

The Business of Murder

by PMJ Downing

The Business of Murder

Chapter 1

The sound of heavy boots climbing the stairs to his office made Slater look at his watch. It was 2330 hours. There was a loud knocking on the outer door. He switched of the screen to his PC and called. "What do you want?" The knock became louder and more insistent. With a sigh, he brushed the unruly hair out of his eyes and stood up, his body stiff and unresponsive from sitting to long at his desk. The knock came again even louder and this time, prolonged. It would not be new business at this time of the night. "All right, all right, hold your horses, I'm coming." He went to the door, unlocked it and swung it open.

"It's late. Please come back..."

"Mr Slater?" interrupted the police officer holding up his warrant card and then flipping it away before he could read it. "I'm Detective Chief Inspector Lane, homicide division, and this is my associate, Detective Sgt Hobbs. We would like to ask you some questions. Can we come in?" He stepped through the door without waiting for an invitation.

Lane was tall, thin and wiry with arms that seemed to be too long for his body. They stuck out of the sleeves of his coat by at least two inches. *The long arm of the law*, Slater thought and suppressed a grin. Lane had a good-looking genial face but lined with worry.

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His grey eyes looked tired. Slater guessed he would be about forty-five years of age but looked older. His hair was going prematurely grey at the temples. He had probably spent a large part of his career chasing the less desirable elements of society and it was evidently taking its toll.

Slater looked at his watch. "At this time of night? Come on, Chief Inspector, it's late and I'm tired. Can't this, whatever *this* is, wait until the morning?"

Lane ignored him and, followed by Hobbs, stepped further into the office, so that Slater was the one nearer the door, done to establish his dominance. Lane said. "Do you know a James Carter, Mr Slater?"

Slater nodded. "Yes," he said, a sudden chill running down his spine. "Well, I know of him though we've never actually met." *That was a stupid statement to make*, he thought and wondered what Lane would make of it.

Lane frowned, his forehead wrinkled in concentration. "So you know him but have never met him? Is that correct Mr Slater?"

Why did police officers always repeat what you tell them he wondered? "Yes, I know that sounds strange, but it's true." He was thinking about Carters phone call asking to meet him because he had information about his current case. "What is it Chief Inspector? You said you were from homicide division. Homicide means dead people and dead people normally mean trouble for

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someone.”

“You are quite correct Mr Slater.” Lane looked about the office, noting the framed certificates telling all and sundry that Slater had completed his training to a high degree. A copy of his private investigators license stood on the filing cabinet. Lane knew all about Slater’s reputation. He had heard that he was a good investigator, even though he sometimes cut corners, corners that he, Lane, was unable to negotiate if he wanted to stay within the law. He also knew that Slater would not be stupid enough to murder someone and then leave his name in the dead man’s pocket. Never the less he had to go through the motions. “Yes, Mr Slater, we are from homicide division and you are quite correct about that meaning dead people. James Carter was found dead just over an hour ago. He had your name in his pocket.”

* * * *

Carter had wanted to meet him in the trading estate to give him some information but didn’t say what it was. It was a foul night and he had arrived on time and huddled deeper into his coat. It was cold and a stiff wind howled along the road driving flurries of heavy rain before it. The gutter was awash with water and industrial detritus. The drains overflowed across the road, unable to cope with the heavy downpour.

The dismal brick walls of the industrial estate buildings, bordering the road, shone wetly in the dim light of the street lamps that highlighted the graffiti

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scrawled across them, graffiti that proclaimed, *Fred was 'ere* along with great multicoloured flashes that could have graced the front of a Marvel comic.

For the tenth time in as many minutes, he had glanced at his watch. It was 2110 hours and Jimmy Carter was late. He did not know Carter, in fact, he had never met him, but the man had called and said he had some important information regarding the case he was working on. Carter had asked to meet him in the trading estate to disclose the information. Why he had chosen such a desolate place for a meeting was beyond him when they could have met comfortably in a pub over a pint of bitter. Somewhere warm and congenial, somewhere dry.

A man and woman looked at him as they hurried past with their heads bent beneath their umbrella, struggling to hold it against the wind. Their speed increased and Slater wondered if they thought he was an axe murderer waiting for his next victim. Why else would a person stand here in the pouring rain? He wondered what they were doing out on a night like this for it was a dead end. There was no shortcut from the town to anywhere else. Perhaps they were on an assignation, were they lovers or married? The couple quickly moved on round a corner and glanced back to see if was still there. Then they were gone from sight and he was once again alone in the rain.

He pulled his collar higher and hat lower but the

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driving rain found an opening and a cold trickle of water run down his neck, soaking his shirt collar. He looked up and down the street, but there was not another soul in sight. Where the hell was Carter? A car swished past, its tyres spraying water that soaked his trouser legs before he could jump out of the way. He mentally shook his fist at it and watched it expectantly but it turned the corner and was gone. Still no Carter.

He was puzzled. Why would the man arrange a meeting and fail to turn up. Carter had suggested the meeting and chosen the venue so why didn't he show, and why here? He took a last look up the road then decided that he could tell him what the information was in the morning. He was off to the pub to warm up and down a welcome pint.

He had gone to the Kings Arms Saloon Bar and pushed his way to the crowded bar.

"What can I get you?" a young smartly dressed man wearing a black bow tie asked. He had a nametag on his shirt that claimed his name was Ben. Definitely an upmarket pub.

Slater indicated the appropriate pump. "Pint of Charlie, please,"

He looked at the pumps. "Charlie?"

Obviously, Ben had not been in the forces for Charlie was a squaddies nickname for Carlsberg Lager. "Sorry, a Carlsberg please."

Ben poured from the pump and slid the drink

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across the bar, condensation already coating the sides of the glass and running down to pool on the bar surface in a wet ring. Slater paid and took a long drink from the glass, licked his lips, then asked. "I'm looking for someone called James, or Jimmy Carter, do you know him? Has he been in tonight?"

"Jimmy Carter? Don't know the name, sorry. I cannot help. Hang on a minute," He called along the bar to another barman. "Phil, do you a Jimmy Carter?" Phil turned his mouth down and shook his head. Ben shrugged "Sorry, we don't know him." He turned away to attend to another customer clamouring for his attention. It was busy in the pub that had been modernised to suit the smart set with lots of beams and even more fake wood. High on expense and low on character but the staff were friendly enough. He took another drink from his glass, the beer good and cold.

"You lookin' for Jimmy Carter?" a thin whining voice asked from a few feet along the bar. Slater glanced in the voices direction. It belonged to a man whose appearance matched his voice, thin weasel like features, and thick stubble on his chin, unkempt hair and shifty eyes that looked away when Slater looked at him. He thought the man was definitely out of place in a pub such as this and wondered why they let him in. It lowered the tone of the place.

The man was short at about five foot six and was dressed in clothing that had seen better days over which

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he wore a grubby raincoat that was still damp from the rain. A cloth cap was perched on his head like a badly adjusted toupee. There was an almost empty half-pint glass on the bar in front of him.

“Yes,” Slater was hopeful. “Do you know him then?”

Weasel face chortled as though engaged in some private joke. “Yup.”

He sighed, he had a feeling this conversation was going to be hard work. “Has he been in here tonight?”

“E might ‘ave bin,” Weasel Face drained his glass in one long gulp and placed it on the bar suggestively, his small eyes flicking between the glass and the barman.

Everyone has to be on the damn take, he thought. He caught Ben’s eye and indicated that he should give the man another glass. The barman placed the pint on the bar. Weasel’s hand eagerly grabbed it and took a quick gulp.

Slater looked at him carefully, his face devoid of expression. “Have you seen him then?”

“Nope,” Weasel Face chortled again, still enjoying his private joke at Slater’s expense.

Slater got annoyed. Reaching along the bar, he deftly slid the pint out of the Weasel’s reach and placed it in front of himself. “That’s not good enough,” he growled.

“Hey,” the thin man whined, his face grimaced in a

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frown. "That's mine. Give it back."

He shook his head, smiled and said mildly. "It's not yours any more. It's mine until I say you can have it. I paid for information and you need to do much better than a *nope*."

"Okay, okay. This ain't 'is pub. E's a regular at the Queens 'ead on the 'igh Street." He was sullen as he eyed the pint that was just out of his reach. With a look of longing, and his petulant bottom lip trembled slightly. "Can I 'ave me pint back now?"

He is probably an alcoholic, Slater thought. "No. I want better information than that before you can have it back. Have you seen Carter tonight?"

"Nah," he muttered eagerly, anxious to make amends. "I ain't seen 'im for a couple of days."

"Do you know where he lives?"

"Nah, but it must be around 'ere somewhere though coz I seen 'im around 'ere often enough."

Slater glared at Weasel Face with distaste. He wondered what kind of man Carter was. "How well do you know Carter?"

Weasel face grinned showing a row of bad teeth. "'e buys me a pint now and then."

"He buys you a pint and you don't know where he lives."

"That's right, mate. Can I 'ave me pint back now?"

Slater ignored his plea and stared at him. "Tell me, is there anything that you do know?"

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The man grinned again, showing several gaps in his teeth. "Nope."

"Then tell me why I should give you a pint, you don't deserve it. You haven't given me squat."

Weasel face's voice raised a notch. "Aww I told yuh where 'is pub is."

Slater sighed, he knew he wasn't going to get anymore from the weasel and slid the pint back to him. He grasped it in his thin bony hands, clutching it to him as though to prevent it Slater taking it away from him again.

He also drew a blank at the Queens Head. The barman told him that although he knew Carter by sight he had not been in at all that day. He couldn't remember when he had last seen him and he didn't know where he lived. Slater gave up; it was time to call it a day.

Despite the fact that it was late, he went to his office to complete some paper work. His client would be expecting a report in the morning and after a week of investigation. So far, he had precious little to tell him.

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Chapter 2

“Well, Mr Slater?”

Slater’s thoughts returned to the present. “Homicide? That means dead people.”

“Yes, Mr Slater, we are from homicide division and you are correct about that meaning dead people. James Carter was found dead just over an hour ago.”

“Carter? Dead? Is it *my* Carter?” How the hell could Carter end up dead, and, more to the point, how did he die?

“You tell *me* if it is your Carter.”

Slater ignored the sarcasm in his voice. “What the hell happened to him then?”

“He was murdered,” Lane paused to let that sink in, his eyes watching Slater intently. “Murdered with a knife—stuck right between the ribs—straight into his heart. That was certainly a contributing factor in his death.”

The DCI certainly liked to drag it out, or was he just sadistic, Slater wondered. So Jimmy Carter was murdered. Well that explained why he failed to meet him as arranged, but why was he murdered? Was it because of the information he had been about to impart? What was that information? What kind of information would get a man killed? Carter had not told him on the phone what that information was when he had asked for

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the meeting but had merely said it was of utmost importance.

“Carter had a note in his pocket.” Lane interrupted Slater’s thought processes.

“Yes?”

“It had your name on it, Mr Slater.”

“I would imagine that he would have seen we were going to meet.” He knew that this was not going to be good. “I have already said I knew of him.”

“The note also said that you were going to meet him in the Jackson Trading Estate at 2100 hours this evening.”

“Yes, I know, we made that arrangement earlier in the evening.”

“Did you keep that appointment, Mr Slater?”

“Yes,” he said. “Well, I did but he didn’t. I waited for about thirty minutes when Carter didn’t turn up, I left.”

Lane smiled a sad smile, the tired lines on his face wrinkling a little more. “I am not surprised he didn’t turn up, Mr Slater, Carter was dead at the time you had arranged to meet, very dead.” Lane was apparently enjoying his sardonic humour. “Where were you at around 2000 hours, Mr Slater?”

Out of the corner of his eyes, Slater saw the DS wander over to the filing cabinet. Hobbs reached out and pulled open a drawer, his narrow eyes peering at the neat rows of files. Slater slid the drawer shut on his

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fingers and turned the key. "Naughty," he admonished, wagging a finger at him. "You know that's confidential. You want to look at those records you'll need to get a warrant."

Hobbs shrugged apparently without interest. He was a stocky, good-looking man that looked like he had a lot of power in his broad shoulders. His well-pressed suit looked to be handmade, something a police sergeant could ill afford. A snowy white shirt complemented by a neatly tied tie nestling beneath his jacket. He appeared quite fresh compared with Lane and Slater wondered if he had just come on duty. His face was youthful, unlined and appeared un-worried and Slater decided that Lane didn't share his worries with his sidekick very much.

"Where were you, Mr Slater?" Lane persisted, breaking into his thoughts.

That was easy to answer, Slater thought, he was right here preparing to meet Carter. "I was right here getting ready to go and meet Carter."

"What was the meeting about, Slater?" asked the DS who, apart from his foray to the filing cabinet, had been quiet until then and Slater noticed that there was no polite *Mr* from him either.

He looked at Hobbs. "I don't know." He thought he sounded a bit foolish. "He asked me to meet him as he said had some information for me."

Lane broke in. "What information was that?"

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"I don't know, he didn't tell me. He said he'd tell me when we met but he did say it was very important."

"Didn't you think it was a strange place for a meeting, Mr Slater, a trading estate, at night, a dark wet night?" Lane spelt it out in no uncertain terms. "Who suggested that location?"

"Why, Carter did."

"Yes, of course he did," Lane, shook his head in disbelief. "And, you have no idea what the information was."

"No, but it was probably something to do with my current case."

"Which is," the Sgt come to back to life, eyeing some files on the desk. Slater could see that he was longing to browse through them, his fingers itching to open a file, hankering to see what he was investigating.

"You know better than to ask that, Sgt."

Hobbs shrugged again.

"What time did you arrive at the trading estate, Mr Slater?" Lane asked mildly.

"About 2050."

Hobbs made a few notes in his notebook.

"What time did you leave?"

"I waited until 2130 and then, as I said, when Carter didn't show I left and went to the Kings Arms, had a pint, asked if anyone had seen him, but nobody had. Then I left there and went to the Queens Head and did the same but no one had seen him there either."

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“Then what did you do, Mr Slater?”

“I came back here to do some work. Then you knocked.”

“Can anyone verify where you were at about 2000, Mr Slater?”

Slater shook his head. “No, Chief Inspector I don’t have an alibi for that time, I was here until I left for the trading estate. My receptionist had gone home, she leaves at 1730 and I stayed here to complete some paper work.”

“When did Mr Carter make this appointment with you?” Lane made the word appointment sound as if he did not believe him.

“About 1800 – 1810 or so, I’m not sure of the exact time.”

“How did he contact you?”

“By telephone.”

“And you were alone when this appointment was made?”

Slater nodded. “Yes.”

“How very convenient,” Hobbs muttered sardonically.

“So you also cannot verify that you actually received this telephone call?” then he added before Slater could reply. “Is this appointment in your appointment book, Mr Slater?”

“Err, no, it isn’t.”

Lane raised his eyebrows. “Why not?”

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Slater laughed softly. "Because it had only just been made. I wasn't likely to forget it, was I?"

"No, quite," muttered Lane.

"Why didn't Carter come here to see you?" asked Hobbs with a sneer on his face. "That would seem to be the logical thing to do."

Slater shrugged and wondered what was bugging Hobbs. He seemed to have a chip on his shoulders. "Yes it would have been and I would have preferred that. I don't know why he chose not to, you'd need to ask him that."

"And of course," he said quietly. "We cannot do that—can we—*Sir?*"

Slater ignored the implications in the tone of his words. "Carter himself suggested the meeting place. If he had wanted to come here, then I guess he would have said so. There is no telling what people decide to do in this business. I'm sure you are aware of that."

Lane looked about the office. "How is business, Mr Slater?"

"Why?"

He smiled. "Oh, no reason. Have you ever met Mr Carter?"

"I have already said that I had never met the man."

Lane smiled and rubbed his temple with a finger. "Oh yes, so you did. I quite forgot that for a moment."

Lane didn't give the impression that he forgot many things. He probably had memory like an ele-

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phant. Slater asked. "Did Carter have any papers on him? If he did, they may have been for me. Perhaps it was the information he had for me."

Lane stared at him, his sharp eyes taking in his features. "I cannot tell you that, Mr Slater, not until we have completed our enquiries."

"Okay, thanks." He was disappointed but it was only to be expected. Still, he needed to try and find out what Jimmy Carter was going to tell him.

"And you maintain that you have never met Carter," Lane said again.

He frowned. "Yes. For goodness sake, Lane, I've told you that already."

"So you have, but let me get this straight, Mr Slater?" Lane said his face screwed up in concentration. He took Hobbs' notebook and studied it, flipping the pages back and forth. "Just so I am clear in my mind. A man who you don't know, who you have never met, wants to meet you in a deserted place such as a trading estate to impart unknown information to you, and gets himself killed. Don't you find that rather strange?" He gave the notebook back to Hobbs.

He nodded. "Strange, yes, but true. The first time I heard his name was tonight when he phoned me, so yes, I can confirm that we have never actually met."

"And he just phoned out of the blue and said he had some information for you, is that it?"

"That's about it, Chief Inspector. Put like that, it

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does sound a bit farfetched, but that was how it happened.”

“Not planning a holiday, are you, sir?” Lane said softly.

“What? No.”

“We will need to speak to you again. So please keep yourself available.”

“Yes, I will. I know how it works Chief Inspector.”

Chief Inspector Lane and Sgt Hobbs left. Hobbs threw Slater a disbelieving glance and sneered. “We’ll get you, you asshole.”

Slater gave him a single finger salute and shut the door on them. He now had more unanswered questions, even more than he had before. Who killed Jimmy Carter and why. What was the information the man had had for him? How would it have helped Caruthers? Would it have proved his innocence or his guilt?

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Chapter 3

Jack Slater, Private Investigator, it said grandly in gold leaf on the glass partition on the door to his first floor office. Beneath that it said, *Investigations of any kind undertaken.*

He was thirty-five years old and six foot one in his socks with broad muscular shoulders to match. He glanced in the mirror and rubbed his hands tiredly over the stubble that darkened his square chin. Hazel eyes with laughter lines in the corners looked tiredly back at him. He pulled the lower lid down and wry face at his bloodshot eyes. He noted that his unruly dark brown hair was unfashionably long and needed a trim. Stray strands kept dropping across his eyes that he had to brush away with his fingers. He had a straight nose, even though it had been broken in a fight some years before, sitting above a generous, smiling mouth. *I'm getting tired*, he thought, *I need a holiday.*

Mary, his receptionist, put a mug of coffee on the desk in front of him. "Och, that is dreadful news about poor Mr Carter," she said when Slater had told her what had happened. "Who was he?"

He shrugged. "Just someone who had some information for me, Mary."

"Who on earth could have done that to the wee man?"

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He picked up his drink. He liked Mary but she was soon to retire and he had not yet considered a successor. He realised that her efficiency would be hard to replace. "I don't know, but I'm sure going to try and find out."

She sniffed. "Och, I hope yea can, for his wee families sake." She gasped and put her hands to her mouth in horror. "We don't even know if he had a family." She took a deep breath and added in a more business like way. "Your appointment with Mr Caruthers is due in a few minutes. Shall I show him straight in when he arrives?"

"Yes please, Mary." He was not really looking forward to this meeting with Caruthers for he had precious little progress to report and progress was exactly what he would be looking for.

He selected the Caruthers file from his filing cabinet and dropped it on the desk in front of him. He opened it and stared at a blank sheet of paper. Damn it, he had nothing yet. What the hell was he going to tell Caruthers this morning? He didn't have this problem in the army.

He had done his stint in the Army for ten years. He had gone where they said and when they said jump he asked *how high*. He had always done what they ordered when they ordered it and how they ordered it. The Special Air Services, the famed SAS, had him body and soul for two years and he had served with them in Borneo, Northern Ireland and the gulf before deciding

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that there was more to life than the army.

At the time, he had thought that being an investigator would be all glamorous and exciting with beautiful women clamouring for his help and his body but it was not to be so. It had all become rather mundane and even boring after a while. His cases usually involved wives, or husbands, searching for proof of their spouses' infidelity so they could instigate divorce proceedings against the other party and get generous settlements. His broken nose had been the result of being caught photographing a cheating husband who resented Slater discovering him with the other woman.

However, his current case was different, very different. His client, Andrew Caruthers was an important official in the Ministry of Defence in some little known building in Curzon Place. He was in trouble. Details concerning secret government arms deals to foreign regimes in the Middle East, like Iran and Iraq. The authorities accused Caruthers of this and he was under currently investigation. He had informed Slater that someone was attempting to set him up to be the fall guy. He was due in court in twenty-eight days to answer these charges and Slater had till to get to the facts. Caruthers had come to the investigator protesting his innocence and begging for help. So far, Slater had nothing for him, nothing but a great big fat zero.

A few minutes later Mary knocked on his door. "Mr Caruthers to see you."

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Slater stood. "Thank you, Mary. Please come in and sit down, Mr Caruthers. Would you like a coffee?"

"No thank you, I only have a few minutes to spare. Do you have any news for me, Mr Slater?" Caruthers settled himself in the visitor's chair. He seemed agitated and fidgeted about like he had hot coals under his bum.

"I'm still looking into it, Mr Caruthers. I should have some information soon. Tell me, do you know someone called Jimmy Carter? Or perhaps better known as James Carter."

Caruthers thought for a few seconds, his brow wrinkled. "I think there is a James Carter at our building but he's in another department."

Slater had difficulty hiding his surprise. However, the name was common enough so perhaps it was not even the same person. Although he did wonder if the dead Carter was *Caruthers's* Carter. "What department is that?"

He frowned, forehead creased in concentration. "Something to do with maps, perhaps cartography, I'm not sure. It's on the third floor somewhere. I can find out when I get back to the office."

"That would be good. Please do, and phone me?"

"Of course; why do you want to know? Is Carter something to do with my problem?"

"I don't know yet." Slater opened the almost empty file and studied the blank page as though he was reading it. "But I intend to find out." This was too much

of a coincidence surely, he thought. He said. "A Jimmy or James Carter was going to meet me last night."

Caruthers looked surprised. "Carter? Carter was going to meet you?"

Slater nodded. "Yes, although I don't know if they are the same person."

"James Carter was going to meet you? Why would he be doing that, Mr Slater?"

"The one that was going to meet me had some information, perhaps about your case. However, he happened to get himself killed before he could tell me what that information was. It seems a good bet that they are the same person."

"Really" Caruthers, his face a blank mask. "What on earth happened to him?"

"He was murdered."

"Oh dear, oh dear, the poor chap." Caruthers sounded insincere. "And he was unable to give you the information that he had?"

"That's correct, which is why I don't have much of a progress report for you at the moment."

"What do you think the information was?"

Slater shook his head. "I don't know, he didn't say."

"Do you think it might have helped my case?"

Slater shrugged. "I can't tell until I know what that information was. Whatever it was might have got him killed."

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“Oh well.” He stood up. “You will call me when you find out something, won’t you?” He walked towards the door.

Slater thought he seemed anxious to be gone. “Yes, of course I will, and please let me know if they are the same person,” he told the rapidly departing figure.

Somehow, Caruthers seemed unperturbed that a person had been murdered that may have been a work colleague or at least worked in the same building as him. Then perhaps that was the way of all civil servants. Did it mean that Caruthers knew more than he was telling him? Was there more to him than met the eyes.

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Chapter 4

Slater went to Scotland Yard and asked for Inspector Lane, a young PCW took him to his office. He admired her slim bottom as he followed her to Lane's office.

"What can I do for you, Mr Slater?"

Lane didn't ask him to sit down but he did anyway, sitting on a vacant chair in front of the desk. He looked about the office. Small with too little space. There was a pile of files on the corner of the desk and a file open in front of Lane. "So this is where the other half live."

He frowned. "I'm quite busy. What can I do for you?"

Slater grinned. "Sorry. This Jimmy Carter that was murdered, would he happen to be the one who works, or worked, in an MOD building, Procurement and Supply, on Curzon Place?"

"Now I wonder why you would be interested in that, Mr Slater." Lane was curious although he knew that Caruthers had engaged a private investigator and it was probably Slater.

"Carter's name has come up again during my investigation and I am trying to find out if it's the same Carter that phoned me last night."

"How would you know anyone at MOD.?" Lane's eyebrows rose until they almost disappeared under his

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thinning hair. "Not your field of expertise I would have thought."

Slater bristled at the slur. "I do far more than you think, Lane. It might have something to do with the case I am working on."

Lane put his pen down and lent back in his chair. "Ahh." He said as though he now understood everything. "And would that case have anything to do with Mr Andrew Caruthers?"

Damn it, Slater thought, he might not look it but Lane was sharp. "Yes it has." He didn't think there was any harm in divulging the name of his client. "How did you know that Chief Inspector?"

Lane sighed. "Not particularly hard to work out, Mr Slater. Caruthers is a high profile case and insists that he is innocent and has said he would engage a private eye to prove it."

"Please, Chief Inspector," Slater smiled broadly. "I prefer to be called a Private Enquiry Agent."

"Yes, whatever. So, Caruthers has engaged you?"

"Yes."

"To do what exactly?"

"He believes he is being set up for leaking those arms deal secrets. My job is to find out who is doing the leaking and get Caruthers off the hook."

"Do you think he is innocent?"

"I don't think anything until I find out the facts."

"Well said, Mr Slater. And tell me, just what have

you discovered?”

He shook his head and said softly. “Nothing yet. That’s why I was hoping Carter had some papers for me when he was killed.”

“You can rest assured, Mr Slater that James Carter did not have any papers relating to Caruthers, MOD, Procurement and Supply or yourself on his body.”

“Well, can you at least tell me if my Jimmy Carter is the one that works in the same building as Caruthers?”

Lane thought for a second, his brow furrowed as he tried to decide if there was any benefit in telling him. “Yes, Mr Slater, they are one and the same, or were, and both are now as dead as each other.” Lane almost smiled at his attempt at a joke.

Slater stood up. “Thanks for that, Chief Inspector.” At least he now had more information than when he started. However, he didn’t know how that was going to help him.

“You will keep me informed as you obtain information regarding this case, Mr Slater.” That sounded like an order to Slater, not a request. “The case of Caruthers is highly sensitive as you imagine. I, we, need to know as you obtain information and what that information is.”

Slater agreed with Lane that a co-operation between them could be mutually beneficial although he was sure it would be more beneficial to Lane than it

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would him. “Yes, I will.” He mentally crossed his fingers. “I will do my best to keep you informed.”

“Thank you, Mr Slater.” He picked up his pen indicating that the meeting was over. “Was there anything else?”

“Do you have any leads in Carter’s killing?”

“No.” Lane stared directly at him, not caring that Slater knew he would not tell him. *So much for co-operation*, Slater thought.

He left Lane’s office and headed to the building where Caruthers worked.

He entered the double doors at the little known MOD offices in Curzon Place. He wondered what they did there for it was away from the normal area for MOD buildings. The reception was bright and cool. A pretty woman was dealing with two men at the reception counter.

He looked about the foyer while he waited next in line. It had been done out beautifully in rich mahogany with highly polished brass fittings and the reception counter would not have looked out of place in any upper class hotel situated anywhere in the world. So, he thought, this is where some of my hard-earned taxes go. The wall facing the street was all glass and stainless steel allowing lots of light into the area and was perhaps out of context among the wood and brass. A low table stood in front of the window surrounded by four comfortable looking leather chairs, although he doubted

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that they were as comfortable as they looked. Several large framed prints were on the walls, prints he had seen in many a hotel room.

A lift in one corner hummed quietly and expensively as it deposited its passengers in the foyer. There were several doors in the same rich panelled mahogany leading from the foyer into the nether regions of MOD. He noted the surveillance camera high in one corner. The two men in front of him completed their business and left. Slater stepped up to the counter.

He smiled. "I wish to speak with Andrew Caruthers." She was very pretty, in fact, he thought she was strikingly beautiful and intelligent looking. She had glossy black hair pulled back from her face so that it hung behind her in a long ponytail. She was young, perhaps no more than twenty-seven years old. Her eyes were as black as midnight with long lashes and Jack felt his breath catch in his throat. She wore very little make up on her fine boned face other than a little neutral gloss on her lips and a thin line highlighting her eyes. She had on a short skirt that showed well-shaped legs, legs that were longer than any woman deserved to have. A well-filled white blouse completed her outfit. A nametag pinned to her breast said her name was *Sara Carr*. He noted the lack of a wedding band and wondered if she was in a relationship.

Sara Carr smiled showing pure white even teeth. "I am sorry, Mr Slater." She turned his business card over

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in her slim fingers with carefully manicured nails. He had a range of business cards, the one he had given her proclaimed him to be a sales representative from a military hardware company. "I'm sorry. Mr Caruthers will not see anybody without a prior appointment. You do not have one, do you?" She smiled sweetly at him, her eyes looking candidly into his.

* * * *

Sara Carr's heart beat a little faster. She thought the man in front of her was very handsome and masculine. She liked the hint of stubble on his chin, a bit like George Michael. She wondered if he was married or available. Did he have a wife or girlfriend? She glanced at his ring finger and a warm flush brushed across her skin when she saw he had no rings. She knew that her face would be glowing pink and she hoped he wouldn't notice. He was smiling at her and that made her flush even more. A little tremor flashed across her tummy.

She had not had a relationship since she had split with her boyfriend some months ago, although he had shared her apartment until quite recently just until he had found a place of his own. They had parted very good friends and he stayed overnight at her apartment on odd occasions after she had invited him for a meal and they had shared a bottle of wine.

She was as red blooded as any girl and handsome men always got her juices flowing, and the one standing

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before her was no exception. She flushed again and with a hint of a smile on her lips, she almost reached up to touch her hair but stopped the movement just in time.

When she had been dealing with the two men from the Ministry of Defence in Whitehall, she had noticed him standing waiting and thought him to be very handsome then. Now, close up, she thought he was even more desirable. She wished he would stop looking into her eyes like that. It was making her flustered.

“No, I don’t have one,” he was saying, bringing her back down to earth with a jolt. “Please, just give him a call. I’m sure he will see me.”

“Perhaps you should ring him and arrange an appointment.”

“If you call him and tell him I am here.”

She gave a sigh. If she tried Mr Caruthers phone and he wasn’t in his office, it would mean the man would stay in front of her a few minutes longer while she tried to locate him. She had seen his eyes glance at her breasts and she was a little embarrassed but at the same time was pleased that he had noticed her. “I’ll try for you, Mr Slater, if you don’t mind waiting.”

He leant an elbow on the counter and rested his chin in his hand. “With you helping me I can wait all day.”

She flushed deeply and picked up the phone. Flustered, she dialled the wrong extension and had to try again. She hoped Mr Caruthers would not be in his

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office, and then she would ask the man to wait until he returned keeping him here longer.

* * * *

Slater noted the number Carr punched in the phone for Caruthers. He answered the phone and she told him Slater was there. She nodded a few times and hung up. "Mr Caruthers said he will be down in a few minutes," she sounded surprised. "Meanwhile, please sign in here." She spun a visitor's book in his direction and pointed with a slim finger to the line he had to sign. He signed it and she handed him a visitor's pass. Deliberately, he let his fingers brush hers as he took it. She was saying. "Please wear the pass at all times while you are in the building. Please hand it back when you leave."

He leant across the counter, and stared into her eyes said softly. "Do I need to wear it when I take you to dinner tonight?"

Before she could answer him, Caruthers came out of the lift, hurried to Slater's side and grabbed his arm, pulling him out of earshot of the reception. He was agitated, his voice harsh. "What the hell are you doing here? I told you that I would contact you."

"Calm down, Mr Caruthers. I need to get a look at Carter's office and you were the only way I can get in that I can see."

"Are you crazy? That's utterly impossible." His eyes kept glancing from side to side as if in hope that nobody would see him talking to the investigator. Slater

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wondered why. Was it a sin to try and prove one's innocence?

He pushed Caruthers harder. "Come on, Mr Caruthers, you must have some influence around here. It could be important to your case."

He was visibly weakening. "What do you expect to find?"

Slater frowned and shook his head. "I really don't know until I've had a look around. Carter had some information for me and died before he could pass it on. I'm hoping he had recorded it somewhere." Slater had told the truth, he really did not know what to expect in the office. If the murdered man had kept a record of the information he was about to impart, he had to try and find it, he owed it to his client.

"You know the police have been in there for the last two days? Poking around into god knows what."

Slater chuckled. "I would imagine that they have. It's what I would have expected considering the occupant has been murdered."

Caruthers winced at the word murder but Slater could see he was evidently worried. He shuddered. "Murder is such a harsh word. Who would have thought someone from here would be killed."

"Well, Carter was killed, of that there's no doubt. The police have left now though, haven't they?"

He nodded. "Yes, they left earlier today."

"Well? Can you sign me in there or not? I really

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need to check out that office.”

His face was a mask of concern. “I’m not sure that I should. If the police didn’t find anything, how do you expect to?”

Slater sighed and wondered why it was so difficult to convince him to help. “The police would be looking for a murderer they wouldn’t be looking for something that might prove, or disprove, your innocence. That would be very low on their priorities.”

“You know I could get into a lot of trouble for letting you in here? I’m not allowed to let anyone in without having genuine business to be here.”

Slater was starting to lose his patience. “Mr Caruthers, you are already in a lot of trouble, what’s a little more? Couldn’t be much worse, could it? That must good enough to get me in.”

His shoulders slumped and he said with resignation. “All right, all right.” Slater could see the conflict in his mind as he wrestled with his conscience. His need to prove his innocence won and they crossed over to the receptionist where he told the woman. “I will be taking Mr Slater to my office, Miss Carr.”

“Very well, Mr Caruthers,” she smiled sweetly in Slater’s direction and he gave her a wink, noting the delicate flush on her face. He wondered if the offer of dinner was a possibility. He hoped that she was free and would want to go with him.

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Chapter 5

The late Carter's office on the third floor was totally unremarkable. It was small, rather dingy and in marked contrast to the opulence of the reception area. Two small windows looked out onto the brick wall of an adjacent building. He sat at the murdered man's desk and thought about the person who had occupied this very same chair a few days earlier. What was he like? Who were his colleagues? What information did he have? Was the information he was going to tell him the reason for his murder? Would that information have helped his investigation? Caruthers stood in the door watching him.

Slater wanted him to go so he could examine the office in peace. "I can manage by myself, Mr Caruthers."

Caruthers was reluctant to leave him and kept looking at the passage behind him. "How long do you think you will you be?"

How long would it take Slater wondered, it really depended what he found. He took a guess. "Thirty minutes or so, perhaps more. Don't worry about it. I'll be as quick as I can."

Caruthers frowned in annoyance. "I'm not supposed to leave you on your own. You have to have an escort at all times. It's the rules, you know."

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Slater could see he was nervous. Was it so bad to leave someone alone? Did the offence mean dismissal, or worse? "Yes, you told me, Mr Caruthers, but if I'm to do my job..."

Caruthers looked up and down the corridor again. Was he expecting someone to be there watching him? "You have to be escorted at all times," he repeated nervously. "And I have another appointment in ten minutes. An appointment that I cannot miss."

"That's alright. I can let myself out. Don't worry, Mr Caruthers, I'll be discrete, I promise." He could see that Caruthers was determined that he would be supervised. However, he was equally determined that he would be left alone to search the office in peace. He said persuasively. "Stop fussing I have done this kind of thing plenty of times before. Go to your appointment, you don't want to keep him waiting." Obviously, his next appointment was quite important because he left abruptly. "All right, all right but for God's sake be quick," he said over his shoulder as he left.

He got up and closed the office door on Caruthers' retreating figure. He noted that the door nameplate had been removed already leaving two screw holes and a dark patch on the wood. He sat back in the chair behind the desk. There were minute traces of fingerprint powder here and there about the office and he wondered what the SOCO men had found during their examination. Had they found the information he was seeking? If

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they had, he would probably never get to hear what it was.

He looked about him. There was the usual office furniture that consisted of a kneehole desk, the surface that was empty except for a computer and keyboard, not even a blotter, calendar or penholder marred the shiny surface. He wondered why it was so pristine. He chuckled to himself; it was like a virgin desk.

An upright chair stood in front of the desk, uncomfortable looking obviously designed to discourage long stay visitors. A single four-drawer filing cabinet stood on one wall and on another stood a six drawer map case. That agreed with what Caruthers had said about Carter having something to do with maps. The office was devoid of anything personal, no pictures other than two stock MOD prints on the walls, one a smaller version of the reception prints.

He opened the map drawers one by one but they were all empty. He wondered where Carter would hide information he didn't want found. He pulled open the desk drawers one by one. Nothing in them, they were empty but for some fluff, a few loose paper clips and some drawing pins, the usual stuff left in a drawer that the occupant cleared out. On the other hand, Carter didn't clear out the drawers, someone else had. He felt under the drawers to see if anything had been stuck there, nothing. He looked underneath the kneehole portion of the desk but nothing had been stuck there

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either. These were the all too obvious hiding places but they needed checking anyway. One never knew where someone who didn't want something found would hide stuff.

He looked around thoughtfully. Where else would he hide something? Carter's computer was still on the desk, another obvious place but he switched it on anyway. Damn, it was asking for a password. He tried *carter* and a few variations of his name using upper and lower case but he could not get in. He wondered what his birth date was. Apparently, Carter had not chosen his password carelessly. He switched the PC off again.

The prints on the walls depicted farmyard and country scenes and although he realised that he was wasting his time, he looked behind each one anyway, still nothing. Trouble was he didn't really know what he was looking for. What was it? Something like an object, a box, a file or was it papers, or just a single piece of paper? Perhaps there was nothing here after all; it might have been contained in his head, in his memory. If it was it was now gone forever.

He turned his attention back to the map drawers and looked beneath every one, nothing there. Next, he went to the filing cabinet and tried to open the drawers; locked. Taking a thin pouch from his pocket, he selected two slim probes and wriggled them about in the lock, until the lock clicked open with a clunk. Sliding the top-drawer open he peered inside but it was empty,

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as empty as the desk had been, not even some fluff this time. The other three drawers were also empty. Carter had only been dead a few days and not even buried, yet his office was empty already, and, in that case why would anyone bother to lock an empty filing cabinet? Why not leave it unlocked with the keys in it ready for the next occupant.

He remembered that sometimes papers slid over the back of a drawer and fell into the base of the cabinet. He slid open the bottom drawer again, lifted it from the runners and laid it on the floor. Inside, on the base there were three pieces of A5 paper, he lifted them out and slid the drawer back in place. Whoever had sanitised the office did not do such a thorough job after all for these papers were still there. Two of the pieces of paper looked like inter-office memos that meant nothing to him. However, the third appeared very interesting even though he could not even begin to understand what it meant. Before he could read it properly, the door opened and a man walked in with a bundle of files under his arm. Was he the next occupant moving in?

Slater was on his hands and knees and the newcomer looked down at him in surprise. "Hello," he said, his eyes opened wide looking like he had seen a ghost. "What the hell are you doing down there? What's going on?"

Slater stood up, thrust the papers into his pocket, and pulled out his pocketknife in one smooth move-

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ment. He held it up for the man to see and smiled disarmingly. "Got it," he told him brightly. He was glad he had slid the bottom drawer back into the cabinet for that would have been much harder to explain. "Lost it last week when I came to see James. It was at the back of the cabinet. I thought I had lost it for good but I'm glad I found it, it has great sentimental value." He started to walk towards the door. "Well, see yuh."

"Wait a minute." The man had spotted the visitors badge on Slater's jacket. He stretched out his arm as though to bar the doorway to prevent him from leaving. "Who are you? Where's your escort? You have to have an escort at all times."

"I know, but he had to pee. I'll go and join him." He pushed past the man, who was unsure whether he should stop him or not, and into the corridor. Slater turned left hoping that was the way to the restroom. He was in luck for the door to the restroom was just a few yards away. Pushing open the door, he turned his head, gave the man a smile and a wave, and went in. The man was standing in the office doorway watching him with a puzzled expression on his face. Slater realised that he needed to get out of the building as quickly as possible before the man called security and had him escorted out of the building or worse, arrested for...for what, for trespassing? That would only be after they asked a number of awkward questions about why he was there and who had let him in.

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He waited a few seconds then checked that the man had gone into Carter's office and quickly left the restroom. He found a telephone mounted on the wall and dialled Caruthers on the number he had seen the receptionist use.

Caruthers answered quickly. "Caruthers," he said sharply.

"Mr Caruthers, Jack Slater, I need to get out of here. Can you pick me up right away?"

A solid wave of worry transmitted itself through the telephone to him. "Why, what's happened? You were discovered without an escort, weren't you?" There was panic was evident in his voice.

"Yes, I was surprised by someone while I was in Carter's office. He noticed my visitors' badge and the lack of an escort. I told him my escort was in the restroom." Someone came out of an office along the hall and Slater kept his back to the man but he turned in the opposite direction.

Caruthers groaned in his ear, his voice full of despair. "Oh no, damn it. I knew I shouldn't have left you alone; it's against all the rules. I'm in real trouble now."

"What they going to do, sack you? They might do that anyway if I can't get to the truth in time. Just calm down. It will be alright if you pick me up and get me out of here right now."

"Alright, alright. Where are you?"

Slater looked at the room number on an adjacent

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door and told him and Caruthers was at his side in less than a minute.

“I hope all this was worth it and you found what you were looking for.”

His face was a mask of concern and he appeared to have aged visibly in the last hour. Why? What was he concerned about, his skin? Why was it such a sin to leave someone unescorted? “Did you know that Carter’s office has been cleared out completely, sanitised, and someone else is moving in already?” He tried to keep up with Caruthers who was almost running to the lift, tripping over himself in his haste to remove Slater from the building.

“No, I didn’t know that. You say someone is moving in?” He glanced at Slater to see if he was telling the truth.

Slater nodded. “A guy came in with a pile of files in his arms so I guess he was moving in. What else would he be doing?”

He frowned and pressed the button for the lift. “That seems a bit quick even for here.”

“That’s just what I was thinking, talk about being in a dead man’s shoes.”

The lift arrived, they stepped in and Caruthers pressed the button for the ground floor. He hurried to the reception and watched while Slater signed out and returned his pass to the woman. He visibly relaxed as he passed responsibility of Slater’s presence in the building

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to the receptionist.

Slater held out his hand. "Thank you Mr Caruthers, that was most informative. I hope we can do it again sometime. Goodbye."

They shook hands. "Goodbye, Mr Slater, please call me when you have the information that I require." He was very formal. He turned towards the lift and left.

"Now, Miss Carr, how about that dinner? Tonight at eight?" She blushed and this time, to her annoyance, she did put up her hand to smooth her hair, a small smile softened the line of her lips. He left the building with her address in his pocket and a firm date for dinner that evening.

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Chapter 6

In his office, Slater turned his attention to the pieces of paper recovered from the bottom of Carter's filing cabinet. They were curious but meant nothing. Two seemed to be nothing more than internal office memos. One simply said, *James, we're running out of coffee, please order new supplies*, and the other was quite old for there was a faded date of two years previous that said *James. Are we having a departmental Christmas meal this year? Are you organizing it same as usual?* Apparently, Carter was in charge of the social side of the department as befitting a junior official. However, the third piece of paper was much more interesting although he didn't know what it meant.

Written in scrawling script was, '*What is The Alpha Project?*' A number of question marks followed this. Also written was, *Department Y*, with no explanation what that meant. On the back of the scrap of paper, scrawled in the same untidy handwriting, there was the name, *Dimitri Sokolov*, underlined several times. There were several question marks and some doodles. He angled the paper against the light to see if there was any indentation from other writing. There was nothing obvious. He telephoned Caruthers. "Who or what is The Alpha Project?" he asked when Caruthers answered the telephone.

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He hesitated and Slater could imagine his face creased in a worried frown. "I have no idea. Where did you get that project name from?"

"It is on a piece of paper I found in Carter's office before I was discovered. You have never heard of it before?"

"No, never."

"It was in the filing cabinet. You are sure?"

"Sorry, Slater. I have never heard of it. What does it mean?"

"I was rather hoping you could tell me that."

"It means nothing to me."

"Do you know why an empty filing cabinet would be kept locked?"

"Yes, its department policy to keep all cabinets locked even when empty."

"How strange. Where are the keys kept?"

"They are held by security."

"What about Department Y? Have you heard of that?" There was a long silence on the phone and Slater could almost feel the tension coming down the wires.

"Are you still there, Mr Caruthers?"

His voice was cautious, careful, almost a whisper. "What do you know about Department Y?"

"Absolutely nothing, that's why I am asking you if you know."

"Sorry," he replied rather stiffly. "I cannot tell you anything about it."

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Slater had the impression that he knew more than he was telling. "Cannot, or will not?"

"I'm afraid it is both."

"Mr Caruthers, it is your neck on the line here and knowing what it is might be important to the case."

There was another long silence until he thought Caruthers had gone. "Do you think so?"

Slater sighed in frustration. "Damn it, Mr Caruthers, I won't know if it will be important until I know what it is." He could almost see the man looking over his shoulder to see if anyone was listening to their conversation.

"Can you meet me in the Kings Arms in about an hour?" he finally said, the tension still deep in his voice.

"All right, the Kings Arms it is, in an hour."

* * * *

Cold though it was, they sat, with a pint of beer each, at a table in the beer garden, alone and shivering. Slater wondered what other patrons thought as to why they sat there in the cold when there were perfectly good tables in the warmth of the pub where they had a log fire burning and the atmosphere was more sociable.

Slater pulled his coat collar higher to stop the wind getting down his neck. "We stand out like a sore thumb sitting here, in the cold. We could be inside in the warm."

Caruthers' screwed his face up against the cold.

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“Sorry, Slater, I cannot take the chance on being overheard.” He sat silent for some time.

“Department Y,” Slater prompted him.

He jumped as though stung and, although he knew they were alone, he could not resist yet another glance around him to see if anyone was close enough to overhear them. Satisfied no one was within earshot he finally said. “Department Y is a secret project down in the basement. Something to do with computers I believe, but what they do exactly I have no idea. Nobody seems to know what they do, we, that is, us ordinary mortals, don’t even know who is in charge but I know that seventh floor executives govern it.”

“Has The Alpha Project anything to do with Department Y?”

“I don’t know? I have never heard the Alpha Project mentioned. Then I believe they do some hush-hush work down there so I would not be surprised if it is something Department Y is working on. They wouldn’t talk to us underlings about what they do or what they’re called.”

Slater was mystified. “Why on earth not?” What could be so secret that no one had heard what they do?

“I told you, its hush, hush, very top secret. The last person that tried to find out about Department Y was curious like you and they dismissed him within 24 hours? He apparently asked too many awkward questions and we never saw him again. We don’t know what

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happened to him. Probably banned from working anywhere in MOD.”

Slater wondered if that was another murder like Carter. Would Lane tell him what he wanted to know? If he even knew. On the other hand, was their information exchange going to be a one-way thing? “Okay, do you have that man’s name?”

He thought for a minute. “I think it was Graham Gardiner, I’m not sure. I can find out.”

“Do you have his address?”

“Not on me, but I can probable get it when I get back to the office.”

“Please do that for me.”

He looked sideways at the pub as two men left the front door. He waited until they were out of earshot. “What does he have to do with my problem?”

“Mr Caruthers, I have very little information right now so anything I find out has to be followed up to either dismiss it or added it to my findings. I never know if something is going to be relevant until I investigate it. It’s what you’re paying me to do.” He looked crestfallen but at last, he had made him realise the importance of providing what information he could.

“Very well. I’ll confirm his name and look for his address when I get back.”

“Thank you. What about Dimitri Sokolov. Do you know him?”

“Dimitri Sokolov? No sorry, never heard of him.

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However, over a hundred people work in the building, so it's possible that he works there, I wouldn't know everyone. I have no idea how many people work down there," he said looking briefly downwards, obviously meaning the basement and Department Y.

"Can you check your internal directory, or the email addresses? If he works in your building he would be listed and have an email address, wouldn't he?"

"Yes, of course, but he sounds Russian, I am sure he wouldn't work there. Staff is vetted quite carefully."

Slater spread his hands, palms up and he got the message. He said resignedly. "All right, I'll check the email list."

"Did Carter have any family?"

He nodded. "His parents live in Scotland but he lives, or lived with his sister in Hounslow."

"Do you have the address?"

"Not with me of course but I can probably get it. Like Gardiner the old records are probably still accessible."

"Please do that for I need to know as soon as possible."

Slater wondered if Caruthers would get him back into the building. He wanted to get a look at this Department Y. Somehow though; he didn't think he would do it again. After all, he'd had quite a scare when the new occupant of the late Carter's office had caught him without an escort. One scare for Caruthers with

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Slater being unescorted in his building was enough for him. He didn't seem to be a brave person and was obviously scared to take any more chances even though the chances might prove his innocence.

They parted company and thirty minutes later Caruthers telephoned Slater's mobile to say that a Dimitri Sokolov did not work in the building, or at least did not have a telephone number or email. He gave him the address of Carters sister and the address of Graham Gardiner. He jotted them down in his notebook along with their telephone numbers.

"Mr Caruthers, would Dimitri Sokolov be listed if he worked in the basement or with Department Y or if he was involved in The Alpha Project?"

There was a slight hesitation as he thought about it. "I don't know."

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Chapter 7

Slater picked up Sarah Carr from her apartment at eight and took her to Nicole's restaurant just off New Bond Street where he knew they did excellent meals and gave a service that was second to none.

She had brushed her dark hair so that it hung to her shoulders. It shimmered in the candle light and framed her face in soft waves. It transformed her from the pretty receptionist into a very attractive and desirable woman full of sensuality. Her black eyes, with tiny flecks of purple in the iris, looked wide and innocent as she studied him from under slightly lowered lashes doing nothing for his heart rate.

She had a slim, perfectly shaped, nose above the bow of her very sensuous red painted lips. Her eyelids had just a little shadow on them making her eyes look dark and mysterious. High cheekbones gave her face the regal look of a beautiful high-class model and Slater felt his heart beat a little faster. He longed to touch his lips to hers, to taste her sweetness, even though he had only just met her.

She was dressed simply in a mid-calf length skirt held up by a tan leather belt and a silk blouse through which Slater could see the faint image of a lacy bra. The top buttons were undone a little lower than was good for his blood pressure. He could see the swell of each

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breast in the deep cleavage and he wondered if that was deliberate on her part. If it were deliberate, then it was having the desired effect. Altogether, she is really quite a beautiful woman, he thought as he studied her. He decided that he wanted to get to know her better, much better.

The Maitre'd had addressed Slater by name as he showed them to a table. "Your favourite table is free for you, Mr Slater," he had said and Sara seemed suitably impressed that they knew him.

Slater handed her the drinks menu. "What would you like to drink?"

She looked at Slater instead of the card. "White wine, please." The tip of her tongue touched along the edge of her lips.

The headwaiter arrived to take their order. "I can recommend the Salmon poached in white wine and herbs for the lady. Would you like your usual fillet steak Mr Slater?"

"That's fine for me, Archie. Sara, would you like the Salmon or something else?"

She glanced over the rest of the menu and frowned at the outrageous prices displayed on the menu. "The salmon sounds wonderful; I'll have that, please."

"White wine for the lady, Archie and single malt whisky, for me, the Islay tonight, I think. We'll have the drinks while we wait please."

"Yes, Mr Slater."

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Sara watched him go and turned her eyes to Slater, the lids partially closed giving her a sexy look. "They seem to know you quite well here."

"Yes, I've been in here a few times. It's my favourite restaurant."

"It is nice."

Archie arrived with their drinks.

Slater complimented her on her looks and so the pleasantries continued. Then he thought he had better get to the point of the date, not that her company was anything other than very pleasant which he was enjoying immensely and wanted it to continue forever.

As though it was a normal topic of conversation, he asked her casually. "Do you know a Dimitri Sokolov in your building?"

"Dimitri Sokolov?" Her forehead creased in a frown that didn't detract from her beauty and he wondered why such a beautiful girl didn't have a partner. For all he knew she had a boyfriend or fiancée or even a husband on the sidelines but liked to play around with other men. He hoped not. He thought that men must clamour after her. She said. "No, no, I don't think so. The name is not familiar. Why do you want to know?"

"Oh, no reason really. His name came up when I was talking to Mr Caruthers and I just wondered where he worked," he lied. "I heard he might work on The Alpha Project," he added casually as though he knew all

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about it.

Her eyes studied him over the rim of her glass. "Sorry, I have not heard of him," she told him. "What was the Department you mentioned?"

"The Alpha Project," he hoped she would know what that meant. "I don't know if it is a department or something else."

She shook her head and sipped her wine. "No, I have never heard of it. Why do you want to know?"

"Oh, I'm just curious." He changed the subject. "What do you like to do on your days off?"

"I cycle, swim and I play squash."

"You keep fit then. Perhaps we can have a game of squash sometime."

She smiled. "Yes, that would be lovely. Where do you play?"

"I don't at the moment but I'm looking for a club to join. In my youth I used to play quite a lot."

She rummaged into her bag and produced a card. "Try my club. They usually have some vacancies."

He took the card, his fingers lingering on hers, before sliding it in his shirt pocket. "Do you get very busy on reception? It seems a pretty quiet sort of building."

She withdrew her hand and laughed the sound a sweet tinkle over the background buzz of the restaurant and the clatter of knives and forks on china. "Oh yes. We get very busy at times."

"Really? I wouldn't have thought there would be

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that many people working there.”

“Oh, there are over a hundred,” she smiled again and his heart missed a beat. He wondered what was happening to him so fast. It was a long time since a woman had affected him so dramatically. She was saying. “But don’t forget all the visitors we get. We get at least that many each day.”

“Really?”

“Yes, people are visiting all day long,” she told him, evidently proud of her role on the reception.

“Is there just you on reception? It seems a lot to do for one pretty receptionist.”

* * * *

Sara felt the heat return to her face and hoped he wouldn’t notice in the dim light from the candles on the table. She took a drink from her glass, mentally flapping her hand in front of her face to cool down. Her heart and stomach were both doing a flip and she wondered why he affected her in this way. Perhaps it was because she had been abstinent for so long. She wondered if he had a girlfriend or perhaps there was a wife somewhere. God, what if he was married, he could be a womaniser. She fervently hoped he was single. She managed to keep talking in spite of her heart palpitations. “No there are three of us working there. Anyway, why are you asking such a lot of questions about my work.”

He smiled and her heart flipped again. “Just interested in all things about you.”

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Whew, she thought, trying not to look into his eyes, he is such a hunk. I wonder what he's like in bed. Another wave of heat swept over her at her thoughts. God, Sara, she admonished herself, stop thinking sexually about him, but her thoughts would not let it be. She sighed inwardly. Would she let him make love to her if he tried? She instantly made up her mind, that if Jack Slater wanted to take her to bed, she wouldn't stop him. Part of her hoped he would want to. Her tummy contracted again at her thoughts.

To take her mind away from him making love to her she looked about the restaurant, at the other diners, all who seemed to be enjoying themselves. "It's nice in here."

* * * *

He looked at the other diners. "Yes it is. What do they actually do there?"

"What?"

"I have never understood what they do where you work."

"Oh, as you know it is part of the Ministry of Defence. Most of it is to do with supplying our troops with the equipment they need. Well, not supplying them exactly, but sourcing the supply from the manufacturers and ensuring MOD gets the best deal for their money."

"Is that what Mr Caruthers does?"

She looked at him carefully. "Don't you know what

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Mr Caruthers does?”

He tried to look sheepish. “Well, I do, but he confused me by telling me about several jobs he said he did.”

Satisfied, she said. “He’s the main contact between the manufacturers and MOD. He’s the one that is in charge of field tests of all the equipment put forward for consideration.”

“That’s what he said but I thought all this was done by other MOD departments.”

She laughed again. “You know how inefficient government is. Someone, somewhere, decided that we would do it as well. Seems a waste of money to me but why should I care when I have a good job.”

“Yes of course. Ahh, our dinner is here,” he said pointlessly as the waiter set their plates on the table. He watched her elegantly putting small bits of salmon in her mouth. “Are you married, Sara?”

“No, don’t be silly.”

“Attached?”

She smiled shyly. “No. Those are very personal questions, why do you want to know?”

“I’d like to keep seeing you, that’s why.” She said nothing but looked down at her food.

He asked. “Would that be a problem?” She shook her head and kept her eyes lowered. He could see a flush of colour on her cheeks that endeared her even more to him. She was becoming more beautiful to him

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by the second.

“Do you know a Graham Gardiner?”

“Who?”

“Graham Gardiner, I believe he used to work there, in your building. Do you know what happened to him?”

“That must have been before my time. I don’t recognise the name.” She raised her head and looked him in the eyes. “Jack, can I ask you something?”

He felt like diving into those deep dark pools and nearly lost his train of thought. He wondered what she would be like in bed. “Of course you can, you can ask me anything.”

“Why are you showing so much interest in our building and who works there? In your line of business I would have thought you would know most of the answers.”

Damn, this girl is beautiful, he thought as he stared back at her, and she was certainly no dummy. Moreover, she had a very direct way about her that was a little disconcerting.

“I guess you know about the bother Mr Caruthers is in?” he countered. He busied himself with cutting his steak.

“Yes, the poor man. He’s in real trouble right now. I do hope he is going to be all right.”

“Do you think he’s guilty of what they say?”

“What?” Surprise etched across her face. “No, don’t be silly, of course he isn’t. He’s a really nice

man.”

He smiled to soften his words. “Being nice doesn’t stop a person being guilty. Nice people can be crooks as well as the bad guys.”

“I suppose so, but not Mr Caruthers. I couldn’t believe it of him, he’s a gentleman.” Then she added thoughtfully. “I understand that he has hired a private investigator to help clear his name. I really hope he can help him.”

He swallowed his steak and busied himself with his plate, then looked up at her. “Yes, I know he has.”

She raised an eyebrow and looked curiously at him. “How do you know? Did Mr Caruthers tell you that?” She picked up her drink stared at him over the rim of the glass. “Jack, what is it that you really do? You’re not a military hardware salesman, are you?”

He chuckled. “No, I’m not. I’m sorry for the subterfuge but it was necessary at the time. I wouldn’t know the first thing about military sales, that stuff mystifies me.”

She stared at him, her face serious and her food forgotten. “Then what is it that you do?”

“I am an investigator, a private detective, a PI.”

Her voice rose a little. “You mean...you mean that you are the one he has hired?”

Slater grinned, enjoying the surprised look on her face. “Well I prefer to say he has engaged my expert services.”

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She became excited. Probably this was the most exciting thing to happen to her for some time. “Goodness that is so interesting. I’ve never met a private detective before. What have you found out?” She fidgeted on her seat. “Can you help him? Do you think he is innocent?”

“Whoa, Sara, slow down a bit. Let us just say I am doing my best to get at the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.”

The courtroom quote was lost on her and she nibbled at her salmon without interest. “I’ll help you if I can. Do you want to ask me some questions?”

He laughed. “I have been doing that since we have been here.”

She frowned. “Oh yes, so you have. But what happens if you find out that he did do those things that they said.”

“Who are *they*?”

“What?”

“You said all the things *they* say he did, who are they?”

She looked puzzled, her forehead creased in a frown. “Well err...I mean, Management, his work colleagues, everybody who works at P and S actually. Everyone says he must be guilty. We hear all sorts of things on reception.”

“P and S?”

“Sorry, Procurement and Supply. We call it P and S

for short.”

“So he has been convicted already has he?”

She shook her head. “Well...no, not by us girls on reception, anyway. Actually, I don’t believe that he’s guilty myself, I never did. As I said he’s such a nice man.” She had twin spots of colour high on her cheeks. “It’s just that almost everyone else seems to think he is.”

“As I said before, being nice doesn’t mean he’s innocent.”

She frowned, her cheeks flushed with twin spots of colour. Perhaps she was a little angry. “You think he’s guilty, don’t you?”

“No, Sara. I don’t think anything either way until I get to all the facts. If he’s innocent I’ll find out.” Conversation stopped while the waiter cleared the table and brought their sweets. “What’s Department Y?” Slater asked her over a mouthful of chocolate mousse.

Sara almost choked over her sweet and suddenly looked frightened. She glanced around the restaurant nervously. She lowered her voice almost to a whisper until he had to strain to hear what she was saying against the noise of the restaurant. “You are not supposed to talk about that. What if someone hears you?”

First Caruthers and now Sara seemed frightened of this elusive Department Y. “Why? What is it? It can’t be that bad.”

“I think you had better take me home.” She stood

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and put on her coat without waiting for him to help.

Mystified by her attitude he said. "Sara, what is the matter?"

She picked up her purse and waited for him to put on his own coat. "Take me home, please."

He sighed. What was it about Department Y that seemed to have everyone in a blue funk, or was it just the fear of losing their job that made people clam up? There would be other jobs around even in these uncertain times. He paid the bill.

"Something wrong, Mr Slater?" Archie stared with reproach at the untouched sweets the waiter removed from the table.

"No, Archie, nothing is wrong. Miss Carr has just remembered an important appointment and we have to go." Archie frowned, his face a picture of disbelief and he knew Archie would be wondering what could be more important than eating.

He hurried after Sara and caught up with her at his car. He opened the door for her. He shut the door when she had settled and walked round the other side and got behind the wheel. He swivelled towards her and took hold of her hand. He was pleased that she didn't pull it away.

"Sara, please tell me, what is Department Y? You must tell me if I am to help Mr Caruthers."

She looked around again as though to see if anyone could overhear what she said. *Just like Caruthers had at*

the pub, he thought.

Then she said. "Department Y is a very secret department in the basement of our building."

"Really? What do they do there?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. Nobody does. That's why it's a secret. We don't talk about it, about whom they are or what they are supposed to do. If we do, we get dismissed instantly, well, if they find out that is."

"Come on, Sara. It can't be that serious not to talk about it. Someone must know. Don't you and the other girls discuss it?"

She pulled her hand from his grasp and placed them in her lap, fingers entwined. "Of course we do, or at least we used to. We hear rumours about all kinds of things, but we daren't let anyone hear us discuss it. And yes someone must know, of course they must," she looked at her lap where her fingers were twisting together nervously. "But certainly not at my level. It's rumoured that some of the staff down there don't leave for a week at a time, perhaps longer."

"What? You're kidding."

She became defensive. "It's only what I've heard. I know that's silly, but as I said, they are only rumours."

"What are the other rumours that you and the other girls have heard?"

She shook her head emphatically, her hair swinging with the motion. "I can't tell you. Anyway, you

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wouldn't believe me if I did".

He reached for her hand again and held it. "Try me. I promise I won't laugh, cross my heart."

"Well...we..." She stopped.

"Go on," he prompted her. "No one can hear us in here."

She lowered her voice almost to a whisper. "We heard that people who ask about Department Y disappear, I mean, really disappear, you know, murdered. Look at poor Mr Carter, and there have been at least two others."

Slater was silent and she glanced at him to see if he was laughing at her, mocking her. He sensed that she felt relieved now that she had told someone, even if she knew they wouldn't believe her. He guessed she had bottled the rumours inside her since she had first heard them. She had probably dismissed them at first but constant rumours will become real if you hear them often enough.

He kept a straight face. If what she said were true, it would be an amazing story, but it would be a hell of a job digging out the truth. He kept his voice neutral. "Do you think they have they been murdered as well?"

Angrily, she snatched her hand from his. "I knew you wouldn't believe me. I just knew it. You think I am a silly woman with crazy fanciful ideas."

He had to be careful what he said. She was very sensitive about it and he didn't want to antagonise her

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further. "Sara, I can assure I don't think you are a silly woman, honest I don't, far from it. Nevertheless, I don't believe or disbelieve anything until I get to the facts, and there is no doubt that Carter was murdered. Graham Gardiner had asked some questions and he no longer works there. I don't know where he is right now. I wonder where he worked, perhaps it was Department Y."

She took a deep breath. "Can you drive around for a bit, I want to make sure we cannot be overheard?" Did this mean she was going to tell him more about Department Y he wondered? He started the engine and pulled from the kerb and into the noise of the traffic. "Where did you hear about the murders?"

"I didn't say they were murdered, it's only rumours, anyway I can't remember. It's something that has circulated between the reception staff ever since I have been there. When I started that job, the girls warned me not to discuss Department Y. They reckoned that lots of people had been murdered because of it but I didn't believe it at first."

"Do you believe it now?"

She rubbed her hands over her face. "Oh God, I don't know. It seems farfetched, a bit like a horror movie."

Slater doubted that they killed people simply because they had discussed a secret department, whoever *they* were. Never the less, Carter had certainly been

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murdered and that may have been the reason. However, the reason was more likely that the information he possessed was going to be damaging to this mysterious Department Y. "I agree with you. Did anyone go to the police about these rumours?"

"A friend did once, she was dismissed and we never saw her again."

He wondered if Lane had been involved in the investigation or was it tasked to a minor detective. They wouldn't have taken the accusation very seriously. "Did the police investigate?"

"Someone came and asked us questions but then nothing happened."

He wasn't surprised, allegations such as those Sara was telling him were usually the product of over active imaginations. The investigating officer would have soon rumbled that. Never the less, the reception girls obviously believed it. "Do you know who the police officer was?"

"No, sorry. He was quite young though."

"What's your friend's name? I can make some checks."

"Brenda Harris."

"I don't suppose you have her date of birth?"

She shook her head. "No, sorry. Do you think you can find out what happened to her?"

"I can try." He wondered how he would be able to fit it in. "When was she dismissed?"

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"It was about a year ago, sometime in November I think. I don't know the actual date."

"Hmm. How many people work down there?"

She shook her head. "I don't know," she looked out of the car window at the other vehicles as he negotiated a roundabout. He indicated left and swore at a black cab cutting inside him. He turned down a side street. "Take a guess. You must have some idea."

She shrugged her shoulders. "Really, Jack, I don't know. Honest, if I knew I would tell you. I want to help poor Mr Caruthers as much as you do."

"Okay." Slater was thoughtful as turned the car in the direction of her apartment once more. He seemed to be getting nowhere but he had to find out more about this very mysterious and secretive Department Y.

Sara went on absently as though she had just remembered something. "It's really strange, sometimes people go down there and we never see them leave. On the other hand, people leave that we never saw arrive. Perhaps they come in or out when the building is closed. It's almost as though there is another entrance or exit, but there isn't, of course, that would be silly, wouldn't it?"

Sara, there is always another way in, he thought, *and I just need to find it*. "What about their visitors, don't you have to book them in and out?"

"No I don't, visitors for the Department Y are always met in the foyer by an official from the depart-

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ment and taken directly downstairs. If the escort isn't there when the visitor arrives, we have to phone a number and someone comes for them within seconds. It is the same when they leave; someone brings them back and watches them until they leave the building. If we see them go, that is."

"How strange," Slater muttered softly as he negotiated the traffic. "Who do they ask for when they arrive?"

"We usually have their name on a list of expected visitor's and we ring down for their escort."

"Can you remember any names on the list?"

She shook her head and frowned. "No, I'm really sorry. I'm not being much help, am I?"

"Yes, you are helping me a lot. Do you think you could get a name next time a visitor arrives or when you get the list?"

She looked out of the window again. "I suppose so. The visitor's sheet is usually taken away when all the visitors have arrived."

"Okay, but you could copy a name down. Jot it down on a piece of paper."

He pulled up outside her apartment block and switched off the engine.

"And their passes," Sara added thoughtfully. "They're really strange."

He waited for her to continue but she remained silent. He prompted her. "What's strange about their

passes, Sara?"

"They are not issued by reception, not by me or any of the reception staff." "Would that be usual? You issue all the other passes don't you?"

"Yes, but we don't for visitors going to Department Y."

"But why not? Just what's going on down there?"

"I don't know but it is the way it has always been. We don't issue them from reception. I have never issued a pass for anyone going to the basement."

He frowned, trying to get a picture of the entry system. "Where do those visitors get their passes from?"

"Their escort brings a pass with them."

Slater definitely needed to see this mysterious Department Y for himself but he had no idea how he was going to achieve entry. "Sara, do they work shifts in Department Y?"

"I don't know, I don't think so," she looked out of the car windows but there was nobody in sight. "Everyone seems to go home at around eight o'clock and the building is locked, I assume they do the same from the basement as well, although I don't think I have ever seen anyone actually leave so perhaps they do work overnight. Besides, we don't really know who works down there, so we might not recognise them as being from there."

"I need to go and have a look around this Department. Can you get me in there?"

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She looked at him in astonishment and shook her head, her hair swinging enticingly, disbelief in her eyes. "You mean into Department Y?" When he didn't say anything, she added. "You must be mad. Nobody can get into that department without special authorisation. Anyway, what would happen if the rumours of murder were true? You might end up being one of their victims."

A couple walked slowly past arm in arm, the woman's head on the man's shoulder. Slater watched them turn a corner until they were gone. "I'll do my best to avoid that. Do you think you could you get me a pass?"

She frowned and little worry lines marred her features. "No, I couldn't, the passes I issue would not be for Department Y. They are only for the rest of the building. Anyway, you need to have an escort and you would not have one, would you? You'd be picked up by security as soon as you are seen without one."

His brain was going into overdrive thinking about ways to see Department Y. "I'd manage, somehow," he said softly.

"And," she went on as though she had not heard him. "The pass would be wrong and they would know who gave it to you because it would be my name in the book as the issuer. They would dismiss me instantly. And I don't want to be another statistic."

"You wouldn't need to sign the pass out so no one

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will know where it came from”

She looked serious, and frightened. “I need my job, Jack.”

“You could have a job being my secretary and investigative assistant,” he grinned half-heartedly. “Could you get hold of a pass for me and I’ll copy it and give it back. It would be quite different from the original in name and number. That way who gave it to me would remain a secret between you and me. They could pull out my fingernails and I wouldn’t tell anyone, honest.” He had a glimmer of a smile on his face.

Sara surprised him when she said that she would see what she could do. She opened the car door and got out. Slater walked her to the door of her apartment building where she punched in a code for the door lock. She looked beautiful in the soft light from the hallway and wanted to take her in his arms and kiss her lips. Instead, he leaned forward and gently kissed her cheek. Her skin smelt sweet and she was wearing a subtle perfume. Again, he forced himself to be content to kiss her cheek and not to take her in his arms and kiss her properly.

“Thank you for a very pleasant evening, Sara.” For a minute, he thought she was going to invite him in but the moment passed and she murmured goodnight and gently closed the door on him.

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Chapter 8

“Getting rid of Carter in that way was extremely clumsy of you, Figgis.” The man talking was tall and had to look down at Figgis, the man walking beside him in Hyde Park. They came to a bench, taking a handkerchief from his pocket the tall man dusted the seat and sat down. He invited Figgis to sit alongside him.

The tall man was dressed in a pin stripe suit of dark blue over which he wore a grey overcoat with a black astrakhan collar. A tie with a Guards Brigade motif knotted meticulously in a Windsor knot was positioned neatly, and perfectly central, under the collar of a snowy white shirt. He wore highly polished brown leather shoes. Although the day was overcast and threatening to rain, he was wearing wrap around sport sunglasses. A thin pencil moustache perched precariously on his upper lip and his hair was showing signs of going grey at the temples.

The other man, Figgis, was dressed in slacks and a leather windcheater and wore trainers. He was stocky with broad shoulders and had a hard pugnacious face. He could be mistaken for a boxer. He looked powerfully built and was probably a man who could take care of himself in a brawl. His broad build made him look short although he was about five foot seven inches tall. However, in spite of his toughness, he was frightened

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of the tall man. He stammered. "I'm sorry, Sir." He shuffled his feet in the thick carpet of leaves beneath the bench not knowing quite what he could say to redeem the situation. He knew his boss could be quite vicious when the need arose, as his various contracts would testify.

The two men he had hired to get rid of Carter had been hoodlums, nothing more than cheap criminals. They were low life thugs who would kill their own mother if the price was right and he now knew that his choice of men to carry out the murder of Carter had been a big mistake. He realised he should have employed more reliable assassins, if there was such a thing. It always comes down to cost cutting, budget restraints and that undermined everything. The boss always insisted on cheapness above all. He never had enough cash to carry out these operations. Perhaps he should have taken care of the job personally.

The tall man continued talking with veiled menace in his tone. "By having Carter killed so clumsily you have drawn attention to our operation. Attention we do not want or desire and certainly cannot afford. I speak not only for myself but also for the whole organisation. The share holders will be most unhappy."

"Yes sir, I understand. Perhaps if I had a larger budget..."

Sunglasses interrupted. "It's a simple matter of economics, Figgis. You had more than enough money

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to take care of Carter.”

“Yes sir. I had instructed the men to get rid of him properly. The instructions were that they should get rid of the body. But...”

Sunglasses snapped. “I do not want your excuses, Figgis. You were charged with that task and you failed to carry it out as per my instructions.” He paused and contemplated some children playing with a Frisbee for a few minutes until Figgis squirmed uncomfortably on the bench, waiting for his boss to speak again and not daring to be the first to break the silence. Then the tall man went on conversationally. “You and I, Figgis, we are very small fry here and we are both just as expendable as Carter.” Then sunglasses turned towards Figgis and stared at him. Figgis could see his own reflection in the shiny surface of the glasses, and he began to feel apprehensive under the stare. The man in the suit went on. “I can assure you, Figgis, of the two of us it will not be I that is the more expendable. Do I make myself absolutely clear?”

“Perfectly sir,” Figgis tried to sound confident, but that was something he did not feel. He wished the tall man would take off his sunglasses. He found it disturbing not being able to see his superior’s eyes and a shiver of apprehension went up his spine.

“Another thing, Figgis, Johnson said he found a man in Carter’s office. Who was he?” Sunglasses’ voice was cold.

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Another chill finger of fear spread through Figgis' body. He knew the man in sunglasses would not hesitate to do to him what he had ordered done to Carter. "I don't know who he was."

"How did he get in, who was his escort, what was he doing there, what was he looking for?"

"Johnson said he didn't have time to see the guy's pass so we don't know. I had the register checked and there were twenty-seven passes issued during that period but we don't know which pass it was. I have a man checking the reception surveillance tapes for that time period."

The man behind the sunglasses frowned. "Have each pass issue checked against the named escort and then match it against the tapes. I want a face for this man."

"But," Figgis complained. "That could take hours."

The man slammed his fist on the arm of the park bench in an unusual show of violent anger. He was normally cold and calm. "Just do it, Figgis. I want to know who that man was within twenty-four hours, is that perfectly clear?"

Figgis stiffened in fear. "Yes sir, I'll get on to it personally."

"See that you do. I will not stand for another failure."

A young couple walked past hand in hand, the man looked curiously at the pair on the bench. Sunglasses

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waited until they were out of earshot. "Make no mistake, Figgis, I want the information in twenty four hours, no more."

"Yes, Sir." Figgis wasn't sure how he was going to get that information so quickly. He wondered whether he should do a runner before the boss did away with him like all the others. But he knew that he wouldn't dare. He was sure he had a long reach and he didn't want to spend the rest of his life looking over his shoulder for his killer.

Sunglasses then spoke in a more reasonable tone, the switch in character unnerving Figgis. "Come along, Figgis, walk with me." They got up and strolled at a relaxed pace along the path under the trees. The thick carpet of leaves rustled underfoot as they walked. A squirrel raced about collecting a late meal from his cache. Sunglasses spoke suddenly, making Figgis jump nervously. "Was Carter's office sanitized correctly?"

"Yes sir, of course it was."

"You are absolutely sure that there was nothing left there that related to the group or our work?"

"Yes sir," Figgis looked worried. Had he done the job correctly? He was positive that there was nothing whatever left in Carter's office but there had been so little time before the law had descended upon it. "I did it myself. I made sure it was as clean as a whistle."

A football rolled their way from a group of youths playing on the grass. The man picked it up and threw it

to the teenager coming for it. "Thanks mate," the boy called. The man in the glasses smiled benignly at him.

"For your sake I hope it was," he watched the boys kicking the ball for a few moments. He continued talking. "Even I will be held accountable if any of this gets out. Therefore, Figgis, you had better ensure that there are no leaks. I want everything locked down so tight that nothing will be found in a million years, do you understand me?"

They continued to walk for a few minutes. In spite of the cold weather, mothers still pushed babies in their pushchairs, and toddlers run and played in the piles of leaves.

"I suggest that you get on with checking who those passes were issued to, Figgis," Sunglasses said. "Meanwhile I am going to continue my walk and make the most of this fresh air."

Fresh air? Figgis thought, *the man must be mad.* "Yes sir." He tried to keep his face as expressionless as his bosses.

Sunglasses watched him leave. *I shall have to do something about Figgis,* he thought, *he is not exactly the sharpest pin in the box, in fact, of late, the point has become rather blunted.* He realised his strong right hand man was rapidly becoming a liability, an incompetent encumbrance. He wondered how he had come to recruit him in the first place.

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Chapter 9

Slater drove to the late Carter's address in Shepherds Bush. It was a middle class area of impressive Victorian houses along a road shaded by tall beach trees. The late Carter's house was sandwiched cheek by jowl with similar properties in a long row. They were narrow and tall with small gardens in front and long flights of concrete steps to the front doors. Basement windows stood either side of the steps. The paintwork looked bright and fresh and the house appeared well kept. The garden was neat and well cared for.

He hoped Carter's sister would be in as with some misgivings, he knocked on the impressive front door. He could hear footstep approaching. The door opened and a tall, willowy woman stood there. She was, with her high heels, almost as tall as him. She wore a button through cotton dress to mid calf length that clung around her hips and emphasised her slim figure. She had a long cardigan slung about her shoulders, the sleeves carelessly knotted casually over her breasts. Light brown hair fell about a slim face in gentle waves that reached behind her almost to her waist. "Yes, can I help you?" She asked in a well-modulated and educated voice.

She was about forty-five years old, had neat features and a slim straight nose. Her smooth skin was just

starting to show the signs of age if he cared to look closely. He thought she would have been a real beauty in her younger day with many a suitor clamouring for her favours. She was still a handsome woman even if age was taking its toll. She was ageing gracefully. Her piercing blue eyes stared into his with candour waiting for his answer.

“Miss Carter?”

“It’s Wallace actually, *Mrs* Wallace.” She looked him up and down as though trying to decide if he was a threat to her. “Carter is my maiden name.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t know.” He had not thought to ask Caruthers if she was married.

“What can I do for you...Mr?”

“Slater, Jack Slater.” He gave her his business card.

She read it carefully and put it in the pocket of her dress. “Goodness. A private investigator. What would a private investigator want with me?”

He hesitated and then said. “I’m investigating the murder of your brother, James.”

A dark cloud crossed her face and she frowned, fine wrinkles marring her forehead. “The police are already investigating that, Mr Slater. I’m sure they can manage without a private investigator’s help.”

“Yes, I know the police are dealing with it.”

“Are you working with the Police?”

He shook his head with a wry smile. Damn she was direct. “No. They wouldn’t stoop to working with a PI.”

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He looked up and down the street. "May I come in for a few minutes? It will be more private than standing on the steps. I'd like to ask you about James if it won't be too painful for you."

She made up her mind and stood aside to let him into the porch. She closed the door behind him. Leading him along a short passage, she turned into a comfortably furnished room with deeply buttoned dark brown leather club chairs and a long sofa. "Please sit down, Mr Slater." He did so. "Now, tell me what this is all about?"

"I'm working on behalf of Mr Caruthers."

"Yes?"

"He works where your brother worked." She said nothing and her expression didn't change. She had obviously not heard of Caruthers or the impending case against him. "You've not heard the name?"

She shook her head. "No, I haven't. Should I have done?"

"James never mentioned it to you?"

"No, he didn't." She frowned. "How well did you know James?"

"I didn't know him at all, I'd never met him. He made an appointment to see me on the night he was killed." Another cloud briefly showed in her eyes. "But we never actually met."

"I see."

He wondered if she did. "He said he had some in-

formation for me regarding my case but he didn't tell me what it was."

"And why do you think I can help you, Mr Slater?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "I was hoping he might have said something to you or your husband, perhaps he would know?"

She smiled, a little sadly, he thought. "I doubt that my husband would know anything." Slater raised his eyebrows and she went on. "You see, Brian and I have been divorced for a number of years and he now lives in New Zealand with wife number two."

Damn, another fact he had failed to get before calling on her. "Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't know."

"How could you?" Her face brightened reinforcing his view of her ageless beauty. "I'm sorry; it's very remiss of me. Would you like a cup of tea?"

He nodded. "Please. One sugar and a little milk." She left to make the tea. She gave him the impression that she was longing for company or at least a shoulder to cry on or someone to talk to. After all her brother was not yet buried and now she was on her own, or perhaps she had a male friend in the wings. A woman with her looks would have no trouble getting a friend, male or otherwise.

He looked about the room. Apart from the bulky leather furniture there was a baby grand piano and a roll top bureau with an expensive looking vase on the top. An antique display unit, possible Sheraton, stood on one

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wall and had several pictures in frames on the shelves along with fine porcelain ornaments. It was obvious that she wasn't short of money and he wondered if Carter was responsible for the wealth or had the ex husband had it all.

He picked up a picture of a middle-aged man and wondered if it was her brother. He had a round face and his hair was going thin across the scalp. He didn't see any resemblance to the sister.

She returned with a tray and on it were a teapot, milk, sugar and cups. A plate of biscuits and scones looked inviting. She started to pour.

Slater pointed to the picture. "Is this your brother, Mrs Wallace?"

She glanced up. "Yes, that's him." She handed him his tea and picked up the picture. Her eyes moistened as she looked at it. "He's was the only family I had left. We looked out for each other all the time." She drew a deep breath. "Now...now he's...he's gone."

"I'm really sorry I've got to ask you these questions at what must be a very difficult time for you. Perhaps you would like me to come back later."

She stiffened her resolve, showing her upper class upbringing. "That's all right, Mr Slater. Life must go on. Now is as good a time as any other I can assure you."

He sipped his tea. "Do you play the piano, Mrs Wallace?"

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She smiled a little sadly. "Please, call me Abigail." She smiled again with more animation. "Yes, I was once a concert pianist, quite a good one, to all accounts." She held up her hands and studied them carefully. "But these don't work fast enough for concerts anymore."

"I don't seem to be able to say the right things, do I, Abigail?"

"It's not your fault, Mr Slater. I suspect you are a little out of your depth."

"It's Jack," he told her. "And yes, I am floundering a bit. I have nothing but questions and no answers yet. It would help if I knew what information your brother had for me."

"Well, Jack, I'm not sure I can help you. James never told me exactly what he did."

"So he didn't talk about his work at all? About what he did for the government?"

"No, but I gather he was of some importance. He had a good job, I believe."

He did not intend to take away her memories of what her brother was or what he did. "What about his work colleagues. Did he have any special friends from work?"

"Not as far as I know. He didn't mix a great deal outside his office. As far as I know, he only had one real friend and that was Ian Bronson. Of course, he had work colleagues but I never met any of them. I don't

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know of any he may have seen socially.”

“Do you have an address for Mr Bronson?”

“No, I’m sorry, I don’t.”

“What about his place of work, Bronson’s that is.”

Again, she shook her head. “Sorry, but I understand he was something big in the city. Perhaps he worked for a bank or a financial institution. I’m not being much help am I?”

Well, the city covered a wide field, Slater thought. He was reluctant to impose upon her good nature but he needed to see Carter’s papers. “I know it’s an imposition but I was wondering if...”

Abigail interrupted. “You want to see James’s things.”

Damn she was a smart woman, he thought. “Yes, if that would be all right. You know, you don’t have to show me anything. You don’t even have to talk to me at all if you don’t want to.”

She stood, straightening her dress over her bottom. “Of course, Mr Slater, I understand and I don’t mind, really I don’t. Please wait here for a few moments.” She returned shortly with a briefcase and a small box file. “There you are, Mr Slater, Jack. That’s the only papers that he left here. He lived a simple life.”

“Thanks, do you mind if I have a quick look?” He said eager to examine the life of the dead Carter.

“Of course, I’d prefer it if you did.” He opened the box. It held receipts waiting checking against his

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account. There were some chequebook stubs made out to various businesses, payment for groceries or DIY materials. A huge payment for a baby grand piano almost made him choke on his biscuit. There was nothing else of interest in the box. Abigail sat patiently watching him with her legs pressed primly together and her hands on her knees.

He turned his attention to the briefcase. There was an account book, the figures very neatly and precisely entered, an accounting to income and expenditure. James Carter certainly lived well within his means. There was a mobile phone in the pocket. He lifted it out. "May I?"

She nodded. "Please do."

He checked the phone address book. There was his work numbers, the local take away, two pubs, his home, and there he was, Ian Bronson along with two other names. He made a note of the numbers. The phone also listed his address but not that of the two other names. He copied the details into his notebook.

He held up the phone. "Do you know who these are? Harry Harmon and Derek Butterworth?"

"The names don't sound familiar." She stood and leant into him so she could read the small screen. He could smell a delicate perfume on her skin and her arm brushed his, warm and smooth. He was reluctant to pull away and perhaps embarrass her so he stayed still. Eventually, she sat back in her chair and her face looked

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flushed. "I don't recognise the numbers either. Perhaps they are work colleagues."

"Yes, perhaps they are." He made a mental note to ask Sara if they worked at Curzon Place

"Was it any help, Jack?"

"Of course," he said. "It's a great help. Tell me, did he ever mention Department Y? Or perhaps the Alpha Project?"

Her brow wrinkled as she thought. "No...no, I don't think so."

He knew that the police would have routinely visited her but he had to ask. "Have the police been to see you?"

"Yes of course, they...they came to tell me about James's..." she hesitated as though frightened to voice the word, then said softly. "...murder." Her voice faded almost to a whisper. A tear glistened at the corner of her eye as her iron control started to crumble.

Slater stood up, sorry to have invaded her grief. "I'm really sorry, Abigail. I'd better go, I'll let myself out."

She looked up, alarm crossing her face. "No, please don't go...not yet...please."

He sat again. The poor woman had just lost the last member of her family and really didn't want to be on her own and he was cruelly reminding her of the tragedy with his questions. "Well perhaps another cup of tea would be really nice."

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She quickly got up, her face brightening. "I'll put the kettle on."

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Chapter 10

When Slater got back to his office, his phone was ringing. He picked up the receiver. "Slater."

It was Sara. "Jack? Can you meet me for lunch?"

Slater was delighted. "What about the Kings Arms?" He was looking forward to seeing her again. She had made quite an impression on him and that was something that had not happened to him for some time. He hoped he had had a similar impact on her.

"No," she hesitated. "No, not there. I know a nice little place in Knightsbridge called The Isola Bar, can you meet me there at one o'clock."

"Yes, I know it." He wondered what was wrong with the Kings Arms. He thought it was a nice pub and had great food. "One o'clock then."

After leaving Abigail Carter, he had made the rounds of the local pubs hoping to find out who Dimitri Sokolov was but he seemed to be unknown by all he spoke to. The Sokolov lead appeared to be at a dead end until he could ask some of his other contacts about him. He went to New Scotland Yard and asked to see DCI Lane.

"Come to confess, Slater," Sgt Hobbs sneered, keeping up the hard man image in front of the rookies at the station.

"Yes," Slater was contrite. "I confess that I found

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you pretty obnoxious even for a cop.” Hobbs’s face turned red and behind him, one of his police colleagues, turned away smothering a chuckle behind his hand. “Can I see DCI lane?” Slater said before Hobbs exploded.

Angry at having the tables turned on him, Hobbs led him to Lane’s office. He knocked and opened it at Lane’s invitation. “Slater to see you, Sir.”

“Really? Then you had better show him in Sgt.” Hobbs stood aside to let Slater into Lane’s office.

Lane frowned. “What is it, Mr Slater?” He had a mass of papers on his desk and a pen in his hand.

“Another name has cropped up during my investigation,” Slater said.

“And...?”

He wanted the two-way information to work for him. “Dimitri Sokolov, he sounds like a Russian, have you heard of him?”

“The name doesn’t ring any bells,” Lane said. “What significance has this, Sokolov?”

“I don’t know but I found the name on a piece of paper in Carter’s office.”

“Hmm, very interesting. How did you find that when we hadn’t?”

Slater grinned. “I have my methods, Lane.”

Lane called out for Hobbs. “Yes sir,” he said poking his head into the office.

“Sgt, check the records for a Dimitri Sokolov, and

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then check with the Russian embassy to see if they have any knowledge of this man.”

Hobbs withdrew and Lane leant back in his chair looked at Slater across his desk. “What were you doing in Mr Carter’s office, Mr Slater?”

Slater grinned again. “I was trying to find out what information Carter had had for me. He must have recorded it somewhere and I hoped it was there. It may have been the reason he was killed.”

“And did you find out what that information was?”

“No,” he said truthfully. “The office had been pretty thoroughly sanitized, except for a piece of paper with that name on it.”

“Hmm, that's interesting.” Lane looked thoughtful. “You would, of course, tell me if you had found anything else, wouldn’t you, Mr Slater?”

“Yes, of course, I told you about Sokolov, didn’t I?” He hesitated. “Do you know what they do in the basement in Curzon Place?”

“The basement? You have lost me, Mr Slater.”

“Yes, the basement in that MOD building, in Curzon Place. They have something going on in the basement and I cannot find out what they do there, it seems to be something hush, hush. Do you know what they do Chief Inspector?”

“Mr Slater,” Lane sighed resignedly. “Perhaps you cannot find out because they don’t want you to know.”

“But do you know what they do.”

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Lane stared directly at him. "No."

"You would of course tell me if you knew, wouldn't you, Chief Inspector?" Slater mimicked him.

"Yes, of course," Lane never batted an eye.

"Curzon Place seems a bit of the normal track for MOD. I wonder why it's in that building. Do you know?"

"Mr Slater, you will need to take that up with the MOD although I doubt that they will tell you."

Hobbs stuck his head round the door. "Nothing known in CRO on a Dimitri Sokolov, Sir," he told Lane. "The Russian embassy, naturally, deny he's from there so that means nothing."

"Thank you, Sgt, that'll be all," he dismissed Hobbs and Slater got the distinct impression that the DCI was not happy that Hobbs had revealed his search results in front of him.

"Was there anything else, Mr Slater?" Lane picked up his pen and pointed to the papers heaped on his desk, indicating that he had given him enough of his time. "I am rather busy as you can see."

"Yes, paperwork bogs us all down." He hesitated and then said. "There is one more thing, have you heard of Department Y?"

Lane frowned and put his pen down again. "Department Y? No. What is it?"

"All I can find out is that it is a department within the basement at Curzon Place. They do some secret

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stuff down there, apparently, but I can't find out what."

Lane grinned. "Mr Slater, perhaps you can't find out because it is a secret."

"Something funny is going on there. There's a rumour circulating with the reception staff that anyone who asks too many questions about Department Y is murdered. I wondered if that has been investigated."

Lane laughed. "Mr Slater, if we investigated every rumour passed to us we would have no time left to catch criminals. Anything else?"

Slater went on. "Apparently, a receptionist did report her fears to the police and she was dismissed and never seen again. A police constable did go and ask questions but nothing came of it."

Lane looked thoughtful. "When was this?"

"I don't know but I can find out. What about a Graham Gardiner? He was sacked for asking questions and nobody has seen him since either."

Lane picked up his pen and searched for a pad. "Right, the names are...?"

"Graham Gardiner."

"Address, date of birth?"

"I don't know."

Lane put his pen down again. "How can I check on a person without details?"

"That's all I got at the moment. You could check to see if a Graham Gardiner was a murder victim. And the woman Brenda Harris, she asked questions and disap-

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peared. This was about a year ago.”

“Don't tell me, you don't have her date of birth either.”

“No, sorry.”

Lane sighed. “I'll check the records, Slater. Is there anything else?”

He decided to keep the Alpha Project to himself for the time being. “No, that's all I wanted to know. Thanks for the information.”

Slater left the police station and went to the Isola Bar to meet Sara. He arrived a few minutes late. He spotted her sitting at a table at the rear of the room. He gave her a familiar kiss on the cheek and was pleased that she presented her cheek for it. Her skin was cool under his lips. She was still wearing her coat buttoned to the neck although it was warm in the bar.

“Would you like something to drink?” He asked her. “What about some lunch.”

“I don't have time for lunch so I think I'll just have a coffee, please,” she glanced at the drinks menu. “A Cappuccino will be lovely. Thank you.”

Slater ordered two coffees at the bar, paid for them and returned to the table.

“Jack,” she was hesitant and looked a little worried. “Do you really want to get into the basement?”

“Yes, you know I do. It might help my investigation and help Mr Caruthers.”

She reached into her bag and withdrew an enve-

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lope. "Here," she held it underneath the table and thrust it into his hand as though it might contaminate her. "It's what you asked me to get for you. I hope it helps"

He went to open the envelope but she put her hand on it glancing around to see if anyone was watching. "Please, don't look at it here, if anyone saw it I would be in real trouble." Without a word, he slid the envelope into his pocket. Sara went on. "I must have it back by five o'clock tonight at the very latest. That's when I go off duty."

That didn't give him much time to copy it but he told her. "Alright, I'll have it back to you by then. Thank you, Sara."

Sara looked troubled. "Please make sure that you do or I am dead, up the proverbial creek without a paddle, out of a job, finished."

How many ways could she say it? "Then are you sure you want to do this? I can find another way in if it will cause you too much trouble..."

"Just do it, Jack, if it's going to help poor Mr Caruthers." She leant closer and whispered. "I find it quite exciting to help but please, just don't let me get caught." She stood and picked up her things. "Remember it must be back with me before five o'clock." She walked out without a backward glance, leaving her untouched cappuccino on the table.

"It will be, Sara," he called after her but he didn't think she heard him.

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Slater walked out of the Isola bar and across Knightsbridge and into Hyde Park. He pulled out his mobile and dialled a number he hadn't used for some time. It rang several times. "Hello," a throaty voice breathed in his ear.

"Dave?"

"Yeah," Dave Adams said. "Who's this?"

"It's Jack, Jack Slater."

The voice brightened in recognition. "Jack boy, how are you doing then?"

"I am great, Dave," he hated calling on his ex-colleague for a big favour but it was almost an emergency. "Dave, I need an urgent job. Can I ask you for a favour?"

Dave chuckled. "Your jobs always were urgent as I remember, Jack. I thought you had left the service."

"I have, I took demob three years ago. I'm now working as a private investigator. I'm on a big case right now."

"That's great." Dave sounded as though he meant it. "What do you want doing this time then?"

"I need a pass copying. Can do?"

"It'll be a breeze; you of all people know that. When do you need it by?"

"The original must be back in my sources hands by 1700 tonight."

Adams laughed down the phone in obvious delight. "Ha, ha. You always were the joker. You haven't

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changed one bit then.” Slater did not respond and his silence made Adams realise that he was quite serious.

Slater had known Dave Adams from his Northern Island days. He had been the regiment’s prize forger and the undercover SAS troops kept him busy creating passes and ID cards for their excursions into the republic.

“You really mean it, don’t you, Jack?” he said at last.

“Yes, I promise you, Dave, it’s really urgent.”

“It’ll cost you. You know that don’t you?”

“Of course I do and it’ll be worth it if you can deliver on time.”

He was indignant. “You know I’ll deliver if I say I will. Get the original to me straight away and let me take a look at it.”

Adams had a one-room apartment a short distance away and a cab got Slater there in record time.

Dave Adams was a tall man with a skinny body on long spindly legs and a long thin face that always looked mournful. Bushy eyebrows above piercing blue eyes stared at the pass, turning it over in his bony hands as he studied it carefully. “It’ll be difficult; it has a lot of security features and watermarks embedded in it.”

“I don’t need it to get through a close examination. I’m hoping it will be only a cursory glance, if it’s seen at all, that is.” Slater didn’t think anyone would examine it in any detail. “It just needs to look convincing

from a distance—I hope.”

“Ok, can do.” Dave turned the pass over and studied the name. Brian Turner was the name on the pass and Slater wondered if that was Sara’s boyfriend although she had said she was unattached. “What name do you want on it, this one, as is?”

“No, how about, err...Adam Brown? Just make up a number to go with it.” It didn’t really matter what name was on the pass. Adam Brown seemed as good a name as any.

“Ok. Give me two hours. Give me your mobile number and I’ll call you when it’s ready.”

“Thanks Dave. I knew I could rely on you” He gave Adams his mobile number.

He wandered along the pavement towards Hyde Park assembling his thoughts. He had too many unanswered questions and the list was getting longer by the day. Who had killed Carter and why? Was it because he had information for him? How did Sara manage to get the pass when she had said she did not issue them? Why did nobody know about The Alpha Project? What *was* The Alpha Project? What did they do in the basement? What was Department Y? Was Department Y also in the basement? Perhaps Department Y and the Basement were one and the same. Was Caruthers as innocent as he wanted people to believe? Unanswered questions were piling up and he still had none of the answers.

His phone rang. It was Dave Adams telling him the

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pass was ready. He realised that he had walked a long way and had to get a taxi back to pick up the pass. It was an almost perfect copy of the original.

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Chapter 11

Slater was back at the reception long before Sara's 1700 deadline. A stocky man stood behind the desk looking through the visitor's book. Sara saw Slater approaching and gave him a minute shake of her head. Something was wrong and he could not just turn and leave for that would look suspicious. He had already arrived at the counter. The man glanced up curiously and stared at him.

"Can I help you, sir?" Sara asked.

"Yes, I hope so," Slater said. "I am looking for the Royal College of Defence Studies. Do you know where it is?"

"Yes, sir. The RCDS is at Seaford House, Belgrave Square."

The man was making notes from the visitors' book, his head down and engrossed in his work. Sara mouthed for him to phone her so he gave a nod.

"So that's Seaford House, Belgrave Square," he repeated. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

Slater turned on his heel and walked from the building, resisting the urge to glance behind him to see what was happening.

"Who was that, Miss Carr?" he heard the man say with a harsh east end accent, as he went through the exit

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door.

“Just someone asking for directions, Mr Figgis.” Slater thought she sounded a little frightened.

He waited a further thirty minutes, walked past the door, and saw that the reception was clear. Crossing to the desk, he arrived just as the lift doors opened and a tall man walked out, Slater grabbed Sara’s hand, raised it to his lips for a kiss, and at the same time neatly pressed the original pass in her palm. “Dinner tonight?” he said releasing her hand. He had just made Sara’s deadline for returning the pass and she deftly slid the pass under the counter out of sight. “Pick you up at eight?” he smiled.

“Can you make personal arrangements on your own time, please, Miss Carr?” The tall man from the lift said coldly as he deposited a small package on her desk.

Her face reddened and she seemed nervous. “Yes, sir, sorry.”

“Mr Evans from the ministry will be coming in to collect that, please see that he gets it. Just check his ID before you release it to him.”

“Very well, Mr Smith. I go off duty at 5:30 sir. What do you want me to do with it if he has not collected it?”

“He will arrive before you go off duty Miss Carr.” Smith dismissed her and turned his head in Slater’s direction and his eyes stared directly into his as though he was committing the facial details to memory. “Have

we met?" His voice was cold, Slater thought, and rather chilling. Evidently, he was not a man to tangle with. He went on. "Your face seems familiar to me."

Slater shook his head, noting the man's Windsor knotted tie and pencil slim moustache. "No, I don't think we've met. I'm sure I would have remembered you if we had."

"Then who are you?" He asked directly as though he was used to people jumping when he spoke. Well, Slater had met a few like him in the army and one more didn't faze him.

"I'm Brian Forbes, Sara's, Miss Carr's, finance," Slater plucked a name out of his head. "And who are you?"

"My name is Smith." It sounded though he expected everyone to know it, that it had some importance. Without taking his eyes from Slater's, he said. "I did not know you were engaged, Miss Carr, congratulations. And congratulations also to you Mr...err...Forbes...was it?"

"Yes," Slater smiled disarmingly. "Brian Forbes, that's Forbes with an S." Somehow, he had a feeling that Mr Smith knew exactly who he was. It was perhaps a mistake to have given him a false name so flippantly. He had a strong feeling that he was going to get to know this Mr Smith a great deal better in the future. He also noticed that the knot on Smith's Guards tie was precisely central in the vee of Smith's collar. He hated

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that ex officer precision. It reminded him of his commanding officer in NI who was a demon for precision where everything had to be correct and meticulous.

Slater turned to go. "Pick you up at eight then, Sara."

"Yes," Her voice was quiet and nervous. He wondered what it was about this man that disturbed her so. Slater didn't know what function Smith had. "Bye, darling," he said and turned to Smith. "Nice meeting you, Mr...er...Smith was it? Goodbye." It was childish but he was satisfied when Smith's face grew stony cold. He turned and left but he could feel Smith's eyes boring into his back. *If they were daggers*, he thought, *I would be dead by now*. He resisted the urge to turn round until he had passed through the door. Then turned and waved to Sara who gave a timid wave in return. Smith was still staring coldly after him.

* * * *

"The man in Carter's office was Jack Slater, a private investigator, Sir," Figgis said to Mr Smith, the man in the pin stripe suit, as he handed over a photograph of Slater. Once more, they were walking in Hyde Park to avoid anyone eavesdropping on their conversation.

"That's very interesting," Smith said softly, almost to himself. "Mr Slater and I have already met. He told me that his name was Brian Forbes."

"Really, Sir?" Figgis was worried. How did Smith keep getting information before he did? "How strange."

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“Yes, Slater/Forbes, whatever his name is, is apparently well acquainted with Miss Carr on reception. Now I find that coincidence a little too much to be a mere happenstance and as you are aware, Figgis, I do not believe in coincidences.”

Figgis swallowed nervously. “Yes, sir, of course.”

“What was this private detective doing in Carters office, Figgis?”

“It appears that he is working for Caruthers, Sir, it’s possible that he’s trying to find out why Carter was killed, perhaps he was trying to find out what information Carter had,” Figgis said with some misgiving realising, even as he said it, that he’d got it wrong again.

“It appears, perhaps and it is possible? Don’t you *know*, Figgis?” Smith had a cold chill in his voice. “I suggest that you make sure you are in possession of all your facts before you call me and ask for a meeting.”

Figgis swallowed again and felt intimidated by the direct stare of Smith. Damn it, this whole business was worsening by the minute. First, he had botched getting rid of Carter whose body should have been permanently disposed off and never seen again but had been discovered and was now the subject of a police investigation. Then this damn investigator, Slater, had wandered about Carters office, probably looking for information relating to Caruthers. He fervently hoped his hired thugs had got rid of Carter before he could blab to the private eye. It

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was bad enough that the police detectives had been there for two whole days probing about looking for god knows what. He had barely had time to remove any incriminating material from the office before they had descended on it.

“I thought that you would have wanted to be informed straight away, Sir.” Figgis’ voice cracked under the strain.

“I do, Figgis,” Smith replied with a stare. “I do. But not when you are only in possession of half the required information.” Smith stared at Figgis for a few seconds longer. “I suggest that you get on with finding out precisely whom this Slater is. I want his history from birth to now. Find for whom he is working for and exactly what he was doing in Carters office and I don’t care how you do it.”

“Yes, Sir,” replied the unfortunate Figgis, squirming under the other’s stare.

“And, Figgis,” he added, tapping the photograph with his finger. “This man claims to be engaged to Miss Carr on reception.”

Damn, thought Figgis wretchedly, how did Smith obtain that information when intensive probing by himself and his team hadn’t been able to? He tried not to let his jaw hang open in surprise. “Perhaps they are both the same man...” he suggested weakly, his voice fading away under the hard stare from Smith.

“They *are* one and the same, Figgis.” The chill in

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Smith's voice going down a few degrees until it was positively icy. "I want to know who, what and why this man is posing as two different people. I also want to know what relationship he has with Miss Carr. I suggest you interview her without delay."

"Yes, Sir," muttered Figgis wretchedly.

"And make no more mistakes, Figgis, I will not tolerate any further incompetence and nor will the people at the top."

* * * *

Slater hid behind a tree and studied the two men through a pair of powerful binoculars. He wished he could lip read. He wanted to get closer so that he might hear what they were saying but that would be impossible without them spotting him. They had selected their meeting place with great care for there was nothing but open space around them preventing an eavesdropper from getting remotely within earshot. *Oh for a parabolic microphone*, he thought wistfully.

He had waited outside the MOD building until he had seen Smith leave, and had followed him at a safe distance to Hyde Park. Within minutes, he had seen him meet the man who had been looking through the reception visitor's book the first time he tried to return the pass to Sara. Figgis or Higgins, something like that he had heard Sara call him. Slater's curiosity had been

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aroused when the second man, Smith, had given him that cold stare when he had been talking to Sara. The feeling in his gut that he was going to see Smith again was a compelling enough reason to follow him and find out more about him. The man Smith was talking too seemed nervous as though he was also frightened of him. They ended their conversation and split up. For a moment, Slater was undecided who to follow, in the end he chose Smith. He was disappointed for the man simply returned to the building in Curzon Place. Then a few moments later, surprise, surprise, along came the second man who also entered the building. Slater loitered near the door and saw him enter the lift. Strange, why would two people who work in the same building have an apparent meeting in a park? Surely, they had an office each. In addition, why would they return to the building separately, if they were colleagues, why did they not return together. *Curioser and curioser, as Alice in Wonderland had said*, he thought.

Reception was empty of visitors and he quickly crossed to the reception. "Sara, who was that man who just entered and went to the lift?"

"What...Oh, that was Mr Figgis," she was mystified. "Jack, what's going on?"

Figgis was his name, he had heard correctly. "I'll tell you later. Are we still on for dinner tonight?"

"Oh, were you serious? I thought it was just a cover up because Mr Smith was here."

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“It was both. Shall I pick you up?”

“Alright,” she muttered.

Don’t be too enthusiastic, Sara, he thought while wondering if she really wanted to go to dinner with him. Perhaps she had something else to attend to. “Pick you up at eight then. Just casual.”

“Yes, alright.”

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Chapter 12

The phone on the reception desk rang and Sara picked it up. "Reception, Sara Carr speaking, how can I help you?"

"Mr Figgis here Miss Carr. Come up to my office immediately."

Her heart sank. For Mr Figgis to summon her to his fourth floor office meant trouble, big trouble. Had he found out about the pass she had given to Jack? If he had, her job was gone. "Yes, sir. Just as soon as my relief arrives."

"I'm sending someone to relieve you. I want you here right away." He hung up without another word. She felt her stomach ache in worry and felt sick.

A few minutes later one of Figgis's staff got out of the lift. He was another of her nightmares, a man called Brestilano. He was a nasty little Italian man who always tried to pinch her bottom if he was near enough to her, she had to keep out of his way. His eyes would stare openly at her breasts and he would leer at her and make suggestive innuendos.

True to form, he leered at her this time. "Ciao my pretty bed companion." He cornered her behind the counter. "Mr Figgis wants to see you in a hurry. I think you might be in trouble my little fuck buddy." His hands stroked across her breast and she slapped his

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hand away fiercely. "Get your hands off me, Brestilano."

He leered again. "It's Mr Brestilano to you sweetheart."

A wave of bravado swept through her. She leant toward him like a conspirator and whispered in his ear. "Get your fucking hands off me, *Mr* Brestilano. If you touch me one more time I'll take a knife to your fucking balls."

The leer left his face in a rush. "You wouldn't dare."

She smiled sweetly, but her body trembled inside. "Just try me." She felt her face flush with the words that had burst unbidden from her mouth. However, it did have the desired effect because for once Brestilano was speechless. She wagged her fingers, "Ciao, I have to go," she said. *Wow, I enjoyed that*, she thought. Although she did wonder how safe her job was now she had stood up to Brestilano. How much influence did he have with Mr Figgis? She shivered at the thought of his vile hands on her breasts and she trembled as she pressed the button for the fourth floor. Perhaps in a few minutes, it wouldn't matter any longer and her worries returned.

She walked along the corridor until she came to the door marked *Harold Figgis Esq.* *Esq.* *That was a laugh*, she thought, *who did he think he was?* Timidly, she knocked on the door.

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His harsh voice called. "Come in."

She opened the door and Figgis turned on the charm. "Ahh Miss Carr, thank you for coming so quickly. Please sit down."

His bonhomie didn't fool her. Everyone knew Figgis was nastiest when he appeared the friendliest. "You wanted to see me, Mr Figgis?" Her throat had all but clogged up in her nervousness and her mouth was dry, lips sticking to her teeth.

"Yes, my dear. Mr Smith and I would like to congratulate you on your engagement to Mr...err...what is his name?"

What did he want? He must know already, surely Mr Smith had told him. What was the name Jack had used? She had to get it right. Oh yes, that was it, he'd said Brian Forbes. "Didn't Mr Smith tell you Mr Figgis?"

Briefly, his eyes turned hard but then flicked back to his friendly persona. "Yes of course he did but I have forgotten. Forbes or something, isn't it?"

"Yes, it's Brian Forbes."

"Oh yes, now I remember. Tell me, how did you two meet?"

Oh God, she wondered what Jack would say—she didn't know. Well, she had to say something for he was waiting for an answer. "I...err...we met in a bar. He bought me a drink."

"And when was this?"

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When was it supposed to be? Damn it, what did Mr Figgis want? Would two months be enough to end up engaged? In the end, she decided on three months. "Three months ago, thereabouts, Mr Figgis. I really can't remember for sure."

Figgis smiled his sickly smile and she felt nauseated. "What bar was it, Miss Carr."

"The Isola Bar," she replied quickly, perhaps a little too quickly.

He smiled again. "What does he do?"

Sara dared to ask. "Why are you asking all these questions, Mr Figgis?"

His voice went cold, more like the Figgis she knew. "Just answer my questions, Miss Carr."

What was on that business card Jack had given her? It was something to do with the military. Then she remembered, it had said he was a sales representative for a military hardware company. "I think he is a salesman."

Figgis smiled again. "And just what does he sell?"

God, would these questions never end. She wondered when he would get to the point of her interrogation, for interrogation is what it was, of that she was in no doubt. "He said it was something to do with military supplies but he couldn't tell me what."

"Very well, Miss Carr." He paused for a long time until she began to fidget on the chair. Then he said suddenly. "Tell me, what do you know of a man called

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Jack Slater?”

Sara’s heart started beating fiercely in her breast and her stomach twisted into a knot of fear. Did Figgis know who Jack really was? Did he know that he had asked her to get a pass? Worse still, did he know she had actually got a pass for him?

“Well, Miss Carr, I’m waiting for your answer.”

Sara hoped he wouldn’t see her heart beating so rapidly under her uniform blouse. She was not very good at telling lies but said, “What was that name you said, Mr Figgis?”

“Slater, Jack Slater. He’s an investigator.”

“Golly,” she said in a girlish way, stalling to let her brain get working. “Is he a policeman?” She could see Figgis was becoming frustrated with her answers. She kept her face as blank as possible.

Figgis sighed. He didn’t think Carr knew that Slater and Forbes was one and the same person. “No Miss Carr, he is a private investigator. Have you heard the name?”

She frowned. “No...no, I don’t think so. Should I have done?”

Figgis changed tack. “Have you set a date for your marriage yet?”

She giggled and looked coy. “No, don’t be silly, it’s far too soon to think of marriage. We are only just engaged.”

She could see anger seething in the back of his eyes

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and thought that she may have over stepped the mark.

His voice was silky smooth when he said. "Please be sure to tell us when you do."

"Yes, of course I will, Mr Figgis. Why do you want to know?"

"So we can organise a collection for a wedding present." He said smoothly. She felt revulsion at his slimy expression. "Thank you, Miss Carr. You may go back to your duties. Please ask Mr Brestilano to see me here."

That will be my pleasure, she thought. "Certainly, Mr Figgis."

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Chapter 13

Dead on eight, Slater rang the buzzer to Sara's apartment. The door intercom buzzed and she asked who it was and he told her. The door lock clicked open. "Come on up, Jack, first floor, apartment four." He ran lightly up the stairs and tapped on her door and she answered it wearing jeans and a sweatshirt.

"Hello, Jack, come in."

He looked her up and down. "I said casual but didn't mean this casual," he joked with a laugh.

She frowned and shrugged. "Do you mind if we don't go out to eat, I really don't feel like it? I can cook something for us here."

Nothing would suit him better for he wanted to speak with her privately and this would be just right. "Fine, if that's what you want to do."

"Would you like something to drink?"

"A whisky would be nice, if you have some."

She pointed to a small table with some bottles and glasses on it. "Help yourself. There's a bottle over there, on the table. I'm busy in the kitchen."

There was an unopened bottle of Islay Malt on the table. Had she got that for him? He poured a generous measure into a cut glass tumbler. An insulated bucket contained some ice. "Shall I pour you one?"

"Please, with some ginger ale, and some ice."

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He made the drink and took it to her in the small kitchen.

“Thank you. Please sit down.” She began to busy herself with pans.

He wandered back into the lounge and looked about her flat. It was small but comfortable, clean and tidy. A small sofa was along one wall and a flat screen television standing on a consol nearby. A large bookcase full of books stood along another wall. He wandered over and looked at some of the titles. There were classics including Dickens, Henry James, Jules Verne and H G Wells, romances by Barbara Bradford, thrillers by authors such as Dick Francis and Jon Cleary. There were adventures, both novels and factual, Agatha Christie mysteries and several biographies. She evidently had a wide variety of tastes in her reading.

A Bay window looked out onto communal gardens at the rear of the building and heavy drapes hung ready to shut out the night. A flurry of rain spattered the windows ensuring everyone was aware that winter was fast approaching.

A small dining table stood in the window bay with four chairs placed strategically around it. Nearby was a display unit with glass-fronted top, doors and drawers in the bottom. There were some pieces of porcelain highlighted by soft lights. A door led to the kitchen where she was working and another door to the bathroom. A third door led to what must be her bedroom.

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He peered into the kitchen. Her jeans and sweat top did nothing to hide her figure. He admired the way her breasts moved beneath the top for a few seconds. "Can I help in here?"

She laughed gently. "No, but thanks, I never trust a man in the kitchen. I've got it all in hand. Just sit down and chill out for a while."

"Okay." He wandered to the display unit. There was a picture of a smiling man and a woman in a small frame on a shelf. He picked it up and studied it. The man was good looking, fashionably grey at the temples and looked very distinguished. He looked vaguely familiar but Slater could not place him. The woman was also very attractive with fine laughter lines at the corners of her eyes. Dark hair hung to her shoulders and he could see Sara's good looks in her face. She looked like a woman who had a lot of laughs in her life. He made the connection for the man was evidently her father.

"My Mother and father," Sara confirmed from the doorway when she saw him looking at the picture. "They are both dead. Father died of cancer four years ago and Mother died a year later."

"Gosh, I'm so sorry, Sara."

She turned down the corners of her mouth. "Well, it was a long time ago and I'm over it now although I will never forget them. They were the best parents a girl could have had."

PMJ Downing

It was always the best ones that went early, he thought. "And nor should you forget. Do you have any other family, you know, brothers or sisters?"

She looked wistful for a moment. "I have a brother who is married but he lives in Auckland, New Zealand. I've not seen him for a long time. Although he phones me now and then"

"Is there no one else?"

She laughed. "Oh I'm sure there is an aunt or uncle around somewhere, perhaps a cousin or two, but we've lost touch. Will a mushroom omelette and salad do, Jack?"

"Yes that's fine." He sipped his whisky. "Are you sure I can't do something to help?"

She nodded. "All right you can help, seeing that you can't sit still. You can put a pot of coffee on for me, the makings are in there," she nodded towards a cupboard on the wall and started to break eggs into a bowl.

He busied himself with making the coffee.

"What's going on Jack?" She asked suddenly, her back to him, keeping herself engrossed in mixing the eggs. "Why were you asking those questions about Mr Figgis?"

He did not answer her question instead said. "Did you know that Figgis and Smith have meetings together in the park?"

She turned around, mixing bowl in her hands,

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beater still beating. "Really? Why on earth would they do that? They both have an office."

"That's what I wondered. If it was a warm summers day I could understand it, but it was cold and wintery"

"Anyway, how do you know all this?"

"I followed Smith this afternoon, after I met him at reception and he gave me the third degree."

She stared at him for a few seconds. "You followed Mr Smith? Why would you do that?"

He shrugged and laughed at her serious expression. "I'm an investigator, remember? We do things like that all the time, it's bred into us, part of our training," he grinned again and then went serious. "There is something funny going on in that building and I intend finding out what it is."

"Do you think Mr Smith is involved in what Mr Caruthers has been accused of?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. I'm curious about Smith though. He seemed a cold hard character and I wondered what he's really like, and he bothered me with his stare. I saw him meet this Figgis character in the park but I couldn't get near enough to overhear what they were talking about. Did you get into trouble when Smith saw me at reception?"

A grimace of distaste flashed across her face. "No I didn't but he gave me such a look after you left. I don't think he believed you...you know...about what you

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said about us. He gives me the shudders. I don't like him one little bit."

Smiths just like a retired army officer, he thought. "He's a cold character all right, and I don't like him either so you're not alone. Was he in the Army?"

"I don't know. Most of the staff seems to have some military connect so I suppose Mr Smith has as well." She smiled and then her smile faded. "I got called into Figgis's office today."

"Really? Why?"

"He wanted to know all about you. He asked how and when we met and what you did for a living."

That was interesting, he thought. "What did you tell him?"

"I told him what was on your business card. About you being a sales representative. I told him your name was Brian Forbes like you told Mr Smith."

"Good girl that was quick thinking."

She leant forward like a conspirator and almost whispered. "Then he went on about you. He asked if I had heard your name. I told him I hadn't. He seemed satisfied with that."

He looked thoughtful. "He was fishing and you didn't bite. I wonder what he was after."

She looked at him in incomprehension. "Fishing?"

He laughed at her bemused expression. "It's what we say when someone doesn't know what they want and they hope you will stumble and give them some-

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thing to gnaw on.”

“Oh, okay.”

“Was it all right with the pass?”

“Yes, I returned it alright, that was not a problem. I thought that was what they summonsed me to the office for. I really thought that they had found out about it somehow.”

She was still beating the eggs. Reaching out he stilled her hands and laughed. “It’s an omelette, Sara, not a soufflé.”

She flushed and grinned. “Sorry, I got carried away.” She added some seasoning to the eggs.

“Sara,” he said tentatively. “How did you manage to get that pass if they are not issued by reception?”

She concentrated on what she was doing, not looking at him. “I borrowed it.”

Damn, he thought *that was a bit dumb of her*. “That may have been a bit silly. How would you explain that away if anyone had found out?”

“It’s alright, Jack, I got it from a friend of mine.”

“A friend gives you a pass? Just like that?”

Her face reddened. “Well, all right, it was my boyfriend, well ex-boyfriend really, he was sleeping off a night shift, and I took it without him knowing. We are still very good friends and we...er...meet sometimes. We stay at each other’s places now and then and I cook him a meal.”

A twinge of jealousy went through him although

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they had only just met. He wondered if she slept with the ex *now and then*. Perhaps she had slept with him to get her hands on his pass. Was he staying here? He looked about the flat with renewed interest but he couldn't see anything masculine lying about. "That was a bit risky, what if you'd been caught. How would you have explained that away?"

She shook her head. "Don't be silly, Jack, of course I was careful. Although I don't know what I would have done if he *had* caught me with it. That's why I had to have it back by five. He set's his alarm for 6pm. I had to get to his place before he discovered it was missing."

"You have a key to his apartment?"

Her face reddened. "We both do. I told you we are very good friends."

He asked thoughtfully. "So, does the ex still work in the basement?"

"He never talks about it but I guess he must do, he still has a pass. I'm sure that would be withdrawn if he didn't work down there anymore."

"Do you think he could get me in there?" He knew what the answer would be even as he asked it.

"No, I would not ask him, so don't ask me to ask him to help."

She was right of course. "Okay, sorry, it was wrong of me to ask." He wondered if she still had feelings for the ex boyfriend. Was there a chance for him?

"Did he ever talk about what they do down in the

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basement?”

She shook her head. “No, as I said, he never talked about it.” Slater wondered if he ever talked in his sleep but didn’t know how to ask her. He changed the line of questions. “What does this Figgis character do? How does he fit into the organization?”

She was on safer ground. She felt uneasy talking about her ex. “He is in charge of internal security both for the offices and the personnel,” she told him. “His department also does the vetting of new staff and stuff like that.”

“He’s quite an important guy then. What about Mr Smith? What does he do?”

“I don’t know,” she added some chilli flakes, mushrooms and grated cheese to the omelette mix and a twist or two of black pepper from a mill. “He must be high-ranking because he has an executive office on the seventh floor.”

The office of Mr Smith was another place he would give his right arm to have a good look around, if he could get in there. “Surveillance cameras.”

She frowned. “What about them?”

“Are there cameras around the building?”

“There’s one in reception.”

“I’ve seen that one. What about everywhere else?”

“I don’t know for sure but I should imagine there are some. I have no idea what they have in the basement.”

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She poured the omelette mix into a large pan. "Can you get me the salad stuff out of the fridge?" He obliged her and got out an iceberg lettuce, tomatoes, spring onions and sweet peppers, which she commenced to chop and mix. She added the salad to a bowl along with some dressing and carried it to the table in the living room. "Can you get the cutlery out of that drawer?" she said, pointing to the drawer.

A few moments later, she placed two plates of omelette on the table along with a bottle of white wine and two glasses. Slater poured them both a glass of wine and they started to eat.

"Jack," she said staring into his eyes, a worried smile on her face. "Are you still intent on trying to get into Department Y?"

Her wonderful eyes disconcerted him. He stared back, looking deeply into them, noting the little flecks of purple in the iris. The beginnings of desire stirred in him and he brutally brushed it aside. He nodded. "Yes, I need to find out what goes on down there, where the basement fits into the scheme of things. There's something funny going on and I want to know what it is."

She frowned. "I think you are mad. You will get caught and arrested and thrown in gaol, I know you will." She had a hint of apprehension in her voice. He wondered why she was so against him getting into the basement. However, at the same time, he wondered why

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she was helping him. After all, she didn't really know who he was only what he had told her.

He grinned. "It won't be the first time I have been arrested." He decided to trust her. "I'm going to try to get in tomorrow night."

She shook her head as she started to clear away the supper things. "Well don't blame me if you get caught and thrown in prison." Then she called from the kitchen. "And don't bring my name into it if you are caught. I can do without that kind of grief in my life. Exciting or not, I need to keep my job."

He laughed again. "I think your Mr Smith already knows that you are something to do with me." She carried two mugs of coffee to the sofa, handed him one, sat on the opposite end of the sofa and curled her legs under her. He went on. "I suspect that he knew all along who I was and it may have been rather stupid of me to give him a false name."

"Yes, I think so to, and I'm really worried about losing my job. You don't know how hard Mr Smith and Mr Figgis can be."

"I'm sure you would be able to get a job anywhere."

"Don't you believe it; I was out of work for ages before I got that job. This is London, and there's too many people chasing too few jobs."

Slater looked at her and thought she was very beautiful, even with a worried frown on her face. "I meant it

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when I said you could work for me, become a PI.”

“Don’t be silly, Jack, you don’t know me.”

He smiled. “And you don’t really know me either, but I’d like to remedy that and get to know you much better.” He wondered how she would feel if he tried to kiss her. Would she would accept it, or, push him away. He regretfully decided that now was not the right time to try even though he wanted to and had difficulty suppressing the urge to take her in his arms. They drank their coffee in agreeable silence until Slater stood up. “I must go, Sara. Don’t worry, I’ll be all right.” He hoped her concern was for his personal welfare.

She walked with him to her door. “Please give up this crazy idea, Jack.”

“I can’t, I owe it to my client to do what I can to prove his innocence or otherwise. I also want to find out who killed Carter.”

She reached up and kissed him on the cheek. Her lips were dry and warm. “Please take care.”

Again, he resisted the urge to take her in his arms and kiss her properly. “I will do my best,” he said as he went down the stairs and out of the building.

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Chapter 14

Slater pressed the doorbell to a luxury flat off Fenchurch Street, the residence of Ian Bronson. He thought that the city evidently paid Mr Bronson very well. Distant chimes sounded in his ear. Eventually the door opened and a portly man with a smiling round face stood there. He was in his late fifties, going bald and didn't give the impression of being much of a city whizz kid.

"My name's Jack Slater..."

He interrupted with a smile. "I know who you are, Mr Slater." Bronson had alert eyes, a sharp demeanour and Slater began to change his earlier opinion. "Abigail phoned me and told me to expect you."

"Did she tell you what I'm trying to do?"

"Yes. What do you hope to achieve that the police cannot?"

"I don't know," he paused. "Would you mind if we had a chat? I need to get some background information on James."

"I'm just about to go out for a meal. You're welcome to join me, I hate eating alone."

Thirty minutes later, they were sitting at a table in a nearby pub.

Ian Bronson ordered a 16-ounce steak and a huge mound of fries. Slater settled for a black coffee. "Do

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you mind if I don't eat? I've already had a meal."

Bronson grinned. "I don't mind at all as long as you don't mind me getting on with mine."

Slater shook his head. "Sure, you go ahead."

Bronson looked directly into his eyes. "Right. Now Mr Slater, what do you want to know?"

"Tell me about Jimmy Carter, what was he like?"

"Jim and I go...went...back a long time. We've been friends since our school days and have remained friends until now. Do you know who killed him?"

"No, I don't, sorry." Like Abigail, Ian was looking for a quick closure to the brutal murder of a friend.

"We served together in the RAF you know. We even signed up together, standing right next to each other as we took the oath. We had a pretty good time, I can tell you."

"I didn't know he'd been in the RAF. When was this?"

"We joined up together in 1977, did twelve years."

Slater laughed. "I was in the army, only managed ten years, before Civvy Street beckoned."

"I know the feeling. Did you go to many places?"

"Borneo, NI and the Gulf. What about you?"

"We had it pretty good. We nearly always managed postings to the same places. Hong Kong, Germany, Cyprus, so we had a ball. God knows how we managed to do that because most people don't get the postings they wanted."

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“What did he do?”

“Electronics and communications. We both were.”

“When did you get demobbed?”

“1989. Demobbed together as well.”

Slater thought he had enough background. “Did he ever talk about what he did in Curzon Place?”

His steak and chips arrived. “Do you mind if I get stuck in?”

“Go ahead.” Slater watched him splash tomato ketchup liberally over the fries along with several vigorous twists of the pepper mill. Slater ordered another coffee. He was a man that ate with gusto.

He shook his head. “No he didn’t but I know he was becoming increasingly concerned about something he’d discovered at work. It was something that would rock the nation, he’d told me.”

Was that the information Carter was going to tell him? “Did he tell you what it was?”

He shook his head again, unable to speak around a mouthful of steak. Slater waited and eventually Bronson swallowed and said. “No. All I know is that he said he was worried enough to tell someone but wasn’t sure who to tell. He was going to go to the police but he changed his mind for some reason. The last I heard was he still trying to decide what he was going to do, and then he was killed.”

“What about other friends? Did he have many?”

Bronson stared at him over a forkful of fries.

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“Friends?” he laughed. “I think I was the only friend he had. He was pretty much a loner. Course he might have led a secret life and had friends all over the place.” He laughed again, shoved a bunch of fries in his mouth, chewed vigorously, and swallowed. “Though I did hear he had a girlfriend somewhere.”

Perhaps he had confided in the girlfriend. “Do you know her name?”

He took a drink from his wine glass, his forehead wrinkled in a frown. “Carol or Caroline, I think it was. Yes, that was it. Caroline Dawson.”

“I don’t suppose you know her address.”

“No, but he was always going to Camden, so that might have been to visit her.”

“Damn, an address would have been useful.”

“Sorry, old boy.”

“What about Harry Harmon or Derek Butterworth?”

He shook his head. “The names are not familiar. Perhaps they were work colleagues.” Slater made a mental note to ask Caruthers about them. There didn’t seem to be anything more Bronson could give him so he thanked him for his help and left him to his mound of fries and huge steak. Outside the pub, he phoned Abigail Carter. “Did Jimmy ever mention a Caroline Dawson?” he said when they had exchanged greetings.

“No, I’m sorry. Who is she?”

“I don’t know at the moment.”

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“Jack, I have something here that might interest you.” He wondered what she was offering. Then she went on. “I have found Jimmy’s address book. If you think it might help, you can have it.”

“Yes, I would like to see it.” He glanced at his watch. It was getting late. “I know it’s late but would you mind if I come round now?”

“Please do,” she said, an inflection in her voice he couldn’t quite fathom.

Forty minutes later, he rang her doorbell. She was apparently waiting for him for the door opened immediately, her face wreathed in a beaming smile. “Jack,” she said as though she was surprised to see him. Perhaps that was for the benefit of the neighbours. “How nice to see you. Please come in.”

He stepped in and she shut the door behind him with a solid thud and a click of the key turning in the lock. She led him to the leather room. He thought she had applied some make-up and looked younger. She was dressed in slacks and a silk blouse. “Sit down, Jack. Here’s Jimmy’s address book.” She handed him a small leather bound pocketbook, Filofax style. She smiled. “I’ll put the kettle on.”

He turned to the D’s but there was no entry for Dawson. He opened the book at the C’s there was an entry, just the initials CD and an address in Camden Town. He wondered if CD was Caroline Dawson. The odds were good that they were. He looked under H and

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B but there was no entry.

Abigail returned. "Tea won't be long."

He wagged the slim book. "Mind if I hang onto this for a bit?"

"Please do. However, I would like it back some-time."

"Of course, I just need to study it." He looked at her carefully but he couldn't read the messages in her eyes. The sadness was still there but she had a quality that he hadn't noticed before. He had felt uncomfortable watching her grief and he wanted to reward her for her help. "Abigail, you have been a big help. Let me take you out somewhere for a bite to eat."

They went to a small restaurant not far from her house and ate a light supper. They passed the time in small talk. He could tell she didn't want to be on her own and he felt sorry for her. After the meal and a few glasses of wine. "Let me take you home."

They reached her house and she unlocked her door and asked him in, tears welling up in her face. "Can you stay for a while, Jack, please? I really don't want to be on my own tonight. I want to talk to someone."

"Abigail..." she stopped him with her fingers on his lips, her head resting on his chest, her tears wetting his shirt.

"Please stay, just tonight, for a little while. The house is so empty without James."

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Chapter 15

Abigail had made the bed up in a spare room and they had chatted about her brother over endless glasses of wine until late. She played the piano for him and her fingers flowed over the keys eliciting sweetness and melody before she rubbed her hands together. "Playing makes my hands ache now, arthritis, that's why I no longer play." Eventually she had said goodnight, kissed his cheek and left him.

She had come back to him in the early hours of the morning, waking him as she had lifted the covers to slide in beside him. Her body was shivering, not from cold; he realised but from suppressed passion and eager anticipation.

They had made love, gently at first until her ardour had exploded from her in violent waves, shocking him with the intensity of her desire. She had shoved him violently back on the bed and straddled him, riding him until she had become like a woman possessed. He wondered how long it had been for her, how long since she had had a man, how long since she had felt the release of an intercourse induced orgasm. Her screams of release echoed in his ears. She threw her head back, exposing her fine throat, her body arched and her breasts thrust forward as several volcanic orgasms flooded from her. Satiated, she had finally left him but

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not until the sky was brightening the eastern sky.

At breakfast, he was a little embarrassed and wondered if she considered him an out and out heel to have taken advantage of a bereaved woman. Then, just perhaps, she had taken advantage of him. However, he need not have worried. She had a beatific expression on her face and looked years younger, the lines of worry and grief smoothed away by their lovemaking.

“Abigail, I’m so sorry. I didn’t intend that to happen.”

She put a delicate finger on his lips. “Hush you silly boy. It was wonderful. Thank you.”

When he’d left, she had given him his a kiss on his cheek and said again. “Thank you, Jack, I needed that.”

* * * *

He rang Caruthers. “Mr Caruthers, Jack Slater here. Have you heard of Harry Harmon or Derek Butterworth?”

After a moments silence, Caruthers said. “Yes, they used to work here, last year I think it was. Why do you want to know?”

“Carter had their names in his mobile phone address book but no numbers. Do you know why they left?”

“No, I assume they found better jobs elsewhere. Why does anyone leave a job?”

“Had they been sacked?”

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He laughed. "How would I know that Mr Slater? I don't do the hiring and firing."

"Okay, thanks. I'll be in touch." He hung up and dialled Lane's number. "Two more names for you Lane. Perhaps you can check on them for me." He passed on the two names.

Lane sighed. "Slater, I have better things to do than check on names for you."

"They may have been murdered." He told him of his suspicions.

"They may have simply moved on to other jobs. That happens all the time."

He hung up; satisfied that Lane would be curious enough to check and pass the results on. He spent the rest of the day trying to ascertain just who Dimitri Sokolov was, but he drew a blank with the electoral roll and the post office had apparently never heard of him. The Russian embassy refused to talk to him as they had Sgt Hobbs and Sokolov did not have a license to drive a car according to his contact in the DVLA. Although Hobbs had already checked the CRO, according to another contact he had, Sokolov did not have a criminal record. Comrade Sokolov was like the proverbial invisible man.

He rang the number for Caroline Dawson that he had obtained from Carter's address book but could not get any reply. He made a mental note to try again that evening. He tried Graham Gardiner's number and a

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line-disconnected tone told him it was no longer in use.

He arrived back at his office at around 1845 to find to his dismay, an intruder had ransacked the place. His papers and files had been scattered about the floor. He groaned and stepped further into the office. He heard a scuffle behind him but before he could turn, a vicious shove in his back sent him stumbling forward, his feet slipping on the heaped papers. He flung out his arms to regain his balance but crashed into the filing cabinet with a clatter. The outer office door slammed shut and there was the sound of frantic footsteps running down the stairs two or three at a time. He raced out of his office, hurtled down the stairs after the intruder and glimpsed him running into the underground garage. He followed and ran into a classic trap. The intruder had an accomplice waiting.

In his peripheral vision, he saw an arm with a blackjack held in the raised fist swinging at him. He ducked his head to one side and the club struck his shoulder a numbing blow. He swung round and hit his attacker on the jaw, knocking him backward to the floor. Then an almighty blow on the back of his head knocked him to his knees and his jeans tore on the rough concrete. His vision dimmed as waves of nausea swept over him. A huge fist swung him round and grabbed his shirtfront, lifting his head up of the concrete. "What were ya doin' in Carter's office, Slater?" The man snarled. He gave Slater a vicious open-handed

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slap that rocked his head back until it bounced on the concrete. His ears rang and his eyes watered with pain. He fought to retain his consciousness.

“I was looking for my car,” he said flippantly, his tongue tripping over the words. “I couldn’t remember where I parked it.”

“A smart arse, huh?” Thug number two snarled as he kicked Slater in the ribs knocking the breath from his lungs. “Let me ‘ave ‘im Ernie, I’ll make the bastard talk.” Thug number two’s fist replaced Ernie’s on his shirtfront while his right drew back and hurtled forward smashing Slater’s lips against his teeth. “Talk, Slater, what were ya doin’ in that fuckin’ office?”

“You keep hitting me like that and I won’t be able to talk at all,” Slater slurred through thick and bloodied lips. Then Ernie pulled a knuckle-duster from his coat pocket, slid it slowly onto his knuckles and proceeded to pound it into Slater’s stomach while thug number two held him in a vice like grip so that he was unable to move.

“‘Ere, le’me ‘ave the dirty punk.” Ernie snarled in bad imitation of James Cagney. He pulled a vicious looking knife with a keen blade from a sheath on his belt. “This’ll make the fuckin’ bastard talk.” He waved the knife in front of Slater’s watering eyes until it shone, twinkling in the lights of the garage, the serrations along the back standing out in sharp relief. The edge of the blade drew Slater’s eyes like a moth to a

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flame. Ernie sneered and sliced the knife toward Slater's stomach. He cringed away from it, stomach drawn in to protect it. The blade cut into his jacket like a razor and he knew the next thrust would be into him, slicing him open like a watermelon.

"What were ya doin' in that office? What were ya looking for? What did ya find?"

"Which question do you want answering first?" Slater lips were by now very swollen and he could feel blood filling his mouth. He spat it out, spraying the shirt of the man holding him.

"What were ya doin' in Carter's office?"

"I told you, I was looking for my car."

Thug number one waved the knife again. "Ya tryin' ta commit suicide, Slater. 'Coz that's what ya doin'," he snarled, spittle flying from his lips. A speck landed on Slater's cheek. The knife waved closer to his eyes. He tried to focus on the blade but was unable to. He started to lose consciousness.

Then, they could all hear the wail of a police siren coming down the ramp into the garage, the sound thin, echoing against in the confines of the car park until it swelled to a crescendo that bounced from wall to wall, and echoing in the cavernous space.

"Cops," the one called Ernie cried in a panic. "Let's get tha fuck outa 'ere."

Car doors slammed and tires shrieked as the two hoodlums beat a hasty retreat up the exit ramp, wheels

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spinning in their panic sending clouds of smoke behind them in their haste to avoid the police. The acrid smell of burning rubber drifted past Slater's nose as the ventilation system sucked it into the garage exhaust vents. "And don't come back," he slurred, and spat some more blood from his mouth. He was thankful for the boys in blue and their timely rescue. He might have to donate something to their Christmas fund.

Expectantly he looked toward the entrance ramp and a boy of about ten or eleven years old came into view riding his mountain bike. There was a toy police siren clamped to the handlebars, the sound very realistic, realistic enough to have made his attackers flee in panic. The boy flamboyantly skidded sideways to a halt in front of him and turned the siren off with an expert flick of his thumb.

He stared at Slater lying on the concrete for a few seconds, his eyes wide with wonder, his young face taking in the scene. "Yuh alright Mr?" He looked at the blood on Slater's face in awe, his eyes round buttons in his young face. "Yuh got blood all over yuh."

Painful though it was, Slater laughed. "Yeah, I know." He spat some more blood. He laughed from deep in his belly, he laughed until his damaged stomach muscles contracted in pain. A small boy and a toy siren had rescued him from the painful ministrations of two thugs. "Yes," he pushed himself painfully to his feet. "Yes, I'm alright now, thanks to you."

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“What happened? Have yuh been beaten up? Was yuh mugged?”

Slater nodded which was a mistake because it only made his head pound more. “Yes.” He told the boy, this time with minimal movement of his head.

“Gee, cool, yuh want for me to get the cops for yuh?”

The kid thinks it's cool, he thought, I've got blood all over me and the kid thinks it cool. He smiled grotesquely through the blood. “No, I'll be alright now.” He fished a ten-pound note from his wallet and gave it to the lad. “Buy a lot of batteries for that thing,” he pointed to the siren on his handlebars. “Buy a damn lot of batteries.”

“Gee, thanks, Mr,” the boy shouted excitedly and stuffed the note in his pocket, a beaming smile on his young face. He whirled the bike around and raced away up the exit ramp, standing up on the pedals for extra speed, his bike wobbling from side to side beneath him as he gained momentum.

Slater Slowly retraced his steps to his office and surveyed the mess the two intruders had made. From what they had asked him it was obvious that they were searching for anything to do with the Caruthers case. Well they would not have found much because he had not found out a great deal himself. What could be so important about Carter's office, he wondered. Who were they? Well, whoever they were, they were just

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drawing attention to whatever it was they were doing. That made him more determined to find out what it was.

His face looked dreadful in the washroom mirror. He sponged away the blood, dried himself with a paper towel, and checked the damage. He was relieved to see that it was not as bad as it felt. He had a swollen split lip, and a loose tooth that wobbled when he probed it with his tongue. His stomach was painful to touch where the knuckle-duster had connected and angry purple bruising was already making itself evident. He studied the slit the knife had made in his jacket. He shuddered for it had been close to his ribs, just another centimetre and he would be stitching his skin instead of a jacket. He sighed; the jacket had cost a small fortune and he wondered if it was repairable.

He looked at his watch. Pain or not it was time to secrete himself in that MOD building ready for his incursion into the nether regions of the basement and Department Y. With Mary on retirement leave in Scotland, cleaning up the mess in the office was going to have to wait for the time being. Before he left he tried Caroline Dawson's telephone once more. Still there was no reply. He thought he would try it again later.

Chapter 16

Slater went to Curzon Place just before they closed the doors to members of the public at 1730. "Oh my God," exclaimed Sara when he stopped in front of her counter. "What on earth has happened to you?"

He tried to smile flippantly and winced. "It's nothing really. You should see the other person. Not a mark on him."

"But what happened?"

"Someone has strongly objected to the way I'm running my enquiries and want me to change my ways."

Sara had concern etched across her face and he hoped it was the beginning of feelings for him. "You must go to the police."

He shook his head. "Nah, I'll be all right. I can do without the police right now."

"Perhaps you should go to the hospital and let them check you over."

He reached for her hand. "Really, Sara, I am all right. Now, are there any toilets behind those doors?"

"Yes, that one," she pointed to the middle door. "Half way down the passage on the left."

"Is the passage door open?"

"No, it's kept locked but I can buzz you through from here." Concern marred her face. "Jack, are you

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still intent on going down there?”

He nodded and was thankful that his head stayed on this time. He hoped his body wouldn't let him down when he needed it. “Yes.”

“I wish you would reconsider. I'm frightened they will catch you. They will know that I opened the door for you. You don't know Mr Smith and Mr Figgis.” She gave a shudder. “Figgis is a horrible man and he frightens me. There is something sadistic about him.”

Slater said with more bravado that he felt. “I have got to go and have a look, babe.” The attack on him by the two thugs and the ransacking of his office, not to mention the murder of Carter indicated that there were high stakes involved, very high stakes. Who knows what he would find in the basement or Department Y? But then, perhaps there was *nothing* to find. Perhaps the basement and Department Y were one and the same. Perhaps it was it nothing more than rumours circulating, rumours with no substance to them. However, he had to find out for himself.

“I'll see you tomorrow, we'll have dinner and I'll tell you all about it.” He reached for her hand and kissed it, his lips lingering on her fingers. “Now, be good girl and let me through.”

“Let me come with you, I know the building, well some of it anyway. Perhaps I can be of some help. I want to help you.”

“I don't think so. It might be dangerous and I don't

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want anything to happen to you. Now please, be a good girl and let me in.”

She sighed resignedly and pressed a button beneath her counter and he heard the lock click open with a well-bred thud.

The door opened into a long corridor with a number of closed doors along the length. Without hesitating, he walked purposefully along until he came to a door marked *Washrooms* and went in. The washroom was empty. Entering a stall, he stood on the seat and reached up to one of the roof panels, lifting it from the frame. A small crawlspace in the ceiling housed the heating and ventilation pipes and he pulled himself up, his stomach muscles screaming in protest, until he was lying flat on the ceiling beams. He replaced the ceiling panel leaving a gap large enough to see through. The heat coming from the pipes was warm and soothing on his back.

At 2030, he heard someone enter the toilets and push open each stall door with a bang. He squinted through a gap he'd left and watched a security patrol checking to see if the building was clear of visitors. Satisfied, the man left and the outer door closed with a swish of the hydraulic door closer. At 2100, the lights went out and silence descended on the building apart from the ticking of the heating as it cooled. He waited another hour before removing the ceiling tile and descending into the toilet. He replaced the tile behind him. He switched on a pencil torch, inched open the

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door into the corridor and peered out. Night lighting had replaced the glare of the fluorescent lights. There was a surveillance camera at the nearest end of the corridor but he clipped on his badge and walked boldly to the door as though he belonged there. The main lights automatically switched on as he approached and went off again when he was out of range of the sensors. Carefully he opened the door into the foyer and saw a security officer looking through the desk. He waited for him to leave and apparently finding what he wanted he wandered off through one of the other doors. Slater slipped silently across the foyer to the lift where he pressed the call button, the doors opened and he stepped in.

He reached for the floor destination buttons, but saw there was not a button for the basement. *How curious*, he thought. The numbers ascended from ground to floor seven, but there was none going down to the basement. There had to be a button to go down somewhere. How did the staff get down there if there was no button? He looked for a panel hiding it and discovered the button located in the emergency telephone compartment where a casual visitor would not see it. He hesitated and then pressed it, the lift hummed into life and dropped rapidly downwards, basement and Department Y here I come, he thought, his heart beating a little faster.

The lift stopped smoothly and the doors slid open.

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Two doors faced him in a tiny vestibule. Ministry grey paint covered the walls, darker grey at the bottom half and lighter grey at the top. *Typical government, no imagination*, he thought. He opened the first door a crack and peered through. The lights were on and he could see several people working at computers. He went to retreat but it was too late, they had spotted him.

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Chapter 17

Slater could not retreat. To retreat would have been suspicious. *That's torn it*, he thought, *they've rumbled me*. He pushed the door fully open and stepped into the room with his heart beating fiercely. *We boldly go...*

"Hi," he said brightly to the man who had spotted him peering through the door.

"Hello," the man glanced at Slater's fake badge. "Adam," he smiled, "what can I do for you?" Slater had not expected that reaction from a supposedly ultra secret department when an unknown man appears in their midst at 2300hrs.

Slater watched the man's eyes take in the bruising on his face and he made wry face. "I got mugged last night, there were two of them, and they beat me up." He explained and grimaced to show his pain. *That should satisfy him*, he thought. "I'm posted in next week, err...John," he improvised, glancing at the man's own badge that said his name was John Horton, Supervisor. He was thankful that Dave had produced an almost perfect pass for him in spite of the limited notice he had been given and Slater's assurances that it didn't matter.

John Horton was grey haired and on the wrong side of sixty. A small slim moustache reminiscent of a major in the army adorned his upper lip. His eyes

looked weary as though he had seen enough of life and didn't want to see more. He was slim and about as tall as Slater was. He was wearing a suit, white shirt and a tie. A white dustcoat hung loosely about his skinny frame.

"Did you report it to the police?"

"Nah, what can they do. I didn't get a good look at them. They didn't get my wallet anyhow; someone scared them off before they had a chance." He almost chuckled at the thought of the two thugs scared off by a boy on a bike.

Horton seemed satisfied. "Anyway, what can I do for you?"

Slater, with his heart in his mouth said, "Mr Smith said I could pop in and see my new work place so long as you weren't too busy. He said night time would be best, so here I am."

"Did he now?" retorted Horton indignantly, a heavy frown knitting his eyebrows together into a scowl that added to greatly to his tired demeanour. "Goddamn that Smith, he knows we are always busy down here."

"Isn't that just like management," Slater agreed, putting indignation into his voice. "They don't seem know what goes on at ground level."

"Yes, quite," John Horton seemed put out by his appearance in the basement. He sighed. "Well, now you are here, I suppose I had better show you around."

Slater was astounded that Horton was so casual

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about him, someone he did not know from Adam, no pun intended, and he was going to show him around. He wondered how far he could run with this and what it would reveal.

“I guess you had better use Carter’s PC, poor chap won’t need it anymore.”

Slater was mystified. “I thought Carter had an office upstairs.”

“He did. He was only here on probation. But now he has got to be replaced.”

Keeping his face blank, Slater said. “Why’s that then? What’s happened?”

Horton shook his head in apparent sorrow. “Haven’t you heard? The chap got himself murdered last week. It’s left us in an awful bind. We are short staffed enough as it is and now we have an increased work load with his demise so your recruitment is most welcome, I can assure you.”

Slater put on a shocked expression. “Murdered, you say. That’s why the cops have been prowling about upstairs, I wondered why. What the hell happened?”

Horton shook his head. “Someone took a knife to him. Apparently he was stabbed a number of times before he died.”

“That’s terrible. Do they know who did it?”

Horton shook his head again, sadness made his already dour face, worse. “No. The police are still investigating. Poor chap had only been with us for a few

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months and as I said, he was still on probation. He worked down here for two days and upstairs for three.” He stopped in front of a workstation. “Here, this is...was...Carter’s PC. You’ll get your access codes when you start proper. When is that by the way?”

“Monday,” Slater said.

Horton groaned like a man under stress. “Damn, I could have done with you right away.” Slater guessed that the job was becoming too much for him and he wondered if he was about to retire. “Will you be here full time or have we to share you with another department like Carter?”

This was too good to be true, Slater thought, and unbelievable. Why was this secret department that had everyone in awe and fear being so helpful and apparently prepared to greet him with open arms? Moreover, why had Horton accepted him at face value without even a quick phone call to check his credentials?

“Once I have cleared my work upstairs I will be here full time, might take a week or two though. John, what will be my duties?”

“Didn’t Smith tell you?” His voice tu-tutted in exasperation. “Goddamn it, he’s been told before that he must brief new members of staff before sending them down to us, we just don’t have the time to do it ourselves. If we had a dozen new staff we still wouldn’t have enough.”

Slater sat in the late Carter’s chair and spun it

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around. He grinned at Horton. "So, what will I be doing then?"

"You will collate information. This is the department of Anti Terrorist Surveillance and Collation, ATSC. We receive the information from a variety of sources including satellite, the PNC, that's the Police National Computer, and from various bugs that we collate for the government."

"Bugs?" Slater repeated stupidly. What did they have for the need of bugs?

"Yes, we have a number of surveillance bugs situated in offices of top politicians and industrialists—we even have some in their homes." He smiled broadly, the smile taking years away from his face. He was proud of the technology at his disposal. "We collate the information received from all these sources to form the basis of a report which is forwarded to the seventh floor management."

"Then what do they do with it upstairs?"

"I have no idea, and I don't care really. We just do the collating. I assume it is the basis for a governmental report. Then they send instructions back to *take care of* things."

"I bet you get to hear some juicy titbits," Slater said with a lewd grin.

"That's what we are here for. Adam. Anyway, I really must get on with my work. There is a kitchen over there with a pot of coffee and some doughnuts just

help yourself if you want anything. The rule is that if you empty the coffee pot you make a fresh one. We contribute two pounds each per week for the supplies. Ask anyone around if you have any questions. They'll be able to answer you."

"Thanks," Slater bounced up and down on the chair. "Is there any chance of a new chair? This is a bit like dead man's shoes."

"Not a chance old boy," Horton sounded hard done by and his mournful expression returned. "Budget restraints and all that. I'm afraid you will have to get used to it. There's never enough money in the pot." He turned on his heel and disappeared in the direction of the far side of the room without another word.

Slater wandered past the ranks of computers to the kitchen and poured coffee from a filter machine into a paper cup. There was a table and four chairs where he guessed that operatives could take a break.

Standing in the doorway to the rest room, he looked about the main area. The room was large, probably a hundred or so feet square and had no windows that he could see. The air was cool and fresh. He could see some vents high on the walls and more on the ceiling that blew cool air across the room.

Banks of computers stood on desks against the walls and in rows down the centre of the room. Each PC station had an operator sitting hunched in front of it staring intently at the screen and he wondered which

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one was Sara's ex. boyfriend. Sauntering across the room, he looked over several shoulders and was surprised at the masses of information coming into the department. Along one wall stood a bank of three radio receivers each with operatives wearing headsets. Reels of recording tape spun and he could only guess at who and what they were recording—and more importantly—why they were recording it.

One PC, apparently, connected to the PNC had information in a constant stream racing across the screen. As he was looking over the operators shoulder, he could see information coming in about a senior politician's son who was a guest at a drugs party in Mayfair. The police arrested him during a raid on the premises thirty minutes ago but they released the boy, just aged eighteen, on the express orders of the Chief Constable and the crime covered up. "Goddamn it." Slater was angry. "He wouldn't do that if it was our kids."

"Tell me about it," the operator agreed with a grimace. He held out his hand. "My names Peter."

Slater shook it. "Mine's, Adam, nice to meet you." He would have to watch it for he had almost told Peter his name was Jack. "Does this happen all the time?"

"Often enough, damn it. It's who you know that counts, that and having money of course."

John Horton wandered past and overheard the exchange. "Of course, this is all very secret, Adam," he told Slater. "Nothing about our operations here must be

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divulged to a soul, not even your co-workers upstairs. I'm sure you have signed the papers to that effect?"

"Yes, of course, John, Mr Smith did explain the secrecy of the operation. What did you say are they going to do with this information?"

Horton shrugged his shoulders. "I didn't say. Who knows what they are going to do. We just compile the reports of anything we think those upstairs will be interested in and find useful."

"Them being..."

"Smith and his team," he hesitated as the first glimmer of suspicion entered his head. "But surely you know this already?"

Whoops, Slater thought, *I may have blown it*. "Of course I do," he backpedalled. "But I only know Mr Smith and Figgis. Figgis didn't introduce me to anyone else. He said that would come later. I gather they were in a hurry and, I am guessing here, in a hurry to replace Carter."

"Yes, you are quite correct," Horton's suspicions allayed for the moment.

"Will I have access to a locker for my things?"

"Yes. They are over there behind that door, at the back of the canteen. Let me get you the key."

Slater grinned. "Let me guess, I'll be taking over Carter's locker."

Horton was quite serious when he said. "You're spot on, old boy." He extracted a key from a box

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hanging on a wall and handed it to him. "This key must never leave the building. When you go off duty, you leave the key in there, you sign for it in and out. It's an offence to take the key out of here. You sign this book."

"Right, I understand," Slater agreed, although he didn't understand any of it. Nor did he understand why it was happening. Why did the government see the need to monitor peoples live so closely? What were they doing with the information upstairs? Who in government was getting the reports and what were they doing with it? He signed for the locker key in the book.

A few minutes later, he was in the locker room and had soon identified Carter's locker. In anticipation, he pushed the key in the lock and turned it. The door swung open, but the locker was empty apart from fluff and dust on the floor, three paper clips, two safety pins, some thumb tacks and a brown card folder on the shelf. He opened it but it was empty. All traces of the late Mr Carter seem too have been efficiently eliminated. He turned the folder over a few times but there was nothing written on it. Angling it towards the light he tried to see if there were any indentations from a heavy-handed pen, but he could see nothing. He replaced it on the shelf, wondering what a forensics laboratory would be able to do with it. Then on second thoughts, he tucked it under his shirt and his pants and held it in place by his belt.

He wandered back into the main room and peered over several more shoulders. There seemed to be

nothing here that warranted the killing of Jimmy Carter. Then, one never really knew what was in the minds of men like Smith and Figgis and their respective government departments.

Movement caught his eye. He looked and saw a man came through a door on the other side of the room and during the brief period the door was open, he could see further banks of computer consoles. He casually wandered in that direction, and reached the door just before the automatic closer had shut it. There was a numbered key pad guarding the lock. He stopped the door closing and walked through as though he owned it.

Nothing new in here, he thought, looking around the room from the doorway, just computer after computer in rows, just like slot machines at a Las Vegas casino. The operators were staring at the screens just as intently as any addicted gambler.

One screen depicted a busy street that could have been anywhere in the country. It seemed to be rather pointless as the surveillance camera was only showing a group of people apparently waiting to cross the road. A bus was approaching and to Slater's horror, he saw a man deliberately pushed from behind and into the path of the vehicle. There were silent screams from the onlookers as the bus ground the man into the road surface. While all eyes of the pedestrians were on the tragedy before them, the murderer disappeared into the crowd and slid away unseen.

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Before he could say anything, the console operator wrote 'Mission Accomplished' on a form on the desk in front of him. Then he noticed Slater watching him and jumped as though stung.

"Hello, who the hell are you? What are you doing in here?"

He said quickly. "I'm Jimmy Carter's replacement."

"You are not supposed to be in here. This is for senior operatives only." He looked around for assistance.

"Sorry, I didn't know. John told me to have a look around and as the door was open and I just wandered in."

The operator pressed a button on his desk and a bell sounded. A red light above his console started to flash. A man with *Supervisor* on his shirt and the name *Willis* underneath strode quickly across the room looking agitated.

He was a short stocky man who would not be out of place in some fairground-boxing booth. Some would have considered his rugged looks handsome, Slater guessed. He was clean-shaven and had dark hazel eyes to go with his light brown hair.

His face showed alarm. "What is it?" He looked Slater up and down. "Who the hell is this?"

"He said he's Jimmy Carter's replacement," the operator told him. "Says he just wandered in because

the door was open.”

“Well it was open.” Slater felt like an errant school kid discovered in the toilets with an old well-thumbed and dog-eared copy of Playboy.

Willis seemed very cross. “This is for senior operators only. It is out of bounds to everyone else.”

“So I gather.” Slater wasn’t surprised for not everyone wanted to see people murdered before their eyes. “I was told I could have a look round by Mr Smith. I didn’t realise that it didn’t include this room. He never said so.”

“This is the Senior Operations Room, and, no, your tour does not include this room. Please leave immediately. This way.” He turned and marched Slater to the door that he had entered through, opened and ushered him back through it.

“Thank you.” Slater was annoyed at his treatment. “Sorry to have intruded, I’m sure.”

“Please don’t come in here without proper authorisation.”

“No of course not. Perhaps if you had a damn notice on the door saying it was out of bounds it might have alerted me...”

The supervisor didn’t bother to reply but signalled to John Horton who came over at the run, a look of concern on his face. “What’s the problem?”

“Found this person wandering about in our department. I do wish you would keep your staff properly

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informed and under control at all times.”

“Sorry, Bernard, I will. Adam is Carters replacement and Smith didn’t brief him properly. I will do that right away.”

“Thank you. Please see that it doesn’t happen again. Department Y is out of bounds as you know.”

“Yes, yes, all right, no need to keep going on about it, Bernard,” Horton was testy. *There was evidently no love lost between those two*, Slater thought.

Willis abruptly turned on his heel and slammed the door behind him, or tried to as the door closer cushioned the effect and robbed him of his dramatic exit.

Horton turned to Slater. “Sorry, Adam, I should have warned you about Department Y. They don’t allow anybody in there without special clearance. Bernard gets bent out of shape if someone encroaches on his territory.”

That was the nearest he’d heard Horton get to a joke. “So I gathered, I thought he was going to have a heart attack. What the hell do they do in there that has everyone on edge? Damn it, they’re like a hornets’ nest that’s been stirred with a stick.”

“They carry out the bidding of those upstairs, but you are better off not knowing what they do, I can assure you.”

“Upstairs? You mean Smith?”

“Yes and his boss.”

“Do we know who Smith’s boss is?” Slater asked

without any hope of having an answer.

“No, and take it from me, Adam, you are much better not knowing and certainly not asking.”

“Okay.” He thought it was time to leave and he remembered Sara saying something about the possibly of there being a second entrance. “I had better get going. Thanks for letting me look around. See you on Monday then.”

“Yes, we will look forward to your help. It will be most welcome I can assure you.”

“Oh, Figgis mentioned something about another entrance to save going through the rigmarole upstairs.”

“Yes,” Horton grabbed a pad from a nearby consol and scribbled on it, added his signature, stamped it with a rubber stamp and gave it to Slater. “Give this to the attendant on the door and he will let you out. It’s through there.” He pointed to yet another door. This time a heavy metal faced door that looked as though a tank would not blast a way through.

Slater grinned. “Will I be safe going through that one then? No hidden surprise? No traps to fall into.”

Horton didn’t see the funny side of that and just ushered him through the door. “Just go right to the end and the man on duty there will let you out. We’ll see you on Monday. Please come in through the proper channel upstairs and don’t be late. The day shift starts promptly at 0700.”

“Roger,” Slater flippantly gave Horton a sloppy

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salute. "0700 it is." The door shut behind him with a solid boom that reverberated about him.

The lights flickered on and Slater found himself in a passageway that could have been anywhere in the building. The only remarkable thing was there were no doors other than two adjacent to where he was standing, and the door he had just come through. The passage stretched away for about thirty yards and then turned from view. Slater tried the handles of the two doors but both were locked. He tapped them. They were solid but an examination of the locks convinced him that with his lock picking kit he would be able to open them easily enough. He sauntered down the passage. The lights came on at his approach and went off as he passed they were evidently into saving money in the basement. He reached the corner of the hallway and a further twenty yards or so along the second corridor, was a security guard at a reception style counter barring the way. He was sitting in a chair with his arms on the counter, his head resting on his arms, his eyes closed. A few gentle snores told him the man was asleep.

He stepped silently to the counter and looked around the room. It was just another room, unusual only because, like the passage, it had no windows. There was the opening that he had come down at one end and a solid looking door at the other. He could see two other doors, both standing open. One led to a small kitchen and the other to a toilet. In between was the counter

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with its complement of a telephone, a laptop computer and one snoring guard. He looked at the man deep into the land of nod. Time to wake him up, he grinned to himself. "Err—humph," He coughed behind his hand.

The security officer raised his head, startled, a look of fear flashing across his face. He got to his feet, almost standing to attention. "Sorry, sir, I just closed my eyes for a second. I really am sorry. It won't happen again."

He was obviously very concerned that Slater had caught him asleep. Was that a capital offence, he wondered. "Don't worry about it," he told the man. "I won't tell a soul, I promise. It'll be our secret."

A look of relief flushed over his face. "Thank you, sir; it's very good of you."

"What's your name?"

A wary look replaced the relief on his face as though he mistrusted anyone who asked his name. He hesitated, and then said. "It's Henry, sir."

"Henry, don't worry, your snooze secret is safe with me," he held up his hand in a Boy Scout salute. "Scouts honour."

"Thank you, Sir," Henry said again, evidently relieved.

"It must be difficult staying awake sitting here on your own, with nothing to see or do." He said as he handed Henry his exit pass.

Henry was a large well-built man whose face

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looked like he had gone three rounds in a boxing ring with Mike Tyson. Slater guessed that he was probably ex military; perhaps a retired Sgt. Everyone working here seemed to be ex military and he wondered why. Henry's hair was close shaven across his skull and his face well shaven apart from a bristling moustache on his lip. He was wearing a shirt, unbuttoned around a heavy neck, slacks, and no tie. A windcheater with *Security* embroidered across the right breast was hanging on a hook behind him. His lips were set in a straight line. Slater could imagine him on a parade square giving an unhappy recruit a dressing down for some misdemeanor or other.

Slater pointed to the chit given to him by John Horton. "I just need to get out, Henry."

"Of course sir," he opened a drawer and extracted bunch of keys. He went to the heavy metal faced door and opened it. It apparently led into an ally for the smell of uncollected garbage and urine was strong on the night air.

"If I need to come back in this way, how do I call you?"

Henry shone a torch on the wall outside. "Just press this button and it'll alert me."

Wake you up, you mean, Slater thought. Henry went on with his explanation. "You will need a chit from your supervisor though." He shrugged apologetically. "I'm not allowed to let anyone in without the

chit.”

“Ok, I understand, Henry, thanks. Oh by the way, the two doors at the end of this passage, where do they lead?”

Henry looked suspiciously at him, his brows furrowed in a deep frown and Slater guessed that he had not been the brightest Sergeant on the parade ground. “Can you tell me why you want to know that, Sir?”

“I’m Carter’s replacement in ATSC and I’m just curious. Mr Smith said I can have a look around and I have already made one mistake tonight when I wandered into Department Y by accident, I don’t want to make another.”

Henry looked shocked, his eyes opened wide in surprise. “You went into Department Y?”

“Yes I did. Well the door was open and Mr Smith didn’t tell me that Department Y was out of bounds, but I damn soon found out.”

“That’s only open to specially trained personnel.”

“I know that, *now*, I got a right ticking off, I can tell you.”

He nodded and his features relaxed. “I am not surprised, Sir.”

“Why is it called Department Y?”

He shook his head, his brain trying to work out an answer. Finally, he said. “I have no idea, Sir. It’s always been called that, ever since I have worked here.”

“Okay. So, what about those two doors at the end

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of the passage?”

“Those doors belong to Mr Smith. One is to his archives, where he keeps all the old records. He doesn’t allow anyone in there but him. The other door is Mr Smith’s personal entrance so it will be best if you avoid those two doors.”

“Golly, Mr Smith has a private entrance?” *And, personal archives*, he thought. He wondered how he could get a look at those. He might find them very interesting.

“That’s what I said, sir.”

“Does he come in this way very often?”

“Not as far as I know. He uses the main entrance mostly. He has never come through here while I have been on duty.”

“Wow, I’m glad you told me. I could have got into yet more trouble and I don’t start properly until Monday. I certainly don’t want to run into Mr Smith if I can help it. Goodnight, Henry.”

“Goodnight, and thank *you*, sir.”

The door boomed shut behind him and he heard Henry’s keys rattle in the lock. In the stygian gloom, he felt his way down the alley towards the sound of traffic passing on the street outside. He was surprised for the alley exited alongside The Hilton Hotel on Park Lane.

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Chapter 18

Slater's mind was whirling with his thoughts as he wandered across Park Lane and into Hyde Park. The most astounding thing was that he had witnessed a murder. That was the only explanation for what he saw, it could not have been anything other than cold-blooded murder, and they had monitored it on the television equipment in Department Y, apparently at the instigation of the government or at least a department thereof. He wondered how many other murders they had watched from there.

Just who were Smith and Figgis? For whom did they work? Were they government agents? That had to be it, what else could it be? Was the whole set up something to do with MI5 or MI6? Did the Prime Minister know what was going on, whatever that was? Did this have anything to do with the Caruthers case? Caruthers seemed to be small potatoes now and getting less important by the minute. The new information he had uncovered saw to that.

His thoughts turned to Sara Carr. Why was she being so helpful to him? He didn't think murder was in her remit, or, for that matter, anything under hand. She seemed too childlike and trusting. She had said she was excited at the prospect of helping him, why. He realised that he was getting to like her far too much and hoped

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she was just what she appeared, a beautiful and honest woman, even if she was a bit naive. He didn't want to involve her any more than he already had.

He was getting plenty of questions but none of the answers.

He climbed the stairs to his office still thinking round and round in circles. He opened the door and remembered that he needed to clean up the mess the intruders had left. He surveyed it with a groan and decided to leave it till later.

The blinking red light on his answer phone told him he had two messages. The first, left at 2005 and was from Caruthers. He asked if he had any information for him. He was obviously getting agitated the nearer his court case became. The second message left at 0100 was from Sara. Slater's heart ran cold as he listened to her desperate voice begging him to help her. 'Two men...beat...' there was some coughing and then. 'Beat me...attacked me...please...' her voice faded amid electronic crackling on the line. Then there was a few long seconds silence and at last, she said. 'Help me.' There was the sound of the phone being dropped and then as though from a distance. 'The door is unlocked...' There was nothing more but the hiss of an open line and some background noises.

Slater raced down the stairs, picked up his car in the garage and with wheels spinning shot up the exit ramp. He skidded to a halt outside Sara's apartment

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block and left it double-parked, the engine running. He pressed every button on the entry system until someone pressed the release button and the lock clicked back. Didn't the residents wonder why someone was ringing to get in at this hour? He was glad that they didn't. He ran up the stairs, saw the door to her apartment was standing ajar, and inside Sara lay on the floor, blood pouring from a deep gash on her cheek. She groaned and a wave of relief went through him. He grabbed her phone and called for an ambulance wondering why she had not done this herself instead of calling him. He told them the address and replaced the receiver. He grabbed a clean tea towel from the kitchen and knelt by her side. "Sara, Sara I'm here. What happened?" Gently he held the padded cloth over the gash on her cheek to stem the bleeding.

She coughed and winced holding her arms tightly about her body. "Two men..."

"Yes?"

"Two men attacked me..." Her voice tailed off and she shivered. Within minutes, the wail of a siren sounded outside. He pressed the lock release and the ambulance paramedics bustled inside. They glared at Slater as though it was his fault Sara was injured. One knelt by her and gently lifted the towel examined the wound on her cheek.

The other said. "What happened here?"

"She's been attacked. Someone came in here and

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attacked her. Is she going to be all right?" He hesitated. "I'll call the police. Where are you taking her?"

"Are you a relative of hers?"

"No. We are just very good friends."

His partner was completing his examination. "You ready Arthur? She needs to go to hospital without delay."

Alarm went through Slater. "Damn it, tell me. How is she? Will she be all right?"

"She's in a bad way. She possibly has some broken ribs and that gash on her face. We will not know what else until we get her to St Bart's hospital. What's her name?"

"Sara Carr. Her parents are dead and she has a brother in New Zealand. I don't know if she has any other family in this country."

The paramedic turned back to Sara placing an oxygen mask over her nose and mouth. "Sara, Sara, can you hear me, Sara? We are going to lift you onto a stretcher. We will soon have you looked after in hospital." The paramedics eased her onto a stretcher and wheeled it along to the elevator. They lifted the stretcher into the ambulance and began to close the doors.

Slater stopped them closing the door. "I'll come with you."

"That's reserved for relatives. That's all we take, normally."

"I'm not related but I might be all she has right

now.”

“Come on then, be quick and get in.”

Quickly he switched off his engine and locked his car then he scrambled aboard the ambulance and the man slammed the doors shut. With a wail of sirens, they raced to St Bart’s hospital, using the radio to call in advance for a trauma team to be standing by. They skidded to a halt outside the A&E and there was a bustle of white and green hospital gowns as they wheeled Sara into the trauma room.

Slater paced up and down the corridor, anxious for her. He blamed himself for involving her in his investigation and endangering her life. He should have realised how desperate these men were after the murder of Carter and the abortive attempt to get information from him by the two thugs. He wondered if the men that attacked him were the same two men that attacked Sara. He vowed to find them and exact retribution. He sat in a chair, then stood, then sat again. He paced back and forth willing the doctors to hurry and make her well.

A voice broke into his anxiety. “Well, well, Mr Slater, we seem to keep running into each other, don’t we?”

Slater turned and saw DCI Lane standing behind him with the inevitable Sgt Hobbs at his shoulder. “Hello, Chief Inspector, Sgt Hobbs. I’m sure glad to see you.”

“What happened to Miss Carr, Slater?”

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He told him in short sentences, and then added. "I'm going to find them, Lane. I am going to find them and make them pay for this, if it's the last thing I do."

"You don't know who you are dealing with, Slater. These are desperate men. They will stop at nothing to achieve their ends. You'll do best to leave them to the law."

Slater sneered, still angry at himself. "The law didn't do much to help her, did it?"

Lane frowned. "Had she called us instead of you we may have been better placed to apprehend them."

"Yeah right," he said derisively. "Do you know who's responsible?"

"Slater, if I knew I would not be telling you, there is to be no vigilantes' on my patch," Lane ordered.

Damn it, Lane knows something, Slater thought, he damn well knows who's responsible. "You know something about this, don't you, Lane? You know who did this."

Lane stared at him, his face expressionless. "All I can say, Slater, is this is bigger than you can handle and I suggest that you leave it to the professionals before you get someone else hurt."

Slater bristled at the accusation but before he could respond, a doctor came out of the operating theatre, pulling his facemask down to rest beneath his chin. There was blood on his surgical gloves. Slater rushed to his side. "How is she, Doc?"

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The Doctor stared at him. "Who are you?"

"A friend. I found her and called the ambulance. How is she?"

The doctor glanced at DCI Lane who gave him an almost imperceptible nod, a nod that Slater did not miss. The doctor told him. "She has three broken ribs and a bad cut on her cheek as well as several lacerations along her stomach and breasts. One wound penetrated her ribs for about two inches, probably a knife, but thankfully missed any vital organs. She'll be all right given time in recuperation and some further medical treatment."

A wave of relief swept through Slater. "Thank god for that. When can she go home?"

"She is a strong woman and if she progresses as well as the early indications' are she can go home in about a week or ten days."

"Ten days? I need to get her somewhere safe. Can I see her?"

"She's under sedation at the moment, but perhaps you can see her for a few moments when she wakes." He glanced at his watch. "She'll probably be under for at least another hour. I must carry on as I have other patients waiting for my considerable expertise." He grinned and strode along the corridor.

"Slater, can I talk to you for a moment?" Lane curled a finger in a summons. They retreated to a quiet corner. "I'm going to leave an officer outside her door, until she is fit to leave the hospital."

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Did this mean Lane realised the danger she might be in? “Why. Do you think she’s in danger?”

Lane’s piercing grey eyes studied Slater intently. “I think this was a botched murder attempt and is probably connected to the people you are investigating in your rather amateurish way.”

Slater felt angry. Lane knew Sara had been in danger and had failed to let him know. “Why didn’t you tell me? I could have protected her.”

“I doubt that. Your investigation has stirred up a hornets’ nest and I want you to tread carefully from now on before you get stung. And, Slater, do your best to keep me informed.”

“Like you inform me?”

“Police investigations are confidential, you know that.”

“So are mine. Did you find out about those two men, Harmon and Butterworth?”

“I have not had time, Slater. In any case I would not be allowed to divulge information to an amateur detective.”

Lane thinks I am amateur does he? Well he’d show him. “Have you found out about Department Y yet?”

Lane obviously had decided to come clean. “No,” he said simply.

“I have.” Slater felt well pleased at the expression on the DCI’s face. “Not so amateur now, hey? Lane? What do you think of that?”

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“Tell me about Department Y, Slater. What is it?”

“Its murder Lane, murder, and perhaps murder on a grand scale. That’s what they do there. Department Y is a base to murder people.”

“Now, keep a hold of your imagination, Slater.”

“Lane, believe me or not, I don’t care, but I witnessed a murder while I was down there. I saw a man deliberately pushed under a bus, it killed him. While everyone was watching the poor wretch being ground under the wheels, the killer disappeared into the crowd. They were watching it happen on PC Monitors in Department Y and they never turned a hair. Apparently, someone, someone in government, someone up high, ordered the murder. The operator I was watching wrote *Mission Accomplished* on his pad.”

“And you saw this with your own eyes?”

“Damn it, Lane, I was looking over his bloody shoulder while it happened.”

“When was this?”

“Three or four hours ago.”

“Do you know who it was that was killed?”

Slater threw him a contemptuous glance. “Come on, Lane, how the fuck would I know that?”

Lane shrugged. “Just wondered. How did you get in there?”

Slater told him how, with the help of Sara’s borrowed pass, he had hidden in the ceiling of the rest rooms until the building had quietened. He told him

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where the hidden lift button was and how he had got into ATSC and how they had seen him. He told him how they had accepted him at face value until he had wandered into Department Y. Then the shit had hit the fan. He told him that Department Y seemed to be a separate department to ATSC.

Lane said. "What is this ATSC?"

Slater said. "It's the department for Anti Terrorist Surveillance and Collation. They carry out surveillance on politicians and industrialist. Did you know there is an exit from ATSC that leads to an alley alongside the Hilton Hotel on Park Lane?"

"That's very interesting, Mr Slater."

Lane pulled out his mobile phone but an orderly walked past. "Sorry, you cannot use a mobile in here."

He beckoned Slater. "Come with me Slater. Sgt, look after Miss Carr until I can get you relived."

Hobbs glared at them both. "Yes sir," he growled, obviously unhappy at being relegated to the role of nursemaid. Slater was sure he would prefer to be party to what was happening.

Lane strode rapidly out of the building followed by Slater. It amused him the way Lane had taken him *back into the fold*. Once outside Lane again pulled out his mobile. "Sgt Jones? DCI Lane here. Get a car and a spare body to St Bart's hospital, Sgt Hobbs will brief the man." He paused. "Find one." Another pause. "I know we're pushed and don't have enough men—we

never do. This is not a request, just find a damn body and get him to the hospital pronto.” Yet another pause. “Yes, yes, I’ll sign off any overtime required.” He closed the connection. “Come on Slater.”

“Where we going? I need to go back and see Sara.”

Lane glanced sideways at Slater. “She’s not going anywhere right now and I have Sgt Hobbs watching out for her and later there will be some my men who will be making sure she is all right.”

“So where are we going then?”

He tapped the side of his nose secretively. “You’ll see. I want you to meet someone.” Lane was mysterious.

“Who’s that then?”

“You’ll see,” he wouldn’t say where they were going or who they were going to meet.

“Lane, you damn well know I don’t have to come with you if I don’t want to.”

Lane stopped in the act of opening his car door. “Of course not. You are free to pursue whatever course you wish, but if you want to help Miss Carr...”

That was enough and he quickly got into Lane’s car. Lane drove west out of London and eventually turned off the M4 near Maidenhead and into a quiet leafy road bordered by huge, very expensive looking houses. He drew up to an Iron Gate recessed in a tall brick wall. He pressed a button on a post and an unintelligible electronic squawk answered. “Lane.” He

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snapped back. There was a rumble of wheels, electric motors whirled and the gate slid to one side. A long driveway curved round to another gate. Lane pulled in and stopped outside a mansion that could have graced a Hollywood boulevard and could have even been the home of a music or film superstar. He opened his door and got out of the car. "Come along, Slater, you've got to be on your best behaviour now."

Slater grinned disarmingly. "I'm always on my best behaviour, Chief Inspector, you know that."

Lane frowned. He was unconvinced by Slater's apparent sincerity. "Just see that you are." He rang the doorbell adjacent to massive oak doors and distant chimes sounded inside.

Well I'll be damned, Slater thought when an immaculately dressed butler opened the door. "Yes sir?" the butler was old and grey haired the epitome of an English butler and he wondered what he was doing still up at 0300 hours, didn't butlers sleep? The butler looked down his nose at them. "Can I help you?" then he recognised Lane. "Oh, it's you chief inspector. Good morning."

"Yes. Hello, Benson. I'd like to see the Minister."

"I'll see if he is free, Sir."

"Oh, he'll be free, Benson, take my word for it. He is expecting me."

"Yes, Sir. And this gentleman?"

"Mr Slater is with me."

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“Very good, Sir, please come in.” He let them in and the door closed with a solid thud behind them to the sound of electronic locks shutting them in. He led them across a wide hall, gleaming with highly polished wood and showed them into an anteroom where he invited them to sit on Queen Anne style chairs. Slater fingered the chairs fine wood. “Do you reckon these are the real thing, Lane, or do you think they’re repro?”

The butler sniffed and looked down his nose at Slater as he discreetly withdrew and closed the door on them.

“What’s going on Lane, he seems to know you. What the hell are we fucking doing *here*?”

Lane frowned in annoyance. “You’ll know all in good time, Slater. And I said *your best behaviour*, if that’s your best behaviour then heaven help us.”

What the hell was Lane up to? The DCI seemed to be playing some kind of game that he knew nothing about. Was this to do with the men that attacked Sara? Was it anything to do with Caruthers and the MOD or was it all about ATSC and Department Y. He scratched his head in frustration, annoyed with himself for not being able to get at the truth, annoyed that the answers were out of reach.

The door opened and Benson said. “This minister will see you now, sir.”

Slater went to stand but the DCI waved his hand at him to stay seated. “Not you, Slater, you wait here. I’ll

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be back for you in a few minutes when I have briefed the Minister.”

Slater resented to what amounted to a snub but dutifully sat again. Time stretched on and he wandered about the room looking at the paintings. He was not an expert on art but thought he could tell they were the real thing, not fakes. He shook his head at the massive show of wealth on the walls. *Sure beats my Magnolia emulsion and photo of my mum*, he thought.

Thirty minutes later Lane returned. He poked head round the door and said nothing but simply jerked his head for Slater to follow him. He led him into a huge study. It was big enough to be part of a movie set rather than in a house. An old oak desk as big as a tennis court stood in the centre of the room and pools of light from two desk lamps spilled over the dark red leather inlay. The rest of the room was in semi-darkness but in the dim light, he could see that bookcases filled with leather-bound books lined the walls. A man was sitting at the desk, his face partially in shadow.

“Minister, this is Jack Slater, the private eye I told you about.”

Slater grinned. “Please Chief Inspector; I’m a Private enquiry agent.” Slater thought that the face of the man behind the giant oak desk was vaguely familiar.

“Quiet Slater,” commanded Lane. “This is Minister Sheppard, Sir Peter Sheppard. He wants to talk to you about Department Y.”

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Slater snapped his fingers, now he had the identity of the man in shadow. "Got it, you're Secret service aren't you?"

"Yes, Slater, Sir Peter is the boss of the Secret Services," Lane told him. "Now be quiet and tell him what he wants to know."

He grinned. "If I am to be quiet how can I tell him anything? Do I be quiet or do I talk?"

Lane had a warning note in his voice. "Slater..." He turned toward the desk. "Sorry about Slater, Minister. He does not mix in these circles normally and he's a little out of his depth."

"Quite," the man behind the desk said in a soft but firm voice.

Slater studied him and although the minister was sitting, he had the distinct impression that he was quite tall. His shadowed face was slim and he had neatly cut hair with fashionable grey showing at his temples. A Brigade of Guards tie fashioned in a Windsor knot completed a pin stripe suit and waistcoat. It reminded him of Smith who also wore the same tie. He wondered if the Minister knew Smith. If he did then he, Slater, might be in trouble. "Mr Smith wears the same tie as you," he said before he could curb his tongue.

"Minister, or Sir Peter, to you, Slater," growled Lane.

Slater grinned. "Don't you have some criminals to catch Chief Inspector? Like illegal dog pooping or

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something?”

Lane did not rise to the jibe.

The Minister spoke directly to Slater for the first time. “What’s this about my tie, Mr Slater?”

“Brigade of Guards, isn’t it?”

“Yes it is. It is only worn by former members of the regiment, why do you ask?”

“Mr Smith has the same kind of tie; ergo he must have also been in the guards”

“Yes, you are correct, Mr Slater. If he wears the Guards tie and has the right to do so, then he would have served with the brigade. Tell me, who is this Mr Smith?”

What did he know of Smith? Not a lot. “I don’t know much about him but Smith is the supposed boss of ATSC and Department Y. I don’t like him very much. He’s an arrogant son of a bitch.”

“Very interesting, Mr Slater.”

“What is the ATSC?”

“Anti Terrorist Surveillance and Collation, surely you know. It must be governed by your people.”

“That is not a part of MI5 or MI6” He turned to lane. “Chief Inspector, please arrange to check out this man Smith. I want his history from birth to now. Of course, you will have to rely on your own resources, as you are aware, this is a matter where very few can be trusted. I want to know more of this ATSC.”

Lane made a few notes in his pocket book. “Yes

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sir.” He turned to Slater. “Tell me about Smith.” Slater told him what little he knew.

Sir Peter Sheppard coughed. “Now Mr Slater. Tell me about ATSC and Department Y.”

“As I said it’s called Anti Terrorist Surveillance and Collation. ATSC for short. In ATSC they have...” For three hours Minister Sheppard, the minister responsible for all security services in Britain and answerable only to the Prime Minister himself quizzed him about what he had seen in the basement. Not a detail escaped him and he was as astute as anyone Slater had ever known which probably explained why he held such a high position and made a Knight of the Realm.

“Thank you, Mr Slater, is that everything?” he said when Slater had finished his account.

“That’s about it.”

“Do you think you can you get back into the basement?”

Slater laughed. “Am I being recruited into the secret service then?”

“No, Slater.” Lane said, annoyed.

“Just a minute, Chief Inspector.” The Minister waved Lane to silence. He said. “Is that what you want, Mr Slater, to be in the secret service?”

Slater grinned again. “I sure like the sound of it, don’t you? I can say, *my name’s Slater—Jack Slater*,” he mimicked. “Don’t you think it has a certain ring to it?”

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“This is a serious matter, Slater, just answer Sir Peter,” Lane warned.

Slater ignored him. “Would I have a number, like James Bond, you know, 007 or something?”

“Slater...” warned Lane again, his voice getting angry.

Slater glanced from one to the other, his face serious. “Don’t you think it’s about time I was told what the fucking hell’s going on?”

Lane shook his head. “Sorry, we can’t do that.”

Slater shook his head, angry at them both. “Listen, Lane, I’ve had one informant murdered, I’ve seen a person murdered, I’ve personally been beaten up in an effort to get information from me, my office has been ransacked and a friend of mine has been put into hospital.” He drew a breath, and then went on. “All this is probably by the same people, the people who own, apparently, the proverbial lion’s den, that you both expect me to stick my damn head into. I’d say that you *can* tell me what’s going on.” Lane glanced at Sheppard who gave a small nod, then went on. “All right, Slater, listen.”

“I’m all ears.”

“We have been on the track of these people for about three years. We have had a number of murders that we suspected had originated from that building but have been unable to confirm it, until now, although we still have no tangible proof.”

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Slater said. "You have probable cause for a warrant."

"Yes I know, but we want them all, not just the lackeys at the bottom of the heap. CID and MI5 have been conducting extensive enquiries but have been unable to find out who they are or how they operate or even why. We have discovered that several police officers may have turned criminal although we don't know the extent of this or how many. This is why we have been forced to restrict any details of the operation to a very few select officers. In view of the suspected leak, we cannot yet apply for a warrant, as you would appreciate. We don't wish to alert them as to our intentions."

Slater nodded. "Wow, they're very nice people." He was not surprised; after all, he had seen it for himself on the monitors in Department Y.

Sir Peter Sheppard leaned back in his chair with an expensive creak of leather and lit a small cigar. He puffed a cloud of smoke towards the ceiling as though he was in men's club in Mayfair. He shut his eyes and appeared to be nodding off.

There was a discrete knock on the door and Benson appeared. "Yes sir?"

Damn, thought Slater, *how did he call him?* He hadn't seen him press a button nor heard a bell ring.

"I think some refreshments for our visitors, please, Benson."

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“Yes Sir.” Benson closed the door again.

“Anyway,” Lane went on. “We don’t know how they recruit their people—but we suspect that a number of senior ministers could be involved.”

Slater frowned. “Seems to be a lot you don’t know, Chief Inspector. Is there anything that you *do* know?”

Lane frowned. “Slater, do you want me to tell you or not?”

Slater nodded contritely. “Yes, sorry, of course I do.”

“Then shut up and listen. There have been 23 unexplained, and I might add, unsolved, murders in the last twelve months alone. Most of these appear to be motiveless. Victims range from government ministers, members of the armed forces to civilians in government jobs or undertaking military contracts. Military seems to be the only connection.”

“How do you know they are all carried out by the same people, or organisation?”

“We don’t, but for the moment, we attribute any unsolved murder to them. We’ll sort it out later when we get evidence to the contrary.”

“Do you think my client is involved?”

“Caruthers? No, we think he is nothing more than a scapegoat for someone who is selling arms, stolen military arms, on the black market. Of course, he might be involved in some way but we think it’s a separate thing. We need someone on the inside, someone to go

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back into the basement, and you seem to be the best person for this.”

Slater laughed derisively. “You tell me exactly what bastards and murderers they are and you want me to go back in there? You must be kidding.”

Sir Peter had sat quietly; gently drawing on his cigar, during Lane’s explanation, spoke up. “We never joke, Mr Slater. We need you to help us.”

He stared at the minister. “You must have plenty of operatives in the secret service that you can draw upon.”

“Yes, of course we do have plenty of undercover agents. Trouble is, Mr Slater, we are a bit limited for we do not know whom we can trust. Some agents have turned to the other side. The trouble is we don’t know who they are. We are sure there is a mole in both MI-5 and the CID. Only Chief Inspector Lane and myself, and a few select personnel know about this, and now of course you.”

“Then sack them all and start again.”

Sir Peter sighed, puffing out a cloud of cigar smoke. “I only wish it were that simple, Mr Slater, but it isn’t.”

Benson discreetly entered and laid coffee things on a side table. He poured them each a cup and withdrew.

“Anyway,” Slater picked up a cup and went on. “I thought MI-5 and MI-6 dealt with counter intelligence not criminal stuff.”

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Lane sounded annoyed. "Yes it does, Slater, but as you know MI5 also deals with internal security and we have not yet decided that there is not a threat to our national security. However, Sir Peter has raised a special department within MI-5 to deal with certain, rather select, internal matters, such as we have here. We keep it from parliament and it's only known by a few MP's and of course, the Prime Minister himself."

"And now you, me and God knows who else knows all about it?" Slater said with his hands held out palms uppermost.

"Yes. Now be quiet and answer the minister."

"What was the question?"

"Can you get back into the basement?"

"Sure I could, but I'd get caught. They now know who I am and my face would be recognised." There was no way he'd be able to do it again. Then he remembered the back way, through the alley. If he could get past Henry, he might be able to look beyond the two doors in the corridor. That would at least be something.

Sheppard and Lane said nothing.

"Are you trying to get me killed? I'd be no good to you if I'm dead."

Lane shrugged in a non-committal way. "Think about it, Slater. Here's your chance to find the men who attacked Miss Carr."

"Yes and get myself killed into the bargain which won't help anyone. And, Lane, I *am* going to find out

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who they are, with or without any help from you.”

“And how will you do that?”

He grinned. “Don’t worry, Lane, I have my methods and sources.” Two hours later, he and Lane left the Ministers residence. He had given the minister a vague promise that he would *think about it*.

He and Lane dropped in the hospital to see Sara. The doctor begrudgingly allowed Slater to see her for two minutes only and he left Lane talking to the PC appointed to guard her. Her head was swathed in bandages and a broad strip of plaster covered the cut on her cheek. One eye was a purple black and a wave of bitter anger swept through him at the perpetrators of the cowardly attack. Through an opening in her hospital gown, he could see that bandages covered her upper body. “Sara,” he said softly.

She opened one eye while the bruised eye remained puffy and shut. “Jack? Is that you? Hi, how are you?”

“Yes, it’s me, I’m here.”

She reached for his hand and grasped it in hers and she clenched it tightly. “I’m glad you’ve come. I’m frightened. What happened, what did those men want?”

He squeezed her fingers soothingly. “I’m here now. I don’t know what they were after but I’ll look after you—keep you safe. Do you know who they were?”

She shook her head and winced. “No. I had never seen them before.”

“How did they get in?”

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“They must have buzzed someone else’s apartment. When they knocked on my door, I thought it might have been you, that’s why I opened it.” He wondered why she would think it was him at one o’clock in the morning. She went on. “They pushed me inside and did this.” She gave a small smile. “I should have realised that you wouldn’t come up unannounced.”

So much for security, he thought, when in the early hours, you can press any bell and someone will let you in just like someone had let him in. “So you didn’t recognise them.”

“No, but I think I heard one of the men mention Figgis, I’m not sure. Is he something to do with all this?”

Damn Figgis. He might have known that he would have been involved. “I don’t know but I’ll find out. Can you describe the men?”

She described her attackers to the best of her ability and she was describing the men who attacked him in the garage. “I’ll find them, Sara.” Before she could answer, the doctor hustled him out. He promised her he would come back to see how she was progressing. He got Lane to drop him off at Sara’s apartment so he could collect his car.

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Chapter 19

Slater tried Carter's girl friend again and to his surprise, she answered the phone. "Hello." Her voice sounded young, not what he had expected. He introduced himself, the purpose of his call and she agreed to see him. Camden Town was not far and within thirty minutes, he was ringing the bell to her flat. She lived on the third floor of a twenty-story tower block.

Her face peered through the gap in the door. "Who are you?"

"Jack Slater. We spoke a short while ago." He pushed his card through the gap.

She took it and closed the door. There was a rattle of the security chain and locks and she opened the door to let him in. She closed the door behind him with the clunk of several locks and the rattle of the chain again. Security was obviously a priority to her.

"Miss Dawson?" She looked to be not much over twenty-five years old, a significant age difference to Carter who was forty-seven. Blond hair tumbled about a young looking face devoid of makeup. Blue eyes stared at him from beneath lowered lashes. She had on a Tee shirt and leisure pants. She was slim, had a small waist and large breasts. It was obvious that she was not wearing a bra for her nipples were erect and pushing hard against the fabric of her tee shirt. Fluffy slippers

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with a huge padded face of Mickey Mouse on them were on her feet. "You're Miss Dawson?"

She frowned in annoyance and folded her arms across her breasts defensively. "Yes. Do you have a problem with that?"

He shook his head and smiled. "I'm sorry. You're not quite what I expected."

"What is it you want, Mr Slater?" Her voice was soft and sweet with an almost musical quality to it.

"I'm looking into the murder of Jimmy Carter. His death might be something to do with the case I'm working on."

"The police are already looking into his murder, Mr Slater.

He wondered if she had been talking to Abigail Carter who had said the very same thing. "He may have been killed because of some information he had for me." He thought he saw some recognition flash across her eyes before the shutters came down.

"Why do you think I can help?"

"What was your relationship with Jimmy?"

She frowned and he didn't think she was going to answer him. Then she said. "We were very close."

He raised his eyebrows.

She became even more defensive. "All right, I was his girlfriend. He was my boyfriend. Satisfied?"

Slater said nothing.

"I know," she sighed as though she had had the

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same conversation before. "I know it looks unlikely but there it is. We really loved each other very much."

He smiled disarmingly. "Did he talk about his work in Curzon Place?"

"Curzon Place? I don't know. All he said was that he went to work in a new department and found it a bit boring. He said he wished he hadn't taken the job but it was a promotion. He never spoke about it much beyond that."

He wondered why Carter hadn't confided in her. "He phoned me just before he was murdered. Told me he had some information for me but didn't tell me what it was. Did he happen to tell you what he was going to tell me?"

"No he didn't. I didn't even know he was going to meet anyone. He had said something once that I thought was rather strange though. I don't know if it was to do with his work."

"What was that?"

"He kept saying he had to tell someone but no one would believe him. He said that a number of times. I tried to get him to tell me what it was that was troubling him but he wouldn't. Then he kept talking about some project thing but I can't remember what it was."

"Could it have been the Alpha Project?"

"Yes, that's it; at least I think that was what it was. He kept saying he had to tell someone. It was too important to keep it quiet."

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“He didn’t tell you what it was?”

“No, but I know it was obviously bothering him because he became very withdrawn and serious, it was not like him at all, he was normally a jolly person. I began to think he was becoming bored with me.”

“Did he leave any papers here?”

She glanced sideways at him. “No. He did keep some things in the bedroom though.” Her face flushed. “You can look around if you want, I don’t mind.”

“I would like to, but only if you’re sure you really don’t mind. You don’t have to help me at all.”

She shook her head. “Be my guest. I’ll put the kettle on. Will coffee be all right? Or perhaps you would like something a bit stronger.”

“Coffee will be fine, thank you.”

“He didn’t stay here all the time, you know, but he kept a few things in the chest of drawers in there.” She pointed to a door.

He walked into what was obviously her bedroom. It was all done out in pink with ribbons and bows. There were teddy bears everywhere, on shelves and a dozen or so on the bed. There were two drawer units. He pulled open the first drawer. It was full of bras and knickers, flimsy scraps of lace that wouldn’t cover anything. He forced his mind away from imagining her dressed in the tiny scraps of material. She was evidently a very sexy woman, no wonder Carter liked her. The next drawer held slips and Tee shirts. This was hers unless Carter

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was a cross dresser. He turned his attention to the second unit.

This had to be his for it there were some socks and underpants in it. He rummaged about and found a packet of condoms, several erotic picture novels, and some porn movies. He pushed these to one side and delved deeper to the far reaches of the drawer.

“Tea is ready,” she said from the doorway. He saw her eyes look at the sex books in the drawer and her face flushed a bright red.

“Sorry,” he was embarrassed that she knew he had seen them. He shoved the drawer closed. “I’m nearly done.” The last two drawers only contained some jumpers and shirts. He looked in the wardrobe but that only contained woman’s clothing. Yet another blank. There did not seem to be any papers or anything else that could help him. He went back to the lounge. She was pouring some tea into mugs, her face averted from his.

“There’s nothing there. Did he have a briefcase or anything?”

She shook her head and handed him a mug. “No, sorry, he didn’t. He only come here for...well...er...you know.” He nodded and could understand how Carter would have loved sex with a girl like this. Perhaps he had been a lion in bed to attract one so young. She looked embarrassed again and he knew she was trying to be helpful even though it was embar-

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rassing for her.

“Did he have any friends?”

“I don't know, we only talked about us, you know, we had no interest in anyone else.”

He took the tea and sipped, it was hot and very sweet. He was stuck. He had no idea which way to turn from here. He wondered what the illusive Alpha project was. He seemed to be no nearer finding out any of the answers to his rising list of questions. He finished his tea. “Thanks for letting me look around. I didn't find anything to help.”

She smiled shyly. “Sorry. I thought he might have had something here for you. I've not been much help, have I?”

He put the mug on the table and stood up. “That's the life of a PI unfortunately. Thanks again. Although, you have helped eliminate some things in my mind.” She brightened.

He said. “Have the police been to see you?”

She shook her head, her heavy breasts jiggling with the movement. “No, will they want to see me?”

“They might. They will want to find out all they can about James. The more they know about a victim the better they can find out who a murderer is.”

She looked curiously at him. “Do I tell them you have been here?”

He grinned. “Only if they ask.” Then he thought about the two men listed on Carters phone. “Did he ever

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mention a Harry Harmon or Derek Butterworth?”

She shook her head. “No, I don't think so.”

“Okay, thank you Miss Dawson.”

“I'm sorry I can't be any more help.” She went through the unlocking procedure to let him out. The sound of multiple locks seating home followed him to the lift.

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Chapter 20

Slater went to the Black Night bar on Archer Street in Soho. He ordered a beer from the barman, paid and took a long drink from the glass. "Is Winston in?"

The barman knew who Slater was and pressed a button beneath the counter to alert his boss. A huge black man walked from behind screen at back of the bar.

"Yo man," Winston called in his booming voice.

Winston, a black Jamaican 6'6" tall, with shoulders to match, was a friend of Slater's. He was a street wise man and the boss of a powerful West End gang, perhaps one of the best-connected gangs in London. He knew everything about most of the other London criminals and probably knew more about corrupt politicians than the metropolitan police did. He was a good-looking man even though he had several scars sustained in fights during his rise to be the gang boss, a position he had held for more than ten years.

A few years ago by chance, Slater had saved his life when a rival gang sought to oust the big man's position and take over his territory. They used a stolen car in an attempt to run him down and probably intended to kill him. Although Slater had not known at the time, just whom the big black man was, saw the incident unfolding and in a flying tackle thrust the big

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Jamaican out of the way. He had almost fallen under the wheels of the vehicle himself. Winston maintained that he owed Slater for his life. Now he wanted to call in the debt that Winston insisted he owed him.

“sup man?” The black man queried, his teeth gleaming white in the ebony of his face.

They shook hands and touched fisted knuckles. “You’re looking good, Winston.”

“Never better dude, but yuh lookin’ troubled man. Yuh got a problem bro. Yuh wana tell ole Winston abaht it?”

He glanced at the bartender. “Winston, can I see you in private for a few minutes?”

With a jerk of his head Winston indicated that Slater should follow him behind the bar screen to his office. “What’s going down, bro?” he asked when he had shut the office door, leaving the hustle of the bar outside.

Slater came straight to the point. “Winston, I’m looking for two men. They put a good friend of mine in hospital. They beat her up and stabbed her. She didn’t have a chance and now they scarred her for life. They may have been trying to kill her because of something she did for me.”

Winston had never waged war on women. “Hey man, that sucks.” He smiled, his teeth gleaming. “This girl, she yo honey?”

Slater smiled at the thought of Sara being his

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honey. “Not yet but I’m working on it. Not sure she thinks the same as me though.”

“What makes yuh think I can tell yuh who dem homeys are?”

Slater sighed. “Winston, if there’s anyone in London who would know or could find out who they are, it’s you. I want these men bad, real bad. And you know what’s happening here on your patch.”

Winston opened a drinks cabinet and produced two glasses and a bottle of Islay Malt whisky. He poured a generous measure into each glass and handed one to Slater. “I hear dat dem homeys are real bad dudes, yuh know what I’m sayin’. Cheap hoodlums but very bad news.”

“Damn it, Winston, you know something, don’t you?”

“The word is out on da street dat dis had gone down yuh know what I’m sayin’, an’ I tink I know who are de perpetrators.”

“Who, Winston, who was it? Tell me.”

“Yo, dude, gimme a chance. Lemme check ma source first.” He gave his wide smile; his teeth glowed in the light, his black skin gleaming, the office lights glinting on his baldhead.

Slater frowned. “Just give me their names, Winston.”

“De word is dat a homey named Charlie McGurk is one of de perpetrators. I ‘don know who de other homey

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is—yet. Da word is dat McGurk runs with a dude called Ernie Taylor. So dis Taylor is probably de other dude. Yuh know what I’m sayin’?”

“Where can I find him, this Charlie McGurk?”

Winston scratched his head. “Now dat is sometin’ I gota find out, so lemme find out. Yuh know wat I’m saying bro.”

“Can you do that and let me know, please, Winston. I’ve got to make these people pay for what they did to Sara. We’ll be even if you can find out for me.”

“Okay, okay. Lemme see what I can do, bro.” He ran his hand over his shiny baldhead. “And, bro, I will always owe yuh.”

Slater took a deep drink of his whisky knowing that Winston would do his utmost for him. “Thanks, man.”

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Chapter 21

Slater rang DCI Lane. "Slater here, Lane. Have you heard of a man called Charlie McGurk?" he asked, coming straight to the point.

There was a brief moment of silence and then Lane said. "What do you know of McGurk, Slater?"

Damn it, didn't he ever answer a question? "It's possible McGurk was responsible for the attack on Sara Carr."

"Charlie McGurk is nothing but a cheap hoodlum. He's for hire to anyone who needs a strong arm to do the dirty work. He's isn't the brightest of people but we have been unable to pin anything on him because his victims don't complain. We think he has carried out at least one murder but have been unable to prove it."

He wondered why Lane was being so informative. "Sounds like a nice man. Do you know his address?"

"His last known address was a flat in Mile End. I...er, I hope you're not thinking of taking matters into your own hands, Slater."

He chuckled. "Of course not Chief Inspector, would I do that? What's McGurk's address?"

With some satisfaction, satisfaction that he kept concealed from Slater, DCI Lane gave him the last full known address of said Charlie McGurk. He knew that Slater would get something from McGurk where he was

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unable to through legal channels and the lack of evidence.

Twenty minutes later, Slater parked his car a few blocks from the address given him by DCI Lane. His phone rang and it was Winston confirming that Ernie Taylor was the second man and he was indeed going to the correct address.

Opening the glove compartment, he withdrew a short telescopic steel baton, which he put in his pocket along with a brass knuckleduster, both illegal items in the eyes of the law. Lane would have a fit if he knew what the intended use was to be. It was cold and a stiff breeze was blowing down his neck when he walked the short distance to the block of flats.

The neglected twelve-story block would benefit from maintenance and a lick of paint. Boarded up windows with sheets of plywood facing the street where glass should be, gave the building a blind look. He wondered if the occupants had gone away or was in hiding. Old bicycles with bent wheels, a bicycle frame minus wheels, several shopping trolleys and an old rusting washing machine littered the public spaces about the bottom of the building along with heaps of wet cardboard and piles of undelivered newspapers. The smell of damp and rotting garbage pervaded the air.

Although he didn't expect to see McGurk's name on the mailboxes in the foyer, he looked anyway and he was not disappointed. It wasn't there. He knew that the

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man lived on the seventh floor so he pressed the button for the lift. It was out of order. With a sigh, he started on the stairs. Seven stories, fourteen flights of thirteen steps—*how did the residents put up with it on a daily basis*, he thought. At the head of each double flight of stairs was a small square landing littered with papers and other detritus of a community that didn't care. Each landing contained six doors, six flats on each floor housing how many souls. Sounds of music and voices drifted along each landing and somewhere a baby was screaming for attention. A harsh voice shouted for it to shut up. A dog barked and it sounded like it was a big one.

He arrived outside flat 72 slightly out of breath and vowed to work out more. He rested his head against the door, listening for sounds of anyone inside. He was unable to tell if the sounds he could hear were coming from McGurk's apartment or from one of the others on this floor. Music was playing somewhere, a jazzy rock beat that was too loud, the bass thumping its beat and drowning the melody. With his heart pounding painfully in his breast, he knocked on the door to number 72.

There was a moments silence and then steps approached from inside. "'Oose there? 'Wat ya want?'"

Slater pulled his baton from his pocket and extended it in anticipation of its use. It was a constructed of spring steel with a knob of solid steel at the end.

Wielded correctly, it could numb a person's arm for several minutes. He mumbled something un-intelligible in reply and knocked again, louder this time.

"Fur gawd's sake." McGurk shouted through the door. "Watchya want?"

Slater mumbled, "UPS delivery, for a Mr McGurk." He knocked insistently. There was a rattle of security chain and locks. The door opened a crack and McGurk peered through the gap. With all his strength, Slater rammed his shoulder against the door and the safety chain burst apart, the door swung violently inwards with a splintering of wood throwing McGurk to the floor in a shower of wood chips and flakes of paint. McGurk reached toward his belt and fearing he was reaching for a weapon slammed the baton with all his strength down upon McGurk's right arm to the satisfying sound of breaking bones.

"Argh. Wat the fuck," McGurk howled in pain staring at his arm in amazement. "Ya broke me fuckin' arm."

Slater guessed that nobody in the other apartments would take any notice of his howl of pain. They had probably heard it all before and kept themselves to themselves. "Hello, Charlie McGurk," he said softly as he carefully shut and bolted the apartment door. "You *are* Charlie McGurk aren't you?" He kicked the splinters of wood away from underfoot, folded his baton and slid it into his pocket. He reached around McGurk

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and retrieved a .32 Italian Berretta from his belt.

He held the weapon by the barrel. "Tut tut, Mr McGurk, I hope you have a license for this."

"'oo the fuck are you?"

He slid the Berretta in his pocket. "I am disappointed that you don't remember me? I feel quite hurt."

McGurk cradled his broken arm in his other. "'oo the fuck are you?"

"Surely, Mr McGurk, you must remember me? Slater is my name. We last met in an underground garage along with your friend, Ernie." He reached for a chair, straddled it and leant his arms across the back facing McGurk. "It *was* Ernie Taylor with you, wasn't it?"

Recognition and fear swept across the thugs face, mixed in with his pain-wracked features. "Watchya wan' Slater?"

Slater pulled his knuckleduster from his pocket, held it to the light so that the brass gleamed and stroked the smooth metal lovingly. He dusted it, huffed on it and polished it on his jacket. He let McGurk see his intent as he slowly slid it on his fist, holding it at arm's length as though admiring the quality of a diamond ring. "Do you remember, Sara Carr, McGurk?"

McGurk groaned and shook his head. "'oo the fuck is that?"

"Sara Carr is the lovely but rather helpless girl you and your pal beat up and put in hospital." Without warning, his fist lashed out and struck McGurk on the

cheek. The knuckle-duster split the skin over his cheekbone. "You gave her a scar just there, on her cheek, just like that, only you used a knife. She's probably going to have that scar for the rest of her life, McGurk. Very pretty girl is Sara but she now has a great big scar right there." He hit McGurk again to emphasise his point, laying the skin open on his cheek. A gleam of white bone shone through the split tissue. "Yours is not nearly as bad as you gave her but I'm sure we can make it that way." He raised his fist again.

"It wasn't me, it wasn't me," McGurk screamed.

Slater was relentless as he hit McGurk again. "Who was it McGurk? Was it Ernie?"

"If ya know, wat the fuck ya askin me fur?"

Slater slammed the duster against McGurk's mouth. His lip split and a burst of blood spattered down his shirtfront. "Who was it?" Slater looked in disgust at the blood on the knuckle-duster and wiped it clean on McGurk's shirt. "Damn it, do you have to bleed so much?"

"All right, all right fur fuck's sake, Slater. It was Ernie Taylor."

"Did you help him beat her up, McGurk, did you? Did you hold her down so Ernie could beat her up, just like you did to me?"

"Hell, no. It was Taylor, he did it all."

Slater flicked the knuckle-duster across McGurk's cheek. "Damn it Charlie, would you look at that. It has

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a life of its own and it thinks you are lying.”

McGurk howled in pain. “Fur fucks sake, all right, all right, we both did it. Satisfied yuh bastard?”

“Why? Who ordered it?”

“Fuck ya,” he snarled in defiance.

Slater sighed and put the knuckle-duster back in his pocket, retrieved the baton. He slowly extended it and stroked the knob on the end sensuously. Then without warning, he poked McGurk’s broken arm with the end of the baton eliciting a scream of pain from the hapless man. “Looks like you need some encouragement.” He gently tapped the damaged arm again. McGurk screamed. “Who ordered it, McGurk?”

“Damn ya. Go ta ‘ell.”

Slater grinned without humour. “Hmm. I’m quite a patient person. I can keep this up all day and night if you want me to.” A sharp rap with the baton had McGurk sobbing in pain. “But, McGurk, I’ll not ask again, so anytime you want me to stop doing this,” another crack on the arm. “Just talk to me.” Another rap and McGurk fainted.

He made a quick search of the dingy apartment but found nothing to link him to Figgis, Smith or Department Y. There was also nothing relating to the Alpha project, but then, he didn’t know what it was so perhaps he wouldn’t recognise it if he saw it. The apartment was filthy with an unmade bed and dirty crockery in the sink. There was a heap of unwashed underwear on the

table and he wondered if McGurk ever suffered from food poisoning. A groan from the living room alerted him that McGurk was returning to the land of the conscious. He went back into the living room and straddled the chair again.

“Hello Charlie. How are you doing? Is your arm hurting?” Another whack with the baton.

“Fur fuck’s sake. What ya fuckin’ want?” McGurk groaned holding his broken arm trying to shield it from the torture of the baton. Tears of pain streamed down his face.

“Who?” Whack. “Who?” Whack.

“Argh, all right stop it, fur fuck sake, I’ll tell ya.” He remained silent for some time until Slater raised the baton again.

“It was Figgis,” he sobbed. “Figgis ordered us t’ beat ‘er up.”

Damn it, he should have known Figgis was involved. “Why would Figgis order you to do that?”

“Ow t’ fuck do I know? I just do what ‘e tells me.”

“Who does Figgis take his orders from?”

“Dunno,” he moaned in pain, his face contorted in agony.

“And was it Figgis who told you to ransack my office and attack me?”

“I need a doctor, get me a fuckin’ ambulance.”

“All in good time, McGurk, all in good time. Was it Figgis?”

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“Yer, it was Figgis ‘oo told us.”

Slater smiled. “Tell me, just who is *us*, Charlie?”

“What?”

“You keep saying *us* just who is...*us*?”

“Go ta fuckin’ ‘ell.”

Slater sighed for it looked like it was going to be a long night. He rapped McGurk’s arm again. “I’ll not ask again Charlie. Just tell me when to stop.” He poked the arm again.

“Ow. All right, ya bastard, I’ll tell ya.”

Slater waited, and then raised the baton again. “Who is it, Charlie?”

“Fur fucks sake; it was me an Ernie Taylor.”

“Good boy, Charlie, now you are on my wavelength. What were you told to look for in my office?”

He looked at Slater with hatred in his eyes. “Dunno,” he said defiantly.

Slater banged the baton on the floor near McGurk’s arm making him cringe away from the anticipated pain. “Not good enough, Charlie,” he said as he raised the baton again.

“Fur fucks sake, Slater. All right, all right. Yeah, it was damn Figgis—he told us t’ look fur anything that ya might ‘ave found in Carters office.”

“Who killed Carter?”

He looked startled at the shift in the subject. “Dunno,” the defiance creeping back into his voice

The baton swished out without warning, connecting

on the broken arm with a crunch and making McGurk howl with pain. "My, my, you are such a glutton for punishment, Charlie. Was it you?"

McGurk shook his head and the baton flicked out again. "That's funny," mused Slater. "This damn thing also knows when you are lying. Who was it?"

"Dunno."

Whack, the baton struck again.

"All right, ya bastard, all right, t'was me, I killed Carter."

Whack. "What was that, McGurk, I didn't hear you."

He sobbed in pain. "T'was me, I killed Carter, damn ya. T'was Figgis who ordered us t' do it."

Although he knew he was talking about Taylor, he said. "Us being..."

"Me n'Ernie Taylor, we both fuckin' did it together."

"Why did Figgis order the murder of Carter?"

"Dunno," he cringed away from the baton. "We just do as we're told."

"Who does Figgis work for?"

"Dunno," he said cautiously.

Slater believed him. Figgis was just the strong arm of the bosses at the top, the link between executive and thug. He picked up the telephone and called DCI Lane.

"DCI Lane? Slater here. Do you want the man who killed Carter and put Sara in hospital?"

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“What are you up to, Slater?”

“Do you want him or not, Lane?”

“You know I do, but I need him legal.”

“The legalities are up to you.”

“Okay, where are you?”

“I’m at Charlie McGurk’s place. Come and get him.” He replaced the receiver and turned to McGurk. “Now my friend, you’re going to tell the Chief Inspector everything you know.”

“Yeah, sure, Slater,” McGurk had a cunning look on his face.

Slater wondered what he had up his sleeve. “That’s good. Just you remember that.”

Ten minutes later, there was a knock on the door. *It’s too early to be Lane*, Slater thought. *Therefore*, he grinned to himself, *it must be Ernie*. Just elementary deduction, dear boy. Stepping to the door he silently slid the bolts across, flung it open, and pulled Ernie Taylor into the room with a handful of his shirtfront.

“Wat th’ fuck?” Taylor bellowed as Slater sank his fist into his ample stomach. He slid down the wall to the floor, retching. He retched some more and then vomited down his shirtfront. He groaned and gasped for breath. His face looked a bit green. He recovered and his eyes took in the damaged McGurk and instantly recognised Slater. A flicker of fear swept across his face.

“Stay there, Taylor,” snarled Slater. “Don’t fucking move.”

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“’e broke me fuckin arm, Ernie,” McGurk whined plaintively.

Taylor started to get off the floor. “Wat ya want, Slater?”

Slater cracked him across the side of his head with the baton opening a wheal that immediately started oozing blood. “I said stay put, Taylor. One more move and I’ll nail your damn ears to the wall.”

“Ya wouldn’t fuckin’ dare.”

Slater smiled and it was not a pleasant smile, but a smile full of menace that Taylor didn’t like. “You want to try and see if I dare, Taylor? Do you? If you do, try getting up.”

McGurk muttered sullenly from his position on the floor. “Damn it Ernie, ‘ell sure as fuck do it. Look wha’ ‘e did ta me arm.” He flapped his arm and groaned as pain shot across the broken bone.

Taylor subsided on the floor again.

A few minutes later, there was a heavy knock on the door. “Open up, Police.” It was DCI lane.

Slater opened the door. Lane stood on the landing with two burly police constables behind him. “Hello Chief Inspector. Come on in.”

Lane’s eyes flickered past him and saw McGurk and Taylor on the floor. “Everything all right in here, Slater?”

“Sure it is, couldn’t be better. Come on in,” he stepped aside for him.

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Lane turned to his back-up team. "Wait here lads." He stepped into the apartment and Slater shut the door. "What's all this about then, Slater? What's going on?"

Slater pointed to McGurk and Taylor. "These are the two men who killed Carter, beat up Sara and put her in hospital and attacked me."

"I see," Lane said thoughtfully. "Mr McGurk and I are old friends, aren't we Charlie. So you killed Carter?"

"'e made me say that. E beat me up, broke me fuckin arm."

Lane looked thoughtful. "Is that so, Charlie? I find that very hard to believe, a big man like you." He turned to Slater. "Is that true Slater. Did you break his arm?"

"Of course not Chief Inspector. I'm a law abiding citizen, would I do a thing like that?"

"How did he get all this then," he asked as he waved his hand about McGurk's face. "And the broken arm? How did he get that?"

"He fell down the stairs."

"I see. Yes, I do agree those stairs are very dangerous; I nearly took a tumble myself. Now, Mr McGurk, what's this about the murder of Carter?"

"I'm sayin' nuthin'," he dropped his head, staring at the floor sullenly.

Jack flicked out with his baton onto McGurk's arm eliciting a yowl of pain. "Don't be rude, McGurk, answer the Chief Inspector."

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There was a bang on the door and a querulous call from the landing in reply to the yell. "You all right Chief Inspector?"

Lane called back. "Its fine constable, everything is just fine."

McGurk snarled. "Did ya see that? 'E 'it me."

"See what, Charlie? I'm sorry, I'm afraid I had my eyes shut and didn't see anything."

"Fuckin' bastards."

"I'll leave them in your capable hands, Lane. Oh, this was in McGurk's belt." He pulled the Berretta from his pocket, being careful to hold it by the barrel and handed it to Lane.

Lane opened a brown envelope taken from his pocket and Slater dropped the gun in. Ballistics might find that interesting." He grinned. "Let me sort out the constables." He opened the door and spoke to the two men waiting for him. "Get two patrols to take these two men to the nick, one in each car. Put them in separate cells. They are not to communicate with each other in any way. When that's done wait here until I call you, is that clear?" He closed the door leaving the constables to wonder just what had happened. He turned to Taylor. "Ernie Taylor, haven't seen you for a while. How are you doing these days?"

"Awright."

"Now, Ernie, what's this I hear about Charlie McGurk killing Carter? Tell me about it."

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“I’m sayin’ fuckin’ nuthin’,” Taylor was truculent.

Slater whacked the baton on the wall near Taylors head. “It’s *I’m sayin’ fuckin’ nuthin’, Chief Inspector*. Got it, Ernie?”

Taylor started to get to his feet. “I want protective custody,” he demanded, his eyes wide in fear. “Slater’s fuckin’ mad, ‘e is.”

Slater said mildly. “Ernie, I told you what would happen if you didn’t stay on the floor. Take care of him for a moment, please, Chief Inspector.”

“Why, where are you going?”

“Going to see if I can find a hammer and some nails.”

Mystified, Lane merely nodded and said nothing.

“Oh Gawd,” Taylor wailed in fear. “‘E said ‘es gona nail me fuckin’ ears to the wall.”

Lane’s voice had a soothing tone as though he was talking to a child. “Now, now, Ernie, I’m sure Slater won’t do that.”

“Yeah ‘e will. Arrest me. If ya arrest me—ya gota protect me.”

“All in good time. Trouble is, Ernie, I don’t have anything to arrest you for, have I? You were going to tell me about Carter and McGurk.”

McGurk swore. “Don’t say any fuckin’ thing, Ernie. ‘E’s tryin’ ta trick ya.”

Slater came back into the lounge a hammer and two large nails in his hand. “I found some.” He swung the

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hammer in his hand and advanced on the hapless Ernie Taylor.

Taylor cringed against the wall. "Fur fucks sake. All right, all right, it was Charlie wot killed Carter, 'e did it."

McGurk snarled. "Ya fuckin bastard Taylor. I'll git ya fur that."

Slater smiled. "Ahh, the thieves are falling out. It happens all the time. It was Charlie that said it was Ernie who killed Carter."

Taylor glared at McGurk. "Bastard."

For thirty minutes, Taylor confessed to helping McGurk with the killing of Carter and explained how they had carried it out, how he had held Carter down while McGurk stabbed him until he was dead. He confessed to the attack on Sara Carr and Slater. Chief Inspector Lane painstakingly transcribed the confession into his notebook. When he had finished he held it out to Ernie Taylor. "Can you read, Ernie?"

"'Corse I kin fuckin read."

"Then I suggest you read this very carefully. Is it a true account of what you told me?"

Slowly Charlie read the pages in the notebook, his mouth forming the words as he read them. He reached the last page and handed the book back to Lane.

"Well, Ernie? Is it a true account?"

Miserably Taylor nodded.

"I can't hear you."

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“Yeah—it’s true enough.”

Lane looked at him in disgust but keep it out of his voice as he said in a neutral voice. “Are you able to write, Ernie?”

“Yeah, course I kin fuckin’ write.”

Lane handed him a pen and the notebook. “Then write this just as I tell you. *I have read over what Chief inspector Lane wrote in his notebook at my dictation. It is true. I have told this of my own free will and have not been under any coercion to do so. I have been told that I did not have to say anything unless I wished to do so and that it may harm my defence if I fail to say something that I later rely on in court.*”

Licking his lips, he painstakingly wrote as Lane dictated. “Sign it Ernie.” Lane said when Taylor had completed writing. He handed the notebook back to Lane. Lane looked at the scraggly signature and said. “Thank you, Ernie. We’ll have that typed up when we get to the station and you can sign it again.” He turned to McGurk who had been sitting silent and sullen. “Do you wish to add anything, Charlie?”

“Go ta fuckin’ ell,” he snarled.

“As you wish. I think we have enough here, to hang you both. Metaphorically speaking that is.” he tapped the notebook with a finger. “And of course the gun will get you some time.” He turned to Slater. “Do you need to ask any questions, Slater? Can I get rid of them now?”

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"I'm done." Slater had admired the efficient way Lane had got the confession down in his notebook.

Lane opened the flat door. Four constables now stood outside, looking uncomfortable. One was smoking and he quickly ground the butt beneath his heel. "Ok you may take these two to the yard. I remind you that they are to be kept separated at all times, in separate cars and held in separate cells until I get back to the station."

With a click of handcuffs, they led them away with McGurk screaming that he wanted a doctor.

Lane shouted after him. "You'll see a doctor when you get to the station, Charlie."

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Chapter 22

After leaving Taylor and McGurk in the hands of Chief Inspector Lane, Slater dropped by the hospital to see how Sara was progressing. She was, the Doctor informed him, recovering nicely. Although Slater wouldn't have thought so for the bruising on her face was now purple and yellow.

"Hello, Jack," she gave him a pain ridden smile when she saw him.

"Hi, Sara, how do you feel?"

"Terrible," she grumbled. "I hurt in places I didn't know I had or it was possible to hurt."

"Want me to get a doctor to give you something?"

She shook her head and another grimace of pain crossed her features. She tried to cover it up with a smile. "It's all right. You see they gave me this gadget, it's my friend." Her arm emerged from under the covers clutching a handle that had a button on one end. The other end had a tube that disappeared into a machine alongside her bed. "I press this and the pain goes away. Watch this, it's really cool." She pressed the button a number of times and morphine flowed through the cannula in the back of her hand. She started to relax and a sleepy smile spread over her face. "See," she said dreamily. "See, I told you so." Her smile faded and she said. "Jack..." Her voice tailed off and she closed her

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eyes until Slater thought she had gone asleep.

He held her hand in his and stroked her fingers gently with his thumb. "What is it?"

She jumped and her eyes opened briefly. "Am I...am I very much disfigured?" Her voice faded almost a whisper and he thought she was falling asleep again.

He shook his head. "Nah, you'll always be beautiful to me." He hated to lie to her about her injuries but he guessed she would find out the truth soon enough.

"That's good then..." She muttered as her eyes closed once more, and she really did fall asleep.

He leant over the bed and gently kissed her forehead. "You'll always be beautiful to me, sweetheart," he repeated softly.

* * * *

Back in his office, he wrote out a list of all the questions he needed answers to. He looked thoughtfully at it and scratched his head in frustration. There were just too many questions and not enough answers. This case was weird. Just what was happening in ATSC other than murder? Whatever it was, it was important enough to commit murder, or murders, to keep quiet. Did the seventh floor executives govern the basement? He decided that he was going to attempt to get into the seventh floor offices and look around and see if that would provide some of the elusive answers.

Now that Sara was in hospital, his one ally was no longer able to help him so he had to find another way

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in. He wondered if Henry, the passage guard, would let him in the back way. Henry had told him that he required a chit signed by a supervisor for entry. That was something he could not get, but he would have to cross that particular bridge when it arose.

The outer office door opened and heard Mary talking to a client. She tapped on his office door. He was going to be lost without Mary who was back from her holiday and working her last week before she retired for good. He wondered what he was going to do without her. Her head poked round the door into his office. "A Sgt Hobbs, from the police, to see you."

Damn it, Hobbs was the last person he wanted to see right now. "Tell him I'm not in, Mary."

"To late Slater, I'm already here." Hobbs was grinning over Mary's shoulder.

"What do you want, Hobbs? I'm busy."

Hobbs grinned some more as he stepped around Mary and shut the door on her. "You may not believe this, Slater, but I'm actually on your side."

"You could have fooled me. So why the hard man persona?"

He sighed. "It's what everyone expects from me, so I have to keep it up. Wouldn't do to appear soft, would it? Especially in front of the boss and the rookies."

That figured. Hobbs probably needed his subordinates to think him a tough invincible man. "No, I suppose not. What do you want this time?"

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“The Chief Inspector wants to see you.”

“He knows where I am, let him come to me. I’ll be here most of the day.”

Hobbs chuckled, enjoying himself as though he had some private joke he was desperate to share. “He wants to show you something.”

“What?”

“Humour me, Slater. Come with me and see for yourself.”

Slater sighed in frustration as he realized that Hobbs wouldn’t leave his office until his little joke played out to the full. “All right. Is he in his office?”

Hobbs shook his head. “Nope. He’s at the morgue,” his grin got bigger.

“The Morgue?”

“That’s what I said, the morgue. You see, Slater, we’ve found a body and the boss wants you to take a look at it.”

Jack was puzzled, why would Lane want him to look at a body. Why would he even confide in him? What was he up to?

Hobbs smirked some more. “You’ll never guess who we think it might be.”

Then it dawned on him. Of course, this just had to be his missing Russian, Dimitri Sokolov. “It’s Dimitri Sokolov, isn’t it?” He was delighted when Hobbs’s smile faded, his information beaten to the post, his surprise information scuppered.

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“How the hell did you know that?”

Slater chuckled in amusement at the look on his face. “Elementary my dear Hobbs, just elementary. Come on then, you can drive me to the morgue.”

“*That* would be my pleasure.” Hobbs was brusque and looked like he wished he were driving Slater to the morgue for a very different reason. He drove very fast and took risks. Slater was glad that they had arrived in one piece without having an accident.

They walked into the quiet of the building. Well laid out with an impressive reception in clean stainless steel, it was complete with a prim stainless steel receptionist. It was warm in spite of the cold clinical look. She watched them approaching. “Hello Sgt Hobbs. Is this Mr Slater?”

“Hi Mable. Yes, this is Slater. Can we go in?”

“Please do, DCI Lane is waiting for you in the autopsy room.”

Hobbs led him through a heavy door that sealed at the edges with thick rubber buffers. The door swished closed behind them and they entered the cool of the morgue proper.

Hobbs led him up some stairs to a long gallery where a glass screen overlooked the coroners working area below them. Banks of stainless steel cubicles, three deep, housed the resident bodies and Slater wondered how many actually had a body in them. A row of four stainless tables stood in the centre of the room. Hoses

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and other accoutrements hung from the ceiling and a mortuary assistant was hosing down one of the tables, the stainless steel gleamed wetly in the stark overhead lighting. Next to a table containing a body covered with a sheet, DCI Lane was talking to another assistant clad in a rubber apron and short green wellington boots.

In the viewing gallery, Hobbs pressed a button next to a microphone and coughed. "Slater's here, sir."

Both men looked up and Lane waved them down. "Come on down, Slater and you Sgt." Hobbs led him down a flight of stairs and up to a glass door. He pressed the button and the door slid open with a soft hiss. They stepped into the chilly atmosphere of the autopsy room.

"Thank you Karl, we can take it from here," Lane dismissed the attendant. "Mr Slater, I want you to take a look at our deceased." Lane pulled back a sheet covering the body lying on the cold steel table. "Please don't touch him or his clothing. Do you know him?"

"I have no intention of touching any corpse, Lane, him or otherwise." He studied the dead man's features but he was unfamiliar. He had Slavic features with wide cheekbones and thick lips, a parody, he thought, of what one could expect a KGB agent to look like and he wondered if he was an agent. He shook his head. "No, I've never seen him before. Is this the illusive Sokolov?"

"We are still checking on that but, yes, we think

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so.”

“So he had no wallet or papers on him?”

“No, he had absolutely nothing on him—stripped clean.”

Slater looked closer at the body. Sokolov’s skin appeared slightly puckered, the surface looking like orange peel. “Did he drown?”

“Very good, Mr Slater, we don’t know yet, however he *was* found in the Thames near Waterloo Embankment. His clothing had snagged on some bridge piles so drowning is a good contender for his demise. We are still waiting for Dr Spears to carry out the autopsy and give us his report. However,” he pointed to a large lump on the back of the man’s head. “That may have been a contributing factor, but we don’t yet know if he sustained that pre or post mortem.”

Slater looked at the man’s rough clothing, heavy, made for hard work. “He could have been a seaman judging by his clothing. Perhaps he fell overboard from a ship.”

“Or perhaps he was pushed,” Hobbs added quietly.

Lane said. “That may be true, Sgt.” He turned to Slater. “There is a Russian freighter, the SS Uri Gagarin, loading general cargo and grain in Tilbury. She sails for Liverpool on tomorrow’s tide before going on to Bandar e Abbas in Iran.”

Slater frowned. “If he was part of the crew of that ship, he didn’t fall overboard in Tilbury, so he must

have been murdered ashore and dumped in the river, either further up river or round here.”

Lane gave a wry smile. “Why do you say that, Slater?”

Slater thought about it. “If he had gone in the river from a ship in Tilbury the current would have carried him downstream, not upstream. We are nigh on thirty miles from Tilbury. Even a spring tide wouldn’t bring him this far upstream.”

“My, my, Slater, you are on the ball today, and of course, you are quite correct. We have asked the London Port Authority Police to find out if the captain of the SS Uri Gagarin is missing a crewmember. We have faxed them a picture of chummy here.”

Slater looked thoughtfully at the corpse again. “I wonder what he was doing around this part of London.”

“Your guess is as good as mine.”

“Perhaps he was sightseeing, Chief Inspector.” He wondered why Lane was taking him into his confidence by telling him all this. He was sure it had nothing to do with his detecting powers, after all, Lane could work all this out for himself. He was also sure that sooner or later Lane would want something in return. He glanced at his watch; it was time to visit Sara. “I have an errand to run, Lane, I need to go.”

“Miss Carr is being well guarded by one of my men, Slater, there is no need to fret.”

He was annoyed that he was so transparent to the

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Chief Inspector. "I'm sure she is but I want to see her and see for myself how she is progressing."

"Of course, I understand. Can you come and see me in my office when you have ascertained the well being of Miss Carr?"

He frowned. "Why should I do that?"

"I would like to discuss your case in a little more detail."

He wondered what the wily old fox up to, but he agreed to call and see him later. Then Lanes mobile rang and he answered it, his face grew stern as he listened to the caller. "Right, call for back up immediately and I'll be there in a few minutes."

Alarm bells started ringing in Slater's head. "What's going on, Lane?"

"A few moments ago, someone, an unknown male, tried to gain access to Miss Carr's room at the hospital. My man on guard foiled the attempt and the intruder ran away. Come along Hobbs, you to Slater, we're going to the hospital."

With Hobbs driving, Lane beside him and Slater buckled firmly into the back seat, they raced across London with siren blaring. Skidding to halt outside the hospital Slater was the first to leave the vehicle, leaving the door open. He raced up the stairs to Sara's floor followed closely by Lane and Hobbs. The police constable on guard looked pleased with himself.

"What happened, Constable Watson?" Snapped

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Lane. Slater pushed past them into Sara's room. She was sleeping peacefully, oblivious to the drama surrounding her.

"Well Sir, I was on duty when at..."

Lane cut him short. "Stop the police report crap and just tell me what happened in plain language."

PC Watson looked a little crestfallen. "Yes sir. A man dressed in a white coat with a stethoscope round his neck, and badge on his coat proclaiming him to be a doctor tried to get into Miss Carr's room."

"And...?"

"Well, Sir, I noticed that the picture on the badge didn't correspond with the man standing in front of me. I asked him for further identification and he ran off. A few minutes later, a doctor told me that the man had knocked him on the head and took his coat, badge and other stuff. It was the Doctors badge the man had been wearing."

"Did you recognise the intruder?"

Watson shook his head. "No sir. Sorry sir."

"Pity. Very well. That's good work, Constable Watson, well done. You may have prevented the murder of that young woman today." Watson looked pleased with himself. Just then, a posse of reinforcements arrived. Lane made a point of looking at his watch. "What kept you?" he said bitingly.

They had the grace to look sheepish. "We were on the other side of the borough, Sir," one said. "And the

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traffic was atrocious.”

Lane scowled darkly and said scathingly. “I want a much better response next time. You may now return to your patrol area.”

“Yes, Sir,” the PC snapped up a smart salute. They both turned and left at a brisk pace, relieved not to be on the receiving end of any more of the DCI’s sharp tongue.

“How is Miss Carr, Slater?”

“She’s fine, sleeping like a baby. I’m taking her out of here, Lane. I have somewhere safer for her to be.” Lane said nothing.

Slater knew where he could take Sara for safety. He had an elderly aunt who had been a senior matron at a major hospital when matrons ruled the wards. She was now retired and lived in the New Forest in rural Hampshire. He thought she might let Sara stay with her for a while. He didn’t dare phone her as he suspected that they might have tapped his phone and he didn’t trust his mobile. He would just have to go and see her and trust to luck that she would be able to accommodate Sara.

“Where will you take Miss Carr, Slater?”

“Where she won’t be found by these bastards.”

Lane frowned, a worried look on his face. “I hope you’re right, Slater, I really hope you’re right. You aren’t going to tell me where, are you?”

“You are damn right, I’m not. The less people

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know where she is the better as far as I am concerned.”

“I have men to look after her, Slater.”

“By your own admission you don’t know who you can trust. No, Lane, I’ll do it my way.”

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Chapter 23

Doctor Patras, Sara's doctor, protested strongly when Slater told him that he was taking Sara out of the hospital. "Miss Carr is not really fit to be removed from our medical care, Mr Slater."

"She will be well looked after by my family doctor. I can't take the chance of these men getting to her again." He didn't really have a family doctor but he knew that his aunt did.

"She should really stay here." Patras was concerned. "We have the equipment and expertise to care for her." Worry lined his face like old leather. Slater wondered if the concern Patras felt was for the hospital and thought it would be liable if he released Sara.

"She *will* be leaving with me in the morning. Don't worry, she'll be fine, Doctor Patras, I promise you." Patras reluctantly agreed to Sara's release after insisting that Slater sign a medical discharge form absolving the hospital from any consequences. He signed on Sara's behalf and gratefully accepted a large packet of strong painkillers and antibiotics from the doctor along with some well-meaning advice.

Sara had a peaceful night and at 1100 hours the following morning following the doctor's rounds, Slater collected her from the ward. With her leaning on his arm, they made slow progress along the corridor to

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where Slater had parked a car in a doctor's parking spot adjacent to the rear entrance of the hospital. He couldn't be sure that his own car had not been fitted with a tracking device so had hired a three litre BMW. He tucked Sara into the passenger seat and fastened her seat belt, eliciting several groans and winces from her.

Between her groans, Sara gave a wan smile and said. "God, I'm glad to get out of there. The food is awful and I'm starving, I'm looking forward to a good meal and a glass of wine. Where are we going?"

"Somewhere safe for you to stay. Somewhere these men cannot find you. Are you alright?"

She smiled and leant her head against the headrest. "I will be when I've had something to eat. It was really nice to see you while I was lying in bed." Her face reddened. "Well, that's not quite what I meant...I meant visiting me."

He grinned at her, delighted that her spirit was returning. "I know what you mean. We'll stop for a meal soon, I promise. Can you put up with a longish drive?"

She nodded. "Yes, I think so."

"Are you sure?"

She scowled at him. "Damn it, Jack, just drive so I can get some decent food inside me."

He smiled as he put the BMW into gear and backed out of the doctor's parking space. He pulled smoothly into the traffic and drove west toward the London outskirts. Once he hit the M3 motorway, he could get

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some speed on the car. He kept a careful eye on the road behind and became suspicious when he noticed a red Mazda MR2 three vehicles behind him. It had been there for some time and maintained much the same distance. When it turned down a side street and he breathed a sigh of relief.

He changed his direction of travel and drove through Hammersmith and across the Thames toward Richmond Park. He entered the park and drove up Sawyers Hill where he pulled into a lay-by at the side of the road. He carefully scrutinised all the vehicles that passed him. However, they all continued on their way through the park without showing any interest in them.

“What are you doing, Jack?” Sara muttered, her voice gaining strength. “I want some real food and I doubt that here will be any up here.” She looked around. “Unless there is a burger van here.”

Slater grinned. “Sorry, Babe, no burger van. I’m just trying to see if they are following us. I’ll get you a meal soon, a good one, I promise.”

“Do you think we are being followed? You’re looking for Smith or Figgis aren’t you?”

“Yes, or someone that works for them, although I won’t know who it is until they actually turn up.” His eyes scanned another car that slowed as it went by them, but the occupants were looking the other way at the view across London.

“Why? Do you think they are behind all this?”

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He grinned. "I think you are persona non grata with Messrs Smith and Figgis." He told her about the attempt to get at her in the hospital. "There is something very wrong going on in ATSC and something even worse in Department Y. We've opened a can of worms that Smith would rather keep the lid on. I wish that I hadn't asked you to help me because it has focused their attention on you and I didn't want that."

"I was glad to help and I wanted to help, I told you that. We have always known something funny was going on but we never knew what. It would be good to expose them for what they are. Me and the other girls on reception always knew Smith and Figgis were involved in something illegal. Oh God. I hope they will be all right."

Murder is certainly illegal, Sara, he thought then said. "I should think they'll be fine. They don't have anything to do with it. After all, you have helped me not them. I'm sure even Figgis won't take it out on them."

"Jack, do you know what it is that's going on?"

He shook his head. "I'm pretty much in the dark but the ATSC is a surveillance operation on politicians and industrialists, no idea why. While I was down there I wandered into Department Y by mistake. Department Y is actually a separate room in the basement and may have nothing to do with the actual ATSC department at all. Before they realised I was there, I saw a person murdered, I actually saw a man deliberately pushed

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under a bus, apparently on the orders of someone in authority. I saw this on their surveillance cameras. God knows how they have those situated around the city. But that is the extent of my knowledge so far.”

“Wow, we always suspected that they murdered people.

“Well now you know for sure. It caused quite a stink when they noticed me watching what was going on.”

“I can imagine. How did you get in there without them finding out who you are?”

He laughed. “They actually thought I was Carter’s replacement and welcomed me with open arms. They’re short staffed and think I’m joining then on Monday.”

“That’s very sneaky of you, Jack.” She closed her eyes, smiling.

“Are you all right?”

She nodded. “Yes, I’m just hungry, and tired.”

“We’ll eat soon, I promise. You were right about there being another entrance. It leads to an alley alongside the Hilton.”

“I knew it. You didn’t believe me when I told you about it.”

“No, sorry, but I do now.”

A dark green Vauxhall Omega pulled into the lay-by behind him. The driver got out of the vehicle and Slater engaged first gear, ready to accelerate away. However, the driver, a tall man wearing a grey car coat,

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got some binoculars from the boot of his car and returned to the driver's seat. There was a striking looking woman in the passenger seat and the man handed her the binoculars. Slater couldn't see the faces clearly but he noted number of the vehicle before starting his engine, doing a U-turn and left the park the way he had come. He watched the Vauxhall in his rear view mirror but it stayed parked in the lay-by.

He drove up the South Circular, the A205 and Great Chertsey Road that he knew would lead him to the M3 at Sunbury. The M3 would take him to Hampshire. From there he would turn west on the M27 and then on to the A337 that would take him direct to Brockenhurst, deep in the New Forest where he knew that Sara would be safe. However, that was many miles away and he needed to stop for some food.

He found a small restaurant near Crane Park and helped Sara from the car and into the restaurant. Sara ordered some fish with steamed vegetables and Slater had a hamburger with trimmings but he didn't feel much like eating. He felt exposed in the restaurant although he had selected a table as far from the window as he could. He sat with his back to the wall so he could observe the other diners to see if he recognised anyone.

Another couple entered and Slater thought the woman looked familiar for he was sure he had seen the dark chestnut hair and sultry looks before. He couldn't be sure if he recognised the man. However, then he

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remembered where he had seen her. The driver of a Vauxhall Omega had given her a pair of binoculars in Richmond Park when they parked behind his BMW. Was the man the same person who had been with her? He couldn't be sure.

He studied at him carefully. He was tall, slim and had an erect stance, Slater thought perhaps he was ex military for he had that military bearing. Other than that, he seemed rather unremarkable. He saw the man's eyes scan the tables in the room, apparently looking for a vacant one, and they looked past Slater and Sara without a flicker of recognition. He and the woman went to a free table, sat down and studied the menu. Was it just a coincidence, Slater wondered, that had made them come to this particular eating-house. The fact that the man's eyes never flickered when they looked at Slater could indicate that they were nothing but tourists; either that or they were very professional. He kept an eye on the pair but they seemed to have no interest in him and Sara and never once glanced in their direction. However, he remained on edge wanted to get away from the restaurant as soon as possible.

They finished their meal and Sara used the bathroom before they left. They got into the BMW and he looked for a green Vauxhall Omega car in the car park but it was nowhere in sight. Perhaps he had he been mistaken about the type of car they had. Then he noticed a red Mazda MR2 parked unobtrusively in a

corner of the car park. Was this was the Mazda that had been behind him earlier? He had been unable to get the number of the vehicle but the colour was certainly the same and two red Mazda's was too much of a coincidence. He began to feel uneasy. He decided to watch for a while and see who got into it. A few seconds later, the Omega/Mazda couple left the restaurant and got into the Mazda. Now Slater knew for sure they were following him. He wondered who they were working for and how many other cars would be waiting for him and Sara, how many times they would change vehicles to confuse him, worse still, would he recognise any other followers. He had to admit that the couple didn't look like the kind of people that Figgis would employ, but one never really knew.

He started the BMW and drove slowly to the car park exit. The Mazda followed him at a discrete distance. He stopped and opened a map but his eyes were on his interior mirror, not the map. The Mazda stayed behind him. He folded the map and started moving again, then at the last minute, turned toward the petrol pumps. The Mazda had no option but to continue out of the car park and onto the road. Ignoring the other vehicle, Slater filled the BMW, paid and left the forecourt in the opposite direction that the other vehicle had taken.

"What's going on, Jack?" Sara asked, confused by the sudden change of direction.

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He didn't really want to frighten her but thought that she deserved the truth. "It's nothing to worry about, Sara, but I was right; it looks like someone is following us. Did you notice the tall man and the good looking woman?"

"No, I don't think so. I wasn't really looking for anyone."

He looked in his mirror and studied the following traffic but there was no sign of the Mazda. "Looks like I might have lost them." He didn't say that he might not recognise any other car on their trail.

"Who was it?"

"I don't know for sure. I didn't recognise them but I'd guess that Smith and Figgis are involved somewhere. They have to be for I don't think anyone else would be interested in us."

She shuddered. "God, I hope not. They both frighten me."

Slater grinned at her and intimately patted her thigh. "Don't worry, Sara, I won't let them get near you, I promise."

She put her hand on his arm, her fingers squeezing gently. "I know you will, Jack, thank you."

Once on the M3 motorway, he put his foot down and his speed crept up to 100 miles per hour. Nothing kept pace with him and he began to relax. However, at the next exit he indicated and pulled onto the exit ramp towards Frimley. He slowed and watched his mirror but

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nothing followed him from the motorway. On the Portsmouth Road, he slowed to about 15 miles per hour much to the annoyance of other road users. He kept a careful watch on the vehicles that overtook him, almost all glanced in his direction and some shook their fist at him but none seemed to be interested other than frustration at his slow speed. Once he had a break in the traffic, he turned around and drove back towards the motorway, where he again wound the BMW to a high speed. The car crept up to 100 mph then the speed increased until the needle was touching 120 mph.

“God, Jack, do you have to drive so fast? You’re making me nervous.”

“Sorry, I’m just making sure we’ve given them the slip.” However, he slowed to 100 mph to please her.

The junction with the M27 arrived very quickly and shortly after that it was time to turn onto the A337 leading directly to Brockenhurst. The road was very busy with little opportunity for passing. It was impossible to tell if anyone was following them. The traffic in the market town of Lyndhurst was almost at a standstill when he negotiated through the one-way system. He arrived at Brockenhurst but didn’t stop there but went right through the town and turned towards Sway. No other car followed them onto this little used B class road. Satisfied they had not followed him this far, he turned back towards Brockenhurst once more.

He drove into the street where his aunt’s house was

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and he scanned the road behind him but there was not another vehicle in sight. Had he given them the slip? He turned into Mable's driveway and turned off the engine. He got out, pressed her doorbell, and suddenly had misgivings, what if she was away on holiday, what if she could not look after Sara. What if she had moved and no longer lived here. It was too late for retreat for he could see a slim figure approaching the front door. He heard the rattle of the security chain, the door opened and stopped against the limit of the chain with a clunk.

"Hello Mable." He said when Mable's face peered through the gap.

"Good God, is that you, Jack Slater?"

He nodded and grinned with embarrassment. "Hello, Mable. Yes, it's me your long lost nephew."

Mable closed the door and he heard the rattle of the chain again. Then the door opened wide and she stood aside to let him in.

Mable Webster was a tall willowy blond woman whose hair had turned almost white. Her kindly aristocratic face showed fine lines of laughter at the corners of her eyes. She wore a long hippy style skirt that hung to her ankles. It had a flowered pattern and swayed when she moved. She had on a matching waistcoat over a snowy white blouse. She had chosen not to remarry when her husband had died at an early age over 20 years previous.

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“I have a friend with me, can I bring her in?”

Her eyes flickered toward his car, and then she nodded. “Of course you can, Jack; you know you and your friends are always welcome in my house.”

He went to the car and helped Sara from her seat. She walked slowly up the path, lines of pain etched across her face, but he thought her walking was far stronger than when they left the hospital a few hours ago. “Mable, this is Sara—Sara, this is my dear Aunt Mable.”

Mable scanned the bruises on Sara’s face, her wise eyes took in the young woman’s tired, and pain etched demeanour. “Goodness my child what has he done to you. Come in and let me take a look at you.” She glared at Slater who threw up his hands in defeat. “Not me.”

“Two men attacked me,” Sara told her. “They had a knife. I think they were trying to kill me.”

“Goodness me, who would have thought it. What a carry on.”

“Jack’s helping me, he’s keeping me safe.” Mable gave him a black look again as though it was his fault. *Perhaps it was his fault, he thought, he shouldn’t have involved her in his investigation.* If he had left her out of it, the attack on her would not have taken place and he would not have to try and keep her safe.

“That’s good, dear, I’m glad hear that. Would you like a nice cup of tea?”

Sara nodded with a tired smile. “That would be

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lovely. The hospital tea is terrible and I'm hungry."

She must be getting better, Slater thought, glad that her spirits were returning.

Mable took her arm. "Come along then my dear, I'll get you a piece of cake as well." She led Sara to a comfortable looking armchair in front of a glowing log fire and sat her down. "You sit yourself down here in front of the fire where it's nice and warm while I put the kettle on." She glanced at Slater and jerked her head firmly in the direction of the kitchen. He meekly followed her. She picked up the kettle from the range and filled it with water. "What's going on, Jack? Why is that girl so battered and bruised?"

"She helped me in an investigation and the baddies I'm investigating don't like it. They think she's a threat to them so they tried to get some information from her. When they couldn't get it they tried to kill her."

She sounded doubtful. "Hmm, I see. In this day and age is her life *really* in danger?"

He nodded. "I'm afraid it is. I shouldn't have asked her to help but it's too late now." He told her more about his investigation and how, through his blunder, they had found out that Sara was helping him. He told her how Taylor and McGurk had beaten her senseless and put her in hospital. And then someone pretending to be a doctor had attempted to gain access to her in the hospital, probably with evil intent, perhaps to silence her for good.

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The kettle whistled as it boiled. Mable said nothing. She kept herself busy making the tea. She poured the water into the teapot and stirred it with a spoon. She said nothing as she made a cup of strong tea for Sara. Picking up the sugar, she glanced at him with a query in her eyes. He shook his head. "Wait here," she commanded and took the tea and a plate of cake slices into Sara. She soon returned. Slater thought it was the right time to ask his aunt what he wanted. "Err...Mable...I was wondering if Sara could stay with you for a few days. Perhaps your doctor could keep an eye on her."

"You have a damn nerve, Jack Slater. You don't make any contact with me for years and now you ask this. What would your mother say if she were alive today and heard what you are up to? She'd be absolutely appalled."

"Yeah, I know, and I am sorry, really I am." He was ashamed that in the past he had all but ignored his aunt. "But I have got to keep Sara safe. If anything happened to her, it would be my fault. I'd not be able to live with myself if that happened."

Mable reached out and ruffled his hair affectionately. "You silly boy. You know you don't need to ask. Of course, she can stay here." She held two fingers together with one crossed over the other and raised an eyebrow. "Are you and Sara like this?"

He grinned at her. "Mable Webster, you shock me, what on earth are you thinking?"

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“Well, are you?”

Were he and Sara like that, he thought. He would have liked to think so but he felt that it was a bit one sided. “I wish it were. I’m sure she doesn’t know how I feel about her.”

“Have you told her?”

“No, Mable, I haven’t told her. Besides, we’ve not known each other very long. It’s probably too soon to lay my feelings on the line.”

“Well, you should tell her, she won’t wait forever, you know. It might be too soon to you but soon it will be too late so you need to tell her.”

“Yeah, I know and I will.”

“Then what are you going to do about it?”

“Perhaps when she has recovered and this investigation is over, I’ll see how she feels.”

“Yes, you should Jack.”

“So you could manage to look after her okay?”

She looked at him, her aristocratic eyebrows raised. “I’m sure my nursing expertise has not deserted me, rusty perhaps but not forgotten. Of course I’ll manage.”

“That’s not what I meant. Have you room here?”

“Yes, I have a spare room. The poor girl will be alright with me.”

Slater breathed a deep sigh of relief. “Thanks, Mable. I knew you wouldn’t let me down.” He took the tablets Doctor Patras had given him from his pocket. “These are her pain killers, the hospital gave them to

me. And these are her antibiotics.”

She took them and studied the labels, then nodded. “These will do. I’ll ring my doctor in the morning and arrange a home visit.”

Slater frowned. “Will he be discrete?”

“Darling, Dr Oliver has fancied me for nearly 20 years, since Freddie died in fact, of course he’ll be discrete. He’ll do anything for me. He’s such a dear man.”

Slater was not surprised the Dr was after her for Mable was a fine looking woman who had aged gracefully. He grinned at her candour. “It’s imperative that it is not known that she is here because I don’t know who I can trust right now.”

“Of course, I understand. Is it possible that the bad persons followed you here?”

“No, I was very careful. I’m sure I was not followed.”

“Come along then, it is time we rejoined our guest,” she picked up her tea and led the way back into the parlour. Sara’s tea was untouched. She had fallen asleep, her head drooping onto her chest.

“You go about your business Jack and leave Sara to me. She’ll be all right here. Remember what I told you; let her know how you feel before it’s too late.”

“I will, Mable, and thanks.” He kissed her dutifully on the cheek and drove back to London on autopilot.

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Chapter 24

Edgar Shultz was angry. “What do you mean agent Halloran—you lost them? How the fuck did you manage to lose Slater, he’s a damn amateur for God’s sake?”

Edgar Shultz, the MI5 area Commander, head-hunted from the CIA in USA to take over the London area command, was a stocky man with a bull neck sunk into his collar so it looked as though had no neck. His skull show through a US Marine style haircut. He glared scathingly at the two hapless agents standing in front of his desk. “It was a simple enough task and yet you let him run rings around you. Are you both god-damn rookies?”

Liam Halloran looked crestfallen and looked down at the pens on the desk in front of him. “No sir,” he muttered. Shultz had summoned them to appear before him. He had not invited them to sit so Halloran knew congratulations for a job well done would not be forthcoming.

Earlier, the commander had told him, along with fellow agent, Barbara Fothergill to follow Slater and find out where he was taking the woman, Sara Carr, and do their best to keep Slater out of trouble. The Intel was that several bad people were gunning for Slater and they were to ensure his safety, and the safety of the girl.

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They had changed cars with other agents several times and had followed Slater's hired BMW out of London but he had spotted them and given them the slip somewhere in the vicinity of the M4 motorway. It was clever of Slater to turn without warning towards the petrol pumps as they were leaving the restaurant car park. He had had no alternative but to continue out of the car park onto the road or it would have looked suspicious. However, he had a feeling that Slater had made them anyway and knew what he was doing.

"He doubled back a couple of times, boss, and we lost him."

Shultz stared at Halloran with an incredulous look on his face. "He doubled back a couple of times and we lost him," he mocked in a whining voice. His voice changed back to his commander's bark. "Goddamn it. You're an experienced agent, Halloran, yet you let a private detective, and goddamn amateur no less, get the better of you. Explain that, if you can."

Halloran shook his head and stared unseeingly at the pens on Shultz's desk again. "Sorry, boss, I can't."

Shultz turned to the woman. He had always liked Fothergill and hated taking her to task. She was a striking good-looking woman with dark sultry looks, a superb figure and long dark chestnut hair. She was the daughter of General Sir Charles Fothergill, retired, who was a friend of his, which is why Barbara was working for him. Charles had extensively served in China where

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he had met Barbara's mother, an aristocratic Chinese noble woman, the daughter of a local Chinese warlord. Shultz thought that she had inherited her striking good looks from her mother, not her father, which accounted for her dark hair and smooth skin. Altogether, she was far too imposing a figure to be an undercover agent for too many people noticed and remembered her; however, he had promised the General that he would give her a chance. She was so unlike Halloran whom nobody ever noticed for he was Mr Average, which made him an excellent undercover agent. Shultz could not even remember much about Halloran's background such as his anonymity. He smiled to himself, though it wouldn't do to let Halloran know that.

"Well, Fothergill, what can you add to what Halloran has said?" He snapped.

Fothergill had the grace to flush but her eyes held his. In the end, he looked away, breaking contact. *Goddamn it*, he thought, angry with himself, *why can't I hold her gaze*. He covered up his discomfiture with a sharp tone in his voice. "Well Fothergill? What can you add to what little Halloran said?"

Her eyes held his. "As Halloran said, we lost him. Slater is sharper than we thought."

"Obviously," muttered Shultz. He wondered what he was going to tell DCI Lane. He had boasted to his friend and colleague that his men could find a needle in a haystack if necessary and now they had gone and lost

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the damn needle, in fact, they had lost the whole haystack. Lane had asked him to find out where Slater was taking the Carr woman so he could post an undercover man nearby to ensure her safety, and they had goddamn lost him.

“We could pull Slater in and ask him where he took her,” Fothergill said without conviction.

“Of course we could, Fothergill, now why didn’t I think of that? How silly of me. That would let Slater know we are watching him. Why don’t we take out an advertisement in the Times or on the TV and let the fucking world know?”

Fothergill blushed. “Yes, sir, sorry, I wasn’t thinking.”

“Exactly, you weren’t thinking. Now both of you get out of here, try and put your brains in gear for once, and find Slater and the girl. I don’t want to see your faces around here until you have located them.”

Halloran and Fothergill beat a hasty retreat.

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Chapter 25

Slater tried Graham Gardiner's telephone again but it was still unobtainable. He opened up his computer and checked *White Pages* but there was no listing for him. He checked the electoral roll. The address on record was in Putney. He checked his notebook but the address on the roll was different to that given him by Caruthers and he wondered if it was the same man. He sighed, he'd just have to go and see if he was at home. It was raining heavily when he drove out of the garage. It took him almost two hours to get to the Putney address. The house had boards over the windows. Most of the houses seemed to be in the same condition and due for demolition.

There was a worker in a hardhat and fluorescent jacket working in one of the yards. "I'm looking for Graham Gardiner that used to live here. Do you know where he might have gone?"

"Nah, sorry mate. These have been empty for months."

Another dead end. He turned his car towards the address in Clapham as given him by Caruthers. This was a smarter area; at least the houses were not due to be demolished. He knocked on a heavy oak door and then knocked again when there was no answer. He was about to turn away when the door opened and a middle

aged woman stood there with her coat on, evidently about to leave.

She looked at him in surprise. "Goodness, you startled me Can I help you?"

"I'm trying to contact Graham Gardiner. Is this where he lives?"

She shook her head. "Sorry, Mr Gardiner left here about two years ago. Went to live in Putney, I believe."

"Did he happen to leave a forwarding address with you?"

"Yes he did."

"I wonder if I may have it."

She looked him up and down, a deep frown across her face. "Who are you?"

He pulled a card out of his coat pocket and handed it to her. "I'm working on behalf of Benson and Benson Solicitors. Mr Gardiner has inherited a sum of money. They have employed me to find him for them."

"Please wait here, Mr Slater." She backed into the house and shut the door in his face. He heard the lock click. *Careful woman*, he thought. The wait stretched on for several minutes, and then for five. A patrol car pulled gently to a stop at the kerb and two burly constables got out.

"Hello, sir. Can you tell me what you are doing here?"

Slater gave him his card. "I'm Jack Slater, a private investigator."

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He took the card and flapped it against his thumb. "Very pretty, sir. Have you got your license with you?" Slater sighed, pulled the laminated card from his wallet and handed it to the PC. He glanced at it with interest. "Why are you asking questions at these houses and of the occupants?"

"It was just this house, not *these* houses. I'm trying to track down a Graham Gardiner that used to live here. The person who lives here now said she had a forwarding address for him and was going to get it for me."

"It was the owner who telephoned us. She thought you were acting suspicious. You told her you were working for Benson and Benson solicitors. Is that true sir?"

"Err...yes and no."

"What does that mean?"

"Yes, I told her that that I'm working for Benson and Benson and no, it's not true."

"We know that sir. There are no solicitors of that name. I think you need to come to the station while we sort this out."

"Check with Detective Chief Inspector Lane at the yard. He'll vouch for me."

He gave a supercilious smile. "Yes, of course he will, sir. We'll ask him when we get to the station, shall we."

Slater knew better than to put up any resistance. The second PC opened the back door to the patrol car

for him.

“My car is just there, on the parking meter.”

“Then it will still be there when we have sorted this out. Please get in.”

They took him to the local nick at Clapham. “Am I entitled to my phone call?”

The custody Sgt handed him a phone without looking up from his register. Slater took it. “Have you got the number for Scotland Yard?”

The Sgt looked at him curiously but gave him the number. Slater dialled and it rang a number of times before someone answered. “Can you connect me with DCI Lane please?” There was a long pause and then. “Lane here,” the receiver barked into his ear.

“Hello Lane, Slater here. I’m at Clapham nick.”

There was a long pause, then. “What are you doing there?”

“Well, I’ve sort of been arrested.” The custody Sgt shook his head. “No—not arrested, they tell me. Hang on a minute.” He looked at the Sgt. “So I’m free to go then?” The sergeant shook his head again.

He picked up the phone again. “As I said Lane, I have been arrested.”

“What for, Slater, what have you done?”

“Nothing, I was just asking a few questions, the householder decided I was suspicious and called the cops.”

“Who is there with you right now?”

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“Hang on a second.” The custody Sgt, still busy writing in his register, was not paying any attention.

“What's your name Sgt?”

“Who wants to know, Mr Slater?”

“DCI Lane at New Scotland Yard, Homicide division.”

“Very well, I'm Sgt Harris, say hello to Mr Lane for me.”

“You know him?”

“I do indeed, sir. Let me speak to him.”

He handed the Sgt the receiver and he and Lane chatted for some minutes, exchanging greetings. He handed phone back again and the Sgt said. “DCI Lane wants to speak to you again, Sir.”

“Yes, Lane.”

“The duty Inspector will release you as soon as I can speak to him. Can you come by my office when you are?”

* * * *

“Hello Lane. Where's your sidekick today?” Slater said after a constable took him to Lane's office. He sat down in a vacant chair.

“Hobbs? I've sent him out on some enquiries. What were you doing at that house, Mr Slater?”

“I'm trying to track down a Graham Gardiner. He used to work in Curzon Place. He was sacked for asking too many questions about Department Y.”

“And have you located him?”

He shook his head. “No, his phone has been disconnected and his last house is boarded up. The woman who called the police owns the house where he lived before his last known address. She had bought it from Gardiner, apparently.”

“Did she give you a forwarding address?”

“Eventually, yes, but it’s the same house that’s boarded up. Something sinister is going on, Lane. Something bad happens to everyone who asks questions of Department Y. I wonder, is Gardiner one of your unsolved murders?”

Surprisingly, Lane switched on his PC screen and typed in his password. “Gardiner you say?”

Slater nodded, trying to see the screen.

“Do you have his date of birth?”

“No, I’ve only got his first name and last known address.”

“Which is?”

Slater told him and he entered the details on the PC. There was a pause and then the screen opened with the information. “Hmm, you are correct, Mr Slater, Mr Gardiner is one of our unsolved cases from two years ago.”

“What happened to him?”

Lane read down the screen. “He was shot, two bullets in the chest that killed him instantly. Looked like a professional hit, a double tap.” He read some more. “It

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was a .38 weapon probably an automatic. He must have known his killer, or killers, because there was no sign of a struggle and no defensive wounds. They found him on wasteland near Hackney Downs but Lividity shows that was not where he was killed.”

“I wonder why. Did you find the murder weapon?”

“No. My guess is that it’s down some drain or in the river.”

“What about the location? Did you find out where he was killed?”

He scrolled the screen and his eyebrows raised a notch. “Yes, he was shot at the address in Putney.”

“And you have never solved this murder?”

“No—not yet. As you know, murder cases never close until we find a culprit.”

“Yes, I know. Two more names have cropped up. Harry Harmon and Derek Butterworth. Their names were in Carters mobile.”

“What about them?”

“They used to work at Curzon Place but have since disappeared. I can’t find out if they left or were sacked.”

Lane typed the names into his PC. “Nothing on a Harmon. But, and this is interesting, there was a murder last year, another unsolved I might add, of a Derek Butters who did work in Curzon Place. I wonder if Butterworth and Butters are one and the same. I don’t suppose you have date of birth?”

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Slater shook his head. "No, sorry, all I got is the name."

"Damn I wish we could get enough solid evidence to do a raid on that damn place."

Slater thought about the back way into the basement of Curzon Place. "I might be able to help you there. Smith has a private records room, archives. I saw it when I was leaving last time. The door was locked but that shouldn't present a problem."

Lane frowned. "I hope you aren't contemplating anything illegal."

He grinned broadly. "Of course not Chief Inspector. Would I do anything like that? Anyway, would it bother you if I did and come up with the proof you need? Proof to put them out of business for good."

Lane had the grace to look sheepish. "Err...no...not really. I do need to get the proof legal though."

"Legalities are up to you."

"How do you think you can get in again? You said before that they would know who you are."

"The back way. Remember I told you about the entrance alongside the Hilton hotel?" Lane nodded. "That's guarded by one man and if he hasn't been warned about me he might, and I stress might, let me in. He'll be expecting a chit from a supervisor but I might be able to bluff it out."

"How's this going to help? Won't you still have to

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go into where the operators to are?”

“No. The door to the archives is before you go into the computer rooms from that way in. There is a danger that someone could be leaving at the same time and then I’d be blown but I’ll have to take that risk.”

Lane licked his lips in anticipation. “Perhaps I can come with you.”

Slater shook his head. “That’d be impossible. It’ll be hard enough for me to get past the guard; two of us would be twice as hard. Anyway, you said you wanted the evidence nice and legal.”

Lane looked disappointed but accepted the logic. “Take care, Slater. Please keep me informed as much as possible.”

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Chapter 26

It was pouring with rain when Jack Slater entered the alley alongside the Hilton hotel. He listened carefully at the steel door, the door that led to ATSC and Department Y. He had to be sure that he was not going to run into someone leaving at the same time he was attempting to gain entry. But he could hear nothing above the muted rumble of the traffic on Park Lane and the sound of the rain bouncing on the lids of the garbage bins in the alley. Tentatively he pressed the small button to summon the guard, which he sincerely hoped was Henry. There was the rattle of a key scraping in the lock. The door swung open and he breathed a sigh of relief when he saw Henry framed in the light. It was now or never. If they warned Henry about him, it was over before it had begun.

It was evident in his stern voice that he would brook no nonsense. "What do you want? This is private property. Oh, hello, sir, it's you." His voice softened when he recognised Slater in the dim light spilling out from his cubbyhole.

Slater smiled, brushing the rain from his coat. "Hello Henry, how are you tonight?"

"I'm fine thank you sir." He stepped aside and allowed Slater to enter before he closed and locked the alley door behind them. Slater was exultant, the warn-

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ing had evidently not reached this far. "Can I have your chit, Sir?"

Slater fumbled in his pocket, then another and another until he shrugged resignedly. He gave a smile of embarrassment. "Damn it, Henry, I must have left it in my digs." He snapped his fingers in apparent recollection. "I know where it is, I left it on my dresser ready to pick up."

Henry frowned, his eyebrows almost touching, his moustache bristling in his indignation or perhaps his imagined importance. "Before I can let you in, I really need a chit, sir. It's the rules you know."

Slater turned the corner of his mouth down. "Yes I know that, Henry, you did tell me and I have a chit from John Horton; it's just that I've left it behind. I must have forgotten to pick it up. I'm not used to the system yet," he glanced at his watch. "This is my first night on duty. If I have to go round to the main entrance, I'll be late and that won't do on my first day, will it. John Horton specifically told me not to be late." He hoped Henry would remember him catching him asleep and letting him off. That should warrant a return favour, if not, he would not be able to get in.

Henry looked up the corridor as though expecting someone to be watching or monitoring his every move. He was undecided, torn between wanting to help and yet wanting to abide by the rules. Slater wondered if there was any leeway given to the staff. Couldn't they

work on their own initiative? He could see the indecision in Henry's eyes.

He smiled and pressed him persuasively. "Can you let me in this once? I promise it'll be the only time."

Henry made up his mind. "Very well sir. I'll let you in, just this once. Only because it's your first day you understand. Please ensure you have your chit with you in future because I won't be able to do it again."

Slater was elated. If Henry had refused entry, then all hope of getting into the seventh floor offices would be gone. There would not be another opportunity, that's for sure, and then Lane would not get the evidence he so desperately wanted. "Thanks, Henry, you're a champ, I'll not forget it. Of course I'll make sure I have it with me next time."

"Right, Sir. Sign the book, please," He swung a visitor's book toward him and he scrawled an indecipherable signature on the line. He noted that not many of the staff actually used this back entrance.

Slater walked along the passage and turned the corner into the next section of corridor. He glanced back but Henry was engaged in some business of his own and was taking no notice of him. He turned the corner and Henry was lost from view.

He stopped in front of the first of the doors and opened his pouch of lock picks, something the police would describe as going equipped. Within twenty seconds, he had the door open. He grinned to himself as

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he wondered what DCI Lane would have said about breaking into premises had he been here. He'd bet his pension that Lane would have liked to be with him right now.

He switched on a pencil torch, stepped into the room and closed the door. He located the light switch and a single strip of fluorescent lamp blazed into life. The room was quite small, perhaps only twelve feet square, and contained half a dozen steel filing cabinets arranged along one wall. On another wall stood a canteen style table and two wooden chairs. The room contained nothing else. There were no windows just a ventilation vent in the ceiling. Better still, there were no surveillance cameras.

Tentatively, he tried each of the cabinets in turn but they were locked. Taking out his picks once more, he selected a probe and inserted it in the lock of the first cabinet. The locks were of a good quality, and for ten minutes, he wrestled with his probes. Then he felt the lock give and triumphantly pulled open the top drawer. Neat rows of files hung from the suspension bars each with the same colour cover. He lifted one out and opened it. He was disappointed for it was nothing more than a personnel file.

Appleby, James, he read, was born in 1944 and joined the civil service in 1969. He retired as a senior grade four officer in 2004. There was his signed copy of the Official Secrets Act. A bunch of forms listed his

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next of kin, his address and other details relevant to his employment in the civil service.

He scratched his head. There was nothing wrong with personnel files in an archive, so why all the secrecy. He opened a few other files at random and they all seemed to be files of retired civil service personnel. There was nothing to indicate if they had worked in ATSC, Department Y or anywhere else for that matter. He had to assume that these files related to personnel that worked either in either of these departments, why else would these files be here, in the basement, ostensibly hidden, if indeed if that was the intention. Perhaps it was nothing more than utilising a spare bit of space. Thumbing through the files to the 'C' section, he searched for Carter's file but there wasn't one for him. Why was his file missing? He knew that Carter had worked in the basement because he was supposedly Carter's replacement so why was his record not here?

He closed and locked the cabinet before turning his attention to the next in line. This one contained records listed from M to Z and were a continuation of the retired personnel information. Cabinet three was a little more interesting as it contained the files of current employees. He looked up Horton, John.

Horton had been employed in the civil service for a little over twenty years and had been promoted to the position of senior manager grade four three years previous. Slater wondered what he was the manager of

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for there was nothing in the file to indicate this. Slater thought that Chief Inspector Lane would be interested in this list of currently employed personnel.

Taking out a Minox miniature camera, he photographed the summery page of Horton's dossier. In rapid succession, he repeated the process until he had dealt with all the files in the drawer. Apparently, only thirty-five staff worked in the basement but there was no indication where each person worked, Department Y or ATSC. All the current staff records were contained in the one cabinet.

The remaining cabinets seemed to contain old files somewhat like police case files each one tied with a tape. He opened one at random, and started to read. The further he read the more astounded he became. He sat at the table to study the file more closely. Apparently, in 1976, Lord Roland Brown, then a minister in the labour government, paid Department Y £300,000 to eliminate a young man who was wooing his teenage daughter because he did not approve of the partnership.

Peter Wankle, a German youth of no apparent background or means, had befriended Felicity Brown when she was on holiday in Berlin. The friendship had blossomed and Felicity had announced her intention to marry Wankle at the earliest opportunity despite strong opposition from both parents.

An operative from Department Y was despatched to Germany to remove the youth from the marriage

scene—permanently. The operative stabbed Wankle to death in an alley in the back streets of Berlin. The German police were unable to apprehend the killer through lack of evidence. Deeper in the file was a signed form from Lord Brown, countersigned by Brendon Symonds, giving Department Y authority to murder Peter Wankle. Slater wondered who Brendon Symonds is, or was. He went to the retired files and discovered that Brendon Symonds had indeed worked in Department Y as head manager and retired in September 1981. He had died under somewhat dubious circumstances the following year. Slater found it amazing that high-ranking government officials such as Lord Brown were prepared to put their name to damaging documents such as these.

Each folder related to a different case. A business rival destroyed or eliminated, a political rival murdered or disgraced. If the price was right anyone could be *got rid of*. He remembered the person he had seen pushed into the path of the bus. The files were in alphabetical order and he eagerly searched for Carters file. He found it and lifted it onto the table.

Carter had worked in the Anti Terrorist Surveillance and Collating department as a junior collator for just two months. ATSC, and had nothing to do with Department Y for they simply shared the basement space. ATSC was a highly secret department owing to the nature of its surveillance operations. Operations had

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diversified to the extent that they now protected people of importance, just like the youth at the drugs party. Carter had discovered some information regarding Department Y and was going to bring it to public attention. Perhaps that was the information that he had intended passing on to him but they murdered him before he could do so. It did not say in the file what that information was that he was in possession of. None other than Mr Smith himself signed and issued the death warrant for Carter. Smith directed Figgis to carry out the execution order. There was even a document to say the Figgis had employed Charlie McGurk and Ernie Taylor to kill Carter for a fee of £2000.

A door banged off in the distance he listened intently but silence had returned. He glanced at his watch and was astounded to find he had been reading the records for almost four hours. If he was going to get into Smiths office and get out of the building again, he needed to go now. Quickly he photographed Carters file and the others in the cabinet, including Lord Browns, replaced everything as he had found it and locked the cabinet. As an afterthought, he removed the camera storage card and replaced it with an empty one. He slid the card containing the incriminating pictures into his sock where it nestled snug against the arch of his foot.

He listened carefully at the door but it seemed quiet in the corridor outside. He turned off the light and cautiously opened the door. There was nobody in the

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passage. He stepped to the next door and went to work with his picks. The door soon opened and he found himself in a small anteroom with a lift door on one wall. *In for a penny—in for a pound*, he thought as he pressed the button to call the lift. Almost without sound, the single door slid open and Slater stepped inside. There were two buttons with engraved arrows showing up or down. With his heart thumping in his chest, he pressed the up button. The lift rose rapidly and just as rapidly stopped and the door slid silently open.

The office was in darkness but when he stepped from the lift, the lights switched on, flooding the room with a harsh light.

“Good morning, Mr Slater. Nice of you to join us,” said Mr Smith from his chair behind the desk.

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Chapter 27

“Come along, Sgt Hobbs,” Chief Inspector Lane called to his deputy as he shrugged on his coat. “We have some work to do.”

Hobbs looked up from his desk. “Where are we going, Sir?” He had a mug of coffee in his hand.

“To see our colleagues in the docklands. It seems they have some information for us.”

Hobbs looked at his just filled cup. “Can’t they phone it through, Sir?”

Lane looked scathingly at Hobbs. “And let the world and his dog know what’s happening? You know what kind of situation we have here, Hobbs. Come along, man, put that cup down and get your arse in gear.”

“Yes, Sir.” Hobbs hung his head. *Damn*, he thought, *the boss is feisty this morning*.

Lane threw the vehicle keys to him. “You drive, Sergeant.” They drove quickly across London to the docklands and parked in the police station car park.

Lane told the Custody Sergeant. “Detective Chief Inspector Lane to see Detective Chief Inspector Butler.”

“Good morning sir, DCI Butler is expecting you.” He instructed a young rookie constable to take them to the Chief Inspectors office.

“Bill, nice to see you again,” said Chief Inspector

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Ron Butler, shaking Lane's hand vigorously. "Come in, sit down."

Detective Chief Inspector Butler was a stocky man with a craggy face and a shock of dark hair. Thick eyebrows shadowed his dark brown eyes and gave him a permanent frown even when he smiled. He had large hands that had felt the collar of many a criminal, much to their dismay. Lane and Butler had been at Hendon Police College together and had done their probationary beat from the same police station in East London before postings sent them to different divisions. They had risen through the ranks virtually simultaneously but had never crossed their paths once out of their probationary period although they had talked many times on the telephone.

"Hello, Ron. This is my Sgt, Ben Hobbs. He can be trusted."

"Hello Sgt," Butler said shaking Hobbs's hand. "Sit down. Would you both like a coffee?" They engaged in small talk until a very young looking police constable delivered their coffee. He left and shut the door behind him.

Hobbs grunted. "Boy, they're getting younger all the time. Makes me feel positively old." The two DCI's ignored his comments.

Lane grinned at his colleague. "Now, Ron, what's this information that is so important that we had to travel half way across London to get?"

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Butler grinned. "Gun running."

"Gun running?" Lane thought for a second. "That has got to be a Russian named Sokolov," he said softly.

Butler's face showed his disappointment. That Lane knew about the Russian spoiled his surprise because he knew that the murder of Sokolov was on Lane's patch. He recovered quickly. "Exactly." Then Butler smirked because he knew who Sokolov had been dealing with. He was always pleased to be one-step ahead of his old friend.

"So, Ron, just who is Sokolov, or was," Lane corrected himself.

Butler grinned. "Dimitri Sokolov was the second mate of the Uri Gagarin, a Russian cargo ship that was berthed in Tilbury last night. Sails on this morning's tide."

"Thought so," muttered Lane who had still been waiting for confirmation from the Docklands Police. That confirmed their suspicions that Sokolov had been a seaman.

Butler went on. "Anyway, he and another crew-member were running the arms to the Middle East and anywhere there was unrest and who had the money to purchase what they had on offer. We don't think the Captain, or the first mate, knew what they were doing."

Hobbs frowned and dared to speak. "How did they get the arms on board without the captain knowing?"

Lane glanced at him sarcastically and said. "You

are awake then, Sgt.” He turned to Butler. “So how *did* they get the arms on board without the captain knowing about it?”

“Simplest way of all,” Butler’s smile broadened. “In crates labelled ‘machine parts’. The cargo manifest is usually the responsibility of the first mate,” he glanced at his notes. “Alexander Romanov. However, Romanov is a bit lazy, in fact, he is very lazy, and had delegated the job to Sokolov, which was an open invitation for Sokolov to get the arms aboard. The Captain allowed Romanov to do what he wanted as long as he had an easy life and Romanov did the same with Sokolov.”

“Who is supplying Sokolov with arms?”

Butler grinned again and lit a cigarette, puffing smoke contentedly towards the window. He was enjoying keeping Lane in suspense.

“Damn it, Ron. Who is it?”

He fed information sparingly to his colleague. “He works in MOD.”

“Ron...” warned Lane.

Butler grinned. “It’s small building in Curzon Place. He’s some kind of exec there.”

Lane thought for a minute and then it dawned upon him. It had to be Smith and it therefore tied in with Department Y somehow. “Would that be a person called Smith?” He almost laughed at the look of disappointment on Ron Butlers face.

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“Damn it. You know already?”

“No, Ron, I didn’t know about gun running, nor about Smith being involved but Mr Smith is already of interest to us, a great deal of interest. Do you have tangible proof?”

“No, just the rumours that are going around. You know how it is.”

“What do you know of our Mr Smith, Sir?” Hobbs asked Butler

Butler glanced at him. “Not a lot, Sgt, sorry to disappoint you.”

Lane said. “Have you heard of a department called Department Y?”

Butler shook his head. “No. What is it?”

“Damned if we can find out for sure, we’re stalled at every turn. Although, there’s a Private eye working on a case and he keeps turning up something that’s of interest to us. He said he had witnessed a murder on some surveillance screens while he was in there. He passes it on what he finds out. He’s been of some help.”

Butler looked astounded. “You’re working with a private eye?”

Lane grinned. “Yes, believe it or not, well no, not working exactly. He has been into Department Y and, as I said, witnessed a murder on CCTV. They might be involved in murder and perhaps extortion, possibly at government level. Looks like we shall have to include

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gun running on the list now. However, we have no proof other than his say so and some rumours.”

Butler frowned. “It sounds like you might have cause for a warrant.”

“Like the Boss said, sir, no proof,” said Hobbs quietly. “We have nothing but hearsay right now. We need tangible proof to catch them all.”

“Proof is always a problem, Sgt,” muttered Butler.

Lane frowned. “We want to make absolutely sure that we can nail them all before we try for a warrant, Ron. You know how it works. They probably have some high-ranking ministers, perhaps even a judge or two, on their payroll, so we need to tread carefully.”

Butler nodded agreement. “Yes, tread carefully seems to be the catchword these days.”

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Chapter 28

Smith was sitting at an enormous desk of polished mahogany. Standing alongside the desk was Figgis and two other men that Slater did not recognise. Figgis held a .38 police special revolver in his fist, the blued steel shining in the office lights. “Good morning, Mr Slater,” Smith said politely. A curl of smoke drifted up from a Cuban cigar held in his fingers.

It was a shock to find Smith waiting for him and Slater’s muscles were tightly bunched, ready for flight, a nerve flickered across his cheek, the only outward sign of the tension within him. Available options raced through his brain until he had eliminated all but one. And that seemed to be a dash back into the lift but he knew Figgis and his men would reach him before the doors had a chance to close. On the other hand, a bullet would stop him dead in his tracks without much effort. He was equally sure that there would be an override switch to suspend the lift between floors somewhere in the office. He relaxed; perhaps an opportunity to escape would arise later. He smiled. “Hello, Mr Smith. It’s nice to meet you again.”

Smith’s face looked grim. “You’ll not think so when we have done with you, Slater.”

Slater looked about the extravagantly fitted office, with expensive furnishings in rich mahogany. Standard

lamps strategically placed gave a soft light over the deep pile Axminster carpet. Apparently, no expense had been spared and had probably been paid for out of his murder fees.

Smith nodded to Figgis. "Search him. And, Figgis, make no mistake this time, I want a proper job."

"Yes, sir." Figgis advanced, gun held on Slater preventing any action. He stuck the gun in Slater's ear while his cronies removed the contents from his pockets. He placed the items on Smith's desk. Smith picked over them with a pen. Keys, handkerchief, penknife, loose change, camera, a billfold containing about fifty pounds and a folder with Slater's PI license. Smith picked up the camera, studying it from several angles. "What's this for, Slater?"

Slater chuckled, although he didn't feel like being jovial. "Taking pictures."

Smith said seriously. "I know that. Why have you got it?"

He shrugged and said. "I fancy myself as a photographer."

Figgis slammed his fist into Slater's back and he dropped to the floor gasping for breath. Figgis snarled. "Smart arse. Answer the boss properly."

Smith studied the Minox. "What pictures have you been taking?"

Slater got to his feet. He was thankful he had removed the camera storage card and hidden it in his

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sock. He shrugged again. "Nothing, yet, but the night is young. Who knows what opportunities will arise."

"Yes, quite." Smith was pressing the camera buttons. He frowned. "What did you intend taking? This is a spy type camera, not a normal machine for a photographer."

"It's normal for me, I'm an investigator, remember? Perhaps I can interest you in some portraits of your staff."

Smith ignored the comment and dropped the camera on the desk in frustration. "How the hell does this damn thing work?"

"I can show you, Boss." Figgis stepped forward. He picked up the Minox and pressed a few buttons. "Slater's right, boss. There's nothing on here. The storage card is empty."

"Thank you, Figgis." Smith was surprised for he hadn't realised that Figgis had the brains to work a camera. He turned his attention back to Slater. "Mr Slater, you have been a thorn in my side for a little while now and I am glad that you are now in my hands."

Slater wondered what was going to happen next. "The thorn is of your own creation, Smith, and if you feel a prick now and then that is your problem. I am merely investigating allegations made against my client."

Smith nodded. "Ahh, yes, the hapless Mr

Caruthers. A sorry little man who is as innocent as the day he was born.”

“Why are you trying to frame him then?”

“Frame him? Oh, we are not trying to frame him—he has nothing to do with our operation.”

“Which is?”

“Don’t tell me that you have not yet discovered our purpose after the time you spent in my operations room downstairs. Mr Slater, I am disappointed, I expected better things from you. I thought you might have been a challenge for me but it seems I was wrong.”

Slater shrugged. “I have been giving Mr Caruthers all my time. So why murder Carter and, I am sure, many others?”

“Come, come, Slater. Surely you aren’t that naïve.”

“So is it political, revenge, hate, money? What makes you murder fellow human beings?”

Smith smiled sadly. “You are right in one respect. It is money Slater, murder for purely financial reasons. Although in Carter’s case, murder was an expedience. I like money and this one way of accumulating lots of it very quickly. It is a business for me, a murder business.” He rubbed his chin as though assessing if he needed a shave even though he was clean-shaven. “But you are going to cost me dearly for in this instance I am the one who must pay for your demise.”

Slater sneered and said sarcastically “Forgive me for being a nuisance. I am sure you could find a way to

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save your money.” He switched the subject back to Caruthers. “So who is trying to frame Caruthers for selling secrets?”

“That is not our concern.”

“But you must know.”

His voice sounded bored. “Mr Slater, no one is trying to frame him. We may have suggested that he was up to something to avert attention from our own operation. It looks like we may have inadvertently drawn attention to it instead. A grave error of judgment on my part and one I will not repeat.”

“So I can tell Caruthers that he’s off the hook?”

Smith stared at him in surprise and then chuckled mirthlessly. “Why, I doubt that you will be seeing him anytime in the near future.”

“So, you intend to murder me as well?”

“Oh, come, come, Mr. Slater, murder is such a harsh word.”

“What would you call it?”

“I prefer to say that I will have a small irritation removed, removed permanently. Removed like one removes a pimple.” He chuckled again almost to himself; however, his expression was really quite humourless and the humour certainly did not reach his eyes.

“Why are you trying so hard to get at Sara Carr?”

“Ah, the lovely Miss Carr, what a sweet girl. However, Miss Carr is another irritation that requires

removal. She has been prying and was also the instrument that allowed you to get into the basement.”

“So you intend to murder her as well?”

“When we can discover where you have secreted her, yes, she will be removed.”

Slater shook his head. “That is something you will never find out, Smith, never in a million years.”

“Oh, I am sure Mr Figgis and his men will soon extract that information from you. They are very good at that.” But even as he was saying it, he was thinking that they would probably not be able to get any information out of Slater. He turned to Figgis. “Take him to the safe house and find out where he has taken the Carr woman. And, Figgis, I don’t care how you do it.”

Figgis stood up with a malicious smile on his face. “Sure Boss thanks.”

“You can dispose of him once you have the required information.”

Figgis turned to the two men standing next to him. “Tie his hands,” he told them.

Slater knew he had to try and keep his hands free but realised that there was little chance of that. He sighed, they were not going to hogtie him without a fight. As the two men advanced on him, he called to Smith. “What’s the Alpha Project?”

“Wait,” Smith, snapped his fingers that stopped the thugs in their tracks. “What’s that about the Alpha Project, Slater? What do you know of it?”

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“I was hoping you would tell me that.”

“Ahh, so you don’t know. Where did you hear that name mentioned?”

Slater hesitated; it wouldn’t do to give all his secrets away to Smith. “I just heard it mentioned during my investigation. Someone mentioned it but I can’t remember who.”

Satisfied with the answer he said. “You know nothing, Slater.” He turned to Figgis. “Ok, take him away. And make sure he hasn’t told anyone else about the project.”

Figgis waved the thugs forward and they advanced. Slater lashed out and floored the first thug with a well-aimed fist to his chin. The second held back nervously until Figgis urged him on with a shout. “Get on with it you fucking moron.”

Slater backed toward the lift. The second man rushed him and Slater broke his nose with an almighty belt. Then there was a loud retort and he felt the path of the bullet as it whizzed by him.

Smith shouted. “Damn it Figgis, don’t fire that thing in here. Take him without that damn gun. I don’t want blood on my carpet.”

Figgis urged the men on again. The two men came forward again and Slater raised his fist then lights went out as something hard bounced across his head. As he dropped to the floor, consciousness fading, he dimly heard Smith telling Figgis to, take him out of his office.

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Chapter 29

Fothergill pulled the Omega into the kerb near the building in Curzon Place and switched off the engine. There was a ticking sound as the engine cooled and a whirr as the computer system shut down. They had been searching for Slater since their boss had given them a dressing down. Now, at the end of almost 20 hours of tireless labour they had seen Slater quite by chance enter the alley alongside the Hilton hotel. Halloran had left the car and raced to the alley head in time to see Slater enter the steel door at the end before it shut behind him. He went down the alley and examined the door but there were no identifying marks on it. He tried opening but it had been secured from within. He returned to the vehicle brushing the rain from his coat.

“What's going on, Halloran?”

“God it's wet out there. He's gone inside a building. He went through a door in the alley but I don't know where it goes. Call it in and see if operations know where it leads.”

She picked up her radio. “So, are we going to wait till he comes out again?”

“If we have to, my dear Fothergill, this is near to where the Carr woman worked and Slater seems to frequent this area on a regular basis. Therefore, we wait. Perhaps this is where Carr is as well. Go on damn it, ask

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ops about that door.”

Within minutes, operations control had informed them that they knew nothing of the door.

Four hours later, and two beat police officers asking them to move on until they had identified themselves with their MI5 ID cards, Fothergill groaned in exasperation. “But for God’s sake how much longer we got to wait?”

“As long as necessary, Babs, me darlin’. He’ll come out eventually.”

“Damn it, Liam, it’s nearly five in the morning. I’m losing my beauty sleep.”

He glanced at her, admiring her aristocratic oriental profile and ample breasts swelling her shirt, and grinned. “From where I’m sitting, Babs sweetheart you don’t need any beauty sleep.” Secretly he had always wondered if she was as hot in bed as she looked and would love to have the chance to find out but knew there was no chance of that ever happening.

She sighed and smiled tiredly. “You are sweet to say so, Liam, but believe me, I do. How much longer we going to sit here?”

“As long as we have to, sooner or later, he’ll come back out. I have a strong hunch he’s up to something. Let’s face it; PI’s do more in the early hours than at any other time.”

“Hunch my ass,” she muttered sarcastically, scratching an itch on the side of her breast. “When have

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your hunches ever amounted to anything?”

Halloran ignored her and said in a kind tone. “Well, you get your head down and I’ll keep watch for a while. You can get in the back seat and get some sleep if you want.”

She raised her arm, sniffed her armpit and wrinkled her nose in disgust. “God I stink, I need a damn shower.” She glanced at Halloran. “We might have missed him somehow? He could be at his office or tucked up in bed right now,” she suppressed a yawn with the back of her hand. “Where we should be.”

He sighed and grinned. “A chance would be a fine thing.”

She suppressed a smile. “You got no chance, Halloran.” She knew he had the hots for her and loved to tease him.

“A guy can dream can’t he?”

“Yeah, dream on.”

He opened the glove compartment, pulled out what looked like a Blackberry communications phone and handed it to her.

“Wow, a mobile phone—so what?” she scowled. She was not at her friendliest at 5am.

Halloran took the phone from her again and wagged it in front of her. “This is no ordinary phone, Fothergill, it’s a special gadget given to me with the courtesy of Brian the tech wizard.”

Brian Spencer was their boffin who claimed that

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given time and money there was nothing that he couldn't do.

"He's tapped into Slater's office phone line so if he's there I can get any calls his office phone receives, repeated on here. If he uses the phone we'll know he's there."

Fothergill shook her head in wonder. "Wow, that's real James Bond stuff. Spencer is a clever bugger, that's for sure, but I'm telling you Slater's in bed right now." She looked up at the sky to see a glow in the eastern sky. "It's starting to get light."

"Yes. We'll wait as long as we can. At least till he comes out." He looked at his watch. "We might have to go soon though once London wakes up." Even his ID might not let them stay and block the peak London traffic.

"Thank God for that," she muttered softly and closed her eyes, leaning her head back against the headrest.

A movement in the corner of his eyes made Hal-loran look up. "Hello, hello," he gave a delighted chuckle. "My hunch was correct. I knew we were right to wait because there he is, my dear Fothergill." He had spotted Slater leaving the alley alongside the Hilton hotel.

Fothergill looked up, trying to see their quarry. "Where?"

"There, ahead of us, alongside the Hilton. He's

coming out of the alley”

“Yeah, I see him. He took his time, what the hell was he doing in there?”

“Beats me and who cares as long as we’ve still got him tagged.”

“Who are those guys with him?”

“The short one I know, that’s Harry Figgis strong arm for Smith but I don’t know the other two.”

Fothergill frowned “Hang on a minute, looks like Slater has his hands tied behind his back. Something’s wrong.” She watched as the two men manhandled Slater into a black Ford Granada standing at the kerb.

The men, apparently abducting Slater, jumped into the vehicle and with a roar of its powerful engine, the Ford accelerated into Park Lane. Fothergill fumbled with the car keys, started the Omega and raced off in pursuit. The early morning work traffic was sparse and had not yet started to build up but even so, Fothergill had to keep several early commuters’ vehicles between them and the other car so that they wouldn’t spot them following behind. However, they had no difficulty keeping the Ford in sight. A traffic light turned against them, Fothergill put her foot down and the Omega’s supercharged 3 Litre engine responded with a burst of speed. They crossed the intersection on a red light amid a blaring of horns from angry motorists.

“Don’t lose them,” Halloran told her tersely as adrenaline rushed through him making his nerves to

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jangle.

“Yeah, right,” Fothergill muttered her hand lightly caressing the steering wheel of the big car. “As if I’m trying to do that.”

“Sorry sweetheart.” He knew she was a superb driver and had attended the advanced driving course to handle vehicles at speed, the only woman on the course. She had passed top of her class, much to the annoyance of her male contemporaries.

Eventually the Ford turned towards docklands. The traffic became sparse forcing Fothergill to hang further back. The Ford progressed at speed along Westferry Road and then turned right onto Napier Avenue. Fothergill accelerated to the corner and turned into it.

“What the fuck?” Growled Halloran. The Ford was nowhere in sight along the road.

Fothergill stopped the Omega. “They must have pulled into one of these apartment blocks. They couldn’t possibly have reached the end of the road.”

Most of the buildings, old dockland warehouses that had once held world trade goods coming up the river had fallen into disuse in the early 1900’s, had now been developed into luxury offices or apartments for the rich and not a place Halloran would have expected Figgis to frequent. “Cruise slowly up here for a bit.”

They came to a brick wall with broken glass embedded along the top that bordered the road. There was a pair of corrugated iron gates standing open and a huge

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sign said the building was due for demolition and was out of bounds to the public. "The residents will be pleased about that," he said, thinking aloud.

"Pleased about what?"

"Getting rid of this eyesore. Bet they don't like looking out of their living room windows at that relic not after paying a fortune for their pads."

Fothergill stopped so suddenly he jerked forward against his seat belt. She cried excitedly. "They are there. The Ford is parked in the yard." She had spotted it just as the wall had hid her view. She did a U-turn and cruised slowly past the entrance again.

"That's them for sure." Halloran had also spotted the Ford.

"Now what?"

"We wait and see what happens. Park up so we can keep the car under observation."

"Don't you think we should go and rescue Slater?"

"I don't know right now. I guess we'll wait and see what happens."

Fothergill frowned. "Well you're the senior agent so it's your decision but Slater could be in serious trouble and may need help."

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Chapter 30

Indeed Slater was in trouble. His head hurt and he had a sharp pain that shot across his temples with each heavy beat of his heart. He was sitting on a chair with his hands secured to the chair arms and feet tightly bound to the two front legs. If only he had an arm free, he would be able to rub his temples that were still pounding mercilessly. A huge lump on the back of his skull throbbed in time with his heartbeat and the pain in his temples. He owed Figgis for that bang on the head.

When the thugs confronted him in Smiths office Figgis had got behind him while he was concentrating on the other two men, had whacked him across the head with something, and knocked him unconscious. He had regained his faculties as the three men were taking him along the corridor to the alley outside the Hilton. He had muttered a facetious *Goodnight, Henry*, as he was frogmarched past the door attendant who never raised an eyebrow as he watched them forcibly take him from the building. He heard an equally ridiculous *Goodnight Sir*, in return. Perhaps the guardian of the back door into Smiths Empire had seen it all before.

Figgis and the other two men bundled him, none too gently, into a car standing at the kerb and they raced across London to...to...where? Where was he? He had no idea. He vaguely remembered a sharp prick in his

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arm and the remainder of the drive was just a blur. He realised that they had drugged him.

He looked about him as far as his restraints allowed him to twist his body. He appeared to be in some kind of warehouse and a disused one by the look of it. The floor was dusty and the huge space was empty but for a few squashed cartons, half a dozen wooden pallets in a stack, sheets of newspaper and other detritus of a disused building. There was the sound of water dripping from somewhere, the sound a steady musical tink in the gloom of the huge space but he was unable to determine where it was coming from. Iron pillars supported the ceiling some thirty feet above him. He could see a row of skylights and a bleak light filtered through the grimy glass. He wondered what floor he was on. He had no recollection of leaving his abductors car and walking into the building, perhaps he had been carried in. There was no sign of the men who had brought him here. He pulled against his bonds but there was no give in the nylon ropes, they had tied him very securely and struggles only succeeded in chaffing his wrists, adding to the pain.

There was a bang in the distance, the sound booming in the emptiness of the warehouse and he thought he could hear the faint sound of voices. "Hey," he shouted and listened but there was no reply. "Hey," he called again but that only served to make his headache more severely, made him nauseous, and he wondered what

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they had injected into his arm. Then he heard footsteps approaching, grit crunching under the sole of shoes. "Hey," he shouted for the third time.

"So, you're awake at last, Slater." Figgis appeared from behind him. He walked slowly into view and stared curiously at the investigator.

"What do you want, Figgis?"

"We want to ask you a few questions."

"Who are *we*?"

Figgis snarled nastily. "Don't be a fucking smart arse, Slater, just answer the question."

"What question was that?"

Figgis placed his hands on the chair arms and leant close to Slater. "What do you know about the Alpha Project?"

"Never heard of it. What is it?"

"I'll ask the questions. Where have you hidden the Carr woman? We want to talk to her as well."

"Who?"

"Sara Carr."

He could see the thug's brain was not that bright and wondered how he could turn the tables on him. "Sorry, I don't know who you are talking about."

Figgis pushed his head closer, leaning heavily on the chair arms. "Of course you do, Slater, you must know her; she's the woman that works on reception in Curzon Place..." Then it dawned on him that Slater was stringing him along. "You bastard. You'll tell me in the

end, so stop stalling.”

“What’s the Alpha Project, Figgis?”

Surprise etched across his face. “What?”

Slater smiled. “I said, what’s the Alpha Project?”

“You answer my questions, I don’t answer yours.”

Slater sneered. Perhaps this was the way he could turn the tables on Smiths henchman after all. “You don’t know, do you? I know Smith wouldn’t trust you with that kind of information, it’s far too important. You are not very high up his totem pole, that’s for sure.”

Figgis was indignant. “I do know what it is. Mr Smith trusts me implicitly.”

Slater laughed in derision, the laughter echoing around the warehouse as though it was mocking him. He said sarcastically. “Yes, of course he does, Figgis. Then, tell me, why are you here in this grimy hole and he’s relaxing in that nice office of his, drinking whisky and smoking cigars?”

“Well...” his voice tailed off. Then his eyes grew wary. “Where’s Carr?”

“What’s the Alpha Project?” His head rocked as Figgis slammed his fist into the side of his jaw.

“What do you know of the Alpha Project? Who have you told?”

“I know all about the Alpha Project, Figgis.”

He sneered. “You don’t know I heard Mr Smith saying so.”

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“You don't think I'd give away my secrets, do you?”

“Then tell me what it is.”

Slater laughed again. “If you don't know, why should I tell you? Smith doesn't trust you enough to bring you into the loop.”

“Of course he trusts me.”

“Then why hasn't he told you about the Alpha Project?”

“He has told me.”

“Then what is it?”

Figgis started to lose his temper and snarled. “I'll ask the questions, Slater.”

Slater dropped his head wearily. “Ok, Figgis, you win. What do you want to know?”

A look of triumph floated across his face as he said. “What do you know about the Alpha Project?”

“I know everything.”

“What?”

Slater grinned even though the right side of his face was starting to swell from the blow Figgis had given him. “Sorry, Figgis, I didn't know you were hard of hearing.”

“What?”

“There you go again. I said, Sorry, Figgis, I didn't know you were hard of hearing.”

Figgis slammed his fist once more into Slater's jaw and he thought that perhaps he was getting more than a

little annoyed, getting rattled, just what he wanted. Figgis twisted his lips in anger and a fleck of spittle flipped from between his lips. "What do you know about the Alpha Project?"

"As I said. I know everything. I am not an investigator for nothing."

"I bet you don't know about the Prime Minister. You couldn't possibly know because it's been a carefully guarded secret, the whole project has."

Slater kept the surprise from showing on his face. My god, he thought, the PM is involved. "Of course I know about him," he snapped.

"Even about the contract taken out on him by the Chancellor?" Figgis said stupidly his jaw hanging open in surprise.

This gets worse by the second, Slater thought. He knew he had to get out of there somehow. He had to alert Lane but how the hell was he supposed to do that? He had to get away from Figgis first and preferably before the other two thugs put in an appearance, wherever they were. Figgis was expecting some kind of reply. *God, what an idiot the man is*, he thought. He nodded. "Yes I know all about that." He had to find out when the contract was to take place. "Day after tomorrow isn't it?"

A look of triumph glossed over his face. "So that's something you don't know, Slater."

"Damn it, I was sure that's when it was." He

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paused. "Ah, I get it." He gave Figgis a sly sideways look. "You're just trying to fool me into telling you when it is by saying I'm wrong." He grinned, trying to look foolish.

Figgis looked indignant. "No I ain't. You're the one that's wrong."

Slater shook his head. "I'm rarely wrong, Figgis. If you think I'm wrong, then when is it?" He found it painful to watch the thought processes in the man's head. He could see that Figgis had a desperate need to show him how much he knew, how much he was trusted by Smith, how much he had been told, how important he was in Smiths organisation. He suppressed a smile, it all worked to his advantage. "Well," he goaded.

"Huh, it's on November the 5th, on the same night that Guy Fawkes tried, and failed. But we won't fail like he did." he smirked. "Bet you didn't know that, huh, did you, Slater?"

Slater was appalled. November the 5th. That was only eight days away. He had to do something and soon. He didn't really like the current PM or his policies but to murder him was not cricket and was certainly against the British democratic way of life. He shook his head and said quietly. "No, Figgis, I didn't know that."

Figgis bunched his fist he stepped forward. "Enough of this chit chat, Slater, you're wasting my fucking time, I want to know where you have taken

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Sara Carr.”

Here we go again, he thought, *how did Smith involve himself with a man this simple?* He braced himself for a new round of beatings.

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Chapter 31

At that very moment, Archibald Percy Smith, the boss of Department Y, the department responsible for contract murder on a large scale was thinking along the same lines as Slater. He sighed when he realised that Figgis was going to be yet another unpaid murder to take care of, but he had to find a replacement for him first.

His current round of problems had really started with that damn Russian, what was his name? Oh yes, that's it, he remembered—Sokolov. Sokolov should have remained happy with what he had paid him to run the arms to the Middle East and not try to blackmail him. He had wanted more money, a larger slice of the pie. Well, Sokolov had very quickly learnt not to meddle with him and he was now feeding the fish at the bottom of the Thames. With the demise of Sokolov, he had stopped supplying arms for it was less profitable than the murder contracts anyhow. Probably more troublesome too. Murder had a nice finality to it for it had no loose ends. He enjoyed the nicety of finality.

Carter had come next, Carter was about to divulge information to Slater about his operation and what Sokolov was up to, so had had to go too. He had no idea how he had found out what was happening in Department Y, but he had. Figgis had really botched that one

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for he had given him strict instructions that Carter was to *disappear*. He had failed even that simple task for the authorities found Carter's body a few days later. Damn it. That had raised an investigation that had seriously threatened his empire and when that damn police inspector had started snooping around, he had a job keeping a lid on it.

Then Slater had turned up and started to meddle in his affairs and the damn PI was getting too close for comfort with his investigation. In spite of his elaborate security, he had even managed to infiltrate Department Y and probably found out about his operation. Even the official staff in ATSC didn't know what went on behind that door. They assumed Department Y was just another secret government operation. God knows what Slater had seen the short time he was in there.

Then there was the damn Carr woman. She appeared to be helping Slater and, he suspected, knew far more than her pretty face told. If he could find out where Slater had taken her he could get rid of her along with Slater. Perhaps do them both at the same time. That had a nice ring to it.

Now there was Figgis to deal with, the incompetent Figgis. His henchman's mentality seemed to be diminishing each and every day. He vowed that Figgis would be the last free murder he would ever undertake.

Perhaps it was time to close the department. He had always given the impression that there was someone

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else higher up controlling the operations. He smiled grimly at the thought, for the buck stopped with him. He was the top man. If he wanted to bail out and leave everyone to their own devices, it was his choice and no one else's.

He had salted away most of the revenue from the previous contracts and could live very comfortably on that. He paid his staff highly to ensure their silence and even after his wages outlay he still had a large sum stashed away. Perhaps he should take what he had and go abroad, somewhere that didn't have an extradition treaty with Britain. He pulled out his notebook and looked at the figures jotted down. He had just over three million pounds saved. Yes, that would be enough for a sweet comfortable life almost anywhere in the world. He decided that immediately the Alpha Project was completed he would take the money and run. The Alpha contract was worth another four million, the highest contract ever and that would really set him up to live in luxury, he couldn't leave that kind of money behind, and the loss would prey on his mind. To hell with all those left in the department, when he decided to call it a day they could fend for themselves.

The telephone on his desk rang breaking into his thoughts. "Smith," he snapped sharply, he didn't feel like being polite right now.

"It's Willis, sir."

Willis was a very reliable man. He snapped. "Yes?

What is it, Willis?”

“The Beresford contract has been completed satisfactorily.”

He softened his sharp tone. “Thank you, Willis. Fax me the details immediately.”

Willis kept his voice even. “Yes Sir.” He didn’t like Smith very much. He thought he was an arrogant son of a bitch. However, the money he was paid ensured that he bit his tongue when he had to take crap from his boss.

Smith walked to his drinks cabinet but didn’t reach for a bottle, instead he pressed a hidden button and a section of the panelling slid aside to reveal a small safe. He took a bunch of keys from his pocket, opened it and selected the Beresford file. He sat at his desk and flipped it open.

John Beresford, he read, was a rich industrialist and a philanderer, a Casanova of major proportions with many other men’s wives at his beck and call. Mary Beresford, his long-suffering wife, had contracted to pay £50K to have her husband removed from her life—permanently. Smith suspected that she already had a younger man in the wings, a man who took care of her when she needed satisfying and one who was waiting and happy to step into the breach when it opened up for him.

The fax whirred and he waited patiently as an A4 sheet of paper slid into the in tray. It was the details of

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the Beresford contract. The assassin had made the murder to look as though a jealous husband of one of his lovers had killed Beresford. Nice one, he thought, that ties it up neatly. He was pleased with that one. Why couldn't Figgis work that efficiently?

He extracted an external hard drive from the safe and connected it to his PC. He smiled indulgently as he studied the detailed contents that popped onto his screen. He thought that the authorities would love to get their hands on the drive for it contained details of all the murders he had ever contracted to undertake, the monies he had received and the full details of the person, or persons, who requested his rather specialised services along with scanned copies of the signed contract. With this disc, he could go into blackmail in a big way. He could even undertake blackmail from any other country in the world if he so wished. Perhaps that was now the way to go forward for it could be as profitable as the murders themselves. Perhaps even more so.

He noted that Mary Beresford had paid a 50% retainer. Quickly, he typed up the invoice for the balance and saved it to the hard drive after printing out a hard copy for mailing to her. Only one person had ever reneged on the final invoice and Figgis got rid of him. This time he wanted the body found to send a message to anyone else contemplating reneging on an invoice. At least Figgis had got that one right. But that was in his

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better days. He returned the file and the hard drive to the safe and slid the panel back hiding it from view. Once the balance was paid, he would place this file with the others in the basement. Perhaps he should arrange for incineration of those basement files. Soon he decided—he would get rid of them soon, just as soon as the Alpha contract was complete and paid.

He poured himself a large whisky, larger than usual, and sat at his desk again. He opened a humidor, selected a fat Havana cigar, held it to his ear and rolled it between his fingers. He wondered why people did this, but he had seen others doing it in the movies so he emulated them. He clipped the end of the cigar with a pair of silver clippers. He had paid a fortune for these hand rolled cigars but felt that the expense had been worth it. He held his lighter to the tip and puffed until he was satisfied it was drawing properly. He sighed contentedly. He was happiest when his troops completed a contract satisfactorily.

He had a few loose ends for Figgis to carry out, namely Carr and Slater, then it was curtains for Figgis. He then would retire to...to...he had no idea where but no matter, he'd decide that later when it was time to go.

He wondered how Figgis was getting on with his attempt to discover where Slater had taken Carr and wished he'd make contact to update him.

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Chapter 32

Slater continued to struggle with his bonds but only succeeded in rubbing his wrists raw until the rope become covered with his blood. His swollen lips had split where Figgis had repeatedly punched him in an attempt to discover where he had taken Sara. However, for the moment, he was alone but it was perhaps only a small respite. He had only seen Figgis at the warehouse so far and had no idea where the other two thugs had gone. He smiled to himself. It was very trusting of Smith to allow Figgis to work on his own; for the man was dumb. He jumped, startled as Figgis suddenly appeared from behind him and grabbed his shirtfront. He hadn't heard him approaching. "You ready to talk, Slater?"

He put on a show of defeat and mumbled. "All right, all right, you win, I can't take anymore."

Figgis had a note of triumph in his voice. "Well? Where is she? What have you done with her?"

He hung his head and shook it. "I don't know. No, wait," he cried when Figgis raised his fist again. "I don't know the address but I can take you to her." He banked on Figgis wanting to get all the credit for getting Sara and not sharing the victory with his henchmen.

"Enough of the bullshit Slater just let me know where she is."

Slater looked up at him with one eye swollen and almost closed. "I told you I can take you to her. If you want her, Figgis, you'll have to do it my way or not at all. Smith won't like that, will he?" He could see the need to impress his boss over riding any common sense Figgis had.

He looked at him suspiciously, and then said warily. "All right. You try any funny stuff and I'll kill you, Slater, so help me, I will."

"Sure, you could kill me and where will that leave you? You'd never find Sara on your own. You'd have to explain that to Smith, how long would you last with him if that happened?"

Figgis pulled a snub-nosed .38 police special revolver from his pocket and cocked it. He reached out and loosened the bonds holding Slater to the chair, stepped back and levelled the gun. "Come on then, Slater, take me to her."

Slater shook the ropes loose and let them drop to the floor, shaking his hands to get the circulation back. "Damn it, Figgis, let me get the circulation back first. And point that damn thing somewhere else before it goes off."

Figgis jabbed his gun into Slater's ribs, causing him to grunt in pain. "Don't piss me about, Slater, get moving."

"Alright Figgis, keep your hair on. Have you got a car?"

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Figgis became agitated. “You know I have. How the fucking hell do you think you got here?”

“I thought your buddies might have taken it. They seemed more important than you and they’re not here right now.”

Figgis’ face flushed with anger. “I command the car, Slater, don’t you worry about that. They do as I tell them.”

“Do you want to wait for them to come back or are you going to get Sara by yourself? If you think you can.”

Chapter 33

Fothergill yawned and stretched her arms over her head as far as the car roof would allow, her blouse pulling tight across her breasts that threatened the security of the buttons, a point not missed by Halloran. “God this waiting about like this is killing me.” She had noticed his eyes staring at her chest and felt pleased that she warranted a second look. “I’m hungry, I’m tired and I need a damn pee.”

“Have patience, Babs me darlin’.”

She crossed her long legs and pressed her hands in her lap to ease her bladder. “I don’t think we should wait any longer, we should go in. Slater’s in trouble, that’s obvious so let’s go and see what’s going down before it’s too late.”

Liam sighed in exasperation. He thought she could be quite bossy at times. Perhaps he should let her take over the operation and see how she got on, but she was right of course, they should go in and ultimately it was his decision to go or not. “Ok, I’ll give it ten more minutes and if nothing happens then we go. Let’s get tooled up ready.” He opened the glove compartment and pressed a button inside and the recess that had once held the passenger airbag opened to reveal three handguns and boxes of ammunition. He glanced across the car. “Which one do you want?”

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Barbara Fothergill reached across and selected the .38 Smith and Wesson police special, compact and powerful. She held it against her sweater, turning it to catch the light. "Hmm, I'm not sure. Do you think this one matches my outfit?"

Halloran frowned. He was getting tense as he always did at the prospect of some pending action and Fothergill's frivolity didn't help. "Stop pissing about Fothergill. Do you fucking want that one or not?"

She knew Halloran got annoyed when she acted like a bimbo, which made her do it even more. She smiled to herself. "Yeah, I guess this one will do, it goes with my complexion ok. Let me have some ammo."

Halloran threw a box of cartridges across the car. She deftly caught them, flipped the chamber to one side and proceeded to load the revolver. She put a handful of loose cartridges in the pocket of her jeans. "For God's sake Fothergill, we aren't going to war; there are only three of them." She poked her tongue at him behind his back as he selected a 9mm Browning automatic and slid the magazine out which he proceeded to load with bullets.

Now that they were doing something positive, Fothergill had forgotten her need to pee. She wanted to get going and take out the bad guys and rescue Slater. Hmm, she thought with little tummy flip, that Slater is quite a hunk. She wondered if she would be able to get

to know him better when the operation was over. She wished Halloran were as hunky as Slater then perhaps they could have got something going. "Come on Halloran, what are you waiting for, let's go," she said as adrenaline started pumping through her veins.

"Wait on, Fothergill; don't be so all fired up to get shot." He spotted movement near the warehouse. "Hang on a minute—look over there."

She looked where he was pointing and could see Slater and the man Figgis leaving the building. Slater was untied and appeared to be leaving of his own free will. "He looks to be a free man, what's going on?" she said as Slater got into the driving seat of the Ford.

"Look again, Fothergill, is that a damn pea shooter Figgis has in his hand."

Then she noticed the gun Figgis was holding. Slater shut the car door and she watched Figgis walk round to the passenger side and get in. "Come on. Let's take him."

"Goddamn it, Fothergill, will you calm down."

"Now's our chance Liam, we might not get a better one." She reached for the door handle.

"I bet Slater is taking him to where he has taken Sara Carr. We'll follow for a bit and see where this goes. So stop waving that thing around."

She pouted and slid the Smith and Wesson into her purse. She grimaced as she held it up, the gun dragging it down on one side. "It ruins the line of my bag

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completely. I paid a lot of money for this bag. I'll have you know it's a designer item."

Halloran rolled his eyes skyward. "I don't care a damn if you got it from a charity shop. Start up and let's go before we lose them."

She started the Omega. "I wonder where the other two hoods are. I didn't see them come out of the warehouse."

"Who cares, they've split up. One will be easier to take than three."

Secretly Fothergill was glad they hadn't got into a gunfight. Her nerves were at full stretch as it was but it wouldn't do to let Halloran know that. "Damn it, Liam. We could have had such a party if we had taken them when I said."

"For God's sake, Fothergill, calm down, you'll get your chance. Now drive, damn it, they're getting away."

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Chapter 34

“Sgt Hobbs,” shouted detective Chief Inspector Lane from his office door. “Come into my office,” he added to the answering call from Hobbs.

“Yes sir,” Hobbs closed the office door behind him. “What’s up?”

“Slater has gone missing, that’s what’s up, Hobbs.”

“He’ll be around somewhere, Sir, PI’s are like that. One minute nowhere to be found and the next all over you like a damn rash.”

Lane glared at him. “Don’t be frivolous, Sgt, this is a serious matter.”

“Yes, Sir, sorry. Why are we interested if he has gone missing? He’s only a PI.”

“He’s the only one who has any clear knowledge of that damn Department Y and we need to know how he got on in there. If he really did get in there.”

“Sir?”

“He said he was going in the back door, so to speak, last night. He hasn’t reported in yet.”

This mystified Hobbs for he hadn’t known that there was an operation involving Slater in progress. “You should have told me Sir, but he’ll turn up, I’m sure of it.”

“I have a feeling that things are going pear shaped, Hobbs. I want him found and I want to know where he

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has secreted Miss Carr. Put out a call to locate him. Find out if he has any family or relatives in the area. No, extend that to the whole damn country. I want him found, and bloody quick. I fear something might have happened to him.” The last thing he wanted was yet another murder on his patch, unsolved or otherwise.

“Yes Sir.” Hobbs was thinking about the amount of work that was going to involve. That would keep him in the office for a few days when he’d rather be out and about.

Lane went on. “Put that in motion and then come with me.”

He sighed in relief that he could pass on the instructions to subordinates. “Where are we going, sir?”

“We, Sgt, are going to pay Mr Smith a visit. I want to see him in his office if that is possible. I want to see him on his turf and ask him a few questions.”

“Right, Sir.”

“So get your damn finger out and get those background checks moving.”

Hobbs turned to go. “Yes Sir.” He left to delegate the time-consuming checks and traces to some unfortunate PC.

Lane called after him. “Oh, and Hobbs, make sure you select reliable men for the job.”

Two hours later Lane, in company with Hobbs and a young PC, parked his car on the double yellow lines outside the building in Curzon Place.

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"Burton, stay with the vehicle and make sure we don't get a parking ticket. Sgt, come with me." He marched up to the reception and glared at the severe, middle-aged woman on duty. His Warrant card and the snapped command that they see Mr Smith did not faze her.

"Please take a seat Inspector..."

"It's *Detective Chief* Inspector, Madam," Lane snapped, feeling his command slipping in the face of this woman who had probably dealt with more than a DCI in her time.

"Take a seat, *Detective Chief* Inspector," she replied in a calm voice, her hand hovering over the telephone. Obviously, she was not about to call Smith until he had taken the proffered seat. He turned away towards the seating and said out of the corner of his mouth. "If I see as much as a hint of a smile on your face, Hobbs, I'll have you back on the beat on permanent night shift for the rest of your career."

"Yes, Sir, your secret is safe with me," said a stony-faced Hobbs. He was thinking what a great story it was going to be when he was next in the local pub with some of his colleagues.

They waited thirty minutes before Smith come to see them. He stepped out of the lift and held out his hand. He was smiling and appeared relaxed. "DCI Lane? I'm Archie Smith. What can I do for you?"

"I need to ask you some questions. Can we go to

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your office, Mr Smith?"

Smith frowned and his composure slipped slightly but he soon put his smile back on. "What's wrong with asking them here, Chief Inspector? I have nothing to hide."

Lane looked about the reception and glared at the receptionist who was watching them intently. "This is not very private." He wondered why Smith had said he had nothing to hide when he did not know what questions he was about to be asked. "In your office if you please. We shan't keep you long."

Smith hesitated then turned and went to the reception. "These Police Officers will be accompanying me to my office, Mrs Darnell. Please book them in."

"Certainly, Mr Smith." She picked up a pen and glared at Lane. "Your Warrant card please." He passed it over and she laboriously copied his details along the next line in the visitor's book. "Sign here please." Then she did the same for Sgt Hobbs, annotating each with Mr Smith as the escorting officer. She handed them each a pass. "You must wear these all the time you are in the building. Please hand them back when you leave," she said sternly, her lips set in a straight line.

"Yes, Sgt Major." Lane said, flinging up a lazy salute, which produced a frown of annoyance from her much to Lane's satisfaction.

Smith turned toward the lift. "Follow me, Lane. I don't have much time to spare, so can we get on with

this.”

Lane smiled. “Certainly, Mr Smith, you just lead the way.”

Once in Smiths sumptuous office Lane looked about at the lavish furnishings thinking about the meagre fittings in his own office. “This is nice but I wonder how MOD can afford such expensive furnishings, Mr Smith. I thought there was a moratorium in progress. How did you get this expense approved?”

Smith stared at him blankly, his lips set in a thin line. “Is that what you came here to ask?”

Lane smiled benignly. “No, of course not. Forgive me.”

“Then ask your questions. I can give you no more than five minutes of my time.”

“Very well, Mr Smith.” Lane paused for effect. “Who is Dimitri Sokolov?” He watched Smith’s eyes and thought he saw a flicker of recognition in them.

He gave a frown of concentration. “Sokolov? I’ve never heard of him.”

“Really?” Lane’s voice held no inflection and he thought Smiths frown was nothing but play-acting.

“No.”

“That’s not what I have heard. I thought he did some work for you. No matter. Where is Jack Slater?” This time Lane distinctly saw Smith start at the name.

“Who?”

“Don’t play games with me, Smith,” Lane snapped,

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dropping the Mr.

“I don’t know what you are talking about, Lane.”

“Jack Slater is the private investigator working on behalf of one of your colleagues. Surely you have heard that Mr Caruthers is being investigated.”

“What?” Smith was getting rattled and wondered at the point of the questioning.

“Mr Caruthers—he *does* work here, doesn’t he, Sir?”

“I have no idea what you are on about Lane.”

“Does Mr Caruthers work here or not Mr Smith?”

Smiths face grew red. “Yes, he damn works here. What has this got to do with me?”

“Jack Slater is working for your colleague, I take it you did know that. I want to know if you have seen him recently.”

“I have never seen this man.”

Lane smiled again. “Very well,” he paused, then in an amiable voice that was almost a whisper added. “Tell me about the Alpha Project.”

“What did you say? Speak up man.”

Lane raised his voice. “I said; tell me about the Alpha project. What is the Alpha Project?”

This time Smith did react, his body jumped and his face had a moment of panic etched across it, but he recovered quickly. “Once again, Lane, I have no idea what you are talking about. Can you get to the damn point of your presence here? I am a very busy man.”

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Lane was silent for few moments, and then said. "Busy with what, Sir?"

Smith stared at him. "I don't see that that is anything to do with you, Lane."

He nodded. "No, you are quite right; it is none of my business. Have you any idea where Jack Slater might have gone?"

"I told you, I don't know who you are talking about."

Lane thought that Smith was definitely getting very rattled and he pushed a little harder. "Are you quite sure, Sir? I believe you have both met."

"Damn it, I said I haven't. I've never met anyone called Slater why do you persist in this line of questioning?"

"Just trying to get at the truth," Lane said mildly. "Perhaps you can advise me what line I should be taking."

"I have no idea and I don't know any more than I have told you."

Lane tried a different tack. "Where is Miss Carr?"

"What?"

"I said tell me where Miss Carr is."

"I don't know."

"You do know who we are talking about this time, don't you, Sir?"

"Of course I damn well know who Miss Carr is, Lane. Carr has been dismissed for improper conduct

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and she is no longer employed here and therefore she is not allowed in the building.”

“You would tell me where she is if you knew, wouldn’t you Sir?”

Smith was beginning to get angry. “Damn it, Lane, where are you leading with all these irrelevant questions?”

Lane stared at him with a hard expression. “I consider questions regarding two missing people who are central to my investigation into several murders to be very relevant,” he lied adroitly. “However, that will be all for now. Please don’t leave the country with consulting me first. We may need to ask you some more questions in the near future.”

“What...” Smith spluttered, his face turning red. “If I wish to leave the country I shall do so, with or without your permission, Lane. Who the hell do you think you are ordering me about like this? I shall complain to the Chief Constable.”

“That is your right, sir. However if you prefer it I can commandeer your passport to ensure you are available when we need to ask you some more questions.”

With an effort, Smith calmed down. “That won’t be necessary.”

“Good. Shall we see ourselves out?”

“No, I must see you off the premises.”

They signed the visitors’ book as leaving the build-

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ing and as they left, Lane heard Smith telling the receptionist to call him immediately should any member of the police call again. He suppressed a smile. Smith was definitely rattled by his questions and he was satisfied that the man was up to no good—but how did he prove it.

Their car was still at the kerb faithfully guarded by PC Burton. “Everything all right, Burton?”

Burton stiffened. “Yes, Sir,” he said sharply, throwing up a salute.

“Very good,” Lane said as he climbed into the back of the vehicle with Hobbs. “Well Sgt. What do you think of our Mr Smith?” he said when the doors were closed.

“He’s lying through his teeth, Sir.”

“Yes, I thought so too.”

Hobbs grinned. “I think you shook his tree a bit, sir.”

“We certainly did, Sgt, we certainly did and now we must hope something falls out of it that will be to our benefit.”

Burton called from the driver’s seat. “Where to, Sir?”

“Back to the station for now, Burton, back to the station.” He sat back with a smile of satisfaction on his face.

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Chapter 35

Figgis pressed the gun harder into Slater's side. "Drive faster, Slater."

Slater glanced across the car. Figgis had a determined expression on his face. "Do you want me to have an accident or get stopped by the cops for speeding? Okay, that's no problem, Figgis." He pressed accelerator and the car surged forward, rapidly exceeding the speed limit. "I can do that without any trouble."

Alarmed, Figgis pressed the gun harder in his ribs. "Cut it out, Slater, the fucking speed limit will do."

"Make up your mind, Figgis. One minute you say go faster the next you tell me to slow down. What do you want me to do?"

"Just fucking drive."

"As you wish."

Figgis glanced out of the side window in consternation. "What the fuck are you doing? We have been past here twice already."

"Have we really?" Slater said innocently, looking at the passing scenery. "I thought I recognised these buildings. I must have taken a wrong turn somewhere. I never could find my way around London."

Figgis had a murderous look on his face. He snarled. "I'm warning you, Slater, I'm losing my patience."

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He suppressed a smile. Figgis was definitely getting nervous. "All right, all right, Figgis, keep your damn shirt on."

"Just get going, Slater, or..."

Slater sneered at him. "Or what, Figgis? You daren't do anything without your boss holding your hand and you damn well know it." A public convenience was at the side of the road and he pulled over and stopped.

"What the fuck you doing now, why have you stopped?"

Slater pointed to the toilets. "I need a pee, unless you want me to do it in the car."

Figgis grimaced in disgust. "All right, but make it bloody snappy. I won't wait all fucking day."

Slater removed the vehicle keys from the ignition and opened the door. "Of course. I won't be long." He shut the door and walked across the pavement into the toilets, amazed that Figgis sat in the vehicle and expected him to return. Well, he was about to turn the tables on Figgis.

Two hundred yards away Fothergill had pulled the Omega into the kerb. "What the hell is Slater up to now?" She was tired wished this chase would end one way or another. They had been on the go now for just over twenty-six hours and it was starting to tell on her. She pulled the visor down, opened the vanity mirror and stared at her image. She pulled down her lower lid and

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grimaced at the dark rings under her eyes.

Halloran sighed. He was also becoming tired as the adrenaline of chasing the Ford started to wear off. "Looks like he needs a pee, Fothergill, that's all."

The mention of pee reminded her that she also needed to go and the urge to urinate returned with a vengeance. If she didn't go right then she was going to pee her pants and the public convenience beckoned her. She opened the car door.

Halloran was alarmed. "What are you doing, Fothergill, where are you going?"

"It's no good, Halloran; I've got to go for a pee. I'll only be a second," she muttered as she shut the door on his protest. She trotted lightly along the pavement to the toilet block. The single entrance led into a small vestibule and divided into male and female sides, left and right. She hesitated and was very tempted to go left into the male side and see what Slater was up to. She heard Figgis opening the door to his vehicle and quickly went right into the female toilets. Unable to wait any longer she entered a cubical and pulled down her knickers. She sighed as the pressure on her bladder eased. Then she heard a bang and the sound of something falling.

* * * *

Figgis thought Slater was being too long for a simple pee. He had waited until he could no longer stand the strain of wondering what he was doing. He left the

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Ford and approached the entrance to the toilets. He had seen the striking woman go into the block and he glanced at the female door hoping to see her leave. He shrugged and pushed open the male door and immediately regretted doing so as the lights in his head went off and he fell to the floor in a heap.

Slater had removed a cistern lid and waited for Figgis to come and see what was taking him so long as he knew he would. He stood just inside the entrance door, arms straining to hold the heavy lid above his head. He heard someone enter the block and tensed but it was a false alarm, apparently, a female also needed the facilities, he heard the woman's door open and close. Then he faintly heard the Ford door slam and knew that Figgis was on his way. He tensed as the door started to open.

“What’s taking you so fucking long...?” Then his voice cut off as Slater slammed the heavy porcelain lid onto his head. Figgis slumped to the floor. Slater dropped the lid with a clatter and knelt by fallen man. He removed the revolver from his pocket and put it on the floor beside him. He checked his pulse and there was none. Figgis was thoroughly dead. He felt no remorse for the villain and commenced a search of the dead man's pockets but that didn't reveal anything of interest apart from a mobile phone. He slid it in his pocket. Then a woman stepped round him and into the toilets.

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Fothergill said. "My God, Slater, have you killed him?"

He grabbed the gun from the floor and pointed it at the woman. He growled. "Who the fucking hell are you?"

She raised her hands. "Whoa, steady on, we're on your side."

"We? We? Who the hell's *we*?" He wagged the gun at her, making her step back. "Move back."

She stepped further into the block. "Me and my partner," she said. She was thinking that close up Slater was even hunkier in spite of the gun he was pointing at her.

He stood up and raised the revolver menacingly. "I'll only ask one more time."

"Damn it, Slater. I'm Fothergill and my partner is Halloran." She looked at Figgis on the floor, a pool of blood starting to show beneath his head. "Is he dead? He sure looks dead."

"Yeah he's as dead as can be," he said without taking his eyes from the woman. "Who're you working for?"

She grinned. "Oh, sorry, didn't I say? We work for MI5."

He frowned, MI5. What the hell did MI5 want with him? "I assume you have some ID."

"Of course," she smiled and held up her bag. "May I?"

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He lifted the gun. "Slowly, very slowly. My trigger finger is nervous."

She reached into her bag and her fingers caressed the cold steel of her .38 police special.

"Hold it," he snarled, spotting the signs. "Out with it, two fingers, by the barrel. Be careful as I said, I have an itchy finger."

She grimaced as she pulled the weapon from her bag. "That's better." She looked at her bag with a critical eye. "It was ruining the line of the bag. This bag is a collector's item you know. It's a Gucci."

"Really? No, I didn't know. Put the gun on the floor and kick it away from you."

Fothergill bent and placed the .38 on the floor and kicked it hard. It skidded across the floor and stopped against the wall under one of the urinals with a clatter but he ignored it. "Where's your partner?"

"I'm right here, Slater." Halloran said pressing the barrel of his automatic behind Slater's ear. His hand reached round, went over the gun in Slater's hand, and prised it from his grasp. He put it in his own pocket. "Get your weapon, Fothergill, and then search him."

Fothergill retrieved her weapon kneeling on the floor to reach under the urinal. She wrinkled her nose. "God it stinks of pee in here. Do men have to pee on the floor?"

"Don't fuck about, Fothergill, and check him like I said."

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Being careful not to get in the way of her partner, she carefully searched Slater, patting his pockets and clothing, her hands lingering on his thighs and wished she were doing it on a social level. Halloran kept the barrel of his gun pressed against Slater's ear. "He's clean."

"Right, me darlin'." He grinned and took his gun away from Slater's ear. "Check the asshole on the floor; see if he's still alive."

She screwed her face up and groaned. "Aww, do I have to? Slater said he's dead. What if he really is dead? You know I don't like dead bodies."

"If he ain't dead you got nothing to worry about. If he is then you will have to get used to it. Just get on with it, Fothergill."

She knelt and felt for a pulse. She shook her head and grinned. "He's dead all right—it's *Goodbye Mr Figgis*. What the hell did you hit him with Slater? His neck is broken."

Slater pointed to the cistern lid. "That," he said.

Halloran handed Slater the gun he had taken from him. "Good shot. Couldn't have done better myself."

Slater shoved the gun in his waistband. "Who are you and who do you work for?"

"MI5, Slater." Halloran said handing over his ID for inspection. "DCI Lane asked my boss to find out where Miss Carr is so he, Lane that is, can appoint a man to guard her."

“And your boss is?”

“You’ve not met him and I’m not at liberty to divulge his name.”

“Why is he interested in the welfare of Sara?”

“I don’t know that he is interested, he was asked by Lane to help find her. He appointed Fothergill and me to do that.”

“You can tell your boss and Minister Sheppard who I guess is *his* boss and DCI Lane that Miss Carr is very safe where no one will find her.”

Fothergill grimaced. “Come on, Slater, have a heart. We can’t go back and say we couldn’t find her. We’re in enough trouble as it is.”

“Get it right, Fothergill,” Halloran said. “*You* are the one in trouble.”

“That’s not my fault who’s in trouble, and frankly I don’t care,” Slater interrupted them. “I didn’t ask you to interfere in my affairs.”

“Hey,” Fothergill cried indignantly. “We saved you from this asshole,” she added, jerking her thumb at the body of Figgis.

Slater stared at her. “Who hit him, er, what is it, er, Fothergill?” He turned to Halloran. “Is there really an agent called, Fothergill?”

Halloran grinned. “There sure is.”

Slater turned to the woman. “You were following me in a Green Omega. I remember you, Fothergill.”

“Yup, that was me, er, us.”

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“Why were you following me?”

“We told you. Our boss wants to know where Miss Carr is. Lane is worried for her safety. He thinks another attempt is going to be made on her life.”

“Well, you aren’t going to find out. And she is safe where she is.”

“Aww, come on Slater, we have been on the go for over twenty four hours and I’m tired. Just tell us where she is and we can let Lane know. Then we can go and get some sleep.”

“Not my problem, Fothergill, so get off my case.”

Fothergill glared at Slater in annoyance. She turned to Halloran. “What we going to do about this?” She pointed to the crumpled remains of Figgis lying on the floor. The pool of blood was getting bigger and she grimaced as she realised that the man’s skull had split wide open

“Don’t worry; I’ll get a team in.” Pulling a small radio from his pocket, he spoke quietly for a few minutes. “No problem, a cleanup team will be here in five minutes.”

“Good,” said Fothergill wrinkling her pretty nose up. “Can we go now? It stinks in here.”

“You can give me a lift,” Slater told the agents.

Halloran stared at him. “Why should we, Slater. You don’t seem interested in helping us.”

Fothergill frowned. “What’s wrong with the car you came in?”

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Slater shrugged. "That's his car. Your team can get rid of it when they get rid of the body."

Halloran sighed, called operations again, and told them that a car needed to disappear as well.

"You going to give me a ride or not?"

"Tell us where Carr is and we'll consider it."

Slater took out the phone he'd taken from Figgis. "Please yourself." He dialled enquiries and asked for a taxi service.

Fothergill took the phone from him. "Wait a minute, Slater, we'll take you. Where do you want to go?"

Halloran frowned. "What are you doing, Fothergill?"

"Least we can do, Liam, is to take him where he wants to go."

Halloran got the idea. "Yeah sure."

They walked out to the road and along to the Omega. Slater got in the back and Fothergill started the car. "Well, where to, Slater?"

He leant his head back on the cushions. "My office," he said to their annoyance and promptly fell asleep.

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Chapter 36

Hobbs knocked on DCI Lane's office door and burst in without waiting for his boss to invite him in. "Two bits of news, sir."

"Well, Hobbs, what is it?"

"Slater's in his office and," he smirked. "And the other bit is that he has a relative living in Brockenhurst."

"Goddamn, does he now? Who is it, Hobbs? Spit it out man."

"Yes sir," he glanced at the papers in his hand. "An Aunt, Mrs Mable Webster. She used to be a matron in a hospital in Southampton. She retired twelve years ago. She's a widower, her husband died over twenty years ago and she's never remarried."

Lane looked thoughtful. "Ahh is that right. Well done Hobbs that might be just the place he would take Miss Carr for safety."

"Yes sir. It's a good bet that's where she is."

"Get a car and a driver, Hobbs and let's go see our Mr Slater."

"Yes sir."

Twenty minutes later Hobbs parked the car on the double yellow lines. He told the young constable driver to wait in the vehicle. He and Lane climbed the stairs to Slater's office. Halloran, Fothergill and Slater were

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sitting on the office chairs.

Lane looked at the others. "Hello, Mr Slater. Not interrupting anything I hope."

Slater looked at Lane with a tired expression. "Hello Chief Inspector, Sgt Hobbs."

Lane stared at the two agents. "Who are you?"

Halloran pulled his ID from his pocket and showed it to Lane. "Agent Liam Halloran. MI5. This is agent Barbara Fothergill." Lane raised his eyebrows in query. Halloran went on. "Commander Schultz asked us to locate Slater and the Carr woman."

"I see." So Edgar Schultz did send some agents as he had requested. Good for him. He now owed his old friend a favour. "And have you located her?"

"No, sir, Slater refuses to divulge her whereabouts."

Slater leant back in his chair and put his crossed boots on the desk. "Can you two please leave? I want to have a word with Lane—in private."

Lane turned to the two MI5 agents. "You heard him. He needs to talk to me privately."

"Sure," Halloran turned to leave. "I guess we can leave locating Carr to you now. We're off for some shuteye, our job is done."

"Thank you." The door shut and they could hear them going down the stairs. The street door shut with a bang.

Lane stared at Slater. "You look much the worse

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for wear, Mr Slater.”

He rubbed a bruise and grinned ruefully. “Yeah, well the baddies wanted to know where Sara was as well.”

“Tell me where she is, I can protect her. She could be in danger. Let me put a man to guard her.”

“She’s safe enough where she is.”

Lane smiled and rested his chin on his hand and said nonchalantly. “Do you really think Mrs Webster will be able to protect her?”

Damn, Slater thought, *how the hell did he know that?* “We’ll talk about that later. I have some urgent information that you might find interesting.”

“Very well, Mr Slater, what is this urgent information.”

Slater took off his shoe and extracted the camera storage card from his sock. “This will be enough to put Smith and his organisation out of business for good.”

“What is it?”

“It’s a list of the murders Department Y has undertaken and who ordered them and who carried them out.”

Lane raised his eyebrows. He reached for the card. “Very interesting. Where did you get it?”

Slater held it out of his reach. “I got into the basement as I said I would. This was in Smiths archives and I photographed them.” He leant toward his PC and slid the card in the slot. “Look at this.” They waited while the images were processed. Then one after another, the

murder records popped onto the screen. Lane and Hobbs stood either side of Slater and read the screen in amazement.

“Oh my God,” muttered Hobbs. “There’s enough here to hang the lot of them several times over.”

“There certainly is Hobbs. Go back to the Yard on the double and get a warrant started. Send a car back for me. No, wait. Get two cars, I want one car to be left with me, the second car can take the other driver back.”

Slater held up a restraining hand. “Hang on Lane. There’s more, a lot more. I have found out what the Alpha Project is.”

“Yes, what is it?”

“It is a contract on the life of the Prime Minister. It’s scheduled to take place on November 5th.”

“My God,” Lane breathed. “Thank God you’ve found out. Who started that off?”

“The Chancellor. You can bet the fee is pretty high, no doubt to be paid out of public funds.”

“Do you have physical proof of this?”

“No, not really proof but Figgis told me...just before he died.”

Lane frowned. “Figgis is dead? How did that happen?”

“I...er...killed him. I hit him with a toilet lid in the public toilets in docklands. Westferry Road and Manila Street junction.”

“That was rather careless...and very naughty of

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you, Slater. Is his body still there?”

“I don’t think so, Halloran arranged with a clean up team from MI5 to take care of it and I assume they have done so. Figgis was trying to force me to take him to get Sara.”

“Then what happened?”

“We stopped for a pee and he followed me into the toilets and I brained him.”

Hobbs grinned. “Nice one, Slater. I like your style.

“Sgt, let’s get the warrant going. Wake up the magistrates if you have to. Off you go as fast as you can.” Hobbs turned to go. “Yes sir,” he called over his shoulder. His boots thundered down the stairs and the street door banged closed.

Lane turned to Slater. “Where is Miss Carr? She’s not safe until we get some men to guard her.”

“Why are you asking me if you have learnt my aunt’s name?” Lane shrugged. Still not trusting his office phone, Slater opened the mobile he had take from the body of Figgis and switched it on. He dialled his Aunts number. It rang and rang, but there was no answer. Alarm went through him. Of course, they might be in the garden, or have gone to the hospital or the house phone was not working. He glanced at his watch, it was 0830, and of course, she could still be in bed. Never the less he was worried. He closed the phone. “There’s no answer. I’m worried Lane. Something may have happened to them.”

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Lane reached for the phone on Slater's desk. "I'll get a local patrol to check the house."

"Don't use that one, it might be tapped."

Lane gave him a funny look and pulled out his own mobile. He dialled area headquarters and asked for the station number in Brockenhurst. Then he redialled. He paused. "Good morning. Detective Chief Inspector Lane here. I'm with the Metropolitan Police, Homicide Division of Scotland Yard. I need to speak to your commander." He paused. "Then who is the highest ranking officer currently there." Another pause. "Then put him on man."

"What's happening, Lane?"

Lane shushed him. "Sergeant Wallace, can you please send a patrol round to. Hang on." He held his hand over the mouthpiece. "What's the address, Slater?"

"27 Forrest View."

Lane returned to his call. "27 Forrest View, and check on the occupants for us. They may be in danger. Call me back on my mobile. The number is 798654320. Got that? Please make that sooner rather than later. A young woman's life may be at stake."

"They'll check on their well being, Slater. I must go to the yard as you know; it's going to get rather hectic in the next few hours."

"If it's all right, I'll come with you."

Lane hesitated, then said. "Come on then."

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Chapter 37

Bert 'killer' Brown knocked on the door to 27 Forrest View, Brockenhurst. Behind him stood Freddie Brestilano. The door opened to the limit of the security chain and a slim face with a nervous expression peered through the gap. She was wearing her dressing gown.

"Yes? What do you want?" Mable Webster asked.

Brown put on his best polite face and said in a voice that was contradictory to his nickname, although Mable didn't know his name. "Good morning, Madam. We have come about the welfare of Miss Carr."

Mable stared at him through the gap in the door. "It's very early. Who are you?"

He smiled disarmingly. "My name is Albert Brown. Jack Slater sent us to make sure Miss Carr is all right and safe."

She frowned in consternation. Why hadn't Jack phoned her instead of sending someone? That would have been the logical thing to do. "Jack sent you?"

Brown smiled again, his manners impeccable. Brestilano stood behind him and said nothing for his rough Italian voice would have let him down. "Yes Madam, he did. If we may, with your permission of course, speak with her. Then we can pass on our report of her well being to him."

Well, she thought, if Jack had sent them she had

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better invite them in. “You had better come in.” She closed the door, released the security chain and opened it wide. The two men stepped inside and closed the door behind them.

* * * *

Lane’s phone rang. “Yes,” he snapped. They were on their way to New Scotland Yard. “What...wait a second?” He put the phone on mute. “There is no answer from 27 Forrest View.”

Slater fidgeted in his seat. “They must be there, Lane. Mable wouldn’t take Sara out in her condition. They must be there somewhere. Perhaps they’re in the garden or something.”

“At this hour? It’s early.”

“Well perhaps they’ve gone to the local hospital for some reason. The nearest is in Lymington. I don’t know, perhaps Sara took a turn for the worst. I just know they should be there. Perhaps you could phone the hospital.”

Once again, Lane got the number from his headquarters. He telephoned the number given. After an interminable wait, they answered. He told them what he wanted and there was another wait. Lane disconnected the call. “They have not been to the hospital.”

Slater feared the worst. “Ask the patrol check the garden.”

He redialled the Brockenhurst station. “Can you

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ask the patrol to check and see if they are in the garden?" Lane said into the phone. "Yes, I'll wait."

There was a few minutes pause. Then he snapped. "Get back to the house and break in." Another pause. "Damn it; get him to approve it and be damn quick. Call me back when you have it." He ended the call. He slowed the car and turned towards the west.

"What are you doing, Lane? What's going on?"

"They are not in the garden. And we, Slater, are going to Brockenhurst. You heard what I told them."

Slater was worried. "Yes I did. Can you step on it?"

Lane picked up the radio handset. "Control, this is DCI Lane in car MP109."

"Yes Chief Inspector?" came back the reply.

"I'm en route to Brockenhurst as a part of my investigation. Route any messages for me through the national network. Please inform Sgt Hobbs."

"Yes sir." Lane put the microphone on its rest. Thirty minutes later, they were on the M3 where Lane increased the speed of the big supercharged police vehicle to 130 miles per hour, siren screaming and lights flashing. Lane's phone rang.

"Answer that Slater."

Slater flipped it open. "Hello. No, he's driving, you can talk to me." He listened for a few minutes. "Shit, damn and fuck it," he swore vehemently.

Slater's expletives alarmed Lane. "What is it Slater? What's the matter?"

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Slater's voice choked. "They've broken in and found a body in the house."

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Chapter 38

Smith was a worried man. He paced up and down his office like a lion in a cage. Yes, he was definitely a worried man.

He wondered where the hell that damn Figgis had got to. He should have made contact by now to tell him he had obtained the required information from Slater. He'd tried his mobile phone several times but there had been no answer and the phone had kept switching to his answer service. Briefly, he had got a number engaged tone but then the phone went dead. Had Figgis got the information he wanted out of Slater?

Moreover, where were the other two men, Brown and Brestilano? Had they located the Carr woman yet? His contact in Scotland Yard had given him the address of Slater's aunt in Brockenhurst where it was possible that the Carr woman was and he had despatched the two men to get her and bring her to him. In hindsight, that may have been a big mistake because it had left the incompetent Figgis alone with Slater at their safe house. Figgis had always underestimated Slater and this time was probably no exception. Now that he had found out the whereabouts of Carr, he had no further use for Slater. Figgis could dispose of him. If only he would call in or answer his phone, he could give him the appropriate instructions.

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He lit a cigarette and at once stubbed it out. He sat at his desk and immediately stood. He walked the length of his office and back again. God, how he hated this waiting around to hear from his henchmen. He had a strong feeling that things were not going according to plan. His plans were coming apart at the seams.

He opened the safe hidden behind the drink bottles and took out the Alpha file. Perhaps he should bring forward the date, take the money and get out while he still could. He opened it and read every word carefully, looking for a loophole but his lawyer had drafted the agreement carefully to prevent the instigator getting out of the contract but it worked equally well against him. The chancellor had specifically stated that the contract date was November 5th. It must be some symbolic date for him no doubt. Could he convince him to bring the date forward? He doubted it. The way it stood, if he didn't do the contract on the specified date he would get nothing, in fact, he would have to pay a penalty. Damn it, he was stuck with the fifth. Perhaps he should forget the extra four million the Alpha contract would bring, but he knew in his heart, that he would not be able to live without the extra cash. He would forever bemoan the loss of such a large sum and it would prey on his mind until he died of old age.

His phone rang. "What," he snapped viciously, his nerves jangling in response to the harsh tone of the bell. He listened, his voice lightened, and he smiled his heart

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lightening. "You got her. Well done Brown. Bring her straight here and don't stop for anything along the way." He replaced the receiver. Perhaps things were not so bad after all. Now he just needed to hear from Figgis.

* * * *

Against her better judgement, Mable Webster opened the door wide and let the two men in. They looked rather rough characters but if Jack had sent them, they must be all right and the tall man spoke very good English, almost public school. "Sara is in here." She led them into the sitting room.

Knowing that Carr would recognise him, Brestilano stayed in the hall out of sight. Sara was sitting next to the fire reading a book and looked up, startled to see a man standing behind Mable. Who was he she wondered?

Brown looked at her quizzically. "Miss Carr?" She nodded and the man smiled and went on in a reasonable tone. "Jack Slater sent me. He wants me to take you to him. He's very anxious to see you."

She didn't believe that Jack would send someone for her without calling her first. "Really? Jack said that?"

The man nodded. "Yes, he surely did."

She shook her head. "But Jack said he would come for me himself. I know that's what he wanted to do."

He smiled pleasantly but underneath he was seeth-

ing. This broad had better not give him any trouble if she knew what was good for her. With an effort, he restrained himself. "Yes I know, but he's tied up right now so he sent me to fetch you."

Sara's frown deepened. She was using one of Jacks business cards as a bookmark; she marked her place, closed the book and placed it on the table beside her. She folded her arms. "I think I'll wait here for him. This is where he expects me to be and this is where I'm going to be when he comes for me."

The man shook his head. His smile was frozen in place but underneath she could see a hard viciousness that frightened her. He said. "You must come with us. Slater will be waiting for you and he expects you to be with us. We mustn't let him down, must we?"

"No," she said firmly, wondering who *us* was. "I'm going to wait here for Jack, and that is final."

Brown's control broke. He grabbed her arm, squeezed hard and snapped. "You're coming with us so stop pissing us about—or else."

She winced and struggled in his grip. "Let go of me you oaf."

Mable Webster pulled the man round with her hand on his shoulder. "If Sara doesn't want to go with you, you should respect her wishes and leave her alone."

Brown backhanded her across the mouth. "Shut up, you stupid old bitch." Mable gasped and fell back across the hearth, a trickle of blood on her lips. Sara

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screamed, her hand to her mouth, teeth biting into her knuckles. Undaunted, Mable picked up the poker from the fireplace and slammed it across Browns head, leaving a welt that started to ooze blood. He staggered and almost fell. She shouted. "Leave Sara alone."

Brestilano stepped into the room and Sara gasped when she saw that clutched in his hand was a 9mm pistol with a silencer on the end. "Mr Brestilano? What are you doing here?" She watched in horror as he pressed the gun to Mabel's stomach and pulled the trigger. There was a muffled report and a spray of blood as the bullet tore through Mable's stomach and lodged into the wall with a thud. She fell backward and crashed into the sideboard with a rattle of ornaments and crockery. Then she slid to the floor leaving a trail of blood streaked down the woodwork. In slow motion, she fell sideways and lay on her side, blood oozing from her stomach to form a pool that rapidly soaked into the carpet. Her eyes remained open, staring accusingly at her killer.

"Take that you interfering bitch," Brestilano spat viciously. Sara screamed and struggled in Browns grip. She tensed her fingers into talons and raked the side of his face, stripping skin from his cheeks.

He wiped his fingers down his cheek and stared at the blood—his blood. "Fucking bitch," he snarled and punched her in the face and knocked her out. He stared at the body of the old woman on the floor, his bleeding

cheek forgotten for the moment. "You fucking idiot, Brestilano, why'd you have to kill the old woman. She's old and frail for Christ sake. Couldn't you fucking handle one old woman without a fucking gun?"

Brestilano grinned. He felt exhilarated like he always did when he had a chance to kill someone. "It got the job done, didn't it? She was gona brain your head again with that poker. Did you want that?"

Brown sighed. "Come on you stupid asshole, let's get Carr tied up and loaded in the car before the cops come to investigate the shot."

Brestilano smirked. "No one heard it, I had the silencer on."

"Yeah, right, you'd better believe it. Come on, let's move." They tied her hands and feet. Brestilano reversed the car down the drive close to the front door and they heaved her into the boot. Brown got behind the wheel and started the engine and he drove at a sedate speed away from the house.

"Fuck me," growled Brestilano. "We got outa there just in time, here comes the cops. Get a fucking move on."

"I told you they'd be here. God, you're so fucking stupid. If I get a move on it's going to draw attention to us."

They watched in the car mirrors as a police patrol car cruised into Forrest View. Keeping calm, Brown resisted the urge to do as Brestilano said and accelerate

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away.

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Lane skidded to a halt in Forrest View and turned off the siren. A heavy silence descended on them after driving for over an hour with the noise in their ears. Lane had really pushed the big car to its limit and had raced down the road to Brockenhurst almost entirely on the wrong side of the road, scattering oncoming vehicles like confetti.

A bevy of police cars blocked the road in Forest View, and already the area had crime scene tape in place. Slater prayed that they had not found Sara dead, he then felt guilty that he hoped it was Mable instead. The reports they had received on the radio had merely told them that a single female had been found shot dead. They got out of the vehicle, walked to the taped area and Lane showed his warrant card to the officer controlling entry to the crime scene. "Who is the senior officer here?"

"Detective Chief Inspector, Griffiths, sir."

"Good God, is that Charlie Griffiths?" Lane had known Charlie Griffiths in his early days in the Met but had lost track of him. He thought Griffiths had retired from the police service.

"Yes, sir," the constable said pointing to a group of men. "He's over there. He's in conference right now, but I'll tell him you are waiting to see him."

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“Thank you constable but I’ll go and see him and tell him myself.”

The PC was young and unsure how far his authority extended. “Yes sir.” He glanced at Slater. “Who is the gentleman with you sir.”

“This is Mr Jack Slater, a colleague. He’s helping me in my investigation.”

This was surer ground for the young PC. “Is he a civilian, sir?”

“Yes, but I need him to come with me.”

Well, if the visiting DCI said it was all right, then he guessed it must be. “Yes sir,” the constable lifted the tape so they could duck under it and they walked to the group standing together in a huddle.

“Charlie Griffiths, you haven’t changed a bit,” Lane lied because his colleague looked extremely tired and worn out.

Griffiths looked up, surprise etched across his face. “Bill? Bill Lane. What the hell are you doing in this neck of the woods? Thought you were with the Met?”

“I am Charlie. We think this killing might be part of a large investigation we have going on in London. I had asked that a local patrol check on the well being of the occupants here but it looks like they were too late.”

Griffiths grimaced in disgust. “It’s a rum do this is. Old lady shot in the stomach.”

“She’s dead I take it?”

“Dead as can be. Damn blood all over the place.

Damned if we know why because she was a harmless old girl of 70 living on her own.”

“Was there anyone with her?”

“No, just her. Doesn’t look like robbery for there’s a sum of money here and quite a few valuables. As far as we can tell nothing is missing, but we’ll not know for sure until next of kin can tell us.”

Impatiently Slater interrupted. “Was there a young girl with her? The old woman was my aunt and she was looking after a friend of mine. They should have been together.”

Griffiths looked at Slater his eyebrows raised. “And you are?”

Lane interrupted. “Sorry Charlie. This is Jack Slater, a private investigator from my patch.”

“A PI? That’s not like you Bill.” Griffiths said.

Lane grinned. “Yes I know, but Mr Slater has uncovered a lot of information that we hadn’t been able to. He passed the information on to me and it’s been a great help in our investigation.”

Griffiths looked at Slater with something that was almost like respect in his eyes. “Perhaps you can tell us if anything is missing, Mr Slater.”

Slater shook his head. “I’d not seen Mable for over ten years so I wouldn’t know. What about the young girl.”

“Sorry, there is no sign of anyone else being here. Mrs Webster lived alone and as far as we can tell, was

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on her own at the time of her murder. There's no sign of anyone else here."

Lane said. "Has the body been removed yet?"

"Yes the pathologist finished a few minutes ago. The meat wagon has gone."

"Can we have a look around inside, Charlie?"

"I guess so. You know the rules, Bill. No touching and you must wear the full gear."

Lane nodded. "Of course. You have spare coveralls I take it?"

"Yes, over in the SOCO truck. The duty Scenes of Crime Officer is Sgt Benson. He's a good man. Tell him I said it'll be okay for you to look inside but please keep out of his way."

"Of course, thanks Charlie."

They went to the SOCO Truck and donned the white coveralls, pulled hats over their hair and put on boot covers. "Remember, Slater. No touching or the SOCO will have our guts for garters."

"I know how it works Lane."

"Come along then, let's take a look."

With hands in their pockets, they entered the house. There was a hive of activity at the end of the passage and Slater guessed that would be where the shooting had occurred. They walked in that direction and peered through the doorway where three men in white coveralls were busy dusting for fingerprints. One of them spotted Lane and Slater standing in the doorway.

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“Hello, who are you two? You’re not from this station.”

“I’m DCI Lane from the Met and this is Mr Slater. DCI Griffiths said we could have a look around. This murder is probably linked to our case in London.”

He glanced down at their feet to ensure they had shoe covers on. “Okay sir. Please don’t touch anything. Ask me if you want to see something close up.”

“You must be Sgt Benson? DCI Griffiths thinks highly of you.”

“Thank you sir. Remember, no touching or I’ll have to ask you to leave.”

“Of course Sgt, thank you.”

Gingerly they stepped into the room, careful to keep out of the way of the evidence collection team. There was blood spatter across one wall and a long smear of blood went down the sideboard ending in a large dark stain on the carpet. As they expected there was no sign of Sara. Then Slater spotted a book on the table next to an armchair.

“That looks like Sara’s book. She was reading it in hospital.” He went to step forward to look more closely but Lane held his arm.

“Sgt Benson, Mr Slater thinks that book may have belonged to another person who was present in the house. May we see it?”

Benson picked up the book in his gloved hands and turned it towards Slater so he could see the cover. The

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bookmark fluttered to the floor. Slater nodded. "Yes that's Sara's book. She was here all right."

Benson picked up the card fallen from the book. "This says *Jack Slater, Private Investigator*. Is that you, sir?"

"Yes, that's mine, I gave it to her; she must be using it to mark her page."

Benson slid the book into an evidence bag and marked it with a crime scene number and then he did the same with the business card. "Thanks."

"Anything else of note, Sgt?" Lane asked.

Benson glanced at Slater.

Lane added. "Mr Slater is working on an investigation with us. You can tell me what you want to in front of him."

Benson raised his eyebrows but said. "Yes sir, we have a single shell casing from a 9mm. And a poker with a trace of blood and hair stuck to it."

"Same type as Mrs Webster?"

"Don't think so. The hair on the poker is dark and very short, while she was quite grey, almost white long hair. She may have defended herself and got shot for her pains."

Slater said. "Or she tried to stop them taking Sara away and got shot for it." He dreaded to think that the black hair could have belonged to Sara.

Benson said. "Yes, if this Sara was here then that's a possibility, but we won't know without further tests."

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Slater said. "She had to have been here. That's her book and my business card."

"Never the less we'll test them, Mr Slater."

Lane gripped Slater's arm to stop his flow. "Can we look around the rest of the house, Sgt?"

"Be my guest."

"Come on Slater," Lane said.

They went along the passage and entered a bedroom. This was obviously the old women's bedroom and held nothing of interest for them. The next bedroom had woman's things about it, a young woman's. A dress draped over the end of the bed, brassier and panties in a washing basket and a dressing gown on the back of the door.

Lane picked up the panties and bra. "Are these things Miss Carr's?"

Slater took them from him and threw them back in the basket. "I don't know, Lane. I'm not in the habit of looking at her underwear."

"Really? You surprise me. What about the dress?"

Slater didn't think he had seen Sara wear it and shrugged. "I don't know. I only saw some of her things, things she wore when we met. I don't think I have seen this. We didn't bring anything with us so perhaps Mable had gone shopping for her."

"So all we have to say she was here is a book that Mrs Webster might have been reading."

"And my business card, don't forget that. That

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book was definitely Sara's I know it because she had it with her. I brought it down with us when we came from the hospital and this is where I dropped her off."

Lanes mobile rang. "Lane," he paused. "You've got it already, well done Hobbs. No, don't do anything wait until I get back. Although you can put a watch on the entrance and the back door." He mouthed, *warrant*, to Slater. "You'd better take the front door because you know what Smith looks like. Get someone to take the alley door and arrest anyone who leaves by that way." He paused. "I don't care if they've not done anything. We'll sort that out later. If they're leaving by the back door then they'll be involved somewhere along the line." He closed the connection. "Come on Slater, back to London. We have lots of work to do."

PMJ Downing

Chapter 40

When Sara regained consciousness, she found herself tied firmly to a chair in Mr Smith's office. The ropes were cutting into her wrists painfully and there was blood dripping from the tips of her fingers onto the carpet. Her mouth hurt where Brown had punched her. She suspected that one, or more, of her stitches had parted company and she could feel the dampness of blood soaking her bandages.

Mr Smith was standing next to his desk with one buttock resting on the edge facing her and she gasped when she saw Brestilano standing in the shadows behind him. Brestilano, the man who had shot Mable Webster. A tear rolled down her cheeks as she recalled just how he had killed her. Shot in the stomach by that vicious thug. She sobbed and jerked stared towards the hated Brestilano. "Mr Smith that horrible man shot and killed Mrs Webster. What are you doing associating with him?" The images of Mable's blood spraying around the room come to her and she squeezed her eyes shut trying to blot out the terrible scene from her mind.

"Shut the fuck up you stupid cow," Smith snarled, his cold detachment deserting him.

Sara gasped, her face turned red in fear. She had always known that Mr Smith had a nasty streak and it had always frightened her. Now she had had his

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nastiness confirmed it struck terror deep into her heart. Now she believed all those rumours about murder from Department Y. She struggled against her bonds but they had tied her tightly and she only succeeded in making her wrists bleed even more.

Smith walked over to her, placed his hands on the arms of the chair, and leant toward her so his face pressed up close to hers, noses almost touching. His breath smelt of cigars and whisky. He belched in her face and she held her breath so she would not have to breathe in his foul air. His face contorted as he snarled. "What do you know about the Alpha project, Carr?" Drops of spittle hit her cheek and she twisted her head away, longing to wipe his spit away.

"What?" she stammered, her body trembling.

Smith slapped her. Her head rocked back and her ears sang with the force of the blow. "I said what do you know of the Alpha project? Who have you told about it?"

Another tear rolled down her cheek and she said quietly. "I don't know what it is, Mr Smith."

"Don't give me that fucking bullshit. I know you know so who have you fucking told?"

She steeled her nerves. "If...if I don't...know what it is, I...I can't tell anyone, can I?"

He slapped her again. "Don't be a smart bitch with me, Carr. I know Slater told you all about it. I want to know who you have told."

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She lifted her head in hope. "Jack? You have heard from Jack?"

Her head rocked back from another blow and her lip split. More blood smeared across her lips. "What did he tell you? Who did *you* fucking tell?"

"Jack didn't tell me anything," she sobbed, ashamed that Mr Smith was seeing her at her weakest. "I haven't seen him for a few days."

Smith sneered. "You're likely never to see him again. Figgis has taken care of him and he's probably dead and in the bottom of the river by now."

Horror filled her mind. Jack? Was Jack really dead? What had they done to him? Despair filled her heart. What was the point of going on if her knight was dead. He wouldn't be coming to rescue her after all and how could she live with that? She might as well be dead has well. Oh, why hadn't she let Jack know how she felt about him? Now, he would never know, ever.

Smith slapped repeated double blows to her face, first one side and then the other until her head rocked back and forth. She felt her consciousness fading until she slumped in the chair without the strength to sit upright. She faintly heard Smith telling Brestilano to take her to the warehouse and get the information in any way he could and then get rid of her. Hands roughly manhandled her as they carried her from the room. She was aware of them bundling her into the lift and then her consciousness went completely.

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Lane drove at high speed along the M3 towards London. Slater sat beside him and urged him onward, in a hurry to get back. Why? What was he going to do once he got there? He didn't know where Sara was, didn't know where they had taken her or even if she was still alive. Worry swept through him and he again prompted Lane to go faster.

"I hope and pray she is still alive, Lane." Lane concentrated on his driving and said nothing. He continued. "She's got to be alive. I'd never forgive myself if anything happens to her. Oh God, I should never have asked her to help me." He glanced at the speedometer and saw the needle was hovering on 135 mile per hour. "Can't you step on it?"

Lane grunted with his brow furrowed in concentration. "I'm doing my best."

Slater went on thoughtfully, desperation sharpening his thoughts. "As I see it, there are only two places they would take her. One is to Smiths office, or the basement, or at least in that building."

"The Curzon Place entrance and the alley exit are being watched. If they take her there we will know."

"You put that into place after she had been taken. She could still be there."

Lane swung the vehicle past an articulated lorry in the middle lane. "What's the other place?"

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“When Figgis dragged me from Smiths office he took me to a disused warehouse in docklands. It’s where they held me captive. Smith calls it his safe house but it’s really just a hideout for his hoodlums.”

“What’s the address?”

Slater groaned his face full of distress. “Damn it, I don’t know. There are some converted luxury apartments nearby. The warehouse has been scheduled for demolition but I can’t remember exactly where it is. It must be near those toilets on Westferry Road, trouble is, I drove in circles for a bit to delay Figgis so I got disorientated.”

“Haven’t you got anything better to go on than that?”

“No.”

Lane stared ahead. The traffic was building up as they neared the London outskirts. “Use the radio and ask control to give us a list of buildings due for demolition in the docklands area.”

Slater grabbed the mike from its clip and thumbed the button. “Hello control.”

The radio crackled. “This is a police radio network. Identify yourself.”

“This is Slater in DCI Lane’s vehicle.”

“What do you want, Slater? Let me talk to DCI Lane.”

“Lane’s driving and needs to concentrate. He wants you to look up all the buildings due for demoli-

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tion in the docklands area. This is urgent. We need that information yesterday.”

“Roger. It might take a while.”

He snapped desperately. “We don’t have a while. Sara Carr’s life may depend on getting this information.”

“I’ll call you back, Slater.”

“Hold the mike in front of me, Slater.” Slater did so and pressed the transmit button. “Lane here, is that PC Sneddon in the control room?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Who’s the duty Inspector?”

“Inspector Martin.”

“My respects to Inspector Martin but this information is of utmost urgency so I would appreciate his quick action.”

“I’ll get the information for you, sir. Inspector Martin is in conference with the Chief Constable right now.”

He wondered why the Chief Constable was paying a visit. He said. “Good lad. We will be proceeding direct to the addresses when you have them.”

“Yes sir.”

“That’s it Slater, You can hang up now.”

They reached the end of the M3 and Lane switched on his siren and lights as they raced through the outer suburbs, vehicles parted rapidly to allow them through. The radio chattered and bleeped but none of the radio

traffic was for them.

“Goddamn it, what's keeping them? They could have found a hundred buildings by now.”

Lane slowed and squeezed through a gap smaller than his vehicle, or so it seemed to Slater and then accelerated away again. “Have patience, Slater. They’re doing the best they can.”

“It’s not quick enough.”

“I know how you feel and I’d feel the same if I was in your shoes.”

Before Slater could respond, the radio called them and he grabbed the handset, dropping it in his haste. He snatched it up. “Slater here.”

“Right, Slater, here is the first address. Ready to copy.”

“Go ahead.” He wrote down the address on a notepad clipped to the dashboard facia. “Is that it?”

“Yes, will pass on any others as we get them.”

Lane said. “Put that address in the Satnav and let’s go.”

Slater programmed the GPS receiver and it told them they were nearly thirty miles from that address and was going to take forty-five minutes.

“Not if I can help it,” Lane growled as he put his foot down harder on the accelerator.

Thirty-five minutes later, they arrived at the first of the addresses.

“Damn it. This is not the place, I’m sure of it.”

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Lane grabbed the radio handset. "Control, Lane here. We need those other addresses."

"Roger, wait one."

"Damn it, Lane, what the hell are they doing?"

Before lane could answer, the radio burst into life with two more addresses. Slater wrote them down and put the first one into the Satnav. "Five minutes. Let's go."

"Wait a minute, Slater. Control, what news of the Curzon Place operation."

"Nothing yet, Sir. Very quiet at that location."

"Roger." He put the handset in its cradle. "Damn it, Slater, I need to be there as well as here."

"Let's go Lane."

Ten minutes later Lane turned into Napier Avenue. He pulled to a stop by the entrance to the disused warehouse.

There was a car parked in the forecourt. "This is it, Lane. That's where they held me. Sara must be here."

"Is that their vehicle?"

"I don't know but it must be. Come on, let's go and get her."

Lane picked up the radio. "Hold on, Slater, I'll call for back up." He thumbed the transmit button. "Control, this is Lane."

"Yes sir."

"I want back up at the disused warehouse on Napier Road, Docklands. We believe Miss Carr may be

held there.”

“Yes sir, back-up is on the way.”

“Tell them to have a silent approach. I don't want to warn them of our presence.”

“Yes sir.”

Slater opened the car door. “I'm going in, Lane.”

Lane frowned. “Wait for back-up, Slater.”

He got out of the car and gently shut the door. “You can wait for back-up, if you want, but I'm not, I'm going in.” He turned and started to walk through the open gate. He smiled grimly when he heard Lane get out of the vehicle. Lane caught him up. “I thought you were going to wait for back-up.”

“Someone has to ensure you don't break the law, Slater and it might as well be me.”

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Chapter 41

Sara had her back pressed against an iron roof support in the centre of the warehouse, her hands tied behind her at the rear of the pole. Brestilano stood in front of her and her stomach twisted for she knew that when he had done with her he was going to kill her. She had heard Smith telling him to do just that. But what she feared most was what was he going to do to her to get the information that Mr Smith wanted? And how could you give him information she didn't know she had?

Then she knew what he was going to do to her. He slapped her across the face until her head banged against the girder. "Who did you tell about the Alpha Project, Carr?"

She shook her head, her eyes wet with tears of pain. She could feel a lump starting to grow on the back of her head. "Please, I don't know what it is. Jack didn't tell me."

He stepped closer until his face was inches from hers and snarled. "Don't give me that." Then he gave a slimy smile and his voice softened. "Look sweetheart," he almost crooned. "Tell me what I want to know and I'll let you go."

She didn't believe that for a second and mutely shook her head. "I don't know," she whispered.

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“It’ll be the worse for you if you don’t tell me.” His eyes looked up and down her body and lingered on her breasts pushed forward by her posture. He licked his lips. She had spurned him in the past but now she was totally at his mercy and he felt lust surge in his loins. He reached out a hand and traced her curves with a finger, feeling her trying to cringe away from his touch. He remembered that she had threatened to take a knife to his balls. *Let’s see how she’s going to manage that*, he thought. His fingers went down the neckline of her blouse and in one vicious jerk, ripped it from her until it hung in tatters at her waist. She gasped as his hand then went to her bra and tore that away from her body, snapping the thin straps. He threw it to the floor and stared at her naked breasts. He licked his lips again, lust in his eyes. His fingers traced the outline of her breast and she felt her flesh creep at his touch. She was ashamed when her nipples hardened under his fingers.

He sneered. “So you like that do you?” He stared at her breasts and licked his lips again and her marvelled at their perfect symmetry. “You’re sure going to like what I have here for you.” He leered as he clutched his crotch and made lewd thrusting motions with his hips.

His harsh voice sent shivers of horror down her spine. She twisted her hands in a desperate attempt to free herself and beneath the pain and revulsion, felt the ropes loosen a little. Brestilano stepped closer and cupped his hand around her breasts, squeezing, pinching

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her nipples in his fingers. Sara renewed her efforts on the ropes until her heart surged with hope as the ropes loosened a little more.

“I don't care if you don't tell me, sweetheart. I am going to enjoy this for a long time.” He dropped his head to a nipple and mouthed it, squeezing her breast so that her nipple pressed forward into his mouth. She tried to twist her body away from him but the girder behind her prevented any significant movement. Renewing her efforts on the ropes, she felt them give again. Her heart beat faster and then they slid on the blood on her wrists and dropped away to floor. She forced herself to remain motionless. Brestilano held a breast in each hand and lowered his head to her neck, kissing her like a vampire would kiss a victim. Indeed, she felt like a victim. She shuddered and was full of revulsion as he nuzzled her then her fear gave her strength and she lifted her knee, driving it with all her might into his groin.

He yelled in pain and doubled up on the floor. “Argh, you fucking bitch, I'll make you suffer for that.”

She trembled, her throat clogged with fear but she managed to blurt out. “Brestilano, I warned you about touching me.” Desperately, she drew back her foot and kicked him between the legs as hard as she could. He doubled over and vomited over the floor. She kicked him again for good measure.

Gathering what was left of her blouse about her, she ran to the end of the warehouse where she could see

a door. Racing through the opening, she slammed it shut behind her. There was a bolt on the inside and she shot it across. Through a small meshed window in the door, she watched Brestilano struggling to his feet. Her heart was beating so wildly in her breast she thought it was going to burst. Was she safe here? Could he get to her through the door?

He was coming. Doubled over and with a murderous expression on his face, as he hobbled toward her hiding place. Desperately, she looked about for a weapon but there was nothing available. She raced further along the passage; obviously, it was once a row of offices but they were now standing empty. She ran into each one looking for something to defend herself. Nothing.

Her heart leapt into her mouth when she heard a crash at the door she had bolted. Would it hold? The bolt had looked rather flimsy. There was another crash as he hurled his weight at the door again. The noise lent wings to her feet and she raced into the last office where she found a length of wood about two inches square and about eighteen inches long. Snatching it up, she hefted it in her hands. It was not very heavy but it would have to do for there was nothing else available. If Brestilano were going to kill her, she would defend herself with every ounce of her strength and he would be sorry he messed with her. There was another crash at the door, which caved in under the onslaught with a splintering of

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wood.

She raced through the door at the end of the corridor but it just led back into the warehouse. Desperately, she dashed across the cavernous space looking for somewhere to go, her shoes clacking loudly against the concrete. She kicked them off preferring to run silently in her bare feet. Flinging a glance behind her, she was horrified to see he was gaining rapidly on her. Evidently, her kick had been insufficient to incapacitate him. "Stand still you bitch, come here." He snarled from behind her. She ignored him, and shot through a set of double doors and ran straight in the arms of Brown. She gasped when he flung an arm about her waist, holding her immobile, her shoulders drooping in defeat.

He looked at her naked breasts and grinned maliciously. "I see Brestilano has been having fun with you." He dragged her back into the warehouse and snarled at his accomplice. "Damn it Brestilano, can't you handle one little girl?"

"The bitch fucking kicked me in the fucking balls."

Brown laughed loudly and sneered at his accomplice. "It's probably exactly what you deserved. It's time you stopped thinking of your cock."

"Let me have the bitch." Brestilano drew his pistol and walked slowly up to her. He rapped the barrel on her knuckles. "Drop it." With a squeal, she dropped the piece of wood with a clatter. He jammed the pistol

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barrel under her chin, forcing her head back. "Give me one good reason why I don't fucking kill you right now." He cocked the hammer back, the click sounding over loud in the empty space.

She spat in his face. "Then do it, Brestilano. I don't care anymore"

Lane and Slater kept close to the walls of the derelict building underneath the towering scaffolding. Temporary doors made of plywood stood unlocked, the chain and padlock hanging loose. They slipped silently through them. Slater tried to remember where they had carried him last time he was here, hazy images of stairs flitted through his mind, he remembered they were concrete, and functional, steel handrails bolted to the wall. He touched Lane on the arm and pointed to the stairs. They started up the stairs as silently as they could, grit crunching loudly underfoot. Slater took off his shoes and left them on the steps. Lane did likewise.

Somewhere above them, there was a crash and they stopped, listening intently. Then there was another crash from the next floor and then there was another followed by the sound of splintering wood. They raced up the last few steps and Slater glimpsed a figure going through the double doors. They flattened themselves either side of the doors. Slater cautiously peered through the window into the warehouse. Then drew back sharply.

"What is it?" Lane whispered.

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“It’s Sara,” he mouthed, his lips against Lane’s ear. “Two men, one gun that I can see.” He pulled out the revolver he had taken from Figgis and pointed to himself and then to the room.

Lane nodded understanding but pointed to the revolver in Slater’s hand and made a negative motion with his hand. Slater gave him a two-fingered sign and risked another peek through the door. He whispered. “On three, I’m going in. I’ll dive to my left. You stay here.”

Lane nodded. Slater took one last look and he saw the weapon lowered toward the floor. He dropped back and gave Lane a nod. Then ticked his fingers down, one...two...three. He burst through the doors, dived to the left and dropped to the floor. Foolishly, Lane was hot on his heels. There was a sharp crack as the man with the gun fired a shot in their direction. He heard a thud and a cry of pain from Lane. Taking aim, he fired back and his bullet tore through Brestilano’s chest and drove him backwards. He collapsed on the floor in a heap. The other man stooped to pick up the gun. “Don’t do it,” Slater snarled. “I just want the excuse to shoot you as well.” Brown thought better of it and stood back up silently. “Sara, step away from him.”

“Jack? Is that really you? I thought you were dead.”

He kept the gun pointed at the big man. “Do as I tell you, damn it.”

Hurriedly she stepped away. He gestured at Brown

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with the gun. "Kick the gun over here."

Brown hesitated as though contemplating a dive for the gun before it was out of his reach.

Slater snarled. "Do it."

Brown gave the gun a kick.

"On the ground, face down."

Brown smiled, suddenly brave. "And if I don't? You won't shoot me, Slater, not in cold blood. You haven't got the stomach for it."

Slater returned Browns smile with a grim smile of his own. Without hesitating, he shot him in the knee and Brown fell to the floor with a shout of pain. "That's better, I do so like obedience." He glanced around and saw the rope Sara had cast off. "Grab that rope, sweetheart. Let's put Mr. Defiant here out of action for a while." She rushed to the girder, picked up the rope and handed it to him. "Good girl. Now go and see if Lane is hurt bad."

"Jack, I really thought you were dead."

"Sweetheart, I am alive as you can see. Now go and see about Lane."

He flipped Brown onto his face and tied his hands securely behind his back. "That should hold you for a while buster."

Brown groaned in pain. "Damn it, Slater, I need a doctor. I'm hurting."

"I could shoot you in the head, and then you wouldn't hurt anymore. So shut up in case I decide to

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do just that.”

Sara gave a scream of fright and Slater spun round in alarm.

“Drop the gun, Slater.” Inspector Martin said. He had Sara’s arm doubled up behind her back and a .38 revolver, a standard police issue of years ago, in his other hand pointed at Slater. He held Sara in front of him as a shield. “Drop it.” He repeated.

Slater hadn’t heard him come into the warehouse. He contemplated taking a chance and shooting him. His accuracy was good and he knew he could hit him but decided he couldn’t take the chance to endanger Sara.

Lane said from the floor. “Well well, Frank Martin. We wondered who the mole was.” He was sitting with his back against the wall, his trousers covered in blood.

Slater glanced at him, worry across his features. “Are you hurt bad, Lane?”

“Thank you for your concern, Slater. No, I don’t think so. The bullet went right through my thigh. It’s bleeding a bit and hurts like hell but I think it will be all right. I must be getting slow in my old age, didn’t get down quick enough.” He grinned.

Slater returned his grin. “Sorry, Lane. You should have stayed put like I told you.”

“And let you have all the fun. I don’t think so.”

Slater laughed. “But when you think about it, if you had got down quicker it might have hit you further up. Anyway, I’ll see to that wound in a minute. Can you

manage on your own for a bit?"

Lane winced as he shifted to a more comfortable position. "Sure, don't mind me. You carry on."

Martin was watching this exchange with incredulity on his face. He snarled. "Enough of this inane chatter. Drop that gun Slater."

"Don't do it Slater," Lane called. "He couldn't hit a barn if he was standing inside it. He had always failed his range practise."

"Shut up, Lane." He flung an arm about Sara, shifted the gun to her temple, and sneered. "I won't miss at this range though, will I? Now drop it like I said."

Slater dropped the gun to the floor.

Lane called from the floor. "Who's in it with you, Martin? It's too clever for you to do on your own. You don't have the brains."

Martin rounded on Lane and snarled. "Shut up Lane or so help me I'll shoot you stand...er...sit."

Lane sneered. "From there? You'd miss me and you know it."

Out of the corner of his eye, Slater saw a familiar face peer through the door window behind Martin. It was Hobbs then he ducked out of sight again. A few seconds later, he marched into the warehouse as though he owned the place. "Ah, Inspector Martin. I see you have captured all three of them together, well done, Mr Smith will be very pleased with us."

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Martin rounded on him, dragging Sara with him. His brows knitted into a deep frown. "What the fuck are you talking about, Hobbs? Get over there with the others."

"Keep your damn hair on, Martin. I'm in this with you. Smith recruited me to keep an eye on you. He wasn't satisfied that you were passing him all the required information."

Martin's jaw dropped in astonishment. "You work for Smith?"

Hobbs smiled. "Of course, why do you think I am here?"

Martin scowled. "Damn it, I didn't know."

Hobbs laughed loudly. "Of course not. How would I have kept an eye on you if you knew? Have you got the required information out of them yet?"

Martin shook his head, indecision still in his eyes. "No, not yet."

Hobbs shook his head in despair and tut tutted. "As you know, Smith wants it yesterday. I'll get it from them right sharpish." He went closer to Martin. "Here, give me the gun, I'll show you the way to get the information out of them." Without hesitation, he reached out and took the gun from Martin's hand, surprise on his side. Bewilderment kept Martin immobile for a few vital seconds and he released the weapon. Hobbs took Sara's arm and stepped back, gently taking her out of Martin's clutches. He chuckled. "He's all

yours, Slater.”

Lane laughed delightedly from the floor. “Well done, Hobbs that was as nice a piece of work I have ever seen.” Then as Slater picked up his gun and started to advance on the luckless Inspector, he quickly added. “Hang on Slater, we want him alive.”

Slater put the gun away. “Damn it. Just as I was beginning to enjoy myself as well.” He reached Inspector Martin and gripped him by the collar. “What were you saying, Lane. If I can’t shoot him I *can* give him a beating though, can’t I?”

Lane grunted in pain. “Be my guest.”

“Sergeant, can you have a look at Lane and make sure he is all right. I’m going to be tied up for a while.”

Hobbs grinned. “Sure, Slater. Give him a whack for me.” He knelt by his boss. “You all right sir?”

“Of course I’m damn well not all right, Sgt, I have been bloody shot.” They looked up at Slater when he said. “Now Inspector Martin we have some unfinished business.” He drove his fist into the man’s stomach and as he doubled over, he followed it with an uppercut. Martin fell backwards and his head hit the concrete floor with a thud that knocked him out cold.

Lane laughed, and then grimaced as pain shot through his leg. “He can’t even get that right.”

Slater rubbed his knuckles. “Damn it, he could have lasted a bit longer.”

Sara sobbed and Slater spun round, and for the first

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time he noticed, she was all but naked above her waist. Her dislodged bandages were red with fresh blood from her injuries. He took off his jacket and helped her on with it.

“Oh Jack, I am so glad you are alive. Smith told me you had been killed.”

He put his arm about her trembling body and held her close. He laughed. “It will take more than the Smiths of this world to get rid of me, my girl.” He stroked her hair and she laid her head on his chest, her tears wetting his shirt.

Lane coughed from the floor. “Have you got a radio, Hobbs?”

“Yes sir but I left it in the car. I didn’t want it to give me away.”

“Good. Help me up and we’ll go and get it. I want to organise the raid on the premises in Curzon Place just as soon as I can.”

A new voice echoed across the warehouse. “You’ll be going nowhere...any of you.” Smith snarled as he burst through the doorway. He had a Thompson Sub machine gun cradled in his arms.

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Everyone stayed frozen to the spot in surprise at the sudden appearance of Smith, helped considerably by the presence of a Thomson sub machine gun in his hands.

Lane frowned in consternation. "Smith, how did you leave Curzon Place without my men alerting me?"

Smith sneered. "Ahh, Lane, you have your Sgt here to thank for that."

Hobbs stared at him in disbelief. "Me? How am I to blame?"

Smith smiled pityingly. "You left one of my men on the door when you decided to embark on this abortive rescue mission of yours."

"Your man? I left PC Parker there, a very reliable constable."

Smith smiled again, confident that he had the situation well under control. "Yes I know. Very reliable indeed—to me."

Hobbs looked at Lane. "Sorry, sir. I thought Parker was a good choice when I left."

"Never mind Sgt, it has brought them out into the open. Why did you leave your post anyway?"

Hobbs grinned somewhat sheepishly. "I needed a pee sir."

"I see. How did you know to follow Martin?"

"I heard the call for back up come in and he said he

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would deal with it. A bit unusual you must admit. I watched him and he didn't attempt to send back up. I became more suspicious when he asked for a car so I followed him."

"Just as well you did."

Smith snarled. "Enough of this crap." A groan from Inspector Martin who was just coming round attracted his attention. He glanced down at the Inspector in disgust. "You stupid fucking moron. You let them get the better of you. What do you think I pay you for?"

Martin got gingerly to his feet, rubbing the back of his head. "Not enough to take any of this shit from you, Smith."

Smith was astounded. How dare anyone talk like that to him? He was the boss. In a burst of anger, he turned the Thomson machine gun towards Martin and fired a long burst into his chest. Martin flew back as though propelled by a rocket and landed in a heap ten yards away. His chest a mass of damaged flesh.

Sara screamed and stood staring at the terrible scene with her fists to her mouth. Slater took his chance while Smiths attention was on the body of Inspector Martin. He leapt forward, grabbed the hot machine gun barrel, and deflected it towards the roof. It went off with a deafening roar in his ears as the magazine expended itself in destroying the glass skylights above. Bits of glass, concrete and paint showered down upon them. He tore the weapon from Smiths grasp, reversed it and

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smashed across the side of his head. He collapsed unconscious to the floor.

“Well done, Slater. Sgt, handcuff this man. When he comes round read him his rights and charge him with the murder of Inspector Martin. That will do for a start.”

Hobbs pulled a pair of handcuffs from his belt and grinned. “That will be my pleasure, Sir.”

Sara rushed to Slater’s side. He clasped her in his arms and stroked her hair soothingly. “It’s all over my darling. You don’t have anything more to fear from these men. You’re safe now.”

Lane coughed. “When you two love birds have finished canoodling, perhaps someone can get an ambulance for me. And call for some more back up, Hobbs, and put out a call for PC Parker to be arrested.” He winced as pain swept across his leg. “And see that Brown is cautioned and charged with the murder of Mrs Webster. Get a forensics team in here and inform the coroner, he will want to see the bodies of Inspector Martin and Brestilano before they are moved.” He groaned again. “Damn it, can someone help me up?”

* * * *

Lane, Hobbs, Slater and Sara Carr sat in Lane’s office drinking tea. Lane had his leg heavily bandaged and Sara Carr had had stitches replaced and her wounds re-dressed at the local hospital. Other than that, she was none the worse for her horrifying ordeal.

They arrested PC Parker and during his interview,

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gave the names of several other police informants on Smiths payroll in the hope of saving his skin. The specialist investigators brought in from the internal affairs division arrested, and charged, them all.

The raid on the ATSC and Department Y went as planned, and the specialist teams closed ATSC, and charged several of its managers with breaching the privacy laws. Investigations revealed that ATSC staff knew little, if anything, of what went on in Department Y. The forensic teams and investigators from CID and MI5 had still to sift through masses of documents from Smiths Empire.

It transpired that when the Government had appointed Smith the head of ATSC he utilised the spare room, outfitted it at public expense and began his murder business. He recruited a team of villains who would not balk at murder or seeing murder committed to run it for him. He paid them well to ensure their silence and loyalty. He instilled fear in anyone who dared question what he was doing and his murders remained undetected until Carter had discovered what was going on.

From information held in the records, the investigators arrested a number of government ministers, past and present, including the chancellor who they charged with conspiracy to murder the Prime Minister.

Lane reached into his drawer and pulled out a bottle of Islay Malt whiskey and four glasses. He cracked

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open the bottle and poured a generous measure into each glass. He passed them out. "Slater, if you hadn't been such a persistent bugger, we might never have uncovered Smiths murder business."

Slater raised his glass with a grin. "And if you hadn't been prepared to listen to a PI..." he took a drink.

"A few people got killed in this investigation but I'm glad to say it was only the baddies."

"Hear hear, except for Inspector Martin," said Inspector Hobbs. They had promoted him for his ingenious and brave part in disarming Inspector Martin.

"Inspector Martin got exactly what he deserved, Inspector Hobbs, and don't you forget it."

"Yes sir."

The Police federation awarded Slater the police medal for bravery for disarming Smith. They had no doubt that Smith was prepared to kill them all following his callous and deliberate murder of Inspector Martin.

"And you young lady," Lane said to Sara. "When are you going to marry this reprobate and keep him out of trouble?"

Sara blushed to the roots of her hair and gave a shy smile. "Soon, Inspector Lane, soon, I promise you. If he will have me."

Slater grinned. "Of course I will." He knelt on one knee and took her hand in his. "Sara, will you marry me."

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She sobbed and nodded, a tear of joy glistening in the corner of her eyes. “Yes,” she whispered. And so saying, he took her in his arms and, oblivious to the cheers of the others, he kissed her in a way he had dreamed, on her lips.

The End