vernon and Paul Grouty of the Department of Trade and Industry remained unconvinced but they could see that they would have a real problem over proving that Kenton was lying to them.

His story had the same core of unlikely possibility that gives hope to New-Agers and others who seek to find a way to break the laws of the universe via magic crystals, pyramids and similar weird contraptions. Challenging him in the courts was likely to lead to a multi-million-pound trial, which would dragged on for years and achieved no convictions because the jury felt bamboozled in the end.

The newspaper stories were likely to be a hinderance as they pre-conditioned the public into accepting the idea of using divination as a way of predicting stock market movements. The reaction of any jury, on hearing from a prosecutor that Ivan Kenton was the investment counsellor in question, would be amused recognition – *Oh, it's him, is it?* – rather than incredulity – *How could anyone think something so daft!*

The cause was lost.

Hambourne Risk Management's assessors were skilled at staying out of the way of the local police. They could also go places where the police were not welcome and keep their ears open. Following the bomb at their company's offices, they had hit the streets in search of information.

They had soon noticed that Julian Clai, burglar and regular supplier of returned stolen goods, had disappeared. This was nothing unusual as he always went off on a short holiday when he had collected a decent pay-out from HRM. What was unusual, however, was that one of Julie's friends, a

young man called Vince, had been rampaging around, looking for him.

Through asking apparently casual questions, the assessors learned that Clai never went away for more than one week and that he had not been seen for over a fortnight. In fact, he had not been seen since he had collected a pay-off from Simon Jones on behalf of HRM. The assessors had decided to question Vince but they had been unable to find him in the period immediately after the bomb attack. Their luck had changed about ten days later.

Vince was the sort of person who had no problems over trampling on other people's feelings and he had a number of sworn enemies in the Hambourne area. One of them chose to make an anonymous phone call to a message centre when he happened to discover where Vince was hiding.

When he called back the next day, the enemy was told were to look to find a plastic bag containing two hundred pounds in used notes. HRM could be quite generous in ways which left informants feeling secure, and quite ruthless in its methods of taking enemies out of circulation.

Robin Formby arrived at the end of the suburban street just ten minutes after the explosion. The police had just arrived and they were just starting to evacuate people from the surrounding houses.

There were two police cars and an ambulance on the scene, lots of flashing lights, and sirens could be heard approaching along the main road from both directions as the fire brigade and police reinforcements arrived. Formby soon realized that he was going to get nothing from close in so soon after the event.

He found a perch on a garden wall on the other side of a main road, which ran at right angles to the street where the

explosion had occurred. He could see a thread of smoke rising from a ground floor window on his right, about halfway along the row of semi-detached houses between the main road and an intersecting side street.

"This is useless," Formby's photographer said after he had taken a couple of shots of the smoking house.

"Let's get round there." Formby pointed to his right. "See if we can find someone co-operative on the road behind here."

"Looks our best shot," the photographer agreed.

Formby had to ring three doorbells before he found someone in. The woman was of pension age and highly suspicious of people who came to her door unannounced. Luckily, she bought the Hambourne Express and she became co-operative when she had compared Robin Formby in the flesh with his picture in a paper from the fire-lighting pile.

Formby held a transom window open in a back bedroom while his photographer took some unobstructed shots of the house. It had looked undamaged from the front. The ground-floor window at the rear was a wreck and an ominous crack extended up the wall from a broken lintel.

Mrs. Carson-Hall had not heard the explosion but she had been watching an old film on her television in the front room. She had an idea that the house was rented but she knew nothing about whoever lived there. As she knew the names of the neighbours on either side; both families had lived in the respective houses for over fifteen years; Rob Formby decided that she was a reliable source.

Calvin, the photographer, knew that he was not going to get anything better than his pictures of the wrecked rear of the house. The police were clearing neighbours away in case there was a secondary explosion but Calvin knew that he would not be that lucky.

He just knew that all of the day's excitement was way over.

Rob Formby made a preliminary call to his newsroom. He was warning Mrs. Carson-Hall that the police would want her out, too, as they arrived. Calvin headed back into town to get his pictures processed. Formby began a hunt for neighbours of the victim of the bombing, hoping that someone would be able to tell him what the hell was going on but knowing that it just wouldn't happen.

The Hambourne Express had an exclusive picture of the wrecked rear of the house but the story with the picture in that day's paper merely named the occupant of the house, one Vincent Tair, mentioned that he was thought to be something to do with the music industry and discreetly failed to list his convictions for possession of various drugs.

It was not until the following day that the police revealed that an army bomb-disposal team had found materials which had allowed the police to link the late Mr. Tair with the bomb planted at the premises of Hambourne Risk Management. Their theory was that he had blown himself up with another bomb.

The police could offer no motive for Tair's attack on HRM and no evidence that he had ever worked with explosives in the past. He had no known connections with extremist political organizations and no history of association with violent criminals. His fingerprints were on bomb-making materials that had survived the explosion, which ruled out the theory that the HRM bomber was someone else, who had bombed Tair too.

All in all, the death of Vincent Tair was a local mystery.

The day's other local mystery was the identities of the persons who abducted and humiliated a magistrate in the early afternoon. A week earlier, Mrs. Bridget Ormal had insisted

on levying fines in the upper part of the scale on two local traders, who had breached some obscure by-law. Her argument that ignorance of the law is no excuse had been the subject of showers of indignant letters to the Hambourne Express and other local papers with a readers' page.

Mrs. Ormal's pay-back had come in the form of a quick squirt to the eyes with a pepper-spray, or something similar, at her front door. She had then been loaded into a van and driven out into a belt of farmland to the west of Hambourne, where she had been tied to a tree and pelted with rotten fruit by parties of masked persons for half an hour.

Videotapes recording her humiliation had been delivered to the main news media at the end of the afternoon. The lady herself had been found in the early evening with placard around her neck saying: *When the law is an ass, it doesn't need donkeys administering it.*

Nobody at the Hambourne Express had dared to utter the *V-word* but it had been in everyone's thoughts.

# FORTY THREE

## Resolutions

When Ivan Kenton's solicitor visited him at his home at breakfast time at the end of the week, he was able to announce that the DTI had all but called off its investigation into his affairs. There had been no formal declaration of a cease fire but the signs were there that the DTI had lost the stomach for further struggle.

Their big problem was finding some solid evidence against Kenton, a significant something which could not be explained in terms of dowsing and divination.

Ivan Kenton's response was to tell McAinsley to get his claim for compensation moving without delay. He was not the sort of man to savour a victory when he could turn it to profit.

Later in the morning of that same Friday, Robbijohn arrived at Milly Tullough's flat at Mossy Castle with his brilliant idea. He had looked in at his flat first to make some bogus calls to keep the police phone tappers entertained. The kids were at a friend's house and Milly was enjoying being on her own with just One Ton radio for company.

The presence of another adult was acceptable, however.

"I was sorry to hear about Derek," she said around making

tea. "The funeral was on Wednesday?"

Robbijohn nodded. "Right. We were remembering all sorts of things about him at the wake. Did you know he did a high-diving act once."

"News to me."

"This was in the States. He used this rocket-pack to shoot himself about thirty feet up in the air and he landed in a clear plastic tank of water."

"That sounds a weird thing to do," laughed Milly. "How did he ever get into something like that?"

"He met this guy from a carnival family and it all came out of a bet. That Drek couldn't come up with an act that would make people sit up and take notice."

"It would certainly do that! So, anyway, what brings you round to this dump, Steve?" Milly added. "See, I remembered your name."

"Brilliant. Just like my idea," said Robbijohn.

"Sounds like someone's in for a tough time."

Robbijohn looked deeply offended. "On the contrary. How much of your late husband's inheritance have you got left?"

"About a hundred and fifty-two thousand four hundred. Why?"

"That sounds pretty precise for an approximate answer."

"Yeah, well, I counted it again just before Geoff died to find out how deep the hole has got. The prison service paid for the funeral, by the way."

"That's a surprise."

"My solicitor reckons they're trying to avoid embarrassment. They know they're on a loser over my negligence claim and he reckons they'll settle out of court to avoid the bad publicity and save the cost of a trial."

"That's going to make a few QCs unhappy."

Milly shrugged. "Tough on them. So what's your brilliant

idea, Steve?"

"Do you ever get these prize draw things in your post? You can be entered in our grand prize draw if you give us an order? And you can even be entered if you don't buy anything but don't count on winning."

"They go straight in the bin."

"But someone has to win them. And why not someone who deserves to have a hundred and fifty grand? Like Mrs. Milly Tullough?"

"Yeah, right!" laughed Milly.

"When you stop laughing, think about it. A grand prize draw is easy enough to fix. All you need is a co-operative solicitor with an envelope with the winning numbers in his safe. The nearest reply to the winning number collects the first prize. All we have to do is make sure you get nearest to the winning number," Robbijohn added with a beautiful smile.

"Seriously?" Milly frowned as she fished teabags out of the mugs with a spoon.

"You cop for a cheque from the prize draw solicitor for a hundred and fifty grand, you slide that much of Geoff's loot to me and you shove the change in a tin box under the bed, or whatever. The cash is laundered successfully and you get your compensation on top. If you invest it wisely, there should be enough to live on."

"It's like a dream come true, Lance."

"And the good thing about it is that none of your husband's business partners are going to have a claim on the cash. In fact, they're going to waste a lot of time trying to think of places where Geoff could have stashed the loot. Because it's pretty obvious you haven't got it. And all the cash you do have can be accounted for."

"It's brilliant, Lance."

"Steve."

"Oh, yes. You look just like him, you know."

"Maybe I should grow a beard. Or start wearing glasses."

"So when's this going to happen?"

"You should get the cheque in your hot, sticky hand in a couple of months, or so."

"So I'll have a private income?"

"It won't be huge but it'll be more than you're getting at the moment. And it's an idea Geoff would have enjoyed."

"Except he'd be asking why the prize isn't a quarter of a million quid, because that's what he got away with."

"Yes, well, the least said about the missing, cash the better," laughed Robbijohn. "I hope you're over your gambling bug once and for all?"

Milly shuddered. "I don't even do the lottery any more."

"The *Poor People's Income Tax*? Pleased to hear it," said Robbijohn. "So, how are things going otherwise?"

Milly had lots to say about people whom Robbijohn did not know. Listening to her ramblings, and chipping in with sarky comments, gave her a chance to have a conversation with another adult.

After a pleasant hour, as Robbijohn was heading back into the wider world, someone on One Ton was singing, "It's good news week, someone's dropped a bomb somewhere . . ." He turned the sound up a little because he had always like the song.

"Here's some more good news," the One Ton presenter said as the music faded out. "There's some guy going round Hambourne with battery-powered clock the size of a dinner plate in a posh gift-wrapping. He waits for someone to ask him the time, then he rips the posh wrapping off and shows his clock."

"Why?" yelled a pre-recorded chorus.

"He's one of a number of people staging quote *spontaneous* unquote events and Sixties-style *happenings*. And we've had reports of someone posing as a blind man: Where pavements are obstructed by signs, vehicles and other obstacles, he walks into them and kicks up a fuss."

"Why?" yelled the chorus.

"One theory is it's a piece of street theatre. But suspicious people think it could be a distraction for something more sinister. So anyone who sees these guys is advised to be on the lookout for pick-pockets and purse-snatchers. But enough of this, on with the music. Here's another track from our local group *Cockswain Crunt* called *Dead Bikers Still Rock*."

Gavin Murdoch turned down the volume of his radio as a loud *vrooming* of motorbike engines assaulted his ears. He wondered if the 'blind man' had anything to do with what looked like an organized campaign in Hambourne against cars parking illegally half-on and half-off the pavement.

The protesters had begun by putting stickers on the wind-screens of offending vehicles then they had upped the stakes to letting down tyres, smashing the plastic shells on indicators and reversing lights, and blocking the driver's view completely with multiple, difficult to remove stickers.

Murdoch had heard quite a lot about the campaign while canvassing. The voters of his ward all considered parking on the pavement a particularly antisocial act as, in addition to depriving pedestrians of their use, pavements were damaged and left in a dangerous condition which could cause injuries to pedestrians. Worse, the repair costs just became part of local taxes.

The message that Murdoch was getting from his electorate was an uncompromising: *Let the wreckers pay – for repairs to*

*the pavements and for repairs to their vehicles, if that's what it takes to make them behave responsibly*.

Murdoch's instinct was to make political capital out of the issue but Uncle Jack had warned him to be cautious as the only way to do anything about parking on the pavement would be to have more traffic wardens on patrol, especially in the suburbs. Any extension of the wardens' remit was likely to be expensive in terms of wages and unpopular in terms of more local residents being done for illegal parking when no obstruction of the pavement was involved.

Doing something, or not, was a matter of political judgement, Murdoch felt; which could be postponed until he had acquired some further political experience.

Robin Formby scowled at his work-station's monitor screen as the words failed to convey the exact shade of meaning that he required. The machine was causing a malicious disconnection between what was in his head and what was being recorded as his head-content.

A movement in his peripheral vision made him sit back from the screen and smooth out his fierce expression.

"I hope this isn't heading in the direction I think it's going." his editor said over Formby's shoulder.

"It's not coming together at the moment," Formby admitted.

"Okay, what have you got and where are you going with it?" Howard Hatcher claimed a free chair, wheeled it to the work-station and gave his attention to the reporter.

He was at a loose end, which gave him an opportunity to harass his reporters in the workspace (their opinion) or distribute the benefits of his extensive experience in the business (Hatcher's opinion).

"A third dead moneylender," Formby said. "Rachel Emms,

one of the sub-set of local criminal godmothers, heart of stone, would have ordered her blokes to bust your kneecaps if you were a couple of quid short on a repayment."

"And the circumstances?" There was a note of warning in Hatcher's voice.

"Found in a wheely-bin with other rubbish. Suggesting that getting rid of her was the work of vigilantes. Like the other two money-lenders before her."

"But you don't go along with that?" The editor drew his conclusion from Formby's carefree use of the *V-word*.

"The story I'm getting is that she was trying to take over the book of Mike Gastin, the money-lender who was found on the bog in the abandoned factory last Saturday."

"And you have a problem with that, Rob?"

"My problem is the official police line, namely they think it's another vigilante job but I suspect they really think someone's trying to make it look like vigilantes when it's purely criminal rivalries at work."

"And how's that a problem?"

"I have a good police source of information, Howard, and I'm worried about getting him pissed off if I don't go along with the vigilante theory for the moment and help to keep the people behind this in blissful ignorance of what the police know. For the moment."

"I hardly think telling what you *think* to our readers is going to have that much of an effect on any arrests that may be made in the future, Rob. Heresy, though that may be," Hatcher added.

"But if my police contact *thinks* I've let him down, he's going to drop me as hard as he would have if I'd actually let him down."

"And I don't think our local criminals rely on the Express as their sole source of what the police may or may not be

thinking, Rob. On the one hand, you don't lose any points for writing up the facts . . ."

"What, money-lender found dead in circumstances similar to two others? The work of our vigilantes indicated?"

". . . on the other hand, you don't score any points if you don't give the story any added value. A touch of exclusivity that only you could have given it."

"There is this guy I could see. He knows a lot of what's going on in the real-criminal world locally. But I'm not seeing him till about half-twelve. So I was thinking about the facts for now in the early editions and something better later on, or tomorrow, if this guy can give me anything."

Hatcher nodded. "Sounds like a plan. As long as you give me the better version for the evening editions. And you have my permission to use the *V-word* in the early version."

"Can I have that in writing? In case Jayne tries to kill me?" Formby asked with a laugh.

Both men glanced automatically at the glass-walled compartment where Jayne Verity, the news room's 'pit-boss', was hard at work, her mop of red hair bowed over a work-station just like Formby's and bearing a similar collection of stick-on reminder notes.

Laughing, the editor reached for a pad of *PostIt* notelets and wrote: 'V-WORD LICENCE. Granted to Robin Formby for one use only on the morning of Friday, 25th August.' Then he stuck the notelet to a free area of the reporter's monitor.

"Enjoy it while it lasts, Rob. And get something good for this afternoon."

When the editor moved on to give the benefit of his long experience in the newspaper industry to some other lucky person, Formby found that the words were getting to his work-station in better shape. It was all to do with stopping

concentrating on the problem for a while rather than anything his editor had said, Formby knew.

He was having lunch with Gavin Murdoch and he was sure that something mutually beneficial would come from the discussions around the meal. Murdoch felt that some money-lenders performed a useful social service but he had taken a personal dislike to those who used violence as a routine business tactic. He was finding out everything that he could about them – but very discreetly.

Murdoch was choosing to pass on his information to Robin Formby in return for discreet plugs in the Express for his music events; another of which would be held the next day. The plugs, of course, were careful to avoid any mention of the fact that a candidate in the forthcoming local council by-election was staging the events.

Formby was passing on his information to DC Mike Teller in return for unattributable exclusive items from the police. In theory, only the criminals were losers in the deal but Formby knew that he was in a balancing act. He had to publish what he knew but he had to do so in a way that allowed the police to act on his information.

If he revealed too much in the Express too soon, he could do the police out of an arrest, lose the confidence of DC Mike Teller and break the chain.

While his editor might have doubted the true degree of Formby's capacity to disrupt the course of justice, the journalist felt entitled to believe in the importance of what he was doing.

# FORTY FOUR

## Wild Friends

Lionel Dragoner had spent a fair-size fortune on his daughter's wedding but he felt that he had received value for money. He felt relieved that he had been able to exclude her American friends from the marina. He was expecting more than enough trouble from the bride and groom's longer-standing friends.

Overhearing the (alleged) best man tell a bridesmaid, "I reckon people who say size doesn't matter can't find nine inches when it comes to the crunch," made his decision to edit the video of the proceedings personally seem extremely wise. His daughter and the man who was now her husband seemed to have a talent for collecting wild friends.

The rest of Hambourne's wild set had somewhere else to go on that Saturday afternoon. Gavin Murdoch had paid the local commercial and free newspapers to advertise another of his music events. He had also received a satisfactory level of additional free publicity in the form of articles about the local bands which would be appearing.

An empty machine hall at the Clayton Engineering premises provided a space large enough for the fans in the event of rain. The council's public safety inspector had prowled around the site for about half as long again as necessary, but

she had been forced to admit that she could find no objections to the event if Murdoch provided the promised amounts of stewards, toilets, medical facilities and other support services.

Murdoch had no problem with filling a building which would be demolished in due course with wall-to-wall music fans. Although he felt obliged to enforce a strict rule that wanton destruction of any of the facilities would resulting in pain, fines and expulsion. He knew that the punters were liable to bring the whole building crashing down about their ears if they felt that they had a licence for destruction.

One Ton Radio provided DJs to keep the music flowing when the bands changed over. Murdoch had gone for more of a mixture of styles this time and he had brought in two bands with a national reputation to provide the locals with role models.

The event was voted a success when it concluded half an hour after sunset. The fans had been entertained with over six hours of music, local traders had extracted a lot of money from them, the event staff had collected generous wages and Gavin Murdoch's name had acquired an improved feel-good factor.

Sunday morning found Oscar Stanton lying on the beach at the Painter's Island. He was there in search of a little quite contemplation time after twenty-four hours on the go. He had done a DJ-ing stint at the music festival and two spots on One Ton Radio. The first had occupied the two hours up to midnight and the next had been the dawn slot.

Stanton was used to staying awake for twenty or thirty hours at a stretch and recharging himself with six or seven hours' sleep. He could feel himself sinking into an in-between state, in which he lounged around for a few hours

until he was ready to sleep.

Sam Tadeusz was looking very in-between when Stanton arrived. His girls were glad to have one of the men around to make decisions and overrule Tadeusz's objections. Stanton went for a swim and lounged around on a towel on the beach for half an hour.

Then he had to wake up and call the Painter's doctor.

Robbijohn arrived at the private hospital after a suitable delay to give the staff time to settle Tadeusz in his usual room. The doctor's were looking grave and discussing strategies for dealing with kidney failure.

"Yo, Lance," Tadeusz said when Robbijohn was allowed in to his room at last. "I guess this is it."

Robbijohn looked from the tired, bloated figure in the bed to the hand-painted 'DNR' sign propped up on the bedside cabinet. Tadeusz had a drip plugged in to his left arm and a nasal oxygen feed. "Looks a bit desperate," he remarked.

"To every time there is a season, or whatever," Tadeusz said. "And one day, it all stops."

"I guess the only surprise is you've lasted this long."

"Mainly thanks to your first Big Idea, Lance. The *Odessa Caper*. But the Italian Countess really sweetened that deal and got me some pretty state-of-the-art cancer treatments. Got me in shape for the *Really Big One*."

"I have trouble believing I really thought we could pull off something like that."

"Hey, you had a raiding party of screwed-up Vietnam Vets and a couple of Russian *Spetz Nats* guys. What does that stand for again?"

"Gregor reckons it stands for *Specially Nasty*."

"Right. Those guys were real operators. And so were we."

"But it was that guy Bax who made it all happen. The Narc Big Ed Zelasky met in the amputee clinic when he was

having his foot fitted."

"Fred Bax, right. But you could see his point. The bomb those Colombians put in his car when he got too close cost him his wife and kid. Plus an eye and his left foot. And then his chief at the Narcotics Bureau told him it would be politically unacceptable to retaliate in Colombia."

"He sure came up with some good ideas for that job. Although, it was the Russians who came up with a lot of the equipment. The gas-bombs we used to knock out everyone as we closed in. And the fuel bomb we used afterwards."

"I reckon that guy would have paid good money to be in on the job," Tadeusz chuckled. "But who would have thought we'd find sixty-two *million* dollars in cash in the Colombian guy's cellar? How much did it weight?"

"A hundred and twenty kilograms. Two hundred and sixty-some pounds. Not even as much as a small Sumo wrestler."

"A lot more bulk, though. It took forever to load it into the choppers."

"I suppose the guy needed a certain amount of cash on tap. He was a really arrogant sod; but only because he was paying off the government, the army, the police, everyone in the area who counted. And I suppose the odd sixty-two million dollars is not much more than pocket change in an industry that turns over billions of dollars."

"Not a bad return on our investment. Although the guys were looking a bit worried when our expenses got up to half a million. And pounds, not dollars."

"Greedy bastards, arms dealers," Robbijohn remarked.

A nurse entered the room to check Tadeusz's monitors. She looked at the patient and shook her head. "All this talking is tiring you out too much, you know that?" she said.

"Honey, I ain't ever gonna be leaving this joint 'cept in a

wooden box," the Painter told her, exaggerating his American accent almost comically. "So what else is there left to do but talk over old times with my buddies?"

The nurse seemed to be looking for a stock encouraging reply but she just smiled again, threatened to be back in half an hour and left.

"You kinda feel sorry for them," Tadeusz remarked, "doing their job and knowing it ain't gonna make no difference."

Robbijohn shrugged. "Except they have the satisfaction of knowing they're making your last hours somewhat comfortable."

"I wonder if that Colombian guy stayed comfortable? Or if he woke up on the plane?" laughed Tadeusz.

"I'm pretty sure old Fred stuck a hypo in him and he was good and awake when his clock stopped," said Robbijohn. "I mean, that was the whole point of taking Bax along. Not for his expertise. To let him be in at the death."

"That was a pretty spectacular revenge. Loading the Colombian guy and his family on to the radio-controlled airplane that they used for drug smuggling, flying alongside them and steering them into that mountain."

"Code named *Columbus* because it was fourteen hundred and ninety-two feet high. That was another nice touch. And nearly forty miles from Bogata so any rescue mission wouldn't get there in a hurry."

"Fred Bax missed the fuel bomb going off while he was watching the plane hit the mountain. The poor man's nuclear weapon. Isn't that what the Russians called it? And with no fall-out. You just mix a lot of flamable hydrocarbon vapour with air and touch it off. Just like what happens in the cylinder of an internal combustion engine. Only it happens over hundreds of cubic yards."

"I still feel like apologizing to Gregor for when we thought he was exaggerating the safe distance to be from it when he lit it up."

"And I'm glad we took the risk of flying over what was left of the Colombian's compound afterwards. That hole in the ground was totally awesome!"

"It certainly had the rest of the Colombians running scared for a hell of a long time," laughed Robbijohn. "In case we came back and took them out, too."

"I picture this major Colombian bad guy with a map of the world, on his wall," said the Painter. "Getting reports every so often and hatching areas off on his map. Every day, he says, 'No, they ain't here.' And he just keeps waiting patiently until he hits pay dirt one day. Which you can do when you've got more money than you know what to do with and you don't have the imagination to do much with it."

"And a Sicillian Mafia guy doing just the same on the trail of what's left of his ten mil," said Robbijohn. "Wouldn't it be great if they found us simultaneously and wiped each other out claiming the first crack at us?"

"Always the optimist, Lance," laughed the Painter.

# FORTY FIVE

## Decision Points

It was August Bank Holiday Monday morning and Robin Formby was out and about. On a normal Monday, he would be on his way to do a routine interview with a local citizen who had done something interesting. On a day off, he was just cruising around, doing a semi-official survey of which businesses still closed down for the day on bank holidays.

It was a theme which had a certain promise as the basis of a filler article.

Formby stopped at a set of traffic light on a moderately busy main road to the south of the city centre. He just stared when a red-headed youth climbed up the back of a van ahead of him, with all the agility of a monkey. Having gained the roof, the youth started to lever the van's back door open.

Stunned by the young thief's audacity, Formby could only tell himself that if he had such distinctive hair and he was determined to follow a life of crime, he would buy a hat. Unless the hair was a wig or a temporary dye job.

Suddenly, the youth toppled sideways off the roof of the van, as if shot. The lights changed to green. The van drove on. Two men raced out into the road in front of Formby's stationary car, picked the red-headed youth off the road and

rush away with him. Formby responded to the honked horns behind by driving through the traffic lights.

As soon as possible, he parked and raced back to the scene of the incident. He found two witnesses, who were willing to talk to a reporter with a cassette recorder. Formby was careful to avoid prompting them too freely. He was pleased to find that their recollections matched his own exactly and that both women wanted their names in the paper.

Abandoning his survey of closed businesses, Robin Formby recovered his car and headed for the Express building, wishing that he had had a camera with him. A picture of the youngster on the van would have been great. A picture of his rescuers; or kidnappers; would have been even greater.

Lance Robbijohn started his bank holiday by going to Lance Smith's flat in Mossy Castle and giving the local police his half of another mysterious conversation on his mobile phone. He let them know that his plan was about *six inches south of get-go*, and left whoever was on the other end of the bug in the flat's phone to give the phrase significance.

Robbijohn was at the gun club, checking out his hand-eye co-ordination, when the expected bad news about Sam Tadeusz began to circulate. Ford Ford had received a phone call from Oscar Stanton, who had been on vigil duty at the hospital. The Painter had flat-lined while asleep and Oscar had stayed put in his room to make sure that Tadeusz's *do not resuscitate* instructions were respected.

"All the money in the world can't save you when your number's up," Robbijohn remarked philosophically.

"And it was the way he wanted to go," Ford added. "Doing what he wanted to do almost right up to the end. And going out with achievable things left undone."

"And not spending weeks or months dying by inches in a hospital or hospice," Robbijohn added.

"This sounds like bad news about your colleague Mr. Tadeusz," Frank Hogan remarked. He had been supervising Robbijohn on the firing range and the other two had not made any attempt to lower their voices and exclude him.

"Yep, the end of the line for him," said Ford. "And, I guess, the end of the line for your career as a carbon dating expert."

"True," Hogan realized with a familiar sinking feeling.

"But I guess you'll be spending the time you would have spent on that right here, keeping us guys in line," Ford added.

"Also true," said Hogan. "I didn't really get to know Mr. Tadeusz all that well but he struck me as a pretty ace bloke."

Robbijohn smiled. "Yeah, we all need guys we can rely on when the going gets tough."

"Okay, I'd better get organizing." Ford Ford left to get busy with The Painter's final instructions.

Robbijohn had lost track of the number of rounds that he had fired. He dumped the magazine and replaced it with a full one. Now, he knew that he had fifteen rounds including one in the chamber. Certainties count in a combat situation. Sam Tadeusz had told him that once. It was a solid thought for a lot of situations.

As he watched Robbijohn adjust his ear muffs and safety glasses before blasting more holes in his target, Frank Hogan told himself that, despite the loss of part of his income, there was no limit on his contract with the gun club. So he was still ahead of the game and still in Belgium in Hambourne.

After thinking the matter over, Robin Formby had phoned DC Mike Teller, his contact on the local CID, and told him

what he had seen at the traffic lights near the city centre. Teller had been suspicious at first, suspecting a hidden agenda.

Formby had given him just the facts of his experience and the best description of the red-haired thief that he could manage. He had also mentioned his witnesses without offering names and addresses.

Formby was not too surprised to receive a phone call from Teller during the evening to tell him that the body of a red-haired youth had been found dumped at the side of a country road four miles from the city and the detective wanted the details of his witnesses.

The local radio stations had been warning motorists to avoid the area for a couple of hours because the police had blocked off a long section of road at the area where the body had turned up.

By the time he received the call from DC Teller, Robin Forby had half-convinced himself that what he had seen in Hambourne had been another hoax staged for his benefit. The call left him unsure whether another attempted crime had gone disastrously wrong or vigilantes had got hold of a young member of Hamborne's criminal community.

Wherever the truth lay, he had a real news story now. And he also had an exclusive and a decent lead on the opposition.

The next morning, Formby found himself starting his day with a familiar conversation. Jane Verity felt that he was trying to put too much into his account of events which might, or might not, have played a part in the death of Thomas Ryan Gibbs, 21, who had managed to build up a criminal record which would not have disgraced a tearaway of twice his years.

"We're just a small, local paper, Rob," Verity said with much exaggerated patience. "We don't have room for *War*

*And Peace* on this bloke's character. More compactness, okay? What was it Joe Friday used to say? *Just the facts*."

"Who remembers *Dragnet* any more?" scoffed Formby.

"There was a programme on TV about it last week. As a promotion for the movie they made." Verity realized that she was getting side-tracked. "Facts, Rob. What you saw, what your witnesses say, what the police said. That's all we need. No theories, no conspiracy theories, no *V-word*."

"I didn't use the *V-word*," Formby protested.

"You know what I mean."

"The Ten Commandments don't count for much round here, even in their local modifications." Formby quoted from an article which remained perpetually in the preparation stage but which the Express's editors received in draft form every so often. "There's not much coveting thy neighbour's ox around here, for instance; it's more his videorecorder or the contents of his wallet.

"They say that crime is the responsibility of the community and if people are willing to show criminals they won't stand for their presence, they'll soon get the message. There are plenty of precedents for people running undesirables out of town. That's not a very big step from dumping a body on the edge of town to avoid exporting a problem."

"We all know you can write tripe, Rob," Verity said with a laugh as she realized that Formby had reached his point. "But I'm quite happy with just the facts at this point in time."

"Here's something you might not know, Jane. Did you know there's something called *DVPs* circulating around here?"

"What's that?"

"Death Voucher Points. One of my contacts reckons the *V-people* hand them out to decent citizens who are being persecuted by criminals. And if you can collect enough of them,

the victim in question is entitled to select one tormentor for elimination."

"Get back to work, Rob!"

Formby returned to his work station wearing an injured expression.

There was an atmosphere of inevitability on the Painter's South Sea island, Robbijohn felt, on the day after Sam Tadeusz's death. The whole group had turned up for a wake of sorts combined with a discussion about their future in both the short and the long term.

"The next move," Bruce Bruce said as he scratched at the beginnings of a beard. He had decided to give up shaving for a while to see how his facial hair developed. "I don't think we should move out of Hambourne any time soon . . ."

"Right," said Oscar Stanton. "It's like Lance said, the bad guys will have cross this part of the world off their map."

". . . but we should have at least two alternatives available," Bruce finished.

"Australia would be a good place to go," said Big Ed Zelasky. "Great sailing. Or New Zealand."

"I heard New Zealand is the most boring place on Earth," said Ford Ford.

"Somewhere in Eastern Europe makes sense," said Gregor Maiskiy. "Money will buy more there."

"Yes, they may think we're less likely to go for somewhere out of the English-speaking zone," said Robbijohn. "Czechoslovakia would be good. Most of the people we need to know will speak English or Russian."

"And the ones that don't can learn?" laughed Steve Cann.

"What about all this?" Bruce made an inclusive gesture with his beer can. "Retain or unload?"

"Open to public as health club," said Maiskiy. "But only

for rich people."

"I like that idea," said Ford. "There are plenty of people around here who could afford to pay an arm and a leg to come here to get away from it all . . ."

"The Marina Set," remarked Big Ed.

". . . and the girls want to stay on here," Ford added.

The eyes of the seven men travelled to the group of Vietnamese women; Tadeusz's five companions and Mi Tai; who were holding their own, independent discussion further down the beach.

"Sam would be cool with that," said Cann. "Keeping this place going as a memorial to him. The girls are certainly organized enough to run their own business. Maybe we can give Furry Disch a job as a figurehead manager."

"Yeah, if we set up in Australia, we could have a beach like this just down the road," said Zelasky. "So we wouldn't have to build a copy of this place."

"Not something you could say about Czechoslovakia," said Ford. "A beach like this."

"Not all of us are beach-bums," Robbijohn reminded him. "Although, a private beach just like this in downtown Prague would be nice."

"I know what Lance has got against Australia," laughed Big Ed. "His brother's there."

"Yeah, well, one Robbijohn per continent is quite enough," laughed Ford.

"So what sort of time scale is anyone talking about?" said Stanton. "Some of us like Hambourne."

"Some of us are worried the Czechs wouldn't let him play crap music on pirate radio stations over there?" remarked Robbijohn.

"One to two years," said Cann. "A year is a reasonable time scale for getting somewhere adapted to our tastes. Add

on another six months to a year to be sure we're not making any hasty and unwise decisions."

"The money situation is still okay?" said Zelasky.

"The money is still working for us," said Robbijohn. "We can afford to be extravagant for a couple of years. And we're putting the cash into assets with greater value."

"We could buy castle in east of Germany very cheap," said Maiskiy.

"What, develop it as our own, private tourist hotel?" said Ford. "That works for me."

"I guess, what we need to do is write down our ideas and talk about them after the funeral," said Stanton.

"A decision postponed leaves your options open," Robbijohn quoted. "But we need to bounce the idea of the health club off the girls today."

"Right," said Bruce. "You're elected. I'm going for a swim."

"Sounds good to me," added Stanton.

"Before everyone disappears," said Robbijohn, "can we just get a couple of things straight? We meet at the airport at eleven hundred hours on Wednesday for the flight to the US. The cremation is in Boston, also at eleven hundred hours, on Thursday, and we head out for the South Seas to scatter Sam's ashes at fourteen hundred on Thursday.

"We stop over in Hawaii and head for Darwin in Australia on Friday morning. We bomb the Pacific Ocean with Sam at about half-way and we get back here on Sunday. Anyone have a problem with any of that?"

"I reckon we can do handle all that," said Bruce.

"Okay, you can disappear now, guys," said Robbijohn.

Less than one minute later, he was sitting with just Ford Ford and their almost empty cans of beer. Ford picked up a handful of sand and let it trickle through his fingers.

"You know what, Lance?" he remarked. "The thing I still find surprising is there's never any cartridge cases around anywhere. They were, like, *everywhere* in 'Nam. Even in bars and restaurants, you'd be treading on them. And on the beaches."

"Sounds like you're stuck with living in a war zone," laughed Robbijohn. "No wonder you feel so at home at the gun club."

"Except the whole world's a war zone for us now," Ford said reflectively. "Since we tangled with the Italians and the Colombians."

"Yes, I was talking about that with Sam in the hospital." Robbijohn emptied his can and added it to a neat line of empties on a tray. "He had no regrets."

"Me neither." Ford added his empty can to the line. "I was just wondering if there'll ever come a day when some son of a bitch of an Italian or Colombian accountant will decide we ain't worth hunting any more because it's costing too much."

"Could happen, I suppose." Robbijohn kept any trace of a positive note out of his voice.

At around six p.m. on that Tuesday, Robin Formby attended the scene of a crime with a feeling of puzzlement. He kept wondering if there was something significant in Jane Verity's assigning him to what was so clearly a vigilante story.

The facts of the case were straightforward enough. Another local magistrate, Mrs. Doreen Breese, had fined someone the week before for breach of an obscure local by-law. There was a suggestion that the 'criminal' had been shopped by a neighbour as part of a vendetta and the solicitor who provided legal advice to the Express had been obliged to spend some time in research before being able to confirm that the charge was valid.

Enjoying her position of power over her fellow citizens, Mrs. Breese, J.P., had taken the attitude that ignorance of the law is no excuse when the accused had complained about his conviction. A week or so later, she had shared the fate of fellow magistrate Mrs. Bridget Ormal.

A group of younger teenagers had found her at about three-thirty that afternoon, sitting in improvised stocks wearing a hood-mask and covered with squashed organic debris.

According to her statement to the Hambourne police, she had been kidnapped at lunchtime and masked sadists had pelted with rotten fruit and vegetables for at least an hour. The teenagers had been taking a shortcut and they had been attracted to the site of Mrs. Breese's ordeal by her shouts for help.

They had found her wearing a placard reading: *When the law is an ass, it doesn't need donkeys administering it*, just like Mrs. Ormal.

Formby took some snapshots of the crime scene; mainly for his own reference. There was very little left of the 'outrage', other than the remains of the missiles, and little point to his visiting the spot. Formby had just wanted to some personal experience of its isolation.

The sun was a couple of hours from setting but there was a very gloomy feel to the area, which was screened from the short-cut path by a dense bush and a bed of nettles.

A police technician had decided that the vigilantes had used wedges and a chainsaw had split a fairly slender fallen tree and chopped out slots for the victim's legs. Once Mrs. Breese had been installed in the improvised stocks, the two sections of tree had been locked together with industrial size nuts and bolts.

The same system had been used with Mrs. Ormal.

The police had removed the stocks in the vain hope that they would provide some clues as to who had built them but one of the teenagers had taken some pictures of Mrs. Breese being released and she had approached the *Express* in search of profit rather than surrendering the camera to the police.

As he poked around, hoping to find a dropped driving licence or some other identification document, knowing that the police would have found and removed any such obvious clues, Formby tried to imagine what it would feel like to be abandoned in such a very quiet and lonely place.

Someone who had been brought here and humiliated, he felt, would have plenty of time to dwell on their sins.

The story provided scope for a piece on the impartial nature of the local vigilantes, who clearly felt that injustices perpetrated at all levels of society merited their attention if they had humilitated two local magistrates. But Formby knew that anything that he wrote would be for his own amusement rather than publication in the Hambourne Express. The *V-word* was still taboo.

Satisfied that he had exhausted the possibilities of the scene of another of Hambourne's more interesting recent events, Formby returned to his car. Once he had applied a couple of final tweaks to his story for the Express, he would be free to head for the marina and a party of sorts.

Gavin Murdoch had taken delivery of a new black boat during the afternoon – just about three weeks since the first one had been blown up. Hambourne Risk Management had sought maximum publicity for the prompt pay-out as part of a complex statement of corporate values.

With a foot in both camps, Lionel Dragoner had tried to assure his other customers that the Hambourne marina was a perfectly safe place to be under normal circumstances and that if criminals did strike, they would be compensated in

full if they had a policy with HRM.

The local police were not keen to be involved in the PR event and their press office had issued an unhelpful 'inquiries are proceeding' statement in response to questions about the hunt for the bomber(s).

Rob Formby was not expecting to meet anyone from Hambourne CID at Murdoch's *Relaunch Party*. He had heard that Lionel Dragoner had helped Murdoch to find his replacement black boat at a worthwhile discount, but Formby was not expecting to receive a comment on that matter, either.

As he started his car, the radio came on. It was tuned to One Ton and the DJ was reading out that day's amusing advertisements. "*Business woman seeks partners for mutual enjoyment at lunchtime*," said a voice with a strong Northern accent. "*Sense of humour vital. No false teeth.* That comes from *Sunshine News*."

"Now, ain't that a shame?" added another voice with an American accent from south of the Mason-Dixon line "Now, ain't that *illegal!*? If that ain't rampant *teethism*, I don't know what is!"

Robin Formby stopped to make a note about a filler article on *isms* which could become illegal in the near future if the humourless were allowed even greater licence.

Then he headed for the party.

# FORTY SIX

## Media Circus

Jenny Hobson knew that she was witnessing some sort of political act when she joined the media circus which arrived at Lionel Dragoner's home at seven a.m. on a warm August Wednesday. There was definitely an element of humiliation in an arrest made for TV cameras.

By the time she returned to the newsroom at the *Hambourne Express*, Hobson had been careful to gather as much rumour as possible as well as the meagre official facts on offer.

"Okay, so what's the real story?" Judy Beal, her left-hand neighbour, asked when Hobson had sketched out a preliminary version of the arrest story on her workstation.

"Someone was saying Dragoner's daughter and her new husband are fed up with the old man trying to take over their lives," Hobson replied. "And one of them sent some photocopies of compromising documents to the Inland Revenue to get him arrested for fraud and tax evasion."

"Could happen," laughed Scott Palmer, Hobson's right-hand neighbour.

"Or it could be a disgruntled ex-employee," said Hobson. "But it looks like there was some sort of leak of something compromising. Enough to make the police arrest Dragoner

for questioning."

"So what's he looking at? A hundred hours' community service?" said Beal.

"Someone reckoned he'll be out of the way of his daughter and her husband for about five years," said Hobson.

"Yeah, right!" scoffed Palmer. "If it does get to court, the chances are he'll get off because the trial will be so long and complicated, the jury won't be able to follow it and the judge will cock up his summing up. So he'll either get off after the trial or after an appeal."

"Someone was saying that's what's going to happen with Ivan Kenton," said Beal. "That bloke the DTI are trying to get for insider trading. The trial bogging down because no one can make head nor tail of the evidence. Wasn't he supposed to be in league with Dragoner over his insider trading?"

"Nothing ever came of that," said Hobson.

"Still, it'll give Dragoner something to think about other than bothering his daughter and her husband," said Palmer. "And there's got to be something going on. The police wouldn't dare arrest someone with Dragoner's money unless they were happy about the evidence. He's the boss of a very successful insurance company and he's one of the Marina set. He's got to have lots of undercover influence."

"No doubt it will all come out in the wash." Hobson began to scroll through her story, making sure that she had included all of the fact – and none of the rumours.

"Anyone seen Robin?" The newsroom 'pit boss' Jayne Verity burst into the conversation with an air of urgency.

"Wasn't that him disappearing out the door at high speed just now?" Beal said.

Verity grabbed the nearest telephone and keyed a familiar mobile number. Robin Formby answered on the run; he seemed out of breath and/or excited.

"Where are you and what are you doing?" Verity demanded.

"Heading for the Job Centre," Formby replied.

"Anticipating the sack for skiving?" Verity was unable to keep a note of amusement out of her voice.

"Yeah, right. One of the staff has been found dead at her desk. I've just been told she was shot in an open-plan room containing about thirty people. But with dividers creating compartments The police picked up her last client but the bloke who gave me the tip said there's no gun."

Verity heard background noises of a car door slamming and a car engine starting. "Okay, go with it, Rob," she said. "But don't take all bloody day."

"Going, boss," Formby returned before he broke the connection.

Ivan Kenton's sense of getting ahead of the game shredded abruptly when the police turn up to search his home on the day after Lionel Dragoner's arrest, bringing with them the same media posse.

Kenton was still trying to get hold of his solicitor by phone when one of the searchers announced that he had found a book containing lists of pay-offs to police officers, council officials and government officials.

Kenton knew that that he had been stitched up. He had never kept such a damaging record of his illegal activities, but he was sure that some of the alleged pay-offs would match deposit made by him to secret bank accounts. As for the rest, they would be just window dressing and they would be listed as payments made, allegedly, in cash.

Pierre McAinsley, Ivan Kenton's solicitor, had to shove his way through the mob of media vultures and argue with the uniformed constable stationed at the front door.

The police cleared a path for him when they took Ivan Kenton to Hambourne police station for a preliminary interview.

Kenton wore a pair of black sunglasses as a protection against the machine-gunning photoflashes. He smiled for the cameras and took no notice of the questions hurled at him. He played the part of a celebrity passing through a mob of his adoring public even though he was felt outraged inside.

After three-quarters of an hour in a cell, Ivan Kenton was transferred to an interview room. With his solicitor at his side, he denied any knowledge of the notebook and returned 'no comment' to all other questions.

Kenton annoyed Detective Chief Inspector Peter McCord by depriving the investigator of his attention unpredictably while he jotted down observations for his post-release press statement.

Pierre McAinsley upset McCord further by pointing out that his client had already made a response when the detective repeated a question.

There was a good crowd waiting when Ivan Kenton was allowed to leave the police station. Ignoring all questions, Kenton himself read his statement while his solicitor looked on, holding a cassette recorder up to take an exact record of what was said and remind the journalists present that they would be in trouble if they improvised instead of sticking to the letter of the statement.

"Someone has tried to fit me up by planting evidence at my home," Kenton began, reading slowly for the benefit of anyone taking written notes. "This is part of a campaign of dirty tricks carried out against me by the Department of Trade and Industry.

"The Hambourne police are probably not involved in this latest episode but the officer in charge clearly feels that he

has a very shaky case. Which he has tried to sweeten by innuendo by arriving at my doorstep with the press in tow."

A flurry of questions accompanied the statement; Kenton ignored them and continued, "It seems the police are hoping the DTI has blackened my reputation enough to let them create a climate of doubt around me.

"And I can't help but feel that there is something highly suspect in the arrests of my friend Lionel Dragoner and myself on successive days.

"Especially with the police arranging both events as a media circus because the evidence is highly flimsy in both cases."

More questions burst from the waiting reporters.

Kenton shuffled one piece of paper behind the other. "In conclusion, I can tell you that my solicitor will be making a complaint about the manner of my arrest to the senior officer at his police station. And he will be monitoring media comment on this affair with a view to taking legal action to correct any mis-statements, accidental or deliberate. That concludes my statement."

"Can you tell us what are your plans now, Mr. Kenton?" one of the reporters called.

Kenton glanced at his watch. "As it's the local council elections today, I'll probably vote and then think about lunch. And then try to salvage something from the day."

Kenton looked at the unformed policemen on crowd control duty. They cleared a path to his solicitor's car. The mob of journalists continued to take pictures and shout questions; even as Piere McAinsley's car was driving away from them.

"Well, that was another total waste of time," Jenny Hobson remarked to her photographer as she checked the recording made by her pocket cassette-recorder.

Alex Adeling completed the job of stowing his cameras in

their cases and shrugged. "There's obviously something going on. Two prominent local businessmen arrested in two days?"

"Arrested and released a couple of hours later," Hobson pointed out.

"Which could be a warning shot across their bows."

"You're telling me you seriously believe Kenton would keep an uncoded list of his bribes in his sock drawer?" scoffed Hobson.

Adeling shrugged again. "The bigger they are, the more arrogant and lazy they get, Jen."

"Arrogant and lazy, but not stupid, Alex."

"And I didn't think much of his complaint about us meeja being there to watch him get arrested. It's the coppers' way of showing off. Look who we've got the goods on. Look who's going down the river, style of thing."

"So you believe Kenton's been bribing half the council, the local CID and God knows who else besides?"

"I don't think they'll find records of any bribes for coppers," Adeling said with a cynical smile. "But everyone knows most of the councillors are on the take. And the officers."

"So you reckon Kenton's guilty?" Hobson said with a frown.

"Anyone with his money has to be guilty of something," Alex returned.

"So it's okay to fit him up because he deserves it?"

"Right. Hambourne CID needs some good news. Especially after that mess at the job centre yesterday. Someone gets shot in a room containing twenty-nine people and on one sees or hears anything? And the woman gets done in in an area not covered by the security cameras? And none of the people present test positive for firearms residues? The

coppers have got to be thinking someone's trying to wind them up."

"At least there's no vigilante connection," Hobson pointed out.

"That anyone knows of," Adeling said with a laugh. "Right, are we getting back to the Express now? Before Jayne starts sending out search parties?"

"Okay, let's go." Hobson put the cassette recorder into its padded pouch in her bag and closed the clasp carefully. She had not wondered about the photographer's politics but she now knew that he belonged to what she thought of as the *Envious Socialists's* party. "So who are you going to vote for if you think all the candidates are crooks?"

"Gavin Murdoch."

"But isn't he rich, so he has to be a crook, too?"

"Yeah, but he's not one of the crooks inside the system," Adeling pointed out. "So he's not going to have to keep his head down and not rock the boat when he can cause trouble. Not until they give him something he wants, anyway."

"And you think it's the function of a good local councillor to cause trouble?" Hobson said with a laugh.

"You can't let the bastards get away with it all the time."

"You know people are saying Kenton and Dragoner were very cosy with members of the council and they were arrested in time for the election to remind people of that? And make anyone who doesn't like arrangements like that think about voting for someone who isn't connected with the council?"

Adeling shrugged again. "Some people are saying Mr. Murdoch shopped Dragoner. And when I asked him about it, he said it was a good idea and he wished he'd thought of it in time to use it and before the conspiracy theorists got going."

"When were you talking to Murdoch?" Hobson asked with a frown.

"When he came round canvassing last night."

"Good God! He was actually canvassing!" laughed Hobson. "He must be desperate to get elected. I don't think I've *ever* been canvassed for a local election."

There was something of a 'wait and see' policy in operation at Hambourne Marina. Nobody knew what to make of the arrest of a member of the operating consortium and the members felt that it would be safer to postpone any judgement on Lionel Dragoner until they had more of the story.

The local police had announced that there was no conspiracy involved in arresting Lionel Dragoner and Ivan Kenton on successive days. Perversely, most people said that they took the announcement as an admission of guilt rather than Kenton saying that he had been 'fitted-up' as a self-defence tactic.

Similarly, when the identities of those named in Kenton' notebook leaked into the public domain, and they began to protest their innocence, few were willing to accept that the source of the leak was not Hambourn police.

Lionel Dragoner offered Kenton the services of one of his security experts, who looked for signs of entry and assessed how easy it would be to plant evidence on him. The expert concluded that any kid who knew how to break into a car without using ultra-violence could have planted the book containing Kenton's alleged pay-offs record.

"I suppose that means you're going to suggest I spend a couple of grand with you to beef up my security, Likey?" Kenton said with an air of studied weariness.

"Not necessarily," Dragoner countered. "The valuable stuff is well protected. It's just that you're vulnerable to

someone putting stuff in your sock drawer."

"Do you make sock-drawer alert systems, Likey?"

"Not as such," laughed Dragoner. "And even if you get one, you're still at risk of someone bunging something compromising in a cash box and burying it in your rockery."

"So what would you suggest? Barbed wire all round the garden and a set of machine-gun towers?"

"You'd probably be better advised to find out who stitched you up and arranging for him to have a fatal accident."

Kenton sighed heavily. "That's easier said than done. As the poet says, 'There were many questions in the wind but few answers.' But I suppose you feel much the same about your own troubles?"

"That's not going to last forever," Dragoner assured him.

Sheila Avery had considered a move away from Hambourne after Gavin Murdoch's black boat had been explosively assassinated. But Murdoch had encouraged her to hang around and Big Ed, one of the Yanks at the marina, had given her a job as engineer for his boat.

Murdoch had offered to continue to pay her wages while he was waiting for his replacement black boat to be delivered but Avery had accepted Big Ed's offer because she had wanted to keep busy. She had been rather surprised by the speed with which Murdoch had replaced his destroyed boat but she had turned down an offer to give up her new job.

By then, she had been busy with a full check of *Sigma 212* in anticipation of an ocean voyage. Big Ed was planning a cruise in the Mediterranean.

The master plan was for Sheila Avery to head for the coast in the boat, arriving there on Sunday morning, and wait for Big Ed and his pals to arrive back from their friend's funeral in the United States.

In favourable weather, the black boat would head for Cornwall, cross the Channel and follow the French and Spanish coastlines until it reached the Pillars of Hercules at the mouth of the Mediterranean.

The itinerary included Malta, Crete and Cyprus but Big Ed had not decided on an order yet.

# FORTY SEVEN

## Dusty Death

It was another anniversary of the day World War Two broke out and September third had fallen on a Sunday again. The town planners of the 1960s had wished eight tower blocks of flats on the area of Hamborne called Ashford to replace some residual back-to-back terraces in an area which had been battered somewhat by the German air force during that war.

Six of the tower blocks were now history. The last two were scheduled to disappear together in what many people were calling a last rehearsal for the demolition of the final sections of Mossy Castle.

The day was fine and dry when the demolition contractors had been hoping for drizzle to reduce the size of the crowd and damp down the vast clouds of dust which would be released when the twelve-storey buildings hit the ground. The city council, which now included Councillor Gavin Murdoch, was quite pleased to have decent weather for a junket.

People with nothing better to do had come from miles around to watch the tower blocks collapse at 11.30 a.m.; if all went well. Former residents were in demand to tell the press contingent that the flats had been marvellous in their day but that they were now uninhabitable.

There were even two film units on the site, making documentaries about the demolition contractors and the piece of the town's history which was being replaced respectively.

There had been plans to replace the 'living units' with low-rise housing but the council had decided that the space was too small for a housing estate and the 'infrastructure' was in poor condition. So, when the site had been cleared, it would be devoted to industry and provide jobs for local people.

A local brewery wanted to expand its operations and it needed somewhere close to its existing premises to build a new canning factory to replace one which was too small and in need of modernization.

The purchase price for site, the council had agree, would be spent on refurbishment and new housing at a much larger, brown-field site, which was earmarked for houses and small apartment blocks for Mossy Castle's remaining tenants.

The Moss Park Flats Tenants' Association had opposed the plan to build a canning factory. Its members were worried that there would not be enough room for the survivors from Mossy Castle in the new estate, never mind intruders from other examples of monumental public housing.

Their argument had been that the government had provided a grant to support the new canning plant because it was more concerned with industry than housing. A spokeswoman from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, which sounded very grand and American, had pointed out that the city council was creating new housing elsewhere in the district.

Watching the crowds from the official press area, Jenny Hobson of the Hambourne Express remembered the ODPM spokeswoman complaining that she felt that she was in a no-win situtation. People moaned to her about having to live in

grotty flats where there were no jobs. But when the government created new jobs for them at a canning factory, they moaned about having to move to other local areas to brand new housing. She had added that it would be nice to do something right just once.

Afterwards, in the Express newsroom, Robin Formby had come up with the too-late put-down: 'You shouldn't have bloody well got yourself elected if you expected gratitude.'

As she watched the newly elected Councillor Murdoch enjoying his triumph, Hobson made a mental note to use the retort on him the first time he started moaning about the ingratitude of the electorate.

On some high ground well back from the border of the exclusion zone, Robbijohn handed out monoculars to Milly Tillough, who remembered to call him Steve, and her family. Six-year-old Ralph accepted the army-surplus viewing gadget with enthusiasm. Ten-year-old Jack was harder to impress.

"Are you *Uncle* Steve?" he asked Robbijohn with a knowing look, obviously well versed in gaol culture.

"No, I'm just Steve," Robbijohn said firmly.

"Don't be cheeky," his mother added. "Steve is a friend. We went to school together."

"Yes, they had schools back then," said Robbijohn.

"Look at that," said Ralph, more interested in examining the view than interpersonal relationships.

Jack also gave his attention to the doomed buildings, hoping to catch a glimpse of someone thrashing around in one of them. The city's underground newspapers had been spreading a rumour that the local vigilantes intended to chain up several of Hambourne's persistently anti-social inhabitants on one of the upper floors of the buildings, which was why they had been searched by the police while

members of the demolition team had been conducting their final checks.

Robbijohn found himself reflecting that Milly and quite a fair number of other people in the area knew him under his real name from the old days. Most of his other contacts in area knew him under his alias. It was interesting to speculate on what might happen if members of the two groups ever met.

"The place won't seem the same when they've knocked down all the tower blocks," Milly remarked after the ten minute warning hooter had sounded.

"I bet they said that when they knocked down all the houses to make way for the towers," said Robbijohn. "Nothing stays the same, kiddo."

"Did you hear the rumour that the people who won the draw to press the buttons to blow the towers up, they're both related to the council's leaders?"

"One's a cousin of the leader's wife and the other's the chief executive's niece, I heard."

"Not that they'll be bothered, the council. That lot think they can get away with anything."

"From what he says, the new bloke on the council and his allies plan to do a bit of whistle-blowing."

"Until they get a job on the payroll," scoffed Milly.

"Dead cynical, some people," laughed Robbijohn. "And you may be pleased to hear that they don't actually get to press *the* button. They get to press *a* button, but a member of the demolition firm has to press the one that counts. Something to do with the insurance deal on the job."

"So it's more symbolic than actual?"

"A sort of virtual honour. You get your picture on telly and a warm glow, but nothing more."

"Oh, well, that makes it all right," laughed Milly. "Just as

long as they don't fix things so the new houses go to the boss of the council's mates."

"You in line for one of them?"

"I hope so. How about you? What are you going to do when they blow up your hideaway at Mossy Castle?"

"I'll probably have moved on again by then. There are too many people around who might confuse me with my brother, Lance. And Hambourne's okay for a while but there's a lot of other places to be in the world."

"Nice to have the choice," Milly said with a sigh.

"You'll have a few more choices if you win that prize draw you entered."

"Nobody wins prize draws, Steve, they're all fixed."

"You're probably right." Robbijohn glanced at his watch. "Six minutes to go before they rob us of another part of our heritage."

"Did you *believe* that campaign to save one of the towers as an example of Sixties municipal architecture?"

"It was probably run by someone who hoped to swindle a fortune out of all the government money they'd need to stop bits falling off it."

"Look, what's that?" Ralph said urgently.

"It's just a bit of plastic flapping around," Jack said scornfully.

"I wonder if the vigilantes ever planned to leave people in the towers or it's just the Express scare-mongering?" said Milly.

"They seem pretty organized, our local vigilantes," said Robbijohn. "I think if they really have decided to do it, there's a bunch of criminals about to stop breathing about five minutes from now."

"They may be driving the police wild, the vigilantes, but what they're trying to do seems to be working in some ways.

There's less yobs around but the ones they haven't scared off are that much worse."

"Extreme situations require extreme solutions."

"And if the police and the council can't provide them, then the people are entitled to." Milly finished the quotation in a thoughtful tone.

"Still, if I was thinking of murdering someone, I'd do it today and toss the body in the rubble tonight. Let the vigilantes cop for the blame."

"Sounds like someone's been watching too much rubbish on the telly," laughed Milly. "When are you thinking of leaving us?"

"Months rather than days," said Robbijohn.

"Going anywhere nice?"

"Probably. Somewhere new, certainly."

"Somewhere what's-her-name can't find you?"

"I think Susie accepts that Lance is history and his brother Steve is a no-hoper."

"I hope you're going to keep in touch."

"You'll have to get a computer when you win your prize draw. Then we can send each other emails. I'm sure the lads will teach you how to do that."

"That's the last thing I need, the lads messing about with a computer and running up massive phone bills on the internet."

"Your caring local council might give every home on the new estate a low-cost computer and a cheap phone connection if someone on the communications committee can fix himself up with a decent bung."

A blast from the warning siren drowned Milly's sarcastic retort. Most of the crowd stopped talking and turned their attention to the soon-to-be-demolished buildings. Most of them joined in a count-down from ten.

Probably for the benefit of the abundant television cameras, the building to the right of the main viewing area went first and the other tower did not begin to crumble until the first one had disappeared into a vast cloud of dust.

# FORTY EIGHT

## Another Place in Another Country

The Perth Times was getting quite excited about reports of vigilantes in action in the Australian city's suburbs. The newspaper's counterpart in Prague was giving its readers similar thrills. But the Hambourne Express, in contrast, had not run a good vigilante story for months.

Hidden away behind the scenes, Robbijohn watched the police razzia on his personal feed from the unofficial closed-circuit television system, which now covered 85% of the city. The latest section had been installed by a team of Hungarians, who had been flown to Munich, bussed to the area for the job, and returned to their native land with no real idea of where they had been.

Robbijohn's informant had said that around fifty police officers, male and female, were involved in the latest hunt for their unofficial helpers. They were all in plain clothes and trying to be inconspicuous as they sniffed around, looking for the people who were making the area so anomalously crime-reduced. It took practice, but Robbijohn could spot the best of them eventually.

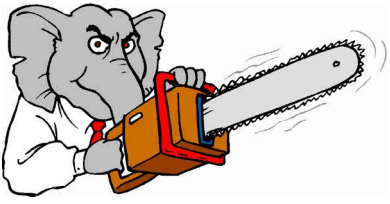
The inexperienced ones kept yakking into their radios. Their bearing and the eyes, which recorded so much without appearing to look, gave the better ones away.

The main police computer was sifting reports, looking for the detail of differences. Robbijohn felt entitled to steer his own people toward the razzia officers to unload enough misleading information to drown any significant facts in confusion.

He and his companions were highly skilled in the art of getting lost and staying lost. Their lives depended on their skill but they felt entitled to some fun along the way; and to use their wealth to make a difference that counted.

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