Another dawn. Unwelcome. The air thick with pollution, trapped in the fog. Gridlock in all directions, spreading outward from a nucleus of police and emergency service vehicles. A sickening crowd of onlookers on their way to work. River traffic either bobbing helplessly in the tide or temporarily moored at the quayside. All focus was on the bizarre silhouette dangling from the millennium pedestrian bridge connecting Newcastle and Gateshead. The struggle of a watery rising sun served to darken the object, which had the outline of a person, unknown as yet to be male or female, alive or dead. Whatever, as the person was attached to the underside of the bridge, it was certainly going to mean the retrieval would be tricky. Especially as it also appeared to be anchored to the river bed with some kind of elastic cord – presumably attached to a heavy weight.

It wasn’t a normal crime scene, chaos ruled and it was everywhere. S.O.C.O personnel couldn’t find each other despite being able to communicate with their mobiles. Recovery teams had been told what they should and should not do with respect to bringing the target to terra firma. Seamus West wasn’t in a particularly good mood even before he was called in. It now seemed that his girlfriend was never going to move north from London after their blazing row had continued long into the small hours. Flashing his warrant card and insisting he had to be allowed through the throng was simply met with shrugging of shoulders and profanities. West hadn’t enjoyed the promotion to DCI in the provinces as much as he’d anticipated. Was this case going to be a turning point? He didn’t seem to think so.
Almost an hour passed before the rescue operation was sufficiently knitted together to begin. First priority was to cut loose the anchor which was preventing any raising of the victim by whatever means. The Fire Service opted to lower operatives to determine if they were indeed dealing with a corpse. A crackled message delivered surprise.

“There is exhalation, but it is very weak. We can’t cut the anchor cord. This poor sod would be yanked up suddenly and that would likely break his or her neck. I can’t tell whether we have a man or woman yet. It’s like a mummy, completely wrapped in black clothing. We need a diver to attach a winch cable to the anchor and bring it to the surface very, very slowly. I know what the forensics people said, but this isn’t a body, well, at least not yet, so I’m going to carefully cut away the wrapping around the head to allow air to the victim. We have to do this now.”

He was given the all clear and after another agonising eight minutes he confirmed that it was a middle-aged woman, and she’d had her mouth stuffed with bandages.

“Can you hear me, love? You’re safe now. Stay with me. I’m going to get you out of this mess. Can you talk to me?”

A shake of the head was all he got. “That’s fine, don’t worry, we’ll have you in a nice warm place soon.”

Things began to dovetail, and gradually winching the anchor upwards until the tension in the elastic cord was neutralised revealed it to be an old safe. The tether was then cut and the delicate process of hauling the victim and fireman up to the bridge walkway commenced. Having landed the catch safely, all the ambulance crew could get from the woman was her name. She was painstakingly taken out of the black wrappings and quickly covered in warm blankets. The police had by now cordoned off most of the surrounding roads for emergency vehicle access and the ambulance sped to the Royal Victoria Infirmary with its siren blasting at full volume.
Meanwhile, the scene of crime investigation gathered pace. The most notable early discovery came when the safe was jemmied open. A sealed plastic bag contained part of a newspaper cutting, but only one word.

‘RETRIBUTION’

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If anything, the crowd had swelled even more, despite the discomfort of having been relentlessly herded into smaller spaces. Nobody, not just the police, could make any sense of what they’d witnessed. It seemed obvious that the ‘mummy’ had been left to die, either by suffocation, hypothermia, or even by a river craft collision, presumably in the dark. There was, however one individual who knew exactly what had happened, and why. Hidden in plain sight, feigning horror and quietly becoming the voyeur the police would never know anything about. This person observed first hand that the safe had been recovered and opened. The note had been delivered. It was time to move on.

Seamus West would have liked to hand-pick his own team when he arrived in Newcastle, and despite protesting this to the brass, he had been lumbered with his predecessor’s ‘cast-offs’. Catherine Moseley sensed his derisory manner during their first conversation and tackled him about it at every opportunity. Before the others could join them she wanted to set the tone.

“What is it that really rankles with you, boss? Ever thought the feeling could be mutual? You came here with a hell of a reputation, but that was down south, you have to earn that same respect on our patch. We really do want that to happen, and right now would seem like a good time to start. This case will go viral. This might actually be your big chance. You, and the rest of us need to be up to the
task. We’re sure to get showered with all kinds of shit from the top, so maybe we can put the attitude to one side and pull together, wouldn’t that be a novelty? Or is your way the only way? Think about it, sir, and forgive the insensitivity, but we need this woman to survive. I suggest I go to the hospital, now. Right now.”

West looked at Cath dispassionately and said nothing, then he just stared obsessively at the newspaper cutting. Cath shook her head in frustration.

“I’ll take that as a yes then, I’ll call you when I get to see her.”

“Err, sure, I… mmm, right – call me with an update. This has all the hallmarks of bringing attention to some kind of grievance. Ok, tell Bradley to get his arse over here, like yesterday. I need to speak with forensics as soon as possible.”

Declan Bradley worried Seamus, or Shay, as he preferred to be known to those higher up the food chain. The young Detective Constable had an eye for making connections between cases when West saw none. A bigger concern was his drinking, womanising, and the other company he kept. Were it not for his contacts amongst the so-called pond life, he may well have been moved on already.

“Sir, you wanted me to go with you to speak to forensics?”

“No, no, we need to know… strike that… we should already know who first reported this incident and to whom.”

“Oh yeah, you mean to us?”

“Piss poor deduction, Bradley. If we’d been the first contact then we would have been here before this bloody throng prevented us from getting on to the bridge. Use your loaf, talk to the guys in the bridge control room. Get uniform to speak to the business owners along the
quayside. There are nightclubs which would have been closing and cafes getting ready to open.”

“Yeah right. I’m on it, sir. I had a bit of a Eureka moment when I first saw that crowd gaping at the victim.”

“You don’t say, Bradley. Ok, let’s have it, make me take it on board.”

“Well, I asked myself why. Not why the woman’s life was under threat, but why here and why so early in the morning.”

“And your shaft of inspiration?”

“It guaranteed a bottleneck of thousands and they were hooked. Whoever did this wanted an audience far in excess of any crime scene I’ve ever known. Right here, on TV, and barrelling through social media in a heartbeat. So, you must be right, sir, we weren’t supposed to get here first. What puzzles me though, is how one person could have staged this, even in the dead of night. We might be looking at a bunch of nutters on this one.”

West couldn’t disguise his slow smile. “Well, Bradley, at last we just might be on the same page. Get back to me when you find who raised the alarm. Let’s keep an open mind here, it could have actually been these perpetrators you so graphically described. The TV people you mentioned is a good shout, check them out first.”

“Yes, sir,” whispered Bradley, hoping he had turned a corner with the shark from the south.

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Cath had to get really assertive with the hospital staff before being allowed to observe the stricken woman in intensive care. The prognosis was better than expected, but the patient had been sedated. There were no physical wounds other than chafing under the arms and around the neck from the rope securing her to the underside of the bridge. DI Cath Moseley repaired to the canteen for a
double shot of caffeine and began making notes of what had occurred on the quayside. It hadn’t taken long for the media vultures to descend on the hospital and she moved quickly to ask a medical spokesperson to keep them at bay, or better still to get them to leave. Her phone vibrated.

“Moseley. What do you want, Bradley?”

“The boss asked me to check out the source of who informed us of the incident. It was the TV lot. Apparently the caller informing them was a hysterical woman. There’s no name and she was having difficulties with her English. The call was aborted before the TV people could ask her anything. She just kept raving on about a suicide on the millennium bridge. Strange that isn’t it, thinking someone could mummify themselves and attach themselves to the bridge, let alone chuck the safe into the river once everything else was in place.”

“So you’re saying exactly what?”

“She was either off her face with something or she deliberately did not call us, the filth. Who the hell would think of ringing the media? Especially as the victim looked like a corpse.”

“Someone thinking it was their lucky day, and tried to earn a few quid for her amazing story?”

“I… err, maybe, but wouldn’t…”

“Did she have pictures on her phone which she could send to them in an instant?”

“Shit, I didn’t ask. I’ll get back to you.”

The patient had woken up, complaining about her sore neck and armpits. Cath sat down and held her hand. “I’m DI Moseley. I understand your name is Evelyn Murray. Are you up to me asking you a few questions?”

A nod was followed by a deluge of tears. “They said it wasn’t personal and that they were sorry. I thought they were going to let me go. Then the woman injected me with something and started to wrap me in black sheets. I must
have passed out. That’s all I can remember about that place, some kind of disused building.”

“Take your time Evelyn. Where exactly did this happen?”

“They first spoke to me in the supermarket car park just as I had switched off the engine. They said they were doing a survey about the lack of decent parking facilities and it would only take thirty seconds. They handed me a ten pound note and asked if I could just tick the appropriate five boxes. I got out my spectacles and took the pen they offered. The next thing I knew they were inside the car and the man produced a knife. ‘Drive,’ he said, ‘just follow my instructions and you’ll be safe.’ I freaked out and he slapped my face. They took me to a quiet spot beside some allotments and then blindfolded me. I begged them to let me go and the woman seemed sympathetic but said they couldn’t. It was dark when the car stopped. I don’t know where we were. Some broken down old garage or workshop door was opened and they tied me to a chair.”

“When precisely was this, Evelyn?”

“Yesterday afternoon.”

“I see, can I ask if you are married?”

“Yes, my husband will be at his wits end. I must speak with him.”

“Of course, we’ll organise that right away.”

“No, I mean he will be here already.”

“Ok, but I’ll have to check with my colleagues, he may have reported you missing.”

“No, you still don’t understand. He works here, in the hospital. The RVI.”
Donald Murray was losing it bigtime. Standing in the intensive care waiting area, a very agitated man, outwardly appearing to be a couple of hours from a nervous breakdown. He’d arrived after his wife had been sedated and he was desperate to speak to her.

When Evelyn had not come home by the time he’d returned from work yesterday, he’d called all of her friends. He then set off on one of their habitual walking routes, maybe she’d had an accident. Dusk was fast approaching when he made his first call to the police, and was promptly told they would look into her disappearance after she’d been missing for twenty-four hours. “I know my wife, she wouldn’t just vanish without contacting me. Something is wrong, you have to help me find her.”

It was to no avail, and he eventually clashed down the phone. He’d tried to stay calm. The car. ‘It’s not here,’ he told himself. ‘She may have had a crash or run out of fuel. No, I’d have heard from her, or someone else. That’s the strangest thing,’ he thought, analysing every possibility concurrent with his anxiety rising again. She wasn’t answering her mobile or responding to voicemail. ‘Where could the car be? There’s no sign of it around here, perhaps it’s outside one of her favourite shops? I need to check the Metrocentre car parks, and then Eldon Square mall parks in town.’ He was becoming more despondent by the minute and called the police again. It turned out to be a pointless rant, mostly at their attitude to his very real concern, and he was cut off when the profanities ramped up dramatically. ‘A glass of whisky, might calm me down.’ He needed to think straight. But he just paced around the house until the mounting frustration burst into a flood of action. He drove to the police station in Whickham village rather than renewing a war of words with the Newcastle mob. A report
was eventually made out and he was offered a mug of hot tea. They notified their traffic units of the problem and the car registration. At least it was a start, even though they only had a fraction of the vehicles the Newcastle force could call upon. He asked if he could stay at the station in case Evelyn’s car was spotted. The release of pent-up angst caught up with him within the hour and he drifted into a shallow snooze.

What seemed to be ten minutes later, but was actually three o’clock in the morning, he was nudged by an officer. “Sorry, sir, all reports have failed to find any trace of your wife’s car or of a woman answering to the description you gave us. I think you should go home and try to get more rest. We are in touch with the Newcastle force and they have also agreed to alert their patrols. We have your number and we’ll get in touch if there are any further developments.”

Donald wearily nodded his agreement and returned home. He was sleeping fitfully after another two shots of whisky when his doorbell chimed. His neighbour stood there in disbelief.

“Donald, I’m so sorry. Is there anything I can do?”

“What? What the hell do you mean, John?” he replied, his heart sinking with despair, and his hands shaking uncontrollably. “It’s about Evelyn, isn’t it? Just tell me for Christ’s sake, man.”

“Shit, you don’t have the television on do you? We wondered why your car was still in the drive. You need to sit down, let’s go and switch on the news.”

It unfolded in front of him. His hand covered his mouth and he began to retch. “The bastards wouldn’t listen to me, would they? I need to go, John, sorry. Why haven’t they called me as they promised?”

“Well, hold on a minute, this is live, Donald, and it’s only in the last five minutes that they knew her name, it took a hell of a long time to rescue her.”
“Rescue? You mean that black package isn’t her body? She’s still alive?”

“Apparently, well I think so. You see, they’re going back and forth with recorded and live footage, it’s really confusing. They said she was weak and was rushed to hospital, your place, the RVI.”

“Oh, are you sure, I, I can’t… err… thanks, John, I’ve… I need to… I mean I’ve got to go. Thanks again. See you later.”

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DCI West gathered his team together, including the one person he had been allowed to bring with him from London. Kieran Sinclair began his adult life with the army, and impressed those above him so much that he was fast-tracked to officer status in Afghanistan. He was considered a natural leader, some even suggested he should have been of interest to the SAS. This all came to an abrupt end when he was mutilated by an improvised explosive device on a sortie. Being a double leg amputee sent him into a downward spiral for a short time, but the determination to walk again pulled him through the dark days of recuperation. The recent advances in prosthetic technology drove him on relentlessly. However, the former extrovert underwent a swift metamorphosis into a single-minded but quiet man. Meeting him for the first time, people could easily have been persuaded that he was slightly autistic. He brooked no small talk or bullshit merely by silence and facial expression. The latest prosthetics he’d had fitted had to be ‘broken in’ like a new pair of running shoes, and he still had to resort to spells of moving around the office in a squeaky-wheeled chair when the discomfort was at its worst. His primary asset, at least according to West, was his analytical focus and tenacity. He ate back-door computer research for breakfast, dinner and sometimes
supper. It was never the wrong time to delve into this murky world. Despite West openly singing his praises, he didn’t seem to need new friends. He was still a loner, and he wanted to bond with his new colleagues in his own time.

“Ok, everybody,” drawled West, making prolonged eye contact with all three of them, “we have another one.”

Cath reacted first. “You mean…”

“Yep, another black mummy. It has apparently taken longer to reach us for two reasons. It was discovered at the other side of Hexham. Forgive my lack of the region’s geography, but I’m told the mummy was strapped over one of these Pilates exercise balls at a heritage site near Bardon Mill. I hope I said that right. Anyway, the curator of a nearby Roman ruin, this… err Vindolanda place, saw the victim as soon as he arrived for work this morning. He obviously doesn’t watch the news or he would have already known about the Evelyn Murray incident. He called the local plods and they finally joined the dots, they called us and the curator left the site as he found it for our people to check it out. Kieran, can you start working on the timeline of both incidents please?”

The ex-soldier nodded and began pushing his chair wheel.

“Wait up, not immediately. I need to cover some of the other stuff. Cath, apparently, Evelyn Murray’s husband is at the RVI now and says she’s hell-bent on seeing you again. Get over there and ask the usual - what she saw, what she heard, anything about her abductors.”

“Right, the husband might know something as well. I’ll talk with them separately first, and then together.”

“Sure. Now then, Bradley, you’re with me.”

“Ok Boss, where are we going? Do I need any special gear?”

“How the hell would I know? I want to speak to the bridge control room again. You talked to them earlier, there might be a change in their story.”
“Why would you think that, sir? I mean why would they lie?”

“Look, the bridge incident was no casual stunt. It needed meticulous planning and very special expertise. But nobody saw anything. Bullshit, in my experience these ghost shifts are a cushy number, and it’s quite possible these guys nod off when watching CCTV for hours on end. Anyway, we should get moving, Bradley, so that you have time to get up to this Vindolanda gaff. But, in the meantime, at least ask yourself, how long did it take the emergency services to get Evelyn out of harm’s way? Yes, a bloody long time. The bridge control guys might have taken turns to go AWOL. Now, the good news. Our esteemed superiors think we may need someone from counter-terrorism to hold our hand now that we have two cases, ‘at least for a while’ was the way they put it. You couldn’t make it up, all they seem concerned about is keeping the politicians happy. No use looking at me like that folks, we can’t waste our time arguing with those knighthood chasers, we’ve got proper police work to do. Are we all clear? Right let’s go.”

Sarcastic smiles spread across the faces of Cath and Bradley as they split up. Kieran Sinclair simply squeaked his way back to his desk and plugged in his head.

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Evelyn Murray looked very pale and utterly exhausted by her ordeal, added to by the plethora of cables, bleeps, and charts hanging on her bed frame. Cath was asked not to add to her stress, particularly if her recall of the last twenty-four hours was limited or patchy. The consultant was pretty assertive.

“This lady has been severely traumatised and needs to recuperate mentally as well as physically. Don’t discount temporary amnesia. Oh, and don’t push it.”
“I’m not a rookie Doctor erm… sorry, can’t read your label. We already have another victim of a similar attack. I think Mrs Murray needs reassurance she’s now in safe hands – from both you and me. I’ll let you know if I need your expert advice again. I suppose you sometimes have to weigh the odds as to when medication or surgery is the way forward. I have to make similar calls on how to take a witness statement, especially if Evelyn’s testimony can prevent any further attacks. Neither you nor I can be sure she was selected at random. So, are we done?”

“I’m just saying, detective…”

“Yes, whatever. I just hope Mrs Murray feels as comfortable with your bedside manner as she will after my little chat with her. Perhaps you should check with her when I’ve gone. Nice to have met you.”

Donald Murray, as anticipated, wanted to remain at Evelyn’s bedside while Cath tried to weasel observations out of her.

“Sir, it would be less stressful for your wife to speak with me alone first. After that I can ask you to fill in a few blanks for me. All three of us can then chat about what happens next. Comfortable with that?”

“Well, I suppose, but I would like to hold her hand, just for reassurance. I won’t…”

“Oh, Donald, I’m fine,” pleaded Evelyn, “It was me who asked you to get a message to Detective Moseley while stuff was fresh in my mind. Off you go to the café, get yourself something to eat. Go on, run along.”

He trailed out of the ward sheepishly, glancing back every few yards. Evelyn was impatient to get started.

“I saw some of them, well, two of them close up. I can still picture their faces. Oh, sorry, I told you that earlier, but I can see them really clearly now if you need me to describe them. There were others, but they were further away and without my driving glasses I couldn’t make out any features, but they seemed to be wearing a uniform of
some kind, all of them. I mean all of the ones I couldn’t recognise again.”

“Ok, Evelyn, that’s great. I’ll arrange for an identikit man to visit you. What colour were these uniforms?”

“Green, not dark green. But the two who spoke to me in the car park were dressed in normal clothing.”

“Did you hear any of the others conversing with each other? Or anything else?”

“Not talking, they seemed as if they were assembling something. There was a droning noise from outside, like an idling vehicle, not very loud or close but it was going all the time I was conscious.”

“That’s great. You’ve been incredibly brave, Evelyn. Why don’t you rest while I go and arrange the identikit session and speak with your husband. You might recall more detail as you get well.”

Cath decided to leave her chat with Donald Murray until her next visit. He was acting strangely for someone in the familiar surroundings of his workplace, furtively glancing around as if he expected to see someone he’d rather avoid.
The atmosphere in West’s office was tense, complemented by the minimalistic furnishings he’d insisted upon. Forensics hadn’t come up with anything useful, the second victim hadn’t yet yielded a note similar to the one found in the safe from the river, and they were anticipating a cuckoo from counter-terrorism at any moment.

“Bradley, is there anything more you can tell us about the Vindolanda case? Or did you just have a nice cold beer up there? What do we know about the victim? Well…?”

“I’ve just this minute had a call, sir. It seems he had no ID on him but he was dressed in fishing gear, so we got in touch with the local angling club, and they knew him. James Wilkinson, fifty-two apparently, and an ex-councillor of the Tynedale borough. He is being kept in hospital under observation for another night. I should go and see him again if you’ll excuse me from the counter… err thingy.”

“Not yet, Bradley. I’ll let you know when,” said West, irritated by something or someone. “Right, Cath, you said Evelyn Murray is with our digital likeness expert. I don’t like the word ‘identikit’, it sounds like a piece out of a Lego box. What do you make of her assertion that there were multiple people at the location where she’d been taken? Particularly her observation that they were in uniform and working on some other task, not directly involved with her.”

“She’s still a bit shaken and fragile, boss. For the moment I’d treat what she said with circumspection until we get the digital images of the two she’s sure she’d recognise again. The consultant seems to think she will drift in and out of amnesia. He’s an arsehole, but he may be right about that. I’ll head back to see her after the Cockney from the capital delivers the sermon.”
“Ok, but I’d like to know what these others were working on. And what have you been up to, Kieran?”

“Not a lot of substantial facts available yet, guv, but even though the reported times of both incidents are sketchy at best, there would seem to be converging evidence that the two were planned concurrently rather than consecutively. Maybe that’s what the alleged uniformed personnel were doing – the support work. This could make sense, bearing in mind your view that multiple skills and pairs of hands were needed for the Newcastle case. Too early to be certain.”

“Fine, keep at it, and if you… oh, bollocks! Here we are, shit, there’s two of them. Double jeopardy folks, hard hats and no loose tongues. Just before we welcome our guests, I found out that the CCTV in the bridge control room doesn’t cover the underside very well. But, hallelujah, the data recording space was full anyway, so we don’t have visuals. Each shift blames the other.”

Just as their guests entered the office, Bradley took a call from Hexham hospital.

West offered a handshake to the two spooks. “Welcome to the Wall, gentlemen. It’s our job to keep a close eye on the White Walkers, so yes, we are the Night Watch. You have heard of ‘Game of Thrones’ haven’t you?”

“Good, I like a sense of humour,” replied the taller of the two visitors. “I’m Niall Osborn, you don’t need to know the name of my colleague. Look, I’ll keep this as brief as possible. From the data you’ve emailed me, I can’t justify any kind of participation in these incidents as yet. We’re already stretched and it’s clear that your investigation is dealing with targeted individuals who’ve probably survived by design. We are full-on, one hundred percent occupied with mass death threats, often perpetrated by people who sacrifice their own lives to create panic. The MO could hardly be more different. Arse-covering is part of modern government window dressing. So, unless you
disagree, we’ve just had a very productive meeting and you will keep me briefed as you go. At least that way I can help deflect any further meddling from the top. One of our advantages is that we don’t have to disclose any strategic measures we take. After all, we are the secret service. Well…?”

An awkward silence persisted until West asked his team to get on with the tasks in hand. Only Bradley loitered, and with some intent. He showed his phone to West. The message which had eluded the Hexham police had been found. The victim’s back displayed a tattoo, one of which James Wilkinson had no prior knowledge. Again, a single word.

‘Justice’

West showed this to Niall Osborn and his unknown companion. “I guess this doesn’t change what you’ve just said, you know, you don’t have time for this small time stuff.”

“Absolutely, it seems we’re comfortable with you keeping us copied in and you receiving nothing from us in return. Our position would be one of non-disclosure, as per the bible. Can you recommend a decent restaurant nearby? We need to avoid the cuisine of our return train.”

The expression on West’s face said it all. “No problem. I’ll join you and then drop you off at the Central Station.”

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Cath was quite surprised to find Evelyn in the hospital café with her husband. She joined them just as the consultant beckoned Donald to follow him, and Evelyn seemed happy to see him depart.

“Well, Evelyn, I have the identikits of the two people who abducted you and I must say they are very distinctive
individuals. The man has an old scar over his left eye and the woman has seemingly broken her nose at some time during her life. Have you been able to bring back any memories of the uniformed people?”

“Not enough to say I’d know them again. But I now remember that the uniforms had a logo on them. A four-letter acronym in black letters, but I still have no recollection of what they said. Apparently, I can go home within the next couple of hours. I think that’s why the consultant wanted to speak with Donald.”

“I see. Well, here’s my card, Evelyn, you’ve been a big help and as soon as we have any suspects to put in a line-up I’ll be in touch. I think I’d better catch up with Donald before you both leave for home.”

*

James Wilkinson was still in serious discomfort. An expert tattooist had been approached by the Hexham force, and he had quickly declared the image as more akin to wood carving than body art, such was the lack of expertise. Wilkinson was lying on his side when Bradley whimsically asked him how he was doing.

“No better for seeing you, where are the police when you actually need them. What is it now?”

“Sorry sir, I’ll be as brief as I can. Just wanted to check what you can remember about your abductors.”

“Bloody Norah, give me strength. Haven’t you spoken to your mates in Hexham?”

“Yes, but they only told me your name, background and about the tattoo on your back. I just assumed they had asked you about your kidnappers but you were too traumatised at that time to recall anything.”

“Well, I suppose that’s partly true, I seem to have brought more to mind in the last few hours, since I got my dressing changed. I can only remember the face of one
person. There were others at the location they took me to but they were busy with something else.”

“Sorry sir, could you just back up a little. Where did you actually get abducted?”

“No wonder we have so many damned criminals running amok these days. I told the other retards about that, and described the location in great detail. My favourite fishing spot is near Bardon Mill. There’s a ruin standing in a field in plain sight from quarter of a mile away, and beyond it the river makes a ninety degree turn. The bank there has a fallen tree, I was, as usual sitting on the trunk when this man stopped to talk to me. I was distracted and suddenly felt a sharp pain in my neck. I hardly had time to confront him before my vision blurred and I became disoriented. I must have passed out because the next thing I remember was recovering consciousness in this old building. I was tied to a chair. The abductor waved to one of the other people and he came over toward me with a scalpel. I screamed for help and the boss man pressed on my throat to make my mouth open wide and the scalpel man filled it with bandages. I was given a second injection, but this wasn’t a knockout type, it must have been a local anaesthetic, because after a few minutes, I could feel a cutting action on my back. It was unpleasant but not overly painful. I had no idea why they were doing this but I couldn’t speak with my mouth crammed. The boss man apologised but said there was no other way. For what - he never actually said. When the surgical stuff was finished I was given a third injection which knocked me out again. I know what you’re going to ask. Can I describe these men? Yes, as far as the boss man is concerned, but not the butcher, he was wearing one of those balaclava type hoods. That’s about it.”

“Thank you, sir. That is very helpful indeed. I hope I’m not being too intrusive, but had anyone reported you
missing? The Hexham force never mentioned any such query.”

“Fat chance of you lot catching these bastards. I’m pretty sure I told your mates that they should inform my wife. She took two days off work to visit her mother in Manchester. I bloody well hope they haven’t forgotten.”

“I’ll ask them now, it won’t take…”

“Bad idea, son. I’m discharging myself once I’ve seen the doctor again. News of this will come better from me if they did forget. No need worry her about the police involvement if she knows I’m ok, and then she won’t have to rush home if the plods did forget to contact her.”

Bradley was able to tell the patient within a few minutes that his wife hadn’t in fact been told about him being a victim. She had heard about the attacks in the northeast, but had no idea her husband was involved in the second one because only the name of Evelyn Murray had been released as yet.

“She’s on her way back now, sir.”

“Oh, bugger. That means I can look forward to another lecture, she’s very good at that – always in hindsight mind you.”

“Ok, sir, I’ll be in touch with any significant developments and we’ll need your description for our digital likeness officer. The Hexham boys don’t have the latest technology for that.”

“Oh really, I’m looking forward to that already!”

*

West had dropped off Batman and his unknown sidekick and was feeling a little more settled. Back at the station he was confronted by a wobbly Kieran, out of his chair, and stumbling toward the office. It was always a nervy time when any stray object or cable could unbalance him, as he’d previously fallen on a number of occasions, but
luckily there had been no serious injury as yet. The determination of the man was virtually without limits, a veritable inspiration, particularly to those who were having something as demoralising as a bad hair day.

“Guv, I’m getting nowhere with these timelines. I mean, in terms of real accuracy. It’s not like we even have guesstimates like time of death, as we don’t have defunct bodies. The witness statements help, but there is still a hell of a lot of time which is unaccounted for, even though we aren’t talking more than a few hours rather than days or weeks. This would suggest that the victims were displayed at or about the same time, but that’s no more than informed speculation. However, as there is such a narrow margin, the distance between the two sites would seem to indicate more than one set of perpetrators. I think my time would be more productively spent on a different approach.”

“Mm, I can’t argue with that. How about digging into why these two victims were chosen, as they don’t seem to fit with totally random selection?”

“Sure, that makes sense. I’ll start with occupation, bank accounts, social media, medical history and stuff like that. There has to be some connection no matter how obscure it might be.”

“Right. Now, just before you dive into that, I’d like all of the team to look at the digital images produced from the victims’ descriptions. They both seemed to have pretty clear recall of the male ‘organiser’ and Evelyn Murray actually spoke to a female equivalent. That in itself is strange, abductors almost always go to a lot of trouble to keep their faces covered. I’ll call Cath and Bradley then we can chew over what this might mean.”
It was a straw to clutch at rather than a breakthrough. Both digital images of the male abductor looked very much like the same person. But, exactly where did that get them? They still needed some forensic or other evidence to stand any chance of pulling up a match on their database. Kieran made a cautious suggestion.

“If we still think these people are intent on drawing attention to some grievance or cause, they may have been activists for some time. The Met has access to some pretty comprehensive data on what they regard as potential troublemakers. They don’t like open access sharing because of the political correctness brigade, but that guy from counter-terrorism could check this out for us. Worth a try?”

“That’s a good shout,” agreed DCI West, his mood lightening markedly. “I’ll call Batman, it might give us a better feeling of why two of them came all the way up here when a phone call would have been the order of the day. After all he did say they were swamped with projects, bigger fish and all that crap.”

Other than this hopeful punt they were all a bit downbeat. Bradley didn’t help when he began waffling on about the total lack of even the remotest piece of forensic pointers and the disparity between the two victims.

“To find out more about the motive, maybe we need to look at this from a different angle.”

He was keenly aware of the dismissive expression on West’s face, nevertheless he persevered. “Evelyn Murray is a schoolteacher whereas James Wilkinson is an ex-councillor and a keen angler.”

“Is there some point to this regurgitation, Bradley? Or are you just happier shooting the breeze than actually sifting through facts?”
“With respect, sir, it’s exactly because we are pretty barren in the fact department that we should pay more attention to why these two victims were chosen. If I recall our previous take on this you said yourself that they weren’t randomly plucked out of thin air. My point is that they could, on the surface of it, hardly be further apart as targets. So, either we’re missing something, or they aren’t connected in a blindingly obvious way, yet they have to be from the perpetrators’ angle.”

“And your proposal is exactly what?”

“They’ve been made to suffer, perhaps for something they’ve done, or perhaps to hurt someone else who holds them dear to their hearts. Like blood relatives, spouses, work colleagues. All I’m saying is that they were allowed to see their captors and the operation location, and also what was going on. Maybe someone connected to the victims would definitely have been able to identify these thugs by name.”

The mere fact that a considerable pause for thought ensued motivated Bradley to chance his arm further.

“Evelyn’s other half was working at the very hospital she was taken to, and James’ wife was away visiting her mother. Neither spouse was at home. Rather convenient wouldn’t you say?”

Kieran got in before Cath. “It’s an interesting thought, guv, stats always show that many such crimes, including murder, wind up being close to home. I can add this dimension to my checks on the victims’ personal stuff.”

Cath reinforced the approach. “I do think Donald Murray is behaving strangely. I’d like another crack at him. Also, we have to bear in mind that there may already be more potential targets on a list. Why would these bastards stop now? They probably know we’re scrambling around in the dark.”

West didn’t appear to be convinced but agreed, simply because he was out of alternative suggestions himself.
When the others had left the room he began searching for the number he’d been given by Niall Osborn, but his thought process was interrupted by an incoming call.

“Julia, I began thinking it must be all over between us when I hadn’t heard from you. Is this a Dear John call?”

“No, well, I mean it’s about my Dad. He’s been hurt and he’s in hospital, so I haven’t had time to…”

West’s brain kicked into another gear – ‘surely it can’t be’, he was about to say. “What’s happened? Do you need me to come down to London?”

“No, he’s broken his pelvis and Mum is distraught. I just wanted you to know I need to stay here and hold her hand. She’s really in a daze. So, I won’t be coming back to the northeast for a while.”

“How did it happen?”

“He came off that stupid moped on his way to work and slid into a bus. Mum has been on his case to get rid of the damned thing for years. He’ll have to now. He admits it was his own fault, dodging between vehicles as usual. They don’t know if he’ll be able to walk properly again and he might need an op when he comes out of traction.”

West saw an opportunity. “Look, Julia, I know I keep saying I’m up to my ears with work, but your Dad and I go back a bit, and he’s always been good to me. I’d like to come and see him unless you want me to stay away. At least you could ask him for me.”

“Ah, that’s nice of you, I’m sure he’d like that. Ok, I’ll tell him – let me know when you’ll be here. Will you drive?”

“No, I’ll take the train. Can you pick me up at King’s Cross?”

“Yeah, of course, just let me know the time. You can stay at mine if you like?”

“Cheers, I really appreciate it. Are you sure after our last convers…”
“Don’t. Let’s put that out of our minds. It can wait. Look forward to seeing you back home again, Shay. Bye.”

Now he had two good reasons to go south. Talking to Niall Osborn would be better than discussing a delicate matter on the phone. He would try to ensure it was without Osborn’s unidentified compatriot, whom he suspected was actually Osborn’s real boss. He sent a text and was somewhat surprised that a reply in the affirmative to meet at a pub had been received while he’d visited the men’s room. He’d been gone all of six minutes. Julia’s call had given him a much wanted distraction from the case, and just as important, a chinwag with Osborn could give him a temporary break from the daily briefings of the regional Chief Constable.

“Cath, just between us, I’ve been invited by Niall Osborn to trawl through records of activists from the northeast who’ve got previous. If there’s anything in Kieran’s suggestion, a bloke with a scar over one eye and a woman that has taken more hits to the nose than a boxer yet to win a fight shouldn’t be too difficult to spot. You’re going to be in charge and keep the Chief Constable up to speed. Don’t let Bradley peddle more wild goose chases, stick to the evidence and facts. Ok?”

“Sure, thanks a bunch, boss. We’ve got nothing on this case and I get the chance to screw up any promotion while you go AWOL. I hope you remember I have some leave coming up.”

“Yes, of course, but I couldn’t ignore Osborn’s invitation, could I?” said West, shrugging his shoulders and gilding the lily just a touch. “Come on, Cath, look at it as a chance to cosy up to the hierarchy. You can do yourself a heap of good.”

“Mm, heap sounds about right. On the other hand, when the cat’s away…”

“See, think outside the box, but make sure Bradley stays in it.”
Kieran was rarely seen working with anyone else, let alone Bradley, but the two of them had pulled down some interesting information on the victims. Evelyn Murray was indeed a schoolteacher, but relatively recently she’d moved from full time to a supply contract. She had a separate bank account from her husband. Hers was quite robust and on an accumulating trend. Their joint account was fairly static, mainly used for what appeared to be unexpected bills. Donald’s personal account indicated a lot of erratic expenses, many of which were for hobby type items, including repeat orders of foreign sourced Viagra.

Even more interesting were the patterns of travel and associated purchases. Evelyn seemed to spend over ninety percent of her own money locally, whereas Donald made very frequent unaccompanied visits to London. Evelyn’s decision to step back from her chosen vocation appeared quite logical in contrast to Donald’s fall from grace into the hospital’s pharmacy. His previous charter was that of an impressive high-flying executive in pharmacological research in the capital.

James Wilkinson’s life appeared to be boringly constant, no real fluctuations were noted in his bank account over the last few years. He could be categorised as someone who blended into the background mist of an LS Lowry matchstick men painting. His wife, Eleanor, in sharp contrast was a fast moving consultant in the dog-eat-dog world of microbiology company start-ups. It appeared to be a jungle in which it was easy to get born, a struggle to learn to walk, and a veritable cannibalistic gorging contest of survival to puberty. Eleanor Wilkinson had the nous to gravitate to safer ground, those who can’t do, often end up teaching others who rarely survive.
As the two detectives continued to peruse the fine detail, Bradley suddenly jumped tracks. “Kieran, does it not strike you as strange that the two victims suffered different manifestations of trauma, you know, the city centre compared to a two thousand year-old site along Hadrian’s Wall, but they were damaged by a common technique.”

“You’ve lost me Bradley, and not for the first time today. Please be more explicit.”

“Well, they were both stretched, their frame, their spine, a throwback to torture techniques in so-called primitive civilisations. They were both put on the ‘rack’, albeit with different degrees of force.”

Kieran became pensive and then exploded into gabbling agreement. “Brilliant observation, subtlety, and lateral thinking. I should have picked up on that. Details, bloody details – that’s supposed to be my strength. This is a symbolic action. We aren’t just seeing a protest against something, but a common response to whatever it is that has pissed off the perpetrators. If this was a lone serial killer I’d have seen this, I’m sure. Because it’s a group I blinked. It might even be a cult of some kind. Let’s see if we can find more stuff on the victims and their spouses. There must be other nuances we’re missing. There must be an embarrassingly obvious belief welding these people to a course of taking the law into their own hands. Why did those earlier civilisations employing the rack use such a debilitating method of eliciting a confession of something their victims might not even have been guilty of? Simple, every fractional increase in tension allows the poor sod on the rack to contemplate just how bad this can get. We, the police, are perceived as an instrument of getting this message across subliminally to the plebs on behalf of the establishment, but in a very public way. We aren’t supposed to solve this particular puzzle, we’re supposed to magnify awareness of the lack of commitment in rooting out total inertia relating to some national malpractice.
Thanks, Bradley, now just disappear for a couple of hours, will you? I need to compartmentalise all the stuff we have so far. I need pin sharp concentration. Go and talk to Cath if you want, leave me alone now.”

Bradley seemed pleased to have spiked Kieran’s interest in the motive, but didn’t know what the hell he had just babbled on about.
West was back from his short sojourn in his old stomping ground. He’d managed to build a few bridges with Julia, mainly because her father had been buoyed by someone who was running such a high profile investigation travelling the length of the country to see how he was. They got on so well together, Desmond admired West’s relative notoriety, visualising him as a minor celebrity. A local boy basking in the rewards of hard graft. They also shared an acerbic sense of humour which Julia felt had been instrumental in bolstering her father’s drive to get well again. Desmond’s demeanour had achieved a volte-face in just two days.

The barometer of romance between West and Julia had shifted from stormy to sunny without him resorting to meaningless overtures regarding his career in the north.

His secondary objective delivered the opposite. He’d met with Niall Osborn, showed him the digital likenesses and was promptly told to come back to the same pub twenty-four hours later. West was unhappy at being excluded but no amount of protest was going to wash. Either he accepted that Osborn would run these checks alone or the activist database would become off-limits. On the return journey he began to rationalise why this might be so. Thinking of the raison d’etre of counter-terrorism, he put it down to the black hole analogy. All kind of matter was sucked in and nothing escaped other than the odd gamma burst. Even light was captive to its crushing grip. And throwing light on sensitive database extracts was anathema to the spooks. He finally concluded that it would all come down to timing. Then, and only then would Niall Osborn become the initiator. Patience was necessary.
As the team assembled once more, West struck the first admission, a unique gesture, as he was definitely not blessed with a modesty gene.

“Ok, people. I’m going to make it easy on you. My expectations of help from the spooks were way too optimistic. I got nada. The only good thing to come out of the trip was that they practically swore on their bible that there would be no further interference. Right, let me hear if you’ve stumbled on to some crumb of progress in my absence. It won’t have to be very good to eclipse my wasted journey. Cath, you were running the show, spell it out.”

She cleared her throat. “I take it that you haven’t heard directly from the Chief Constable then. He’s either already on Valium or he’s going to need some pretty soon. The media have been circulating around him with claims that there will be more victims. There aren’t any specifics in the message which was delivered by letter this time rather than by phone. I was informed of this directly by our esteemed leader in your absence, and at first I took issue with his analysis of the implied threat. He really believes it’s a prank, a deranged sicko looking for attention. I suggested we keep an open mind about that because the message stated that things had moved on. There would be deaths next time around. Here’s a copy of what was delivered by regular first class mail. It is just the same newspaper cuttings technique, and before you ask, there is no DNA or fingerprint evidence. The postmark is in the city centre, walking distance from here.”

“That’s all we need. A Chief Constable in denial, and advance warning of an escalation of hostility from these evil bastards. Ok, I’ll speak to Herr Commandant when we’re done here. What else have we got?”

“I’m not finished, boss,” murmured Cath, “I decided to endorse the Chief Constable’s wisdom when he pointed out that you had convinced him that we weren’t investigating
murders, just ABH. He also said that was the basis on which he authorised your summer city break.”

“Now look, Cath, I also told him that we were still keeping our foot on the gas, so…”

“I know you did, sir, so did I. Just it’s unleaded rather than super unleaded. I followed your advice to the letter, you know, grasping this opportunity to improve my chances of promotion.”

“Ok, ok, I hold my hands up. Still, I’d like to be brought fully up to date, if you don’t mind.”

Wry smiles spread over the faces of Cath and Bradley. Kieran remained stern and raised his hand. “Speculation and more speculation, guv. We know nothing more for certain than we did the day after the incidents. If you’re willing to accept that educated speculation is progress then we have been examining the MO in more depth. The chosen means of inflicting agony on our existing victims is, albeit by different apparatus, a mild version of torture on the rack. The message DI Moseley refers to indicates a more drastic application of the same principle. It could be anything and there’s no point in trying to second guess what they have in mind. However, it does give an insight into motive. I know we’ve touched on how our victims could be connected, so how about them or their spouses being examples of the more benign level of ‘offenders of their cause’. I really believe this symbolic stretching of the spine is the most significant clue we have at present. We are dealing with clever people here.”

“And you expect me to sell this cult or clan shit to the brass? I see what you’re getting at, Kieran, but seriously, there’s not even a remote chance of me risking my arse by proposing to conduct a frigging séance.”

“Not the brass, guv, but we, just the four of us, should bear this in mind, because I agree with DI Moseley regarding the Chief Constable being in some kind of denial. Who is going to pick up the flak when the next
victims appear? If we can’t wheel out forensics, suspects from witness statements, or even characterise the perpetrators from digital images we’re in for more than a bit of a ticking off. All I’m suggesting is that we keep our nose firmly on the trusted grindstone, but document every little detail of a thorough investigation into the motive – defending it as one of the three vital clinchers. The others of course are MO and opportunity. The chances of us making progress on them are pretty close to zero.”

“I suppose so when you put it that way, but it’s still my balls on the bacon slicer. Two more days, Kieran, that’s all I’m authorising for navel gazing. Then we take the flak only on standard procedure failings. Agreed?”

“Agreed, guv. Oh, and by the way, I can’t take all the credit for this approach. It was Bradley who sparked off my train of thought. He’s the one we should be indebted to.”

*

**Five Days Later**

Three people were whispering in the dead of night. Whispering but arguing over the best way to complete their task. A fourth was acting as a lookout, and was becoming quite animated, only able to use gestures to get them to concentrate on the agreed procedure. She would have appeared to any passer-by like a frenzied marionette who’d suddenly been struck dumb but couldn’t tell anyone.

The black mummy was already tethered by the feet to a low fence in a small paddock next to allotments. The discussion was focussed on whether the head should be attached to the horse before it was tethered to an iron stake in the ground, giving the animal a radius of grazing which would involve stretching the spine of the victim. They’d prepared precise drawings of the site but somehow they’d
miscalculated the distance from the fence to the only water trough. They didn’t want to spook the horse, so it was decided to place a small pile of treats closer to the victim than planned, while attaching the specially made harness to the increasingly curious animal. It worked, and the other end of the harness was secured to the victim’s head with a slightly shortened rope. They were all set. The treats had been laced with a substance which would cause the horse to become intensely thirsty over time. They could do no more. It remained to be seen as to whether the victim would suffer repeated, agonising stretching of the spine, or the miscalculation would cause dismemberment when the spine came apart. It would surely be one or the other. The group began gathering up any trace of them having been there and headed to their vehicle. The night traffic was sparse but as soon as dawn broke, the scene would attract walkers if not the owner of the horse. They set off in their vehicle still divided about the outcome, the preferred one had always been to deliver suffering rather than a quick snap of the spine and the cord which housed the nervous system. They wanted pain receptors to be fully functional prior to death. This time there was to be no written message to the authorities until the incident achieved news saturation levels nationwide.

The group of four made contact with their contemporaries to declare the status quo, including the possibility of the victim being in two halves by the time he or she was discovered. Consternation ensued, but served to make absolutely certain that the next victim in the sequence would definitely not be the beneficiary of a quick demise. That would have been extremely counter-productive in the overall scheme they had embarked upon.

They need not have worried. The owner of the horse was an early riser and walked through the allotment complex near the village of Finchmoor just as the rays of the semi-circular rising sun was climbing over the fenced
enclosure. Virtually everyone in the region knew about the black mummies by now and he immediately contacted the police to report his discovery. One suspicious package rather than two. Unlike the first two crime scenes, this one was not brimming with media personnel before law enforcement was alerted. Precisely what that meant for West and his team would however make the headlines, or even be the only headlines. Cath was right, it would become Valium for more than the Chief Constable.
The fenced crime scene now resembled a local football match when viewed from a distance. They were dispersed amongst the gloaters from the village. They were quite pleased with their night’s work, seeing first hand just how forlorn the police appeared to be with their hangdog expressions. It was now time to leave and ready the message for the right moment.

West was unusually pensive. Cath and Bradley were busy quizzing S.O.C.O. already, but hearing only ‘You’ll be the first to know once we know’. The presence of the pathologist was the main attraction for the media, and West knew that. He strolled over to have a word.

“Elizabeth, can you please take all the time you need on this one? I need some space to think before the vultures begin pecking at and exposing my total incomprehension of what this is all about.”

“Well there’s a first. I would always refuse to speculate, as you know, but to be asked not to, is quite a surprise. I feel a bit faint. I can’t pretend he isn’t dead, DCI West.”

“I know that. It’s just that uniform are reporting that the guy who found our man has already shared his opinion on what took place here, and when the press embroider things it will look like this poor sod was tortured to death.”

“That may turn out to be quite accurate.”

“Yes, but he’s telling everyone that the victim was alive when he found him. Only just, but alive. The media will conduct an inquest into why he couldn’t be saved. And that will make it very difficult for us to suppress certain details. We always need to keep crucial information out of the public domain, so that the perpetrators don’t know what we know and what we don’t know.”
“Mm…I can see that but I also have a code to uphold. I know that look in your eye, what are you asking me to do?”

“It’s more a case of asking you not to say anything to anyone while you’re here. I guess you will be doing a toxicology report.”

“Of course, that’s routine.”

“Take your time with it if you don’t mind. And err…let me see it before anyone else knows what you find.”

“I’m confused again. I don’t expect that to be the cause of death, but as you said, I won’t speculate.”

“Thanks, so do you think it’s worth doing similar tests with Evelyn Murray and James Wilkinson?”

“Excuse me? They weren’t referred to me, as they weren’t dead and still aren’t. I’m a pathologist, not their GP.”

“True, but could they still have traces of the substances they were injected with when they were abducted and again when they were hung out to die?”

“It very much depends on the substances, some will metabolise quickly, and others will remain in the system for a while.”

“Ok. I’ll pay them a visit and get back to you. Thanks”

*

He headed towards Cath but was skewered with another pearl from Bradley.

“Sir, none of this makes any sense. If these nutters are trying to champion some cause by killing innocent people, they aren’t doing a very good job. Surely the cause should be obvious. This is like spending a fortune on advertising and keeping the product a secret.”

“Bradley, why is it that you continually pose questions yet never come up with anything remotely close to answers? Look, I came over here to tell the two of you that
it’s about time we started asking suspects questions, but we
don’t have any suspects, do we? That is going to change.
Where the hell is the damned horse-whisperer? He’ll do for
a start.”

Cath butted in. “He’s in the clutches of the TV people
over beside the gate. He gave us a brief statement when we
arrived but I’m sure the piranhas will pump him dry and
twist what he did say into something he didn’t. You have a
press conference together with the Chief Constable this
afternoon, boss. I’d advise you to keep away from the
media for now. Leave it to us. We would just be doing our
job by reeling in the only witness who saw the victim
alive.”

“You’re right, Cath. Just keep Bradley muzzled. Ok, I’m
going to see if S.O.C.O. have unearthed more than they did
with the first two victims. I can see the head of forensics
there, maybe he’d like to write my crib sheet for this
bloody press conference.”

*

Connor Jennings and Shay West were often engaged in
argumentative jousting, but they did retain mutual respect
for the difficulties each had to face in their remits. They
meshed quite well, considering one was intent on parading
humility when in fact he was rather snobbish, the other was
unreservedly a snob and proud of it.

“Monsieur West, it’s rather early for me to be pestered
by someone of your rank, isn’t it?”

“Not really, Connor. You and I are supposed to be the
‘go to’ guys in an arena like this. We’re the gladiators who
entertain the public and slay the lions with consummate
ease. And, let’s not forget the patrons in the crown
prosecution service, the most difficult of all to please.”

“Mm…I do find your little analogies entertaining, Chief
Inspector, but all they achieve in my department is a
distraction. However, I will indulge you for one minute, longer than that would likely elicit you receiving the dreaded vote of confidence from the top. The people responsible for such brutality always make mistakes. These particular criminals are thorough but not immune to overconfidence. All I’m going to say at present is they have dropped the first stitch. There are consistencies with the kind of rope which they seem to like but that is going to be no more than a corroborating item. They have however left vehicle tracks inside the perimeter fence. More tracks than should be necessary for a straight in and out manoeuvre. They seem to have repositioned the vehicle several times. The good news is that we have clear casts of the tyres, from an off roader, and one tyre is different from the others. We should be able to make an educated guess of the make.”

“And that’s it? Narrowing it down to about quarter of a million vehicles? Hell, and I thought Bradley was a stargazer.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Nothing. So, how long before you know the make?”

“Patience please. Come to my office this afternoon, I need to show you something we found in the black textile which has been used with all three victims.”

As West was mentally sifting through what he might say at the impending press conference, his phone vibrated. No recognised number was displayed but the voice was a giveaway.

“Shay?”

“Hello.”

“Hi, it’s Niall Osborn.”

“I figured that out. It’s not so long since you said we wouldn’t hear from you anytime soon.”

“Indeed. But this clown who discovered your latest victim has changed all that. He’s been played already by the media and it’s going to get worse. Whatever your local rags print, we are expecting Fleet Street to cause a tidal
wave over this. Are you aware of what the wanker has claimed?"

“All I know at present is that he has verified the victim was alive when he found him. He did make a statement to my DI, but there was little else of interest, so we are trying to pluck him from the pack of hounds and get him back to the station.”

“I suggest you make that happen right now. My source tells me that the headline will read as a failure in coordination between us, you and me. I know this guy has been used as a pawn to fit with a certain media agenda, but it’s highly likely that he’s on a promise of substantial funding for his story. You know the way this goes, right? They say what might have happened, he doesn’t torpedo that, they print it and we have to prove them wrong.”

“You seem pretty wound up. What has he said?”

“He’s just basically nodded his head to scenarios which could fit with the need for press sensationalism. The black mummification, the torture before death, what could be seen as fanaticism, a shift of methodology of terror – I could go on but we don’t have the luxury of time. The slant of the article I’ve been apprised of is covered in the headline. ‘Home Grown IS Here’ Note the emphasis on IS. Since so-called Islamic State was eradicated in Iraq and Syria, it has taken on a new identity. It could never have been so successful without social media, but with recent clampdowns by the big corporations in that field, it is no longer their safest way to operate. Also, the previous drive towards a Caliphate has been watered down. When they gave up the theatre of conflict in Syria it was just symbolic surrender. As with the removal of Saddam and Gaddafí, a vacuum was created. You cut off one tentacle and behold, another one grows in some place you aren’t expecting. Less of a geographic zone of military conflict, more a cultural virus. I can’t go into more detail, but somebody wants the people of this country to believe that the old hire
a van and mow down pedestrians is such a redundant tentacle. To be replaced by inhuman sacrifice of individuals anywhere at any time. We knew there would be some change to the MO, but we are not convinced this is it. I’m coming up to see you, but I need you to be careful what you say, as I understand you have a press conference. I urge you to give them nothing for now. I also have to ask you if you can keep this witness under protection and isolated until I get there. I’m setting off now, so I suppose if the traffic isn’t too bad I’ll be there later today.”

“Am I going to wake up soon? This is a dream isn’t it? I can’t actually say nothing to the press this afternoon. You need to be more precise as to what I shouldn’t say.”

“Ok, you said the witness statement was pretty useless with regard to your investigation. Just regurgitate that and make mileage out of any journalist pushing this terrorist crap as highly irresponsible, oh, and also suggest this line of inquiry belongs to my department. It’s not your place to get involved in fantasy. I’ll sculpture what happens next when I get there. It will blow over if we handle it correctly.”

“Mm…One question then, what happens if and when another body turns up?”

“I’ll be there, that’s why I’m on my way now. Stay calm.”

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With the horse-whisperer safely ensconced in a gloomily lit interview room, West arrived. He immediately dismissed Bradley from the interview, telling him to observe through the glass. Cath pressed the record button after explaining why Joseph Watson was being asked to officialise the verbal statement he’d given earlier. With Osborn’s words reverberating around inside his head, DCI West asked the witness to recount the verbal testimony. It
worked, there were several discrepancies. The tape was switched off while Cath informed Watson that it was an offence to falsify testimony and waste police time.

“As and when it gets to court, it can be interpreted as perjury. That’s why we wanted you to have nobody influencing your account of this awful discovery.”

West added a veiled threat. “Joseph, you aren’t being investigated here. You are merely someone who can help the family of the dead man get justice for such an awful act. You may have unknowingly acknowledged suggestions of others as to what could explain this horrible death, but misleading the police carries a heavy price. Now, I’m going to ask DI Moseley to switch the tape on again, so are we clear? I don’t want to see you get into trouble for such well-meaning compliance with media people, especially if you were offered a financial reward. Believe me, it will all come out in the end, don’t allow yourself to be used.”

Joseph Watson was on the verge of shitting himself and asked for a glass of water. They held off restarting the recorder.
Cath and Bradley paid a visit to the Murray and the Wilkinson households while the boss headed for the media inquisition. Evelyn and Donald lived on an estate for the well-heeled in the hamlet of Hamsterley Mill. Georgian, Edwardian and Victorian influence could be seen in many of the properties, and immaculately manicured gardens abounded. A colossal copper beech tree spanned their front lawn, the quality of which was screaming out for a tennis net. An appropriately noble chime responded to the bell push and Donald appeared.

“Sorry to trouble you again, Mr Murray. I know you’ll have heard about the fatality in Finchmoor by now. We just wanted to reassure you by taking adequate precautions. A uniformed officer will patrol the estate for the next few days just to make sure there is no repeat of the trauma you’ve both suffered. And I’d like to ask you a few more questions. We want to be sure we haven’t missed any small detail which could help us to nail the perpetrators. Is that ok with you both?”

Evelyn was happy to go along with the proposal. Donald was more circumspect. “Why do you think we need protection? Your resources must be stretched already.”

“Indeed they are, but we must re-allocate to address changes in priorities.”

Donald wouldn’t let go. “You mean only Evelyn and this Wilkinson chap are able to identify these bastards, and that you can’t afford to lose them. There is a risk to both surviving witnesses isn’t there?”

“Only a minimal risk with our patrols in place, but yes the Finchmoor victim wasn’t so lucky, he died. Can we please just ask you one or two more questions?”
Evelyn once again appeared to call the shots. “Of course. Whatever we can do to help prevent more atrocities.”

“Thank you, Mrs Murray. Can either of you think of any instance where you’ve had an argument, disagreement, or general falling out with a personal friend, or an acquaintance, or even someone you didn’t know? Perhaps a work colleague or dissatisfied subordinate. Anything? Anything at all, no matter how trivial it may have seemed at the time? I’m talking about the relatively recent past – say the last two years.”

Bradley was visualising their cerebral cogs whirring like a hard drive in his desktop. He sensed Donald was unconvincing in his efforts to trawl his short-term memory. He was first to declare the result - nothing. Evelyn was still deep in thought when she suddenly retrieved something of note.

“The only incident which comes to mind is Donald’s shabby treatment by that dreadful company he worked for in London.”

“No, darling. I don’t think that’s the kind of situation the officers meant. It was a bit acrimonious but they were extremely generous with the severance package.”

Bradley spoke for the first time during the meeting. “No sir, that’s exactly the sort of example we’re looking for. It may turn out to be nothing, but you never know.”

Donald’s pallor began to change ever so slightly and he reacted badly. “Now listen, I don’t want you digging into my departure from my former employer. My, err, sorry - our pension depends on me keeping my side of the bargain. I’m not going to let you prejudice our future. Now I’d like you to leave. I urge you to back off or you will hear from my solicitor.”

Cath and Bradley apologised and quietly left, confirming that a patrol car would begin the vigil that night. As soon as they turned off the sweeping drive of the
property they looked at each other and smiled. Bradley was first to speak. “Well, at least that explains why they are able to afford such an opulent lifestyle.”

* 

The press conference room was less than half full, to the delight of DCI West. A veiled smile couldn’t disguise the look of consternation on the face of the Chief Constable.

“Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen. Let me get straight to the heart of this gathering. I must confess that I didn’t call for this meeting as some unilateral gesture from the force. The media lobby I received convinced me that, on balance, it would be in the public interest to clarify our position. The session will of necessity be brief and you will have the opportunity to put your questions to the investigating officer, DCI West. You are asked to respect our need to put the public safety as our number one priority, and that may mean we cannot divulge sensitive information which could prevent further atrocities of this nature. DCI West, you have the floor.”

The murmuring amongst the attendees was palpable and yet West could only fixate on his own first words. His father had often said to him that when speaking in public everyone in the audience wanted you to be good, they were on your side, until you spoke, then it was up to you. In this instance, clearing his throat was preceded by another rush of emotion. He’d expected the Chief constable to set out the boundaries. In the absence of such guidance he could only think - ‘you conniving, arse-covering, cowardly bastard’.

“Thank you, sir.” West then turned to the media representatives. “I note that many of your colleagues have decided not to attend. I hope that isn’t simply because their stories are already written to make the evening deadlines.” A muted round of laughter ensued.
“This is a unique case. In stating the obvious, we believe all three cases have the same MO. However, whereas we were previously looking at the first two victims as examples of attempted murder, we now have to revise that line of inquiry.”

Chief Constable Edwin Buchannan did not like the way this was potentially going off the rails. For most people who’d met him, Buchannan was visually a very accurate reincarnation of the more rotund member of the famous silent movie duo, Laurel and Hardy. But, for those who had to work with him, this could turn out to be a cruel deception. He had survived many years longer than any from his era, primarily with the aid of his chameleon-like cunning. What you saw wasn’t necessarily what you’d get. With this in mind West continued.

“There is every possibility that both Evelyn Murray and James Wilkinson were not intended to die, but that they could have done has to be faced. Horrendous suffering is the common denominator. We don’t think the victims have been chosen randomly, and returning to the MO, the perpetrators are not running around the streets looking for easy targets. In that respect, the wider public should feel safe. It’s our job to find these murderers. That process will be complex and although we have leads to follow up, we must protect certain information in order to maximise public safety. I’d like to think that those of you who’ve attended today represent the most responsible of your profession. I’ll try to answer any questions which don’t compromise our investigation. I’ll now hand you back to Chief Constable Buchannan to direct which questions qualify for a response.”

The dark look on Buchannan’s face was all DCI West needed to be certain he would offer his own resignation immediately after the conference ended. Buchannan rose to his feet.
“I’d suggest we take a quick comfort break to give you all a chance to formulate your questions, thank you.”

He turned to West and whispered angrily, “You. With me, now”

West followed into a side office and remained standing despite the offer of a seat. “What the hell was that all about, West? You’ve implied it was just good luck that we don’t have three murders on the books.”

“No sir, I implied that two were staged to extend the suffering in very public places. The third was not, and he died. You may have wrongly interpreted my meaning. Oh, and when was I going to be kept in the loop of these rumblings in the media about further involvement of counter-terrorism? I’d have thought such irresponsible behaviour would be of more concern to you.”

“Who have you been speaking to about this?”

“I didn’t need to hear it from within, sir. More than half of the journalists are already printing such crap. Didn’t you hear about how the horse-whisperer was manipulated, presumably by the gutter press at the scene? It’s just rumour but the scuttlebutt points to him being offered an inducement.”

“That’s all stuff we shouldn’t touch, denial tends to add credibility. You know that, Detective Chief Inspector.”

“Well, speaking of credibility, I’ve lost mine in the way this is all being handled. I accept that some things have to be on a need to know basis, but when politics is running the show my mojo stops working. You’ll have my resignation on your desk first thing in the morning, sir.”

“Get a grip, man, we have to pull together. As you said yourself, this is a unique case. There could be landmark implications.”

“Now, how can a humble DCI be expected to know that this could be a landmark case. Unique, yes, but the rest is way over my head.”
“Look, take a step back and let’s get through this conference. Come to my office in the morning and bring your letter of resignation if you wish, but hear me out then and decide afterwards. Can you live with that?”
“I guess.”

*

Arriving at the abode of James Wilkinson, both Cath and Bradley were struck by the relative similarities with the Murrays’ place in Hamsterley Mill. Not in the architectural style, but in the image it projected. Corbridge was a short distance from Hexham, the market town in which Wilkinson had served as a councillor for the district of Tynedale. A fabulous apartment block, sitting on a plot overlooking the river Tyne would in itself have garnered much admiration, but the penthouse was really two standard flats knocked into one sumptuous residence.

The two police officers carefully wiped their feet, conscious that the décor demanded respect. As usual, Cath initiated the routine.
“How is the recovery going, James?”
“Apart from the bloody tattoo, I’m quite chipper. I might need a skin graft to my back, but I’ve told the doctor I only want the damned thing to heal. I’m too old to worry about a scar on my back. Anyway, what is it you want to talk about today?”
“Yes, well, it’s the first time we’ve met Mrs Wilkinson, so I’d like to let her know I’m DI Moseley, and my colleague is Detective Constable Bradley. I gather you were away when your husband suffered this terrible trauma.”
“Yes, in hindsight it was probably better that I wasn’t here. I’d have really freaked out.”
Cath tried to phrase her questions to place emphasis on their body language. “You now know that there has been a third victim?”

“Of course,” stated Wilkinson, distinctly raising his voice, “what we need to know is what you’re doing about it.”

“Naturally,” replied Cath, “we’ll get to that, and in order to help us, we are trying to establish if there are any individuals you or your wife have come into contact with recently who may have reason to want to cause you harm. Both physical and financial.”

“That’s a pretty stupid question, I was a councillor for the borough. Ten percent liked me, forty percent tolerated me, and the rest weren’t too impressed. There was some abuse, but that goes back many years and it was just verbal. I don’t see how this helps you.”

“We have to cover all angles, sir, and details can be crucial to building a picture of someone’s grievance.”

Bradley just couldn’t adhere to the gently-gently approach as he x-rayed Mrs Wilkinson’s discomfort. “And what about your wife’s contacts?”

Cath was annoyed but it had been said, so she embellished the question. “Yes, we understand you are a consultant, Mrs Wilkinson.”

“James, it could be important, some poor man has been killed.”

Wilkinson nodded reluctantly.

“In my current business, detective, there is a lot of jealously. My previous employment was riddled with very ambitious people. Microbiology is a science which is at the forefront of those qualifying for Nobel Prizes. That’s why I got out. I wanted to help solve problems like world pandemics, not join a puerile yellow brick road to Stockholm. When I left that company, I was strenuously reminded of the plethora of non-disclosure documents I’d signed. And being a high ranking executive they were
nervous at my departure. Because of a clause in my contract, I couldn’t join a competitor for five years. But they didn’t like me starting a consultancy in the industry any better than me being courted by a rival. I can’t seriously believe they would be involved in my husband’s attack, but with the individuals I’ve helped to set up businesses, it’s a different ball game. There are certainly mavericks amongst them, and whenever I’ve had to tell candidates that I don’t think their proposal would fly, it seems to provoke despair, disbelief, denial and refusal to accept my advice. Some who failed my diagnostic tests actually displayed acute rage. This industry fosters burning ambition which can mutate to personality disorders of frightening intensity. I’m a successful consultant in the financial sense but I’m minded to sell the business because of this toxic winner-takes-all trend.”

“I see,” said Cath, feeling this was a good place to stop, as Mrs Wilkinson’s tears were welling up, “it would be much appreciated if you could take your time to make a list of your clients who fall into the category of threatening behaviour. It could be significant, even though it was your husband who was attacked.”

Wilkinson put his arms around his sobbing wife and quietly asked them to leave while agreeing to the police request.
Niall Osborn was getting restless. Waiting at their preferred trendy bar in the student-dominated suburb of Jesmond, a few miles from Newcastle city centre. The location was chosen because any spook trailing Osborn would stand out like a clown at a funeral. DCI West was late because he had carefully penned his resignation, citing the entire list of concerns over the handling of ‘The Rack Case’. He apologised profusely to Osborn, blaming Edwin Buchannan for the delay. They ordered a craft beer and retired to a corner table.

“Buchannan? Right, what do you know about him, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Not much really,” replied West. “Except that he’s not the leader he should be in the role of a Chief Constable. He’s reactive rather than proactive, and I mean all the time.”

“You didn’t hear this from me, but you need to watch your back.”

“Yeah, I had figured that out. To him, everyone under his banner is expendable.”

“He’s part of the problem I told you about. I hope he doesn’t know we’re meeting up.”

“No, he doesn’t, but we should still be on our guard. How do you know he’s mixed up with your lot?”

“I’d rather leave that until we’ve discussed the case ourselves. What happened at your conference?”

“To be honest, Buchannan put me in the firing line by telling the press that I would answer all their questions, immediately after telling me to stay clear of entertaining any queries relating to the first two victims. I had a rush of blood to the head and did the opposite. Anyway, I’m pretty sure the look on his face when the room was half-full was
one of disappointment. It was the maverick mob which
didn’t show. To be fair it eased my task.”

“I see, so the ones my source spoke of just bypassed
Buchannan. Mm, it figures, he wanted to be part of the
solution.”

“The solution? The solution to what?”

“He’s on the short list for a top job in my bailiwick. It
will be an utter disaster if he gets it.”

“I don’t believe it. So that’s why the old fool was
bricking it when I told him I was quitting.”

“You offered your resignation? Now that is interesting.
What reason did you give for quitting?”

“That’s why I was late. Here, it’s in this letter.”

“I need to make a call after I’ve read this.”

“Why?”

“Listen, Shay, it’s in both our interests to harpoon this
egocentric Wally. It’s just a matter of how to snare him.
When did you intend to give him your goodbye in
writing?”

“Tomorrow morning.”

“Good, keep that in mind. Timing is critical here. Your
reason should be one which makes him think you really are
expendable.”

“Ok, but he hinted that he was going to talk me out of
quitting.”

“Of course he would. He wants a straightforward ski
jump into counter-terrorism. Look, scrap this list you’ve
written, it’s too complicated. You have to convince him
that you just want a transfer and you won’t rock the boat.
Get him to sign off on that and we’ll handle the rest.”

“Handle the rest. What the hell does that mean?”

“That you’ll be invited to my patch to deny his version
and explain the misgivings you have about the way you’ve
been treated. You don’t need to give him written notice,
make it all verbal.”

“And what happens when he rejects a transfer?”
“He won’t, you said yourself that he always takes care of himself first. And, you said he was going to talk you out of quitting, so let him talk. He’ll get around to a transfer at some point. Then you let me know, and we’ll call you to come to London to set the record straight. We can’t let this opportunity pass us by.”

“What if I do want a transfer?”

“Are you serious? That would make it watertight.”

“My girlfriend is stuck in London and it’s affecting our relationship. For the right position, I’d be happy to go back.”

“Leave it with me. Now I need to make that call. Do we have a deal?”

“Make the call, then we may have a deal when I hear what’s on offer.”

*

Kieran bristled with impatience to burrow into the lives of Donald Murray and Eleanor Wilkinson. Cath had to pull him away from his array of computing machines. “Kieran, I wasn’t finished telling you what the priorities are. I’m going to leave Bradley with you to make sure you don’t breach any privacy laws or at least you don’t get caught doing it. I want to begin with Eleanor Wilkinson and check into this company she worked for, ‘Genesis Recalibration’. I think that’s what she said. Just find out as much as you can about what they do before we dig into any personnel stuff. Once you’ve got that, do the same for Donald Murray. The company is err… Bi…something”

“Bio-Grid.” said Bradley, and added, “They’re headquartered in Switzerland but are Chinese owned.”

“Thank you Declan Bradley,” retorted Cath, “I’d missed the suffix part. So, Kieran, are you good to go? I need to run the boss to ground, as he isn’t answering his mobile.”

“Yes, DI Moseley, but can I make a suggestion?”
“Ok, make it quick.”
“I like Bradley, but I work better on my own with this kind of search. He could help you find the guy, as that seems to be important to you.”
Bradley nodded as he and Cath left together.

*  

Niall Osborn left DCI West sitting with his beer and made the call from outside the pub. It took a little longer than expected to track down the person he needed. The discussion however, was short, and he made his way back to the bar.

“Right, Shay. What we have in mind is a position in the Met, as a liaison officer with us – CT. You won’t be officially known as a DCI, but you will enjoy that pay grade and benefits without the everyday grind of chasing burglars and ABH suspects. Regular hours should appeal to your girlfriend. What do you say?”

“When would this be?”

“Well, it does depend on Buchannan being led to offer you assurance in writing, that he’s offering you a way out with a transfer. It doesn’t have to be to a specific force, just the principle will suffice. When you have this, call me and within a week you’ll be out of there. But, and this is important, don’t push him, the idea will come to him if you just keep the sword of Damocles of your resignation letter hanging over him. He’s due to come to London for talks before the end of the month. He needs a clean slate, not a well-respected DCI making waves over a case like this.”

“I’ll get another round of beers. We have a deal.”

*
While Cath and Bradley were trawling through West’s usual haunts, Osborn dropped him off in town and sped off to drive through the night to the capital. Cath’s phone rang.

“Boss, where the hell are you?”

“I’m in the Theatre Royal bar. I need to talk to you, where are you?”

“We’re at that awful pub next to the station looking for you.”

“We? You mean Bradley?”

“Yes.”

“Ok, send him home. I need to speak with you alone.”

“Is there something wrong, boss?”

“No, just a little hiccup, but I’m going to be tied up tomorrow morning and this is important.”

“Ok, but I’ve had nothing to eat all day. Can we grab a pizza somewhere?”

“Sure, there’s a restaurant here. I’ll book a table, what kind do you want?”

“Anything, maybe a pepperoni. I’ll be there in ten.”

She had a puzzled look, which Bradley picked up on.

“Sorry, the boss wants to speak with me alone. Why don’t you call it a day?”

“Nice. Fine, I’ll get something to eat myself. What’s it about?”

“I don’t know, do I? Look, maybe it’s something which cropped up at that conference. He sounded strange, not like himself. Let’s not read too much into this until I’ve heard what he actually says.”

“Ok, enjoy your pepperoni.”

* 

“What’s up, boss? Something’s telling me there’s a problem,” said Cath, as she placed the napkin on her knee.

“Let’s order you a drink first.”
“Dry white please. You look nervous, are you feeling unwell?”

West asked the waiter to bring a bottle of Chablis and began tapping his finger on the table. “Cath, this stays between us until I say otherwise, ok”

“No I’m not sure I want to know…no, go on let’s hear it.”

The bar was heaving as it was interval time for the current production, a convenient level of decibels to thwart any eavesdropping.

“I’m quitting.”

Shhhit… I knew there was something wrong, what in hell’s name has happened, boss? The press conference, is that it?”

“Yeah, that’s part of it, but I’ve been taking a good, hard look at my life. I finally realised my career isn’t as important as I believed it was.”

“I don’t buy that - a flick of a switch - no way.”

“Yes, that’s a good way to put it. The conference was that switch, the one I couldn’t or didn’t want to see.”

“But why? We’ve just stumbled on to a promising line of inquiry.”

“Cath, stop talking and listen very carefully. That bastard, Buchannan fed me to the press. It wasn’t a case of me being prevented from telling like it is, more that he sidestepped his responsibility, and then had a real go at me when I’d finished. Such naked hypocrisy got to me, so I just folded my hand and told the repulsive toad that I wanted out. The slime ball then asked me to reconsider and he plans to talk me out of it tomorrow morning.”

“So, you still have a lifeline then?”

“I don’t want one, I just want him to think I do. The other reason I want out is to do with my personal life. Julia is never going to move up here and her Dad’s had a really bad accident. I’ve had an offer to relocate to London again but I can’t talk about that yet.”
“Oh. I see, you’re walking out on us then. Why can’t it wait until we nail these vermin we’re after? It took us a while to warm to your way of doing things, but we’re getting there.”

“Please don’t make it more difficult than it already is, Cath. I shouldn’t be telling you this, but I owe you a lot and I also wanted to warn you about what might happen next. I’d like you to take care of Bradley and Kieran. Declan doesn’t think I’m impressed with him, but that’s just my way of weaning him in the right direction, he’s a talented lad. You might want to think about this promotion you’re after. Buchannan will come under some real pressure to solve this case, with me walking, and if I was in your position I’d tell him you need a bit more time as DI. You can close this case as a DI and use that as your promotion push, rather than fall to earth as an error of judgement on their part. You know how these things work. Believe me, I know I’m letting you down, but if Buchannan chose to fire me in the next few weeks, the rest of you would be tarred with the same brush. He’s a piece of work. I should be able to say more next week. Can you just act as if we haven’t discussed this yet?”

“I suppose.” muttered Cath, failing to disguise the hurt.

They pretended to enjoy the pizza and made their separate ways home. Cath’s euphoria over the possible link between Donald Murray’s downward spiral and Eleanor Wilkinson’s meteoric rise as a consultant, simply melted away.
Few words were exchanged in the Chief Constable’s office. The antithesis of DCI West’s clinically white enclave. Buchannan was into Chinese art and furniture, creating a Confucius arena of perceived wisdom. West sat down, took the envelope from his inside pocket, laid it on the same side of the desk, out of the reach of Buchannan. There was strong eye contact, while coffees were brought in and the door closed by the Chief’s PA.

“Have you really thought this through, DCI West? It will be perceived as running away from the front line when the going gets tough. Not a ringing endorsement for any other post you might seek to apply for.”

“Sir, I realise all that. I have had little sleep while going over the situation again and again, but I can’t break away from either issue. One professional and one personal.”

“Do you want to elaborate? I didn’t really pick up on any personal problem when we spoke yesterday.”

“Well, personal is personal and I don’t want to speak about such things. I’d rather focus on the job.”

“Look, we had a different take on how things went yesterday. That’s healthy – what is it that really bothers you about this case?”

“I can’t really put my finger on it, but I suppose I’m uncomfortable with so many fingers in the pie. Like each incident is orchestrated in some way. Multiple villains, counter-terrorism, and internal interference from yourself downwards. I get frequent requests from Superintendent Gibson as well as keeping you up to date. Maybe it’s the way of doing things up here, but it’s not how I see my job.”

“I think you may be underplaying your personal problems, but if you don’t want to go there I must respect that. Taking some leave could help. I’ll be honest with you, I expected a much more structured approach under your
leadership, but I don’t want to ruin an officer’s career simply by steering clear of their privacy. Resigning means a permanent red star on your record. Do you think you made a mistake in coming to Newcastle?”

“I have thought about that, and it does have some bearing on my quandary.”

“I shouldn’t be bending my principles like this, but things are what they are. If you can’t see yourself settling here and I have to admit I have doubts about your methods, we potentially have a mess. Tell me this, would a return to the south assist in you sorting out your private life?”

“Of course, but I have to think about my team. That wouldn’t help their morale, and they are an outstanding group of officers. This is my problem, not theirs.”

“Well, I appreciate you being so candid. Sometimes you have to recognise that if you aren’t part of the solution you may be part of the problem. If you are happy to shred that resignation letter I can make a few calls to see if we can get you back to London. I can’t promise anything yet, but I will only do this if we both acknowledge this conversation never took place. Are we good with that?”

“Err…Sir, I couldn’t ask you to go out on a limb like that. I mean it’s my problem, as you said. My head isn’t in the right…”

“This isn’t a sentimental gesture, DCI West, we – you and I have a mess. I want it cleaned up. Are we good with my proposal? Yes or no.”

“Yes sir, and thank you, sir.”

“Come back here at two-thirty this afternoon.”

*

West wasted no time in calling London. Niall Osborn got straight to the point. “Did he go for it?

“Affirmative,” said Seamus West, “it’s captured.”
“Great, convert it to an audio file and send it to me. You didn’t deliver your letter?”
“No.”
“So far so good. What happens next?”
“He’s making some calls. I see him again at 2.30 pm.”
“Bingo. Capture whatever is offered then either turn it down or stall. Get the next flight to Heathrow. Flash me your arrival time and flight number. We’ll take it from there. Don’t speak to anyone else.”
“Niall, I have to let my team know I’m leaving.”
“Ok, but no mention of Buchannan other than he didn’t stand in your way after your verbal offer to resign. *Verbal*, got it? No resignation letter was ever offered.”
“Right, I’ll get back to you before 4pm.”

*

West felt he owed more than he could give. He decided only Cath should know of the order of things. He wanted her approval but that would be difficult, after all he was deserting the team and leaving her in limbo with a snake in the grass. There was no turning back, but maybe there would be something he could do once he was back in London.

“Close the door, Cath. I’m afraid I wasn’t having any of Buchannan’s bullshit. I think he just wanted more time to weigh up options after I told him I wanted out. The paperwork will take however long it takes, but I’m taking leave to cover that. Julia’s father isn’t improving and she isn’t coping too well. That’s where I need to be. Listen, you can’t repeat any of this to the guys until after Buchannan has officially informed you. Have you thought about what I said last night in terms of taking on only a temporary promotion if indeed it was offered?”
“Yes, and you’re right, the dust needs to settle here first.”
“If ever you need any kind of reference from me, just call. Hopefully, it won’t be Buchannan that reads it.”
“No thanks, you’re damaged goods, boss, or should I call you Shay now?”
“You might not think about this in that way a couple of weeks from now. But hey, I’d still like to hear from you.”
“Just go and see Julia, I’ve got work to do.”
They parted on a sour note.

* 

A lull before the storm. The less sensational scenario of trouble in the camp for the police, and the countdown to maximum news exposure for them. West sat waiting in Buchannan’s office, mulling over whether he’d acted precipitously and crucially his potentially misplaced trust in Niall Osborn. He was getting fidgety. Buchannan barrelled into the room and startled him.

“Sorry about this, Detective Chief Inspector, but we are on a short timescale here. These situations usually have more wriggle room when they’re planned well ahead of implementation. I’m afraid there’s nothing in central London right now, but there’s an opening in Surrey available. My contact has informed me of a possible opening in Lambeth next month. How desperate are you to get away from Newcastle?”

“It isn’t the city itself. The distance is a factor but as I tried to tell you, the way this force is run clashes with my previous experience. You alluded to that yourself.”

Buchannan’s face reddened considerably.

“Look, we’ve put all that stuff to bed. I need an answer, not more waffle.”

“In that case I’ll think about it. My prospective father-in-law has been injured in a serious accident. I’m taking compassionate leave for a few days. Superintendent Gibson
has signed off on me visiting Julia’s Dad tomorrow. I’m booked on a flight this evening.”

“So, you’ve effectively wasted my time. In that case I’ll make the decision for you. We’ll scrub the position in Surrey, and you can take your chance on the Lambeth one still being open when you get your priorities sorted out. But, make no mistake, you will be leaving this force on my terms now.”

West didn’t offer a reply, stood up, shook his head and walked out. He forwarded the recorded content on to Osborn and confirmed he was on his way to the airport.

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A letter had been dropped off at the head office of the Newcastle Tribune. Once it had worked its way up the chain of command, the editor immediately informed the police. Bradley passed the content on to Cath, who had just been informed by Buchannan via Superintendent Gibson that she’d be standing in for DCI West. It was a temporary move with no definite duration timescale.

“Where’s the boss?” inquired Bradley, speaking to Cath, but looking directly at Kieran.

“Come with me, both of you. All I know for definite is that he’s taking some leave because his girlfriend’s father has been in a nasty road accident. Any speculation as to whether this is the only reason I’m now in charge of the investigation is pointless. And that applies to me as well. Kieran, I know you’ve been pestering me to look at what you’ve dredged up on the spouses of the first two victims, but this message to the media reminds us that the murder at Finchmoor is the priority. She held up the one word, again fashioned from newspaper cuttings.

‘Relativity’
They all stared at it as if hypnotised. It simply made no sense. Retribution - Justice - Relativity. Was it a sequence? Were they components? Was it merely a warning of more to come? Kieran was the first to break the trance.

“Guv, I really do think we should look at Donald Murray and Eleanor Wilkinson again. I understand that murder takes precedence over ABH, but they are linked by this very message we’re gawping at. And, without sounding too insensitive, we can’t revive a dead man, but we may need to think about increasing the protection of the Murray and Wilkinson families.”

Cath looked at Bradley. There seemed to be agreement in his eyes.

“Ok, Kieran, you have my attention. But let me ask you something. You haven’t shown any reaction to DCI West’s leave of absence. I’m going to need you fully focussed and that includes sharing any relevant stuff he might have invested in you but not Bradley and myself. You know, you’re the only one he brought with him. Has he asked you to keep ‘in touch’?”

“No. I could never work like that. He has always accepted it. My disability has been hard to take, but had it not been for my squaddie friends, I would have died. They refused to leave me despite being seriously outnumbered by the enemy. They managed to get helicopter gunship assistance while they held up the hostiles. If that hadn’t been available, all of us would have died. You don’t forget things like that easily. I’m appalled at how much civilian life has pushed such caring for others to the margins. DCI West knew that. It was one of the main reasons he brought me with him. Does that answer your question?”

“Sorry I had to ask, Kieran. I guess it’s just the suddenness of his departure and me being upgraded for only a few days. We have more ways of communicating than ever before, the boss could have run the investigation from London if he’d needed to.”
Cath steeled herself and vowed to see the investigation through to a successful conclusion. The sad thing was that she had nobody to share personal stuff with. Divorced, no sign of a replacement, she’d buried her other life and didn’t really have plans for a resurrection. She would pull on Seamus West’s running for cover as her first plank in a new foundation. Her most important task right now was to get this across to Bradley and Kieran.

“Before you ask, I’ve already applied for a new recruit to bolster the ranks. It wasn’t really a request, it’s a demand. What I’d like to do is run through the entire saga again, piece by piece. First, why do we still not know the identity of the Finchmoor victim?”

“There’s nobody to talk to, apparently,” admitted Bradley, “there are no reports of a missing person fitting the description of the body in the freezer. Somebody should have missed him by now. It’s a total pisser that not one person seems to care about his disappearance. Even if he had no living relatives, surely a neighbour, a doctor, or a shopkeeper would know he wasn’t around anymore.”

Kieran responded. “Relatives, maybe that’s what the message was getting at, you know – Relativity. Could he have someone living abroad?”

“Maybe,” said Cath, “but I suppose we can rule out sheltered accommodation or some institution. It’s bloody embarrassing for people to know we don’t know who he is. What about his possessions, his clothes?”

“Nothing ma’am,” winced Bradley, “he’s been dubbed ‘the invisible man’ in the papers.”

“Not good enough, and do not call me ma’am, boss will do fine. So what about the tyre tracks? Jennings said he’d run down the make of vehicle. Not another blank I hope.”
“Not completely, but he’s refining the possibilities. I can tell he knows more than he wants to tell at the moment.”

“Ok, I’ll put more pressure on him,” said Cath, slowly getting more frustrated. “Bradley, check in with the pathologist, we haven’t seen a toxicity report yet. She’s had time to know whether it’s positive. Now, Kieran, you’ve been burning the midnight oil, nothing to get excited about?”

“I wouldn’t say excited, but when I ran over the Meta Tags on my own database, the word allotment came up twice. Finchmoor and Evelyn Murray’s claim that she’d been driven to a site close to allotments. Could be nothing, but worth bearing in mind. We haven’t yet received the list of aggressive clients Eleanor Wilkinson said she was going to provide. I backed off Donald Murray’s private stuff a little but something rang a bell in my head about the company he took severance from. Bio-Grid paid out a large sum of money for negligence a few years ago. The papers at the time mauled Bio-Grid, and apart from that actual story, reminded the public of the company’s total ripping off of the NHS for two drugs in particular. They were both extremely expensive to buy, but the cost of one was barely credible, very low, so the profit margin was obscene. His name was kept out of the actual scandal, but I looked into the academic publications related to them and there he was, a leading name in the research of the ludicrous one.”

“Well done, Kieran, I’m pleased your appetite hasn’t been diminished by DCI West’s departure. Keep at it.”

“Don’t worry on that account, guv. I don’t know what I’ll be doing in twelve months or twelve years’ time, but I’m going nowhere until we crack this case, and we will.”

*

West shook hands with Niall Osborn. “I’d like you to meet someone, Shay. Let’s get out of here, we’re meeting
up with my immediate boss. Then you need to come to my office in the morning."

“Oh, how long will this take tonight? I have to make it to the hospital sometime this evening.”

“Not more than half an hour after we hook up. Better get my foot down then.”

“I take it you got the recordings?”

“Sure, and Buchannan has been quizzed. As expected he denies everything. My boss just needs to go over the recordings with you and old blubber belly will find out he’s off the short list for his coveted CT post. It’s not like the police, Shay, entrapment is part of the game. He knows that and even though he’ll blow a valve, it will all settle down.”

“I can see him taking this out on the team. I feel guilty about that.”

“Don’t, Buchannan will end up in some think tank where we can keep an eye on him and he can’t do any harm. It will look like a promotion in the real world. Nobody will think he’s been dumped. We need to concentrate on your position. But we’ll do that over a cold beer.”

*

Connor Jennings had counted on Cath’s outwardly friendly demeanour giving him more time. “A couple of things need to be cross-checked before we commit our findings to written statements. I’ll try to get it done within the next forty-eight hours.”

“Do that, Connor, but I want to hear the rough conclusion now. My derriere is orbiting close to a real nasty supernova and I’m not entertaining the chance of it being dragged any closer. Am I getting through?”
He was quite shocked at the language and the indirect threat. “You know full well that verbal snippets get embroidered and I’ve been bitten once too…”

“Often? Yes I get it. But I promise not to do that. Also, I’m one hundred percent certain you won’t like what I’ll promise if you give me nothing whatsoever. I was told my elevation to DCI was likely to be for as long as it took them to find somebody to fill the post permanently. Buchannan passed a message to Superintendent Gibson along the lines that ‘Jennings hasn’t got any forensics, what is it that he actually does? Three crime scenes without forensics – never’. I have to give him daily updates on this case, so do I tell him you won’t consider giving me tyre track data until you know the owner, where they live, and what time they take a dump in the morning?”

“Point taken, but I can’t just twist observations into evidence which gets you, the Super, and the big blue whale off my back. Look, the make of three of the tyres suggest, not prove, but suggest an upmarket four-wheel drive vehicle. Something like a Range Rover. The fourth tyre is different. I’m currently looking into why that might be – as there were a few flakes of automotive paint in the cast from that tyre. Washing away the mud allowed us to test the flakes. They do match with the normal red metallic Range Rover model. That’s all you’re getting, DI Moseley. Just for the record, you will have a report when my work is complete, but don’t expect anything on your aforementioned bowel movement predictions.”

Thank you, Connor, that wasn’t so hard was it?”

Cath informed Bradley and Kieran, and despatched the former to Finchmoor with two uniformed officers. “It’s just possible that Kieran’s ‘allotment’ connection is worth a shot. Maybe there is a workshop of some kind there. Take these enlargements of the tyre types I got from Jennings and look out for anything close to them. He says it’s
probably a Range Rover we’re looking for, we couldn’t get that lucky, could we?”

*

It wasn’t shorty, who’d originally accompanied Osborn to Newcastle who was introduced to DCI West, in fact it was a woman. She wasted no words on trivialities.

“Osborn will continue to be your contact point and you’ll only know me as ‘Marjorie’. You will work out of the Met but you’ll be assigned to one or more boroughs in London for liaison. When we finally left the EU, the border control we were promised would be back in our hands didn’t quite work out the way it was planned. There still is cooperation with the continent on potential threats, but it isn’t as open as before. Different agendas have emerged with respect to illegal migrants. In short, it is a mess. In the Met, like many other public services, there are things we are concerned about. The best way to summarise our position is as follows – over three thousand persons of interest form the A-list. Some are in the Met, some in London borough forces. Others are scattered around the country. Infiltration is the new war we’re fighting. You’ll be undercover in the boroughs you are assigned to and that becomes your cover in the Met. You will be seen to be exclusively involved with these boroughs for the first few months to establish credibility. After that, you’ll be assigned targets in the Met itself. You need to understand your role is one of observation and reporting, not action. Under the cloak of a nine to five office remit, there will be targeted surveillance during unsocial hours. Any further questions should be directed through Osborn. Enjoy your beer.”

West’s first question was to himself. ‘What the hell have I got myself into?’ He almost swallowed his beer in one gulp.
“Niall, this isn’t me. I think we’re both guilty of a misjudgement. I’m sure people need to be trained for this kind of work.”

“Normally yes, but we live in an age where training itself alerts those who would do us harm. Calm down, I felt the same when I joined CT, your time in the boroughs will help you to see what’s out there. In a couple of months you’ll wonder why you had any doubts. Cheers.”

*

Buchanan now realised he’d been outflanked, and was uncharacteristically resigned to the view that contesting any of it was likely to make things worse. In the time he had left in his current remit, he determined to leave the force with some panache. He’d ordered Cath, and Superintendent Gibson to join him.

“I’m sure neither of you want to hear this but change in attitude is necessary if we’re going to avoid being a laughing stock over this damned Finchmoor murder. I want the identity of the victim nailed down for starters, and then we’ll talk about the rest. It’s pathetic that we pander to certain social offensiveness crap rather than enforcing the law. So, in my book, political correctness isn’t law yet, even if we’re ‘obliged’ to be sensitive to the concept. Get the body out of cold storage and get him tidied up as if he was the bloody pharaoh on his way to the afterlife. Take some photos of his face and get them out on to the public. On the internet, ask for the help of the media, get them on our side, there must be somebody on the sodding planet who knows this man.”

Superintendent Gibson was shifting uncomfortably in his chair. Cath sensed this and surprised Buchanan.

“Sir, my analyst, Kieran Sinclair suggested this before DCI West left. He maintained that nobody can help this victim in any other way than bringing his killers to justice.
He also said that if we were truly horrified as a society by such atrocity, we should be able to marginalise any concerns of seeing the dead man’s face in order to help. I was moved by what he said, Kieran is a double amputee, and has come through hell to where he is now. He makes a good point when he suggested we should test out the motives of the media if they refused to help us in laying this man to rest with his killers banged up.”

Buchannan welcomed this and Gibson’s initial vacillating began to recede. “It’s worth a try. It can be handled sensitively.”

Cath strangely admired the scathing look Buchannan flashed at Gibson as he said, “Fine, forget the sensitivity, and just get it done.”
The trawl of the allotment complex didn’t prove anything other than the various structures erected on them were nowhere near big enough to house a small saloon car, never mind a Range Rover. But Bradley did pick up a few more flakes of the red paint Jennings had linked to the vehicle. Amongst them were one or two white flakes. This caused him to return to the gate. There were many more to be seen there, indicating a brush with the gatepost. He wondered – does this mean there were two vehicles or perhaps the red one had been in a recent collision with a white vehicle? Cath told him to stick it on the incident board for now.

Meanwhile Buchannan felt vindicated with regard to using the corpse image to move the case forward. The press had agreed to spread the front and side shots across social media rather than publishing them on the front page of their evening and morning editions. Within nine hours a call was received from the United States.

Simon Blanchard was adamant that it was his father. So sure in fact that he said he was coming to Newcastle as soon as he could.

Jean Michel Blanchard’s wife had passed away several years ago. Their son Simon had landed a plum job in computing sciences in California before his mother died. Jean Michel had declined Simon’s invitation to live with him in America after Clementine died. He’d wanted to remain close to her grave, which was in a cemetery near Morpeth, a market town similar to Hexham. The home of his father was in a very remote location, a secluded mansion-like building surrounded by tall trees. Simon asked if they could check out this address before he set out for the UK.

*
Kieran had taken all this into his head and launched into a search for Jean Michel Blanchard. He insisted Cath came back to the office, even though it was out of normal working hours.

“Guv, this was all documented many years ago but it is significant. I got nowhere fast digging in the UK, but as soon as I switched to France it all came pouring out. Blanchard was the founder of a pharmaceutical company in La Rochelle back in the day. He’d stumbled on a drug which was successful in treating certain types of cancer. Successful means prolonging life and massively reducing pain, but sadly not a complete cure. Before it was given the all clear to step up the clinical approval procedure, his company was hunted down by several predatory corporations. He played one off against another and finally agreed to what was dubbed a merger but was really an acquisition by Morgan. Ring a bell? Morgan-Blanchard? One of the big boys.”

“But that was as you said, back in the day.”

“Yes, but think about Donald Murray, Eleanor Wilkinson and…”

“The connection we couldn’t see! Yes, let’s get straight on to this tomorrow, Kieran. Now go home and get some sleep. I’m going to need you sharp in the morning.”

“I’ll go home, guv, but I don’t know about sleep, it’s for wimps isn’t it?”

*

Bradley had been told to follow up on the list of clients which Eleanor Wilkinson had described as aggressive or ‘unstable’. There was no reply on the landline or either of the couples’ mobiles. Meanwhile, Cath had set off for the address near Morpeth Simon Blanchard had given the police. Her satnav kept sending her around in circles when
using the postcode. She eventually ran across a pedestrian who directed her to an obscure trail, not a tarmacadam surface. Quarter of a mile up this overgrown trail the rusty gates to the property were creaking in the rising breeze. She parked-up and walked the rest of the way to the imposing front door, which was about the only remaining feature which didn’t look decayed. The bell chimed but there was no answer. Stealthily moving around to the rear, she shook her head. The French doors were wide open and glass was lying all over the patio. She peered into what appeared to be a library, as books were scattered all around the floor. The same vandalism had been inflicted on virtually every room in the building. She fumbled for her phone once she failed to find any sign of occupants.

“Bradley, get S.O.C.O. up to Morpeth, like now. This doesn’t have the feel of a normal burglary. There’s nobody here and whoever broke in must have been looking for something specific. It doesn’t look like they found it, but sadly there is lots of mail addressed to Jean Michel Blanchard. I’ll stay here and contact his son, he may know what the intruder was looking for. In fact it seems to me that there was more than one of them.”

“OK, boss, I’ll get on to it. I can’t get any response whatsoever from the Wilkinson couple, I hope the patrols haven’t missed something. I should head over there just to be sure.”

Yeah, but do it after you speak with S.O.C.O. and tell them to let me know when they’ll be here. I know this sounds stupid but it feels as if I’m being watched – I keep hearing strange noises, and although there is a bit of a stiff breeze here, it’s not the doors which are banging. Maybe there is someone in the grounds. I’m not going to venture out there. In fact off you go Bradley and tell Jennings to ring me right now.”

“Ok, look I’m coming up there myself. This stuff with Eleanor Wilkinson can wait.”
“That makes sense. Call me when you get to the north side of the town and I’ll give you directions or you’ll never find this bloody place.”

*

Kieran had buried himself further into the Jean Michel Blanchard story. He’d pretty much become invisible after the sale of his company and his move to the UK to oversee the due diligence details. However he was still a celebrity of a kind in French medical journals. He never physically went back to his country of birth, yet he retained a property which was let to several nouveau riche tenants. There were several newspaper reports claiming that he was avoiding tax on the rental income. More importantly, he was being investigated in absentia for falsifying technical documents which projected a very significant part of the eventual price at which his company was valued. None of this led to him being in court in either country, every investigation resulted in a stalemate and was thus declared non-proven. His self-determined exile did however not induce Morgan-Blanchard to bring charges. They apparently felt it was financially preferable to deny the French allegations than to suffer a massive blow to their balance sheet by admitting that the claims for the wonder drug were vastly overstated. Over the next few years Morgan-Blanchard made ex-gratia payments to Jean Michel for his assistance in further work on the structure of the drug, and this resulted in clear proof that it now worked as he’d originally claimed it would. This public vindication of Blanchard in the UK only served to irritate patients who’d not responded to treatment with the original formulation. He had escaped legal crucifixion, nevertheless he had spawned many enemies in Britain.

*
After an agonising forty minutes Cath spotted Bradley’s car coming up the meandering drive. Her relief was palpable. Bradley scratched his head as he surveyed the property.

“Why would anyone want to live in this place? The Addams Family maybe.”

“Come and take a look inside and tell me what you think.”

He followed Cath to the rear. He peered through the broken glass in the doors, scanning the disarray all over the floor.

“It sure looks like a burglary at first glance, but it’s a bit over the top, wrecking furniture and kicking holes in the plastered walls.”

“Mm…and check out the valuables which have been left in plain sight.”

“I think you’re right, boss, they were looking for something else.”

“And I was right about somebody watching me. I spotted a figure running out towards those woods. I was scared shitless that there may have been more. After it all went silent I wandered a little further out and then I spotted the embers of a fire, maybe he or she was trying to put it out and the noise I heard could have been crackling of burning wood and other stuff.”

Bradley tugged her arm. “Look, beside the rockery, the remains of a newspaper or something.”

They drew closer and dropped to their haunches. It was the corner of a page from a letter or a document which had blown out of the fire. Cath asked Bradley to put it into an evidence pouch. The top right hand corner was all that had survived the blaze, but crucially it revealed a connection to the owner. The charring had failed to reach the letters ‘nchard 18.08.1999.’ and a reference ‘232/468’

“I’ll square this with Jennings,” suggested Cath, “get this back to Kieran and tell him it mustn’t leave the pouch.
Whoever burned Blanchard’s possessions must have wanted rid of information relating to his past. Listen, when you’ve handed this over, bring in Eleanor Wilkinson and Donald Murray for questioning again, we’ll let them see each other but interview them separately. And we don’t want their spouses present.”

Bradley sped off and passed the convoy of Jennings and his crew. Cath felt her phone vibrate. “Yes, sir, I’m stuck up here in the sticks. I asked for S.O.C.O. because I believe we’ve got pretty good evidence that the victim of the Finchmoor incident lived here. His son lives in California but asked us to check out this property, so he’ll come over to officially identify the body.”

“Well, that’s a hell of a relief, DI Moseley. I’ve also got a bit of good news for you. I’ve managed to wangle a temporary transfer of a young DC from the Durham force, with immediate effect. She’ll report to you in the morning.”

“Did you say ‘she’, sir?”

“Yes, Grace Sander-Fenwick, Dutch mother apparently, and British father. Stuart Fenwick was before your time but had an impeccable record in Wales. She’s apparently a rising star in Durham, and they’re happy for her to gain experience with a case like this. So, she should hit the ground running.”

“Thank you, sir,” said Cath, thinking that was all she needed, someone trying to prove herself to daddy. “Now that we have a link of all three victims, she should be able to help us dig deeper into the motive.”

“The motive? Right, so please enlighten me.”

“The three cases now have at least one common denominator – pharmaceutical companies. It’s funny though, the connection would have us believe only one of them is a direct victim, the other two are spouses of the victims. We’ll know more when Jennings gets started here
and Bradley returns with what I hope is an important piece of evidence.”

“Good work, Moseley, damn good work. Let me know if you need anything else, but do it through Superintendent Gibson.” Cath interpreted this as a swipe at the Super. Buchannan seemed to be implying something without actually saying it.

*

Jennings wasn’t a happy bunny. He could see the team being encamped at the property for several days, courtesy of the intruders, who’d really turned the house into a refuse dump. Nothing had been excluded from their destructive search. Cath quietly interrupted his rant with a description of the item Bradley had taken. “We needed a quick check on this, Connor, and I didn’t think you’d get around to examining a little piece of charred paper for a while. Don’t fret, I promise it won’t leave the pouch. It could be a very strong lead for us just because of the few words on it. We aren’t trying to do your job. Are we ok with that?”

“You are so humble when you want a favour, aren’t you? Why don’t you see if there’s anything else you want me to put to one side for now? There’s lots to choose from, now leave me be.”
Grace Sander-Fenwick had become an instant buddy with Kieran, a bit of a threat to Bradley, and slightly more proactive than Cath had anticipated. The team was back up to full strength and they had plenty to chew on. Eleanor Wilkinson and Donald Murray were still resisting further dialogue with the police on the grounds that it may place them back in the firing line of the perpetrators.

Grace had concentrated on Evelyn Murray, playing the obstruction of a police inquiry approach. “We have identified the Finchmoor victim and it’s a murder case now. Don’t you see that means your horrendous episode on the quayside has to be treated as attempted murder? We are back at square one, and regrettably we have to eliminate all the suspects we can. I’m afraid that means Donald has to provide testimony as to his whereabouts at that time. It’s just a formality and it’s better to get it out of the way as soon as possible. We don’t believe he was involved but we can’t be seen to bypass due process. And please take into account the stark reality that we can’t provide protection for you ad infinitum. Just come to the station with Donald and we can get this sorted out.”

“I’m sure you’re right, but Donald is still worried about this souring his relationship with his former employers, you know that part of our pension is on an agreed drawdown basis at their discretion. When he comes back from work I’ll…”

“But can’t you see, Evelyn, this makes him look like he has something to hide. We aren’t interested in anything to do with pensions or tax issues. Our job is to bring the people who almost killed you to account and put them
away for a very long time. One last chance, will you come with me voluntarily or do I have to arrange for a car to bring you to the station?"

“No, forget the police car, I’d rather come with you.”

*

In the meantime, Bradley had run James Wilkinson to ground at the members’ pavilion of his angling club. His approach wasn’t quite so subtle.

“Mr Wilkinson, it seems you’ve not been answering your phone. We have to speak to both you and your wife again. This will be at the station, so what’s it to be? An unmarked vehicle like mine or blue lights and uniform? We have new information that you and Mrs Wilkinson should be aware of, and her case has been upgraded to attempted murder. I’ve just heard that Donald and Evelyn Murray have agreed to help us with a new line of inquiry, so I need an answer, now."

“This is verging on harassment. I want to speak to my solicitor first.”

“No sir, just decide whether you’re coming with me, and if not by all means call your lawyer. He or she will advise you not to obstruct our inquiry as there could be repercussions ahead for both of you. Mrs Wilkinson has still not forwarded the list of clients she promised us some time ago. You do see how this looks from our perspective, surely? Get in the car or call your legal representative. Now would be good.”

It did provoke a considered reaction from the ex-councillor. “Very well, stop by our apartment and we can pick up that wretched list you keep banging on about.”

“Thank you, sir,” said Bradley, semi-apologetically, trying to mask a wry smile.

*
Cath laid out the strategy. “Bradley, you take Evelyn in room 1, Grace and I will try to crack Wilkinson in the more claustrophobic room 2. Kieran, I want you to chaperone the spouses until we’re ready for them. Remember, it’s the spouses we suspect might be the real targets. It should be interesting to see if they actually know each other. You can report on their body language while they share the waiting room. Right, let’s get on with it.”

Evelyn Murray could tell Bradley nothing new and seemed genuinely ignorant of the fine details of her husband’s severance agreement. She was aware of the settlement figure and how it was to be paid. She was relieved that it was enough for her to work part time, and she hadn’t seen the need to ask more questions.

James Wilkinson admitted that he had tried to persuade Eleanor to forget about setting up a consultancy but she said she would be bored if she simply stopped working, and the industry she’d spent her life in was all she knew. He stopped short of saying something like the attack she suffered wasn’t totally unexpected, but had no idea who these five people were on her list. He’d never met them, and had never wanted to interfere with Eleanor’s pet project, implying that she was a strong-headed person, and his overtures would have made no difference. Cath and Grace seemed to accept this was about all they would get out of the crestfallen ex-councillor.

A comfort break allowed Kieran to report his observations. “They obviously knew of each other from all the coverage this case has attracted, but they politely said hello and sat a way apart. Murray was furtive, glancing at his watch continually and checking his phone. Mrs Wilkinson simply read a magazine and hardly looked up. She took a call from someone. It sounded like it might be a friend trying to make an arrangement to meet. It ended without her saying the person’s name or any apparent agreement on a time and place. Murray took notice of this
but didn’t react in any discernible way. It was all a bit of a non-event really.”

Cath decided on the same tactics with the spouses, she and Grace welcomed Donald Murray, leaving the female to Bradley. She allowed Grace to introduce herself and then delved straight into his severance conditions. He rebuffed anything of a financial nature quite aggressively, but repeated his claims that any exposure of his departure terms could cause him serious problems. At one point he referred to the Finchmoor victim again, saying that was where the police should be deploying all of their resources, not on such pestering of him and his wife. Cath calmly mentioned that they were now pretty sure of the victims’ identity, and Murray’s face turned ashen. Both detectives became pretty certain that he knew more than he was prepared to say. They decided to stop the interview, but detain him for another few hours. On hearing this, he asked for his solicitor to be present.

Bradley made copious notes about the five names on Eleanor Wilkinson’s list, but felt this was turning into a bit of a red herring charade. The vibes he was getting were in his opinion a cover for something she didn’t want to talk about. He played along and said they would speak to all five of her ‘dodgy’ clients, and then switched off the recording. He dismissed the attending uniformed officer and smiled at Eleanor, saying they’d contact her when there was something to report. She didn’t even ask about whether the police protection would continue.

*

Simon Blanchard had arrived at the airport and was picked up by Cath. She’d seen the body in the mortuary several times already and instantly saw a likeness.
“I’m so sorry to meet in such sad circumstances. After the identification process, assuming that it’s positive, will you be wanting to visit the house?”

“Maybe, I don’t know. My relationship with Dad had deteriorated a lot before I left for the United States. He and my mother argued a lot about stuff which was over my head, mostly to do with events when I was a kid. I loved him, you know, he was my Dad, but he became more and more irrational over the slightest challenges to his intentions.”

“Sorry to hear that, Simon, it reminds me of my own adolescence. Anyway, let’s get to the mortuary, we can talk on the way. Anything you can tell us about your father, assuming we’re all satisfied that it is him, might help us to find out why this happened.”

Only a mile or so into the journey Simon opened up again. “My Mum kept telling him that they should go back to France, he wouldn’t have it though, claiming that it would end up with bankruptcy. She was fearful for his life even back then. However, I was surprised he didn’t go back to La Rochelle after she died. You know, I’m still hoping I’m wrong about the photo, I should have been here for him despite everything.”

“I should warn you, Simon, if you do want to go to the house, it is in a hell of a mess. Forensics are still working there and it might be upsetting for you. It may help us but I’d understand if you don’t want to go back there. Take your time and think about it.”

“Sure, that’s good advice. Do you know if your people found my Dad’s will at the house? I have no idea if he changed it after he told me he was leaving everything to medical research trusts. I wasn’t bothered at the time, but thinking back, after the way he was treated by some of these so-called charities, they’d be utterly hypocritical if they did accept his entire estate.”
“Oh they’ll take it alright, if he left his will unchanged. As far as I know we haven’t found any will. Listen, Simon, if it’s not too distressing for you, I’d really like to hear about the times when you lived with your parents. I’m becoming more convinced that all three people who’ve been attacked were being paid back for some alleged misdemeanour in their past. Would you be ok with talking me through those times?”

“Absolutely, I do need to get this out of my system and if it helps you to find his killers maybe I’ll feel a tiny bit better about not keeping in touch with Dad.”

The rest of the journey was quite sombre. The city and its suburbs had changed so much during Simon’s absence. He tried to hide it but the tears began to trickle.

* Kieran was working flat out on the significance of the charred piece of paper. Since he’d first found links to journalistic coverage of the report in France, he’d been repeatedly redirected to sites asking for entry codes. He eventually abandoned the approved way of gaining access directly online. He decided to contact a friend in China who worked for the government. Within two hours he received an algorithm link. This took him to a construct which infiltrated such access code-protected sites. He got into the first two pretty quickly but they offered no revelations of interest. The third saw him open-mouthed and talking out loud to himself. He saved the content to an external drive and called Cath. “You need to see what this little scrap of paper leads to. I mean right now. Jesus!”

“Ok, Kieran, I’m at the mortuary at the moment. I’ll get there as soon as I can.”

* Simon Blanchard just stood over the cold, grey corpse and shook with grief. He didn’t have to say anything. He hadn’t been told his father would be in two parts. The
people at the mortuary had done the best they could to reconnect the torso to the pelvis but the necrosis and the freezer environment clearly displayed the futility of their efforts. Simon endured over ten minutes of horror and self-reproach before finally turning his back on a last reminder of his early life.

Cath comforted him and led him to the station cafeteria. “You probably prefer a stiff drink, Simon, but all I can offer you is a mug of hot tea.”

“Tea will be just fine, thank you. Look, I didn’t think this was going to be what it turned out to be. I didn’t book a hotel here because I thought I’d be heading straight back to Heathrow. Now I find myself adrift with conflicting emotions. I owe it to both my parents to see this case further along the line. I’m really whacked at the moment so could you get me a hotel and I’ll come and see you in the morning?”

“Yes, of course. I’ll take you to one which is a short drive from the city centre, so you’ll get more undisturbed sleep. Finish your tea and we’ll go.”
Kieran Sinclair never was and never would be a patient soul. He was utterly exasperated in having failed to get five minutes alone with Cath. He sent her an email despite the fact she was sitting in her office talking on the phone. It was one word long. ‘When?’

Cath finished her call to Simon Blanchard and having seen the alert for the email beckoned Kieran to join her.

“Sorry, let’s get to your findings regarding the charred paper, unfortunately it got lost in the recent maelstrom of activity. Well, the floor is all yours.”

“I know you’ve been trying to help Simon through this tragedy and I’m afraid this new information probably won’t help him. The paper you found was part of a highly confidential report, with very limited access. Jean Michel Blanchard’s misrepresentation of what his wonder drug could do wasn’t the whole story. Apparently, a few people who were prescribed it, before it was further modified by Blanchard and a team of Morgan-Blanchard experts, displayed side effects which ultimately caused horrendous skin lesions as well as failing to arrest the cancer. This was never the scandal it would have been in the media had it not been covered up. The patients involved had been diagnosed as terminal, and when Morgan-Blanchard subsequently offered them all a last ditch experimental treatment in Poland expensed by the company, they understandably accepted. This came with a precondition, which was nothing short of emotional blackmail. The families all had to sign a gagging order to avail of the treatment. This internal report and its implied consequences were buried with the poor people to whom the treatment was given. The families faced a life of ruin and interminable legal nightmare if they blew the whistle. Yet that wouldn’t bring back their loved ones, so they kept
shtum. This could never have been hushed if there had been hundreds of patients rather than a mere handful. It’s a clear motive for angry relatives to hurt Jean Michel. The report doesn’t name the families, rather refers to them with complex codes. Maybe one or more of these family members will be on Eleanor Wilkinson’s list. Worth a shout?“

“Bloody hell, yes, Bradley still has it, at least he did have. Get him in here.”

Frustration set in as Bradley admitted he had no idea where he’d put it. “I didn’t throw it away, I just didn’t buy into these people being willing to hurt her husband because of their rejection by Eleanor. I mean, they were her clients so why would they hang Evelyn Murray from the bridge first?”

“That might not be the case,” stated an angry Kieran, “we still don’t know the exact timeline of those two incidents.”

“Well ok then, why would they harm Evelyn at all?” retorted Bradley.

“We won’t know that until we check out the names, will we?” pointed out Cath. “Hell’s teeth, stop all this speculation. Just find the sodding list, or you’ll have to go and get her to give it to you again.”

Bradley trailed wearily out of the office, glancing over to Grace. It was too easy to use her recruitment as an excuse for taking his eye off the ball. He averted her eyes and pondered where he might have put the list. ‘Come on Declan, get a grip of yourself. You need to turn this around.’ Reprimanding himself didn’t come easy at a time when they were making so much progress, at long last.

*

Simon Blanchard was sitting in reception, red-eyed and dishevelled. Cath wasn’t sure how to approach him when
he was in such a delicate frame of mind. “Have you made up your mind about going to your old home?”

“Yes, I have to. I know you said I might be distressed by what awaits me, but I have to think about my mother as well. I’ve decided to take some leave and start to consider the funeral arrangements. That’s assuming you’ll be able to release his body sometime soon.”

“Right, in that case, Simon, I’ll have to make the arrangements with our forensic team as they still have the house and grounds marked out for investigation. They will have to guide us around. I’ll drive you up there in about an hour and you can tell me about the happier times you had when you lived here.” He simply nodded and followed her to her office.

On the journey, he struggled to tell a relative stranger something he hadn’t been able to talk about to anyone before. “When I was here for my mother’s funeral Dad was in a really bad way. He’d always been calm in the face of adversity, and he’d seen plenty of that with his work. But that day I saw in him a different side to his character. Of course he was overcome with the loss of Mum, but I could detect a growing rage in his language; it was really inappropriate at a funeral. When everyone had left and there was just the two of us, he apologised and began to ramble on about it all being his fault. I tried to tell him that wasn’t true, then he said Mum had passed away a few days ago but she’d really been dead for a long time. She’d never wanted to leave La Rochelle and he made promises that they would go back as soon as he could solve a problem with the company. He then broke down completely and told me that he couldn’t keep his word and he couldn’t tell my mother why. He blamed himself for her gradual deteriorating health. That’s when I asked him to come and live with me in California. He hesitated and said he would think about it. We embraced and agreed to talk more in the morning. When I’d showered and was ready for breakfast,
there was no sign of him downstairs. When I opened his bedroom door, to my horror he seemed to be dead, motionless and no sign of breathing. I panicked and called for an ambulance. The paramedics seemed familiar with his condition and soon had him hooked up to all kinds of equipment. Once he was in hospital and was deemed to be out of immediate danger I relaxed a little, until the consultant informed me he’d taken a significant overdose of sedatives. However, they had detected something else. I didn’t find out what that was, but at least he was well enough to say there would be no repeat of attempted suicide, even though he wouldn’t be coming to live with me. All I can think now is that he might still be alive if he had, or if I’d come back here. Surely, this has something to do with his murder? Are you able to tell me anything about this?”

“Not much as yet I’m afraid, Simon,” admitted Cath, “but that could change. Let’s see if there’s anything at the house which you think might be important. Just prepare yourself for the mess; it looks like it could have been hit by a tornado. I’m confident we’ll find the culprits but it could take time, and that brings me back to your plans for the funeral. Your father’s body could take a while to be released.”

“But he wouldn’t be cremated, he’d be buried next to my Mum. You could surely exhume him if that was necessary.”

“It doesn’t work like that. At present we don’t have any specific suspects. Why don’t you go back to California and we can keep you up to date as we progress. You did mention your father’s will, and you can ask our forensics people if they’ve found it. If not, it could have been burnt by the perpetrators. There was a dying fire in the grounds when I first arrived here.”

As they turned into the overgrown driveway Cath could sense Simon trembling.
Bradley had given up on finding Eleanor Wilkinson’s list and annoyed her by asking for another copy. She eventually agreed but said he’d have to collect it. He decided to ask Grace if she wanted to go instead.

“I’ll return the favour at some point, it’s just that I wanted to talk with Donald Murray again after the dust has settled, you know, since you and the boss interviewed him.”

“Like what kind of favour would I be asking of you?”

“No idea, but you never know, is it a problem?”

“Might be, have you cleared it with the boss? She gave me the impression that she wanted Murray to stew for a while. Get her to agree and you have a deal.”

“Forget it, Grace. We’re supposed to work on initiative as well as orders. I’ll do it myself.”

“Ok, might be best if you do.”

When he arrived at the Wilkinson abode he was handed the list but not invited in. On the way back he glanced at the piece of paper lying on the passenger seat. He couldn’t be sure, yet he needed to be. His excitement grew. As soon as he got back he began rifling through his desk drawers again. Then it hit him, he finally remembered putting the initial list in his jacket, not the one he was currently wearing, the one hanging in his wardrobe at home. He shot off again without telling the others where he was going. When he retrieved the original note he said under his breath - ‘Bingo!!’

Arriving back at the office he smiled at Grace.

“You look like the cat that got the cream,” said Grace, “are you going to share something with us?”

“Not the cream, DC Sander-Fenwick, the gravy. I found the first list and guess what – they aren’t the same. One name is different. Roger Newton has suddenly become Richard Newton. I bloody well knew Eleanor Wilkinson
wasn’t giving us the full picture. Well, I did offer to give you the chance to cosy up to the boss, Grace. Never mind, eh?”

“Little things please little boys. Grow up, Bradley.”

Kieran laughed out loud, which in itself was a rare event, but then he swiftly waved Bradley over.

“Let me see the lists and I’ll look into Mr Newton. You do have contact details, something to get me started?”

“Yes, well, last known addresses, but not phone numbers or email info.”

“Right, that should get us going.”

But it didn’t get them started. Neither Roger nor Richard Newton lived at the fictional address, nor did either of them fit with people of the same name in terms of employment or company ownership. Kieran was frustrated, Bradley was more circumspect. He decided to call Cath. She asked him to hang fire until she got back. He didn’t warm to that but accepted her view that maybe Eleanor had been hoodwinked by one of her clients, and this was too important to screw up. “I think we should have her back for a chat, but let us give her enough rope to implicate herself further. You and I should speak to her together and we need a plan, not a rush of blood to the head. Another day won’t make any difference to us, and she could have more reason to think we didn’t find the original list or we didn’t notice the error.”
Whether or not the timing was directly linked to the bonfire at Jean Michel Blanchard’s property, it was a demoralising revelation. The fact that it was directly reported to the police and the instructions were so specific was difficult to ignore.

The cryptic message, again using newspaper cuttings, implied that the victim could be saved, but only if instant reaction was triggered.

‘An opportunity to save a life, regardless of the resources needed – a decision rather than a pathology item. GPS coordinates overleaf.’

Panic overtook organisation and that played a crucial part in relation to the sight they saw in Chopwell Woods. It turned out to be the cause of the fatality. The copse was extremely well shielded by thickets of large trees and was some distance from the normal signposted trails. Access was restricted and the black ‘mummy’ was fastened at one end with innocuous looking ropes to the trunk of a huge oak. The other end was also tied with rope, but only draped loosely over branches of several smaller trees as it zig-zagged its way out of visibility through metal guides. Its final anchor point could have been in several directions. As the fire service personnel debated exactly how to tackle this scene, a member of the ambulance service thought he saw an item of clothing. His instinct was to approach it, and before anyone could prevent him retrieving it, they all heard a sudden and very loud click. Time stood still as the onlookers watched the zig-zag rope move in a snake-like slither towards an unusually bent tree. The mechanism swung into action and cut the restraining tether on the bent tree. The sickening sound of vertebrae cleaving apart as the tree straightened shifted everyone’s attention. They all saw the mummy fracture around its middle section and the
victim’s warm blood was spattered everywhere. Another case of two halves. Nobody seemed to know what to do next. Surely this could not have happened? They were meant to save this person weren’t they? It was an opportunity, or so the note said. Or were they just meant to witness a forlorn attempt at preventing a predetermined atrocity?

Chopwell Woods has a lot of history, including providing timber for King Charles 1 to build his ship – ‘Sovereign of the Seas’. It is a sprawling forest with the river Derwent meandering through it, and it is notoriously easy to lose one’s way if they don’t stick to the marked routes. It is therefore easy to stage such activity without being seen, even in daylight hours.

Cath, Bradley, and Grace had just about recovered a modicum of composure when Jennings informed them that they didn’t need to look any further for the victim’s identity. “He had several documents with him, all indicating he is... err...he was... Henry Beck, and unless my memory fails me he was a long retired chief executive of the regional health trust. I think he retired about twenty years ago. I must admit I thought he’d passed away a good while back.”

“Is there anything else you know about him, Connor?”

“As far as I can recall he never married, if that’s what you’re driving at.”

“Yeah, it was. So that might mean he has no relatives who would miss him in the short term. Bugger!”

She left Bradley and Grace at the scene for any snippets which might fall their way. She returned to the office to be confronted by Simon Blanchard. He said he was going to take her advice and return to his work in California.

“Did the forensics team find your father’s will?”

“Not so far, but they said they still have a lot to get through. While I was waiting for you I gathered from what
people were saying here at the station that there’s been another incident.”

“Yes, similar to that of your father. Tragically, we could have saved him.”

“Really, you mean he died just before you got there?”

“No, but I can’t say more about it, Simon. On the other hand, and I realise it’s a long shot but have you ever heard your father talk of someone called Henry Beck?”

“The name rings a bell, Henry…Henry… I seem to remember a Henry visiting our house on a few occasions. I was too young to understand what my Dad spoke to him about, and my Mum made sure both of us left them to talk shop. He was probably someone my father worked with. Henry Beck… yes, I think that was his name.”

*

Buchannan didn’t take long to crank up the pressure on all parties. He asked Superintendent Gibson for his input first. He got precisely what he expected, nothing but carefully worded waffle. In summoning Cath to the table he chose to make Gibson sit in but say nothing. He then asked Cath to update him on the latest victim. On hearing that there might be a connection between Jean Michel Blanchard and Henry Beck, he struggled to control a reflex bout of laughter. “So, we’re now in the business of linking victims rather than gathering evidence of who might be suspects. That’s exactly how the press will write about this. We’re going to need to look at this in a different way. Listen, I knew Henry Beck personally, and I fail to see why anyone would want to hurt him. The man was a stalwart of his profession, he was extremely well liked, by hospital staff and patients. I’d wager it has more to do with this bloody French chap. DI Moseley, I think you have to find the real motive behind this slaughter, and quickly. If you feel out of your depth with this you need to admit it to me.
I’m likely to attract criticism for not replacing West with an experienced DCI. Time is not a luxury we have, so I’d like your response today.”

“Yes, sir, I’ll let you know within a couple of hours. There’s something I want to check out first.”

She was realistic about her predicament, but she wasn’t going to throw the towel in without a fight.

*  

Kieran lifted Cath’s spirit a couple of notches with his latest foray into Eleanor Wilkinson’s list.

“Guv, I checked the other four names and they are all kosher. Well, at least they exist. Two of them have made a respectable start to entering the piranha-ridden world of microbiology. The other two have moved on after suffering bankruptcy orders. So, I did a little more digging into the elusive fictional Roger or Richard Newton. It all comes back to Eleanor. Payments into her back account tie up to the penny with invoices paid by Roger or Richard. In her traumatised state she must have forgotten who was real and who was a façade for disguising income from another source. It’s a tax scam and I know where it’s coming from.”

“So, are you going to leave me on the hook or is there a point to all this?”

“No surprise really. It’s Genesis Recalibration, her former employer. Remember her husband getting tetchy about our interest in her past? They weren’t very clever though, the sending bank account is in the name of a holding company owned by Genesis Recalibration, but with an obscure name. It’s basically a shell for these dedicated payments. My hunch is that this is hush money.”

“You beauty, Kieran. We need to keep this between us for now. Buchannan is on the warpath and I’d like to speak with Eleanor Wilkinson now. I’ll send uniform to bring her
in and if that husband of hers refuses to let her speak to us without his presence we’ll give him a choice – a charge of obstructing our inquiries or a cup of coffee in a holding cell for causing a fracas.”

She contacted Buchannan and asked for their session to be put back until the evening because of this new lead which could scatter a little more light on the motive. Words which he wanted to hear and readily agreed to.

*

The expected furore involving James Wilkinson trying to talk on behalf of his wife didn’t materialise, primarily due to the subject being exclusively confined to the fictional Newton twins. There was a look of resignation on his face as Eleanor was led to the interview room. Cath had to have Kieran with her and assigned Bradley to the observation screen with Grace.

“Eleanor, before I begin recording this interview I just want to say we aren’t interested in pursuing any tax implications arising from the elusive Mr Newton and other make-believe characters who’ve funded your lifestyle. In this instance my remit is solely to bring to justice the people responsible for crimes, not tax evasion or related civil offences. We will however, charge you with obstruction and wasting police time if we do not get the whole truth from you this time. You’ve had several opportunities to do this already and declined. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“Yes.”

“Good. You’re protecting someone or some organisation. The evidence suggests you and your former employer at the very least assisted in a deception involving a cancer drug which didn’t actually do what it said on the tin. Now we will begin the official interview.”

She switched on the recorder and cleared her throat.
“Interview with Eleanor Wilkinson at 14.12. Officers present are DI Catherine Moseley and DC Kieran Sinclair. Mrs Wilkinson, do you know or have you heard of a man named Jean Michel Blanchard?”

“I know of him, yes, but I’ve never actually met him.”

Kieran opened his laptop and posed the next question. “Mrs Wilkinson, do you know or have you heard of a man named Henry Beck?”

“Yes, I knew him before I retired.”

Kieran continued after appearing to add something on his laptop. “Did you know him well?”

“I knew him professionally, not as a personal friend.”

“Yes, I see, so did you know him well professionally?”

“Yes, I suppose so.”

“Either yes or no if you don’t mind,” interjected Cath.

“Yes.”

The baton was handed back to Kieran, who was furiously typing, on the keys of his laptop. “Was this professional connection via your work with Genesis Recalibration?”

“Err… yes, my former employer.”

Cath abruptly suspended the interview, switched off the recorder and then said, “Eleanor, we want to give you time to consider where we’re going with this. There are more questions and they are related to what DC Sinclair has unearthed, and this information is on his laptop. He will conduct the rest of the interview, but I’ll be with him in case you need points of clarification. We’ll begin again in ten minutes, so you need to think about whether you want to have a solicitor present.”

They got up to leave the room and Kieran took his laptop. Bradley and Grace watched her closely and could see how vulnerable she’d become, perspiration was evident and she continually folded and unfolded her arms. They allowed ten minutes to become thirteen and returned,
asking if she wanted a drink. She declined. The recorder was again switched on.

“Mrs Wilkinson, do you require a solicitor to be present?” asked Cath.

“No. I assume I’m not being charged with anything as yet.”

“That is correct,” replied Cath, “DC Sinclair, can you please resume questioning Mrs Wilkinson?”

“Yes. Mrs Wilkinson, did you at any time during your employment with Genesis Recalibration threaten to expose certain malpractice by the said company?”

“Yes.”

Another short typing session ensued. “Mrs Wilkinson, in order to prevent any whistleblowing were you offered an inducement to keep quiet?”

“You seem to know the answers to the questions you’re asking, so why the charade?”

“Just answer the question, Mrs Wilkinson, if you please.”

“Yes.”

“Thank you,” said Kieran, “and are you still receiving drawdowns from that inducement sum?”

“Yes.”

Cath interrupted once more. “Thank you Mrs Wilkinson. We suggest another break. However, we think you should have a solicitor present. We’ll resume tomorrow morning at ten o’clock.”
Catherine Moseley instinctively felt she had to test the water with Buchannan. She settled into her seat opposite the Chief Constable, with Superintendent Gibson to her right. After declining a coffee, she fired the first shot to gauge the body language.

“There is now a confession of sorts regarding at least three of the individual attacks.”

As anticipated, Gibson offered no emotion, sitting doodling with his inscribed fountain pen, and appearing to be relatively disinterested. By contrast, Buchannan bristled with expectation. “Now that’s the sort of progress I want to hear, go ahead, fill in the details.”

“Ok, I’ve just sent Eleanor Wilkinson home until tomorrow morning after she admitted she knew the last two victims.”

Gibson’s demeanour was unchanged, but Buchannan was all ears.

“Well, she says she only knew of Jean Michel Blanchard, but had met Henry Beck on a few occasions through her work. Because this information could have implications as to whether their two lives could have been saved is one aspect, the other is that she has knowingly or unknowingly been obstructing our inquiries. I advised her to have a solicitor present tomorrow because we may have to charge her.”

“I see,” chuckled Buchannan, “that is interesting, and, unless I’m not catching your drift, DI Moseley, this could well be the break we need to understand more about the motive for all four attacks.”

Gibson nodded with strained enthusiasm. Cath continued. “Indeed, but what I found more surprising was her unequivocal admission that she took a bribe from her former employer to keep quiet about an underperforming
drug which Blanchard just happens to have developed, and Beck oversaw its use in the region.”

Buchannan’s eyes widened and Gibson at last spoke. “Are we certain about this, or is there some level of forcing pieces of the jigsaw to fit?”

Buchannan showed signs of blowing a valve. “Superintendent, there are always two strands or more to dealing with the media. They would have majored on stuff like this, so they obviously don’t know about it. We should keep our powder dry. As DI Moseley said, we might not want to charge this woman, merely make her see this is her last chance to extricate herself, and in front of, and with the advice of her legal counsel. Well done Detective Inspector, and now your input on whether I need to bring in an experienced DCI. I’m guessing you’d like a little longer in charge.”

“Only if you think that’s the best way forward yourself, sir. I’d like to, that goes without saying, but the reputation of the force comes before any individual’s ambition. I won’t resist another body coming in if that helps.”

Gibson reverted to silent mode. Buchannan thumped the table with a clenched fist. “I’d rather you pressed on with the investigation, we don’t want to disrupt the team ethic, especially after such promising discoveries.”

In the meantime, Bradley had dragged in Donald Murray again, patently against his will, and in a marked police car. He was kept waiting for over half an hour before they appeared in the interview room. This time there were no pleasantries, no glass of water offered and the microphone was pushed much closer to Murray. On this occasion Kieran took the lead, with Cath riding shotgun. They wanted to replicate the interview with Eleanor Wilkinson, but the first question was to determine whether he wanted a solicitor present.

“Do I need one? I’ve told you people over and over again what I know, where I was, and where I looked for
Evelyn the night she was attacked. I shouldn’t even be here never mind needing a solicitor.”

Kieran opened his laptop. “Mr. Murray, do you know a man named Jean Michel Blanchard?”

“What? Excuse me…”

Cath butted in. “Mr Murray this interview is not specifically about the night your wife was attacked, or indeed about her at all. It’s about your past employment. Just answer the questions please. Now, I’m going to ask you one more time, do you want a solicitor present? I think you should.”

“Well how the hell would I know if I don’t know what this is about?”

“Very well,” said Cath, “just stop proceedings at any time if you want a legal representative.”

Kieran put the question to him again. “Mr Murray, the third person to be attacked was Jean Michel Blanchard. Did you know this man before he died so tragically?”

“I’ve heard the name, it was way back, around the time when I worked for Bio-Grid.”

“Did you ever meet him?”

“No, well not to my knowledge. I attended many seminars in those days, and I suppose it’s possible that he may have been at one of those. Look, I don’t know what you’re getting at, why don’t you come right out and say it?”

“So, you never had any direct contact with this man?”

“No, never, or I would have said so.”

“Thank you, Mr Murray. What about Henry Beck? Did you know him?”

“Henry Beck? Yes, I seem to remember corresponding with him about certain approved drugs. Not just those we manufactured at the time, but others which were in the process of approval.”

“Mr Murray, was this contact purely professional or did you know Mr Beck socially?”
“Professional, not socially, unless of course you class the odd business lunch as social. He wasn’t a friend.”

“Thank you, Mr. Murray. Can you tell me if you ever had any contact, either socially or professionally with Eleanor Wilkinson long before the recent attacks?”

“Of course not, since the attacks and the press coverage I’ve learned that she used to be in an industry similar but not precisely the same as my own.”

“Fine, thank you, Mr Murray, and finally, have you ever come across a drug by the name of Sanstrogen?”

“Yes, quite a few years ago it was hailed as a wonder treatment for certain types of cancer. Oh, I see where this is going now. My memory isn’t what it used to be, but unless I’m wrong this chap you asked about earlier, Blanchard, wasn’t he the man whose name was on the patent?”

“I wouldn’t know that, Mr Murray, but I believe his company was involved in its initial development. My information also says it ran into difficulties not long after it was approved.”

“Yes, bigtime. It had to be withdrawn for a while until modifications were made. If I remember correctly it reappeared under a different name, and was rebranded by one of the big pharmaceutical companies, wasn’t it…? Oh right, that’s the connection with Blanchard, because he sold out to Morgan. The new name of the drug was a derivative of the subsequent acquisition when the company became Morgan-Blanchard. I think Sanstrogen was renamed Morinex. I could be wrong.”

“No, you aren’t wrong, Mr Murray. Did your company ever try to develop such a drug when the original Sanstrogen was withdrawn?”

“Aha, that does it. I’d like a solicitor now before answering any more questions.”

The interview was suspended and Murray was told he should make a call. He seemed to expect the cross-examination would be put back to another day. He was
offered a legal aid solicitor if he didn’t have immediate access to someone he preferred. He made the call while the officers left the room. Cath and Kieran joined Bradley and Grace who’d watched on the monitor. Cath kept her voice down.

“I want to make a quick summary of where we are before we speak to Murray again. I have the feeling he’s not as involved in this drug business as Eleanor Wilkinson, but he could have an inside track on what really happened with this clique of manufacturers, hospital trusts, and the NHS in general. Let’s get started, and shout up if you disagree with anything.”

* 

Simon Blanchard’s memory finally began to work pragmatically rather than emotionally. He had dredged up the name of his father’s solicitor. On contacting their office they confirmed that they retained copies of all wills. Simon was more than a little surprised that Jean Michel had rescinded his previous intent to leave his entire estate to any organisation, and he, as his son and sole beneficiary was to inherit a considerable fortune as well as several properties in the UK and France. He left a message for DI Moseley stating that he’d decided to stay in the northeast for the foreseeable future.

* 

A new whiteboard was ready for the team and they all filed into Cath’s office. The blinds were drawn and she began.

“I’ll start emptying my head and you can join in at any time, whether that’s to take issue or add your agreement with what stays on this board.
“I’m moving closer and closer to the belief that the first two victims were selected to hurt the real targets – their spouses.”

Everyone was good with that.

“It seems clear to me that the third and fourth targets were meant to die despite the possibility we might have been able to save them.”

Bradley felt they were both meant to die. “The last one was like Russian roulette – a trap rather than a bullet, nevertheless the lure of the clothing was intended to trigger instant death. The message gave us hope but that relied on us not making an error of judgement.”

Kieran and Grace concurred with Cath, but asked for Bradley’s comment to be left on the board.

“If I’m correct so far,” suggested Cath, “the third and fourth targets were more direct transgressors in the eyes of the perpetrators. Murray and Eleanor Wilkinson were one step removed or more indirect offenders to their cause.”

There was no disagreement on that point.

“Coming to motive, there are more and more revelations which point to malpractice, bribery, suppression of both technical and financial transactions. This may have allowed corporations and even national institutions to ride roughshod through safeguards and approval procedures for certain drugs. It eventually comes down to money.”

Grace and Bradley agreed, but Kieran felt there was more to come which may alter that conclusion. Cath pressed on. “We have to go back to speak with Murray and his brief so let’s look quickly at the overarching motive of the killers, even if we have to refine the motive because of their choice of any future targets. These people have gone the extra mile to leave no forensic evidence behind, and guide both the media and ourselves, albeit in an obscure fashion. I can’t imagine they are going to stop with four victims. This has all the hallmarks of controlled rage over something they feel the establishment has knowingly
condoned or perhaps even promoted. Now, the targeted personnel so far, one and two chosen to damage their nearest and dearest? Three and four selected for clinical fatality? I personally can’t see that any future victims will all be from the same historical era, which is looking more and more like an intro to a grand crusade. Why would they wait all these years to punish people for whatever it is that caused the rage back then? All four are pretty much retired. Could it be that such escalation of their ire means that the offending process is still going on? Well, come on, am I alone in thinking that the current victims represent the beginning of their objections to malpractice, and thus only the start of the atrocities? An eye for every eye and likewise for every tooth?”

Bradley and Kieran nodded. Grace was quick to point out that everything that Cath had said was intuitive, plausible, yet crucially circumstantial. “Even if you’re right, we need evidence to cement or refute this approach.”

Bradley disagreed. “Sometimes we have to get into the minds of the criminals. Profilers are often considered as quacks, some are, some are useful. It doesn’t really matter as long as we end up reinforcing the circumstantial stuff with facts or evidence. Just slavishly rejecting some avenue because there is insufficient evidence turns us into robots. These killers are trying to tell us something without revealing themselves, and they are incredibly dedicated to it.”

Cath had to call a halt to the session. “We have to get back to Donald Murray. Thanks for listening and giving me your unbiased comments.”

In her head she was weighing up what she was getting from all three of her team. All detective constables but with markedly different approaches and therefore potential compatibility issues going forward. It was something to dwell on after they had squeezed Murray one more time.
Cath informed Murray’s brief that this interview was to be focussed on irregularities around the approval, prescription, withdrawal, and any redevelopment of a drug named Sanstrogen. The queries could extend to Morinex, or any other equivalent, whether developed by Morgan-Blanchard or one of their competitors.

“That’s quite a sentence, Detective Inspector, and seemingly unconnected to the horrible experience suffered by my client’s wife.”

“In our inquiries to date, we simply cannot ignore the compelling evidence to suggest there is at the very least an indirect connection to the recent attacks. What I’d like you to help us with is to try and understand that tenuous link. I’m prepared to say that Mr Murray is not being questioned as a suspect involved in the attacks. However, he may unknowingly have information which can point us to those who did carry out those attacks, particularly the one involving his wife. We can’t rule out these sick people attacking him or his wife again if we don’t know what their motive is.”

The brief and Murray began whispering to one another, there seemed to be disagreement at first, and then Murray took the advice on board and nodded affirmation to Cath. Kieran began.

“Mr Murray, I’d like to pick up where we left off earlier. Did your previous employer ever try to develop a similar drug when Sanstrogen was withdrawn?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you, and were they successful?”

“Yes and No.”

“Sorry, could you clarify that for me please?”

“Yes, they tried to get around the patent and at the same time ensure any potential side effects weren’t harmful in
the long term. However, that proved to be almost impossible.”

“So, they never marketed a drug which might offer the same benefits as Sanstrogen, but didn’t have the side effects which caused its withdrawal?”

“That is correct, they abandoned that approach.”

“That approach? What exactly does that mean?”

There was another huddle and Murray took some persuading to carry on.

“My former company asked me to look at a different approach.”

“Can you tell us more about that?” asked Kieran, “we don’t need to know details of the biochemistry which touches on intellectual property, just what the approach was.” Kieran made certain Murray saw him add notes on his laptop.

“I had an idea,” said Murray, quite proudly, “which would employ molecular structure already present in a drug we’d had on the market for quite some time.”

“I see, and was it successful?”

Another huddle.

“Yes, in a technical sense. It had been developed and approved for a different purpose, nothing to do with the cancer treatment targeted by Sanstrogen.”

“Would it have been known as Biothryn?”

“Yes, what is the point of this line of questioning, if you already know what I’m going to say?”

“It is important that you do say it, Mr Murray, and we will explain shortly what it is that we don’t know. That is the point of going through this meticulously. Now, this Biothryn was never used for treating these cancers?”

“Yes, you’re correct in that assertion, at least not in terms of prescription to large numbers of patients. This was still the case even though it had been proven to work in every test grid conducted. People were being deprived of it
until all of the checks and balances had been completed by the licencing authority, which was painfully slow.”

“Fine, I have to ask you then if you had a disagreement with the company over this apparent stalemate. Was that the reason you eventually left?”

The brief took quite a long time to calm Murray down, but finally persuaded him to answer.

“I left because I couldn’t accept that red tape was preventing patients having that last chance saloon choice rather than accepting their termination.”

“And that’s why they offered you a lucrative severance package?”

Murray stood up, determined to leave the room. Cath spoke slowly and left no room for doubt, switching off the recorder. “Anything else you can tell us is off the record, Mr Murray, it will remain confidential. In effect, we’re saying we never heard it from you. We can connect the dots in many other ways if we have just a few key parts to work with. Please think about the bigger picture, we already know that’s why you were going to leave.”

He sat down, head in hands and was obviously in serious distress. Cath nodded to Kieran and left the recorder off.

“The company was angry that you’d been offered a position elsewhere, by a competitor, and offered you an inducement to stay. This couldn’t have appealed to the moral drive in you to bring your product to deserving sufferers. Something made you accept this offer against your better judgement. Will you tell us why? That’s the part we don’t know.”

“Look, maybe there’s a way I can provide a hint which should allow you to fill in the blanks. However, I’d need assurance that none of this will affect the situation with my former company. I took this job in a pharmacy which does not tap into my expertise - my calling if you like. I abandoned a lifetime dream to ensure my family would not
become destitute or worse. I’ve regretted it every single day since I accepted this...seedy...bribe to keep silent. I have always kept it to myself and my severance depends on that remaining so. I’d be ashamed if my wife knew about the sacrifice I made. I need a pledge from you in front of my brief that you will honour the confidentiality you offered insofar as none of this gets back to Bio-Grid.”

Cath was in a tricky spot, admittedly of her own making. She let her gut feeling prevail and acceded to Murray’s request. With a trembling voice Donald Murray stuttered into a lengthy monologue.

“I refer you to a landmark case in 2017, in which two giants in the pharmaceutical industry took legal injunctions out and threatened legal action against the NHS. This is public knowledge and rocked the entire country. You must remember it quite clearly. The government and the NHS hierarchy were all pulled into the quagmire of duplicity.

“The companies concerned were Bayer and Novartis. The drug in question was being recommended by the NHS for treating Macular Degeneration, a worthy cause, but not quite as desperate as short range terminal cancer. The conventional, approved drug was Lucentis, yet one which had been developed years before for treating cancer, Avastin, worked just as well as Lucentis, but was around a tenth of the price. Genetech, the manufacturer of Avastin refused to apply for a licence to treat patients with this eye problem. But in 2012, the IVAN trial, funded by the NHS, showed that the two drugs were equally safe and effective and that its widespread use could potentially save the NHS more than £84 million a year. Avastin had been widely used in the United States and other countries around the world to treat macular degeneration. It was not used much in the UK however, and then the two drug giants that market Lucentis, Novartis and Bayer, warned the NHS commissioners that they would seek a judicial review if
they went ahead with their plans to offer Avastin for this purpose.

“I hope you can begin to see the hypocrisy here. Everyone should know that unlike a normal business, pharma companies have to invest huge sums of money to develop drugs with no payback for up to ten years. So, when someone in the NHS responsibly tries to give better treatment costing ten percent of the existing one, shit hits the fan for the supplier of the original approved drug. Instead of the issue being about the ultimate client being the patient, the pharma companies act as if the customer, a monolith like the NHS, can and should absorb such profligacy in silence. This attitude is comparable to popular sympathy for tax evasion. It’s ok as it’s only depriving the tax man, a detested monolith. Popular but wrong.

“You need to understand the decision by Bio-Grid to buy my silence was by far the cheaper option than deliberately authorising under-recovery of investment made years before. Also, although my particular case was played out many years ago, and with a company which wasn’t one of the big players, it could be hushed up without much risk. But there is no doubt that it became one of the industry ‘thou shalt not’ commandments, and as such heralded the 2017 case with Bayer and Novartis, which was too big to procure silence in the same way. You said earlier that you were looking for a motive. If you are confident there is a link between my wife’s attack and these drugs you mentioned, then I’m equally confident that you have your motive. I’m saying that with trepidation, as it underlines your point about Evelyn and myself possibly remaining on the radar of the perpetrators.”

Cath sat back, looked at Kieran, whose synapses were ablaze with what he might glean from Murray’s guidance. She turned to Donald Murray and said, “Thank you for your cooperation. We will continue the regular patrols around your house. I won’t need to trouble you any more
unless new information comes to hand, but I believe we can take this forward from here.”

“I’d like to think so,” said Murray, “but I fear you’re underestimating the forces involved. My treatment by Bio-Grid was a stark warning of how big pharmaceutical corporations would bully organisations like the NHS in the future. I am ashamed of my own behaviour, really I am, but there was no one there who would fight this alongside me.”

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When the tension had eased a little after Murray’s revelations, the team re-assembled beside the summary whiteboard to add the distillate of the interview. Cath chose to make everyone aware of the confidential nature of Murray’s outpouring, but keep it from the whiteboard itself. She’d still been pondering how to cajole a more interactive presence from Grace. She was smart, focussed and thorough in everything that she did, but there wasn’t any tangible chemistry between her and the two male detective constables. She felt that if this secondment was to benefit the Durham force when she returned, it had to be more than a mere box-ticking exercise. She wanted to help Grace, and knew that as well as being fast-tracked she needed to acquire a few ‘rough edges’ to gel with her compatriots. She was just about to be confronted with a perfect opportunity.

“Boss, before we start on Murray’s bleeding heart story,” said Bradley, “I think we’ve missed something obvious, all of us.”

“All of us?” replied Cath.

“Yep, if we really believe Murray, and that the perpetrators may have him in their crosshairs, and still targeting his wife, it would be the best way to get him to keep shtum. Evelyn gave us the identikit description and James Wilkinson gave a pretty good match for it
independently. But… and we should never have missed this, we didn’t ask Donald Murray to look at it, or Eleanor Wilkinson. Pretty dumb really, wouldn’t you say?”

“Definitely,” admitted Cath, “this got past us after DCI West took those digital images to London for CT to run checks on them. Then West disappeared into the mist. Where are they now?”

“I don’t have the originals, guv, but I scanned them and put them on to my laptop,” admitted Kieran.

“Well, that’s a relief. Bradley it’s your shout, take them from Kieran’s laptop, but show them to Eleanor Wilkinson first, we owe Murray a period of reflection. He needs to trust us more if we’re going to get anything more from him. Take Grace with you, she didn’t miss this trick – she wasn’t here then.”

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DI Moseley wanted some thinking space. She felt that preparation was the key to extracting everything there was from Eleanor Wilkinson. Perhaps it was serendipity that they’d screwed up by not asking her and Murray to look at the digital images fashioned by their spouses. It was even better luck that Bradley was on his way to confront Eleanor with them prior to both her and her brief arriving at the station. She wasn’t certain as to whether she and Murray knew each other, yet the latest revelations had increased the probability.

They both worked in industries which were allied if not directly connected, they both knew or knew of the two deceased. They’d both taken hush money over cancer drugs, albeit on different sides of the issue. Morgan-Blanchard was desperately trying to head off legal culpability threat, whereas, Bio-Grid had tried to muscle in on that misfortune. Where exactly did Genetic Recalibration fit into this mafia squabble?
The Feeding Trough

The recorder was switched on. Cath opened proceedings once more. “Continuation of interview with Eleanor Wilkinson by DI Moseley and DC Sinclair. Also in attendance is Mrs Wilkinson’s legal advisor.”

Kieran had not yet opened his laptop.

“Mrs Wilkinson, you told us earlier that you did not know Donald Murray, either socially or professionally. Can you confirm that statement please?”

“Yes that is correct.”

“Thank you, can you also tell us precisely why your former employer was effectively willing to pay you to leave the company? To put it another way, what was it that you were going to expose that they didn’t want to become public knowledge.” Kieran opened his laptop as he waited for a response.

As expected, this produced the first huddle.

“I can’t comment on that, it is part of a legally binding agreement.”

“I see. If I was to read an extract from a document in my possession, which you are welcome to inspect, would you be able to say if it was accurate?”

“I can only say one way or the other when I hear the extract.”

“Very well. ‘A statistically significant proportion of the patients treated with Sanstrogen displayed untreatable skin breakdown, leaving patches which could not be healed by any known technique.’ Do those words seem familiar to you?”

“Can I see the document from which this statement was made?”
“Of course, but you have read it before.”

The laptop was turned so that both Eleanor and her brief could see that the extract from a research report was authentic. She asked for an adjournment, but Cath was keen to press on

“We can comply with your request but please answer this simple question. In your time with Genesis Recalibration, did you ever read these words?”

Huddle number two took a while longer than the first.

“Yes, they are familiar.”

Kieran closed his laptop and continued.

“Would you dispute what was said in the statement?”

“No.”

“The extract and the rest of the report is not shown here. Do you happen to know who authored it?”

“I assume you know this already, so why ask me?”

“Simply because you claimed you didn’t know the author, Donald Murray. Working for a competitor, he was testing Sanstrogen because they were keen to develop a drug to take its place, primarily because the Morgan-Blanchard product had been withdrawn. Apparently, you never mentioned this when asked about Mr Murray several times in the past few days. It would seem that it’s time for us to understand the relationship between Genesis Recalibration and Morgan-Blanchard. Perhaps we can take that adjournment now.”

Eleanor now appeared to want to say more, but was cut off by Cath announcing the suspension of the interview. They gave her a good fifteen minutes to stew on her consistent reluctance to mention any crossing of paths with Murray, written or vocal, professional or social. She should have mentioned it.

“Resumption of interview with Eleanor Wilkinson. DC Sinclair has more questions.”

Eleanor gestured that the recording could be dispensed with. It was declined.
“Mrs Wilkinson, did you ever meet Donald Murray during your time with Genesis Recalibration?”
“No.”
“Did you know of him or his project work with Bio-Grid?”
“I knew his name and that he worked for them. I’d seen his report, as one of many companies competing with Morgan-Blanchard.”
“So, you knew of his concerns over Sanstrogen, and how did this affect your own work?”
“We, that is Genesis Recalibration, did a lot of outsourced projects for Morgan-Blanchard. This was one of them.”
“Did you discuss the Sanstrogen problems with both your own company and Morgan-Blanchard?”
“No, only within my own company.”
“And that is when your concerns needed to be put in perspective, a massive loss of revenue?”
“Yes.”
Kieran had a vice-like grip on the detail and began to close in on his objective. “Please elaborate.”
“My employer depended heavily on Morgan-Blanchard for our continued growth. I was asked to play down the concerns by conducting experiments to achieve such a result.”
“And this is when you took issue with your employer’s stance?”
“Yes, and that caused them to give me an ultimatum. I could either face dismissal or walk with a continuation of my salary. I tried to reason with them to no avail. I accepted what they offered, even though I hadn’t done anything wrong.”
“So, if I understand you fully, Morgan-Blanchard put profit before propriety by suppressing unwelcome data regarding Sanstrogen, They marketed a ‘cleaned up’ version under the new name of Morinex, at the same time
as Donald Murray, via Bio-Grid unwittingly cast another revenue deprivation shadow over Morinex, and recommended a different class of drug from their portfolio.”

“That would be a good way of summarising what transpired, but I think…”

“Let me finish, please,” said Kieran, wagging his finger, “everyone came out of this with no downside except the poor people who’d been given hope of remission from their terminal condition. You were one of those with no real downside, the country is full of people who’d like to retire young with no reduction in salary. This was a veritable callous, premeditated betrayal, sanitised by all who said nothing, and yet benefitted from doing so. Also a betrayal of the claimed raison d’etre of the industry. I can imagine you aren’t proud of yourself, Mrs Wilkinson, but that’s not really enough is it? At least we can take comfort that such greed would explain why these recent attacks may have been planned.”

There was no reply. The police weren’t going to get into Donald Murray’s situation, but he was included in the utterly distasteful guilt by compliance. She was told she could make an attempt at remorse by looking at the digital images of the two people in Evelyn Murray’s description of her attackers.

She agreed and her casual glance turned into an expression of unbridled fear, clearly observed by everyone else in the interview room, as she averted her eyes.

“This can’t be! It’s not possible…this man died several years ago. Is this some kind of trick?”

“Hold on, Mrs Wilkinson, are you saying you know this man?”

“Knew him, yes, I attended his funeral. I was there, he’s dead.”

“How did you know him?” asked Cath, her mind in overdrive.
“He worked for Henry Beck, in the administration department. They didn’t get on that well and Henry didn’t go to his funeral. He couldn’t have attacked my husband or Mrs Murray.”

She became unsteady on her feet, looking as if she was about to faint, as her brief guided her back to her chair. Cath asked if she’d like a glass of water, Eleanor nodded weakly and whispered something.

“I didn’t catch that, Mrs Wilkinson, are you feeling worse? Do you want me to call a doctor?”

“No, I’m ok, I just said that image was as close as it could be to Michael Storey, it was like a photograph of him. You can surely check this, can’t you? I mean via the births and deaths register?”

“Oh, yes, we can do that, but let’s get you calmed down first. I think it would be sensible to take a break while you recover from the shock you’ve just suffered.”

Eleanor Wilkinson agreed and asked to see her husband.

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During the hiatus, Bradley handed Cath a report from Connor Jennings. The additional substance found in Jean Michel Blanchard’s body had been identified as the modified version of Sanstrogen, the one developed to supposedly eliminate the known side effects. It was also the one which was thought to have caused unhealable lesions. Jennings’ report had a second claim, even though it was less reliable in terms of qualifying as evidence. The initial toxicity results had indicated an overdose of sedatives, but Jennings’ further tests showed the modified Sanstrogen was likely to have enhanced the sedation effect. The report stopped short of stating Jean Michel Blanchard had possibly tried to make reparations toward the patients who’d been worst affected by his original cancer drug.
However, Jennings suggested they should further evaluate the effect of a combination of the two drugs in the lab.

Cath tried to take this on board but she put it to one side for the present. She saw the look on Bradley’s face, not a smirk, but one of recognition. “You want me to show this image to Donald Murray, like right now, don’t you, boss?”

“Get on it, Bradley, good work.”

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Eleanor Wilkinson was joined by her husband as the group reconvened. James confirmed that he had never known or met Michael Storey. Eleanor added something which came across as rather odd.

“Michael was cremated in Portugal. He’d moved there after resigning from the NHS. There were many of his relatives there and quite a few ex-colleagues. It felt like a childish decision that Henry Beck was absent. They had their disagreements but that was work, this was the loss of a loyal colleague and a truly caring person.”

Cath responded. “You said earlier that Michael worked in Admin for the trust and as such reported to Henry Beck. Do you know why their relationship deteriorated?”

“It was rumoured the clash was over the escalating costs of running the pharmacy. Henry wanted drastic action and Michael argued that the cost of all drugs stocked was not directly controllable by admin. The price and stock levels were agreed with pharma companies and were set by other people reporting to Henry. He refused to take the flak for something which was essentially impossible for him to control. This was just the start, their confrontational relationship then soured dramatically over the Sanstrogen issue. Michael flatly refused to go along with the party line of blowing away the smoke to pretend there is no fire. It wasn’t a surprise that Michael resigned less than eighteen months later. In a way he was caught up in the same
dilemma as myself, but he was much braver than me, he was prepared to sacrifice security to uphold his principles.”

“That’s interesting, so do you think that if he was still alive he would hurt those who didn’t share his principles and in fact made money as a result?”

“Look, Inspector, I do have regrets, but how many of us would throw away their future by taking on the pharma mafia? Michael was a beacon in a fog of fear. I did think at his funeral, for a fleeting moment, that they might have got to him, even in his remote apartment in the Algarve. I put it out of my mind. Anyway, to answer your question, despite Michael’s incorruptible principles, I can’t see him harming people who’d disappointed him by choosing a different course. Perhaps Henry Beck would be the exception, simply because he was in a position to do something about the problem.”

The session came to an end. Cath asked the team to meet in an hour at a quiet hostelry on the Gateshead side of the river Tyne. “I need to update Buchannan on all this cloak and dagger, mafia-esque stuff before the press get their claws into it. I’ll ask him to take care of that side while we sift through what we can justify as police work, then the rest is really for the corridors of power in London. Politicians, and maybe even that lot our beloved DCI West deserted us for. Maybe we haven’t seen the last of him after all.”

Bradley nodded but said it might take a little bit longer if they were to run Murray to ground and ask him about the man claimed to be Michael Storey. Cath agreed and told Grace to get on to the registrar of births and deaths to verify Storey’s demise.

“We’ll meet up in an hour and a half.”
Cath was really unsure how Buchannan would react to the latest twist, but still decided to go direct to him rather than via Superintendent Gibson. The Chief Constable had proven many times that he could be a bit of a bull in a china shop when the red mist descended, so she braced herself.

“Well, well, DI Moseley, you seem to have laid open a distinct opportunity for us with your dogged pursuit of the motive. This is going to cause more than a little inconvenience for the Met, and maybe even the government. The question is how to communicate these findings rather than whether we pretend they could become a security risk.”

“I’m sorry, sir, you’ve lost me?”

“A scandal is looming, Moseley, but we’re just doing our job. Cancer patients have been misled about the effectiveness of their treatment, the horrific side-effects swept under the carpet. The NHS have been complicit with these crooked pharmaceutical companies in suppressing the truth, and at the same time stitching them up on costs to add insult to injury. If we add in the fact that CT and the Met looked into the first two attacks and decided there was nothing for them to investigate, the entire charade will ensure that heads will roll. I have to say that I find it difficult to dredge up much sympathy for anyone except the poor families who’ve lost loved ones. They might have lost them anyway, but such a deplorable, hypocritical, shockingly managed debacle has patently heaped so much more suffering on these families, let alone those afflicted with lesions as they passed on. Leave this with me, I’ll handle the media. Just keep up the good work, because I get the feeling there’s more to come.”

“As you wish, sir. Will you inform the Super?”
“Indeed I will.”

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Bradley got to the pub before Grace, but spilled the beans to Cath anyway. “Murray confirms the image is a very good likeness to this Michael Storey, not in such a dramatic way as Eleanor Wilkinson, but he claimed to have worked closely with the man, and he remembers the fracas over the pharmacy’s spiralling costs, as of course he worked in there. He says Storey was a genuine man, liked by everyone and was missed when he left the service. He also vividly recalls the news that the man died suddenly in Portugal. He found it distressing, but couldn’t attend the funeral due to ‘other pressing matters’. But then he volunteered something totally unexpected. He said he vaguely recognised the woman Evelyn had described. He didn’t know her name, but the disfigurement of her nose by various growths had been caused by Sanstrogen. He claims other parts of her body were affected as well. He was puzzled because he thought she had died along with the others who’d been given the drug at the time. It’s a belter, isn’t it?”

“Shit,” exclaimed Cath, “Buchannan is going to ruffle even more feathers! And we thought we were the only ones in the firing line.”

The three of them were on to their second drink when Grace eventually arrived. She declined any alcoholic beverage and opted for cranberry juice. “Well, that was strange. The registrar did have a corresponding note from Portugal relating to the death of Michael Storey, described as an expat, still a British citizen, but there was no dual nationality. However, the copy of the actual death certificate on file was in Portuguese. It hasn’t ever been translated. The doctor’s name is there, and the official stamps etcetera. But the cause of death is described as best we could translate as an ‘embolism’. Next to it however, is
an asterisk, which when checking the footnote refers to ‘distinct probability rather than absolute certainty’. A copy of the post mortem states that a major blood vessel had ruptured and showed tell-tale signs of sudden failure, but there were no indications of diseased tissue, which apparently is the norm with such catastrophic blowouts. The registrar was quite unspecific as to whether anything looked suspect as the deceased was reported as collapsing at home when with his family, and there was no direct evidence of foul play.”

Cath took a large gulp of white wine and almost choked on it. “It just goes on and on, this case is fast becoming a theatre farce. We came here to consolidate efforts on items which will remain under our control. The rest will head south, I’m sure Buchannan will see to that. I have to admit, he said all along that motive was our business, bringing law breakers to account for ABH and murder. The disclosures about greed, immoral payments, false claims about medical products, and bullying of the NHS are all very annoying, but unless laws have clearly been broken we aren’t going to be able to arrest anyone. Are we in any doubt about this?”

It was a bit of a bitter pill because a lot of hard work had produced a much better understanding of the overall motive for the incidents, but hadn’t led the team to any suspects other than people who were already dead. Either Eleanor Wilkinson or Donald Murray, or both were still holding back information, or something obvious had eluded them.

In trying to pare down the motive from a country-wide Pharma-Gate, to who built and employed a modern version of the Rack, was the challenge for the rest of the day.

Well into the evening they came up with an initial shot at a list.

1. The families of all the cancer victims should be contacted
2. They would need the codes referred to by Donald Murray in order to discriminate between those who suffered lesions and the rest.

3. They should consider why Jean Michel Blanchard took any version of Sanstrogen, or whether it was administered by someone else.

4. As both Eleanor Wilkinson and Donald Murray had worked with Henry Beck and the deceased Michael Storey, this should be followed up with some urgency.

5. A similar need arose to identify the woman described by Evelyn Murray at the old building, in which many workers in uniform were working on some other task. Particular attention should be given to Evelyn’s appeal to be released, which was met with a response that there was ‘no other way’ – for what?

6. Connor Jennings still owed the team information on the tyre marks at the Finchmoor site, and Bradley’s samples of paint from the Range Rover and a second white vehicle.

   It appeared to be a rather flimsy battle plan, but that could have been said long before they effectively exposed a national scandal.

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In the meantime, Buchannan had already launched his thinly veiled critique of the London elite. Having been interviewed by the faceless ones recently, he had an inside track on precisely which button to press first. In order to get to the person he preferred he would have to light the touch paper a level down the food chain.

‘Marjorie’ picked up. “Chief Constable, what can I do for you? I have to tell you I’m expected to attend a meeting
in a few minutes so I’d appreciate you being as brief as possible. I can always return your call.”

“I’ll leave you to decide for yourself. I just needed you to know I am obliged to hold a press conference shortly, and I thought it would be in your interests to be made aware of information which has literally been given to us a matter of hours ago. It could be embarrassing for the ‘establishment’ in general, not just the pawns who get their hands dirty. Call me back by all means, but I can’t delay this imminent media briefing, because I’m pretty sure they’ve sniffed some of it out anyway. In my judgement this information is better coming from those upholding the law and those charged with the country’s security than seeing it displayed in tabloid rags. I’d say it may be worth listening to what we’ve unearthed for a couple of minutes on the phone, but that’s entirely up to you.”

“Very well, so tell me what it’s about.”

“Fine. You may recall Niall Osborn and the nameless one visiting our manor when two bizarre attacks were reported in Newcastle city centre and out in the sticks beyond Hexham. And for some reason, CT wanted to know more. Once they had checked out what we were doing and why, they basically said they were satisfied it wasn’t something related to any ongoing issue of theirs. Then, when I returned from my unsuccessful interview with your organisation, I found my DCI on this case was to be spirited away to end up in CT, which was rather…”

“Yes, he wanted out of the northeast for personal reasons, one of those being that you had no confidence in him.”

“No, no, the main reason he gave me was that his girlfriend refused to move north. I admit he didn’t impress me, but it was his choice to leave.”

“That may be, but we have proof that you bullied him into requesting a transfer, there is a recording, I believe.”
“Indeed? Well, I was concerned about the image of the Newcastle force and he admitted he wanted to leave. I’m sure that would be on any recording.”

“Perhaps, but you did imply that you needed to have a tidy ship to leave if your promotion to CT was to be realised.”

“Yes, of course I did, and would have done the same if I hadn’t been short-listed for another post, it’s what I’d call pride in my office as Chief Constable. Furthermore, I set up an immediate transfer to Surrey for him, or a possible vacancy in Lambeth if he could stick it out up here for a while longer. I’m pretty sure those enquiries I made on his behalf will also be on record, if not an underhand recording. Now, ‘Marjorie’, do you want to hear the really important stuff or continue with such dross in which the media have no interest?”

“Certainly, let’s hear it.”

There were no further interruptions, and when Buchannan had completed his disgorging of bad news he added a footnote. “This isn’t going to look good for anyone at your end, especially as the press will deduce that you must have suspected some kind of cover up was being checked out when your people came up here. I’m quite sure you already knew this information existed, but the chances of a few plods from the north exposing the truth were very low. I don’t know how you’re going to explain that two dead persons are the only identifiable characters in what appears to be some kind of vendetta by the killers, against people like the stiffs, who must have been but a fraction of the potential targets. You must have been able to predict the two deaths in Newcastle because you knew there was a cover up in place. Ok, it’s not terrorism in the same sense as the IRA, or Jihadists, but it is a well organised group of angry citizens feeling that there is no other course to justice. So, good luck with that, ‘Marjorie’.”

“Wait, can’t you delay this media briefing?”
“I already said they are digging around, and we can’t prevent the actual victims from speaking to them. I have to get our side of events in first. I didn’t create this mess.”

“I think it would be wise for you to speak with ‘Jerome’.”

“No way, that’s what you get paid for. Look, I realise you will know much more about this being hushed up than I do. I also realise there might be the big picture to think about, but again that’s your bailiwick, I’m just doing my job. Maybe I’m risking my own position, how do I know? I guess I will after the press conference.”

“I’ll speak with ‘Jerome’ and I believe he might prefer another visit to the north than a phone call. Even ‘secure’ lines like this have limitations.”

“Whatever, you know where to find me. I’ll be unavailable until after my media briefing.”

Buchannan had weighed the odds, this wasn’t merely a reckless gamble, but he did feel that survival would be tricky. In the end it came down to whether he preferred to be skewered by the media and the subsequent distrust he would acquire from the people in the region, or be taken down by a stray bullet from the capital, fired by those prolonging the deception.
Wheels within Wheels

The team had seen Buchannan’s press conference. They were surprised at the level of disclosure and his fiercely portrayed acknowledgement of hard work delivering results, despite most of the revelations indicating others in the capital had fallen asleep on their watch. It was refreshing to feel someone was looking out for them.

Cath felt she could tap into this motivational oratory and re-energise Bradley and Kieran. She still harboured doubts over Grace, primarily because she did what she was asked of her and then stopped. She’d considered asking Buchannan to send her back to Durham, but decided instead to push her to be more proactive and less reliant on literal tenets from the bible. She spoke from the open office despite the background noise of people on the phones and filing cabinets being opened then closed. The coffee machine was also whirring continuously.

“We don’t have much time to pry further into stuff which doesn’t really concern us, but such ‘dalliance’ has been a hell of a lot more fertile than bloody forensics and knocking on doors. So, I’ll take the flak if we get a rap over the knuckles. Ok, Kieran, track down all of the known participants in these trials with Sanstrogen. Separate them into groups if you can – those who died, those who survived, those who suffered with lesions and those who didn’t. I’m guessing you’ll have difficulties getting the actual codes they used and breaking them down as to which individuals had which dosage, and those who were given placebos, and maybe the control subjects who were given nothing. If any of these patients or their families
have potential motive we need to tread carefully before we question them.

“Grace, talk to Jennings about Blanchard’s death again. Use your initiative to assess if his latest tests could really indicate he took Sanstrogen himself or was forced to do so before he met his eventual fate. Also, push him on the tests he’s supposed to be doing on the flakes of paint Bradley gave him from Finchmoor.

“Now, Bradley, run Michael Storey’s relatives to ground, but before you get too excited, there’s no trip to the Algarve on offer as yet.

“I’m going to annoy James Wilkinson again, by making Eleanor really study the likeness of the woman Evelyn Murray described during her attack. If Donald Murray knew this woman’s face, but not her name, we can’t realistically expect our database to throw up any previous this woman might have, so I’ll ask for facial recognition technology input instead. It’s a long shot, but if the likeness is as good as Donald Murray said, it’s worth a try. And anyway, I just have vibes that Eleanor Wilkinson was so shaken up when she saw Michael Storey’s likeness that she may truly think she’s in imminent danger. We’ll never have a better time to find out. Let’s all stick to our tasks, and remember, the killing might not be over yet. Buchannan has gone out on a limb, and because he has I hope the perpetrators get it. We aren’t the architects of their grievance, that disgraceful medical hypocrisy was orchestrated by people whose task it was to prevent it ever happening. In a way, Buchannan has brought the exposure of this grievance to the doors of the highest powers in the country, while reiterating the cold fact that we still have a job to do. Or maybe I’m just being naïve.”

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The response came. ‘Marjorie’ had failed to convey sufficient fear to ‘Jerome’ when relating Buchannan’s intention to blow down the closed drawbridge by going ahead with concessions to the media. She then spoke with Niall Osborn, querying whether they should send Seamus West back north again, to reign in further unilateral action by the locals.

Osborn advised against such a transparent move and reminded his boss that they themselves had made the decision to check out the Newcastle investigation in the first place, against his advice. ‘Marjorie’ felt she was being isolated in what was likely to become a blame game sometime soon. With Buchannan effectively handing the media a juicy raw steak, they were bound to fight over any exclusives that money could buy. Such temptation often led to loosening of tongues.

Buchannan on the other hand interpreted the silence from London as a sign that a patsy would be rolled out, a public sacrifice to the gods to preserve the gods. That, he would assess as failure. A little more salt in the wound may be needed. Timing, as always would be important. In the meantime, his standing with the media had risen considerably. Capitalising on this via the ongoing murder investigations was the current priority, as no one could ever know how long it would take for such entente cordiale to be derailed.

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Bradley was first to report back by phone. “Boss, various records show that Michael Storey left a wife and two kids in their late teens. Digging around with the info on his death certificate led me to some of these genealogical sites. He had or has two siblings, an elder sister and a younger brother, both of whom have one child. What surprises me about what I then found by visiting his
last known UK address, was that the whole family settled in Portugal, and I mean lock, stock and barrel, selling up all UK property. Storey’s ex-neighbours were adamant that they’d all decided this country was doomed. I said, ‘you mean Brexit?’ They laughed and said they all left before that, and the reason appeared to be more about internal politics. Maybe I’m reading too much into this, but do people suddenly cut ties with their homeland to move to another European country only for political reasons? I mean, Australia or Canada, yes, it’s a different world, but the Algarve? It’s a big holiday resort.”

“Intriguing information, Bradley. Maybe I should have kept my mouth shut about a trip over there. It’s probably the only way to find out more, by talking with them sensitively. We can’t rely on neighbours’ guessing or bloody Ancestry.co.uk, can we?”

“Don’t really fancy it, boss. But hey, if it gets us a solid lead…?”

“Yeah, yeah. You’d better get back here. Grace has some confusing information from Jennings, and Kieran has that look on his face, so I need to know what he now knows.”

Kieran laid out several printouts and stressed that they were copies of reports which had to be published in order to support applications for drug approvals. “Later I’ll show you stuff I’ve obtained through the black web, that’s all I’m going to say about that at present. So, back to the legit stuff. This is a list of cancer patients who were chosen and offered treatment with Sanstrogen, and here’s another which shows the names of people who asked or applied for inclusion in the programme. The first list contains subjects with varying types and stages of advancement of the diagnosed condition. The second list is exclusively made up of patients who’d already been told they didn’t have much time left, even though they were undergoing conventional treatment. These two lists only deal with
Morgan-Blanchard subjects. I’m having more difficulty probing into Donald Murray’s former company, Bio-Grid. This is understandable as they were initially working on modifying one of their own drugs which was already approved for a different purpose, and hadn’t got as far as producing reports which could qualify as part of the approval process. This fits in with what Donald Murray told us, that it all came to a halt when he was offered his inducement to fade into the background.”

“Right,” said Cath, “so did anything stand out from the Morgan-Blanchard lists?”

“Yes, without having names as yet, the patients which developed lesions were all on list two, but only one managed to thwart the grim reaper. List one reported that Sanstrogen helped eighteen percent compared to their previous treatment. Forty-six percent showed no difference, twenty-seven percent actually deteriorated and the remaining nine percent were made up of placebos and control patients. I couldn’t find out whether this last category knew they were being evaluated for purely psychological effectiveness compared to direct medication. There is however, a note in the appendix to say those who made up the nine percent would be switched on to Sanstrogen, at some point during the trial and those not responding to Sanstrogen would be swapping places with them.”

“I’m trying to take all that in, Kieran, but it sounds like pretty bad news for Morgan-Blanchard.”

“Yes, and as Douglas Murray said, it sparked the rapid development of a modified version of the drug. Until now I haven’t been able to find anything on those tests. Now, let’s talk about the less reputable means of finding ways into the internally protected documents. I’ve concentrated on list two because it contains the only person who survived from the last chance saloon group. Well, I should say - did survive, she may not be alive now. The codes
were intended to be cipher-like in their complexity but actually once a hacker fastened on to the data the company needed for their own analysis, it was pretty elementary. Date of birth, age, sex, initials, cancer classification level, and category into which they were allocated. They’re all long alphanumeric strings, a bit like hiding the front door key under one of the plant pots. Anyway, this survivor was female, aged thirty-eight at the time and had the initials F.G. Cross-referencing this with admission data when first informed of their successful application for inclusion in the trials, we have a Frances Graham. She apparently bucked the trend of her group whose prognosis was termination. This all sounds relevant, as there were comments that her survival was at the expense of grotesque facial tumours which altered her appearance. This was put down to Sanstrogen prevailing over her throat cancer, but failing to prevent it spreading to another site close by. The final revelation I have is that when I went after her address there was someone else living there. They said she’d moved abroad. One guess as to where?”

Grace jumped in uncharacteristically, “Portugal?”

“And the winner is Ms G. Sander-Fenwick.”

“Buchannan is just going to love this,” said Cath, “it’s too much to be a mere coincidence. Great work Kieran. So, Ms Sander-Fenwick, I believe you’ve got something from Jennings. Is it him who’s confused or you?”

“Both, I’d say. He hasn’t made any more progress with the tyre marks so he authorised more effort on the paint flakes. He took very thin sections of lots of the samples and looked at them through an electron microscope. From what he saw he ruled out the possibility of the vehicles sequentially scraping against the same gatepost. He went on to say the pattern of embedding would have been consistent, that is one colour always on top of the other. He found the reverse, and scratched his head, suggesting the vehicles probably collided with each other in some way.
Most of the samples showed the white paint embedded in the red. Only two gave any indication of the red car hitting the white one. He’ll get back to us, but at the moment he thinks the only likely explanation is that the white vehicle hit the red, and this caused a change in trajectory during which the red one swung around and hit back. All of the calculations were over my head, but he says there’s more tests he can do.”

“And if he’s right, what does it tell us?”

“I don’t know, but if he is right he wants to go back to the site, because he can’t figure out what obstacle or observation by the driver of the white vehicle would have caused him or her to hit the red vehicle. His logic is apparently based on the terrain; it was soft grassland and it was quite a narrow entrance to find in darkness without headlights. He believes both vehicles should have been travelling very slowly. He ruled out the possibility that the collision happened somewhere else. I will say though, that he’s really wound up about finding some evidence which could explain such a coming together. Oh, and he has abandoned trying to find out whether Jean Michel Blanchard was forced to take Sanstrogen.”

“Ok, Grace, go with him to Finchmoor and see if you can make sense of whatever he might find, and if it’s going to help us to narrow down identity of the vehicles, even stuff like year of manufacture, retailer, a mistake the perpetrators could have made. I need to update Buchannan again, but just before I do, I can now tell you that Eleanor Wilkinson eventually admitted knowing the woman with the disfigured face from Evelyn Murray’s likeness, just as we suspected. She said it was part of her payoff deal to suppress all information about the drug trials. Apparently, the woman tried to commit suicide because her cancer had shifted rather than been permanently cured. However, the real kicker in Eleanor’s final admission was that the
tumours on her face were benign, not malignant. She was only told this after she’d tried to kill herself.”
A Place in the Sun

As they waited for the first news from the Algarve, the rest of the team were keeping their heads down to avoid the media. Buchannan’s ammunition from Cath was selectively retained until the right moment had arrived. By contrast, the London press were relentlessly hounding government ministers in the face of ‘no comment’ from the Met and CT. It was all about to change. An ex-NHS employee had been found dead in his garage by his wife. There were both obvious and subtle differences from the four victims already known to be under investigation in Newcastle.

Firstly, this victim lived in Chelsea. Secondly, the man’s wife had only been apart from her husband for two and a half hours. She’d been visiting a friend in a care home. The horror which awaited her when the electronic garage door swung open brought the onset of cardiac arrest. A neighbour called for an ambulance and then rang the police. They found a dutifully crafted replica of the instrument of torture, which was a step change in boldness from the perpetrators. The Rack which confronted the police would not have been out of place in the Tower of London. The victim’s mouth was covered with Gaffer Tape, and all of his joints were so distorted that his skin failed to contain the copious amounts of blood seeking an exit from his corpse. There was no dismemberment, but only because those applying the disruptive force knew exactly when to stop. The press had got to the scene quickly and already knew that the police knew the identity of the victim, his background, and that this atrocity had been carried out in broad daylight. Journalists demanded answers without any response and turned their focus back
to the government ministers, but at the same time harassing individual back bench MPs. Journalistic wolves seem to be adept at sensing which targets would provide the easiest prey for their next meal.

Consequently there was a shift of attention from the northeast. Buchannan was grateful for the breathing space but most certainly did not want to be elbowed out of direct jurisdiction on his own patch. He relayed this sentiment to Cath and considered using the unfolding panic in the capital to suggest a ‘loan’ transfer of Superintendent Gibson as the go to man for communication between the two centres of investigation. Whatever might follow, he knew that there were really only two alternatives, the victims were linked or the London horror was a copycat.

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The call that Cath was waiting for eventually came, “Bradley, what on earth have you been up to, all hell has broken loose here?”

“Calm down, boss, these people take forever to take a shit never mind sifting through old paperwork. I had to sit for an hour just to get an appointment with the deaths register guy and that was two days ahead. I decided to use that time to speak to the families. Now, I’m just going to tell you what was said, as I’d be interested in your take on this. Ok, I finally found the conurbation they lived in, about three miles outside Albufeira old town, beyond the marina. It’s pretty much an enclave for foreigners, mainly Brits, with a few Germans and Scandinavians…”

“Declan, you’re a police officer not a bloody travel agent, can we move it on a bit?”

“Yeah right, well, I found the wife of Michael Storey and she didn’t want to talk to me at first but confirmed he’d passed away a while back. She said he had suffered a massive stroke and couldn’t speak or do anything for
himself. There was a hint that she’d never really wanted to live here, but the ‘family’ view had prevailed. She even suggested that this ‘mistake’ could have been responsible for the stroke. I asked where the other siblings lived and was told that the sister had also died, cancer apparently, and the house had been sold. The brother, Victor Storey lived just up the road, but he was away. His wife said he was in Germany with some ‘tart’. Apparently they’re going through a divorce and it isn’t an amicable one. I went back to see Michael’s wife and she put a different spin on it. She said Victor was married to an alcoholic who was also being treated for some personality disorder. When I asked about her two sons, she said they had an apartment in the old town because it was too quiet for them at the conurbation. There was a spark of unease when I eventually got around to asking her to look at the likeness images. There was a tear or two when I showed her the first one, but she nodded and said he looked a lot younger then. When she saw the woman with the disfigured face she recoiled, and said she’d gone back to the UK after Michael died. She seemed to think that if this woman hadn’t survived the Sanstrogen treatment, the family would still be living in Newcastle. She did confirm her name was Frances Graham. Finally, she took me to the garden of remembrance and I saw Michael’s last resting place, a neat engraved stone and lots of flowers. When I got to see the death certificate it all seemed to be in order. I’ve got a copy with me. Now, I checked in with the local police as you requested but it seems that since Brexit there’s not much interest in participating with our investigation. I can see their point, there’s no real evidence over here to connect the people I spoke to in the conurbation to the attacks back in Newcastle. Ok, now, I saw a family picture taken when the clan arrived here and I must say that Michael Storey is a good match for Evelyn Murray’s image, but his brother, Victor would also qualify in the same way. I thought about
your facial recognition technology idea and I took a picture of both brothers on my phone while Mrs Storey was making me a cup of coffee.”

“Mm, my first reaction is that all of this doesn’t really move us any further forward with evidence. It’s more about family feuding than stuff we can ask the CPS to look at.”

“Yes, most of it is, but you didn’t see Storey’s wife’s reaction to Frances Graham’s likeness. I got the impression that the whole move over here by a family of ten, even if it was down to internal politics, doesn’t wash if we’re talking Westminster politics, but we’re not, it’s all family politics, yes, it’s like a viper’s nest. Do you want to hear what my gut feeling is, or would that wait until I get back?”

“Right…” replied Cath, deliberately elongating the word, “but don’t dress it up too much, and get back here as soon as you can.”

“Fine, we have likenesses of two people which fit Michael Storey and Frances Graham. We can rule out Michael, but I wouldn’t put my mortgage on Victor’s wife’s testimony, she’s out to get him and she doesn’t know where she herself is never mind where her husband has gone. Frances is back in the UK, so what if Victor is as well? The body language with this lot was all about being dragged out here against their will. Presumably, Michael was the prime mover and when he’d gone, it was a game-changer, none of them want to be here. If his wife is right about the stroke being brought on by his run in with Henry Beck, back in the day, it could be a motive for his brother and Francis Graham. I only say this, boss, because we still have to explain very positive testimony here and back home that the likenesses do correspond well to the people who actually carried out the attacks. But Michael is out of the frame. Also, those perpetrators must have spent a lot of time in the UK preparing for such complicated MO’s. I think we should at least check border control info to see if
Francis and Victor have been in the UK at the same time as the attacks.”

“It’s a bit of a stretch, Bradley, but check it out there first, and when you get back with our own border forces.”

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The Chelsea victim had been named as William Jordan. His wife, Joyce, had not yet recovered consciousness. The tabloids revealed his retirement was preceded by a prominent position with N.I.C.E, an acronym for The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence. His early career had spanned over twenty-two years in pharmaceutical research, with several different companies. He married Joyce, bringing three decades of bachelorhood to an end. They had no children and no extended families. He was portrayed by people he’d worked with and been friends with as an absolute gentleman. Nobody who’d known him could come to terms with such brutality against a man who had given his life to helping others. Pressure from the press had forced the Met to come out with the usual platitudes, but they tried unsuccessfully to play down connections to the incidents in Newcastle. The media weren’t having any of it. The coverage and questions being thrust into the faces of senior officers just kept on increasing until the Met let it out that they were in discussions with CT. This backfired spectacularly because everybody instinctively knew this had been the case from day one. Buchannan seized on such blatant posturing by revealing his team were checking out new leads following inquiries in Portugal. He made sure the press took note that he had no jurisdiction to even comment on any connection between the latest murder in London and those on Tyneside, either now or in the future. He wanted as much time as possible to plough his own furrow and at the same time keep London at arm’s length. The last thing the
northeast investigation needed was more visits from the likes of ‘Marjorie’ and ‘Jerome’. He joked internally that he’d get more help from Cameron and Jerome.

This left Cath with a dilemma. On one hand, Buchannan had bought some time, on the other, things could change very quickly, her worst nightmare being another body turning up on her patch. She had to get more facts before there could be any thoughts of announcing she might have two named suspects. Bradley’s theory was plausible, Kieran’s cyber-probing was helpful, but Grace was still struggling to gain confidence in acting on initiative as well as protocol.

She decided to make Grace aware of her feelings but with a positive slant. “DC Sander-Fenwick, we’ve seen why you’re rated very highly on doing things by the book, so I need to see Grace in her less formal mode, joining in the throwing around of ideas, as well as bonding more with the rest of the team. We’re going to need to step up a level in getting from standard approaches to the devil in the detail, and that’s if we don’t get any more incidents to deal with. Don’t be afraid to suggest other ways of looking at a bunch of murderers rather than a single pervert. These attacks involve collecting data on people and their habits, meticulous preparation and timing of the final act. It has to be a lot of people who are convinced that their atrocities are justified, and driven by a single motive to get what they perceive as justice. We have to get inside their heads because there is no past experience of this kind of crime in our region. You aren’t going to be marked down by me for floating ideas on new ways of targeting our resources. Go home and think about what I’m saying.”
Two Days later

Buchannan and Cath pondered over whether they should kick start a hunt for Frances Graham, Victor Storey or both. And if so, should it be with or without the help of the public via an appeal. Bradley had managed to prise proof from border control that Frances’ last passport data indicated she was still in the UK. There was no such evidence for Victor. It was a tricky one, simply because the entire lead was based solely on descriptions of ‘potential’ fugitives from the memory of victims. The likenesses had been obtained under stressful conditions, from Evelyn Murray and to a lesser extent, James Wilkinson. They talked for over an hour and briefly entertained the stance that they could claim it was an elimination exercise. Finally, they agreed that it wasn’t the right moment to suggest this lead was solid, and it was deferred until more was known about the William Jordan case in London.

Buchannan disclosed to Cath that he’d turned down a request from Seamus West to come north for a chinwag. “I didn’t want our progress to be jeopardised by having a parrot in our midst. I expect another attempt to pilfer information from us, and ultimately I may have to concede, but now isn’t a good time. We still have to find these two characters from Portugal Bradley failed to nail down, and it occurred to me that Michael Storey’s death could be the actual trigger for action from the killers. It could explain why such a relatively long time elapsed before the violence began. He seems to have been the instigator of leaving for Portugal, but apparently none of those remaining want to be there. Just a thought.”
“I agree, sir, or maybe it wasn’t only his death, we shouldn’t forget that his sister died of cancer over there. I’m going to ask Grace to check out if she’d been diagnosed before the family exodus. If that is the case it would add weight to what you just said. If Michael talked his sister into moving with the family to get treatment she was denied in the UK, they would definitely want to avoid her suffering what happened to Frances Graham. That family would seem to have good reason to be angry at the way Michael felt he had to quit his campaign for better care for a hell of a lot of people he tried to help. I should get on to it right now.”

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Like a tug of war team used to dragging others over the line with consummate ease, CT were faltering as if they were missing an anchor man. The conundrum appeared to be in which direction they could direct media momentum without being blatantly transparent. In the prevailing circumstances damage limitation could be considered a success. ‘Jerome’ was highly critical of ‘Marjorie’s’ bungled attempt to smuggle Seamus West into Newcastle. She was offered time off to regather focus on the issues in hand. Niall Osborn fell victim to becoming the next holder of the poisoned chalice. He’d craved such an opportunity for years, but not one devoid of a means of steering. However, he knew the score, declining a step into the breach would mean automatic disqualification for life. Laying one’s career on the line for a colleague was the minimum expectation. His first hurdle was to somehow circumvent Buchanan. However, Osborn had a conscience, and had been advised several times by both ‘Jerome’ and ‘Marjorie’ that he would need to dump such schizophrenia, if he was serious about seeking promotion
In the meantime, the media were steadily gathering strength in siphoning detail from the mouths of ministers. In a game of political chess the baton could always be handed back rather than forwards, depending on a slip of the tongue to a rogue reporter, or the conjuring up of a sacrificial lamb.

The Home Secretary put the responsibility of finding William Jordan’s killer squarely on the shoulders of the Met. He said, “First and foremost, this is homicide, and that’s what they, the Metropolitan Police do. Any link to other crimes is premature, and speculation that this murder was committed by some socially dysfunctional group has not been corroborated. At this time, no other organisation than the Met will run this investigation, and I want to remind people that they are an apolitical body. That means they proceed via their internal protocols, not having to pander to either the media or the government.”

Niall Osborn’s remit had just been made more difficult.

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Grace had her doubts about investigation by speculation, but conceded that this was a unique case, there simply was no precedent, unless the entire case was moved into a terrorist related category. A scenario nobody wanted to acknowledge. She was a little unsteady without a rule book. It became a lengthy process to cross-reference Gladys Storey’s entire medical history taking into account the change of her maiden name to her married name. She’d been a regular attendee for hospital treatment of a number of conditions, from having tonsils and adenoids removed at eleven years of age, appendix four years later and liver polyps in her early twenties. Her health had continued to spiral downwards and finally, two years after she gave birth as Mrs Walton, she was diagnosed with cancer of the lymph glands. This was all prior to the move to Portugal.
The crucial notation at this time was a decision communicated to the trust that a particular cancer treatment drug was denied to her on the grounds of it being unlikely to extend her life. The hospital trust had apparently fought against this edict, but ultimately had to toe the party line. Her medical records halted at that point, other than to transfer copies of them to a consultant in Albufeira General Hospital. No reciprocal data came back regarding her treatment there before she died. Grace, in an instant, visualised what this could mean and philosophically moved a step closer to the singularity nature of this investigation. A convert in the making?

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The Met seemed to be juggling, keeping as many balls in the air as possible. The media were angered at being fed scraps, and the hierarchy chose to continually beat the drum of discrepancy, typified by their latest statement, which included yet more tired rhetoric.

‘The homicide in Chelsea was a brutal, mindless attack on a well-respected ex-employee of our dedicated National Health Service. To draw premature comparisons with incidents in the northeast of England is totally unwarranted at this point in time. William Jordan was most likely killed by a single deranged person, using a horrible reproduction of a mediaeval torture apparatus. Secondly, and more importantly, there was no alert from the perpetrator to the police or the media, and no message left with the victim’s body, as there was in Newcastle. The sophistication and preparation of the attacks in the northeast lead us to the possibility of a copycat killing. At least we have to consider that avenue.’

On the face of it, this was a reasonable statement, something for the tabloids to fill their columns with, yet it was more supposition than hard evidence. It left room for
manoeuvre if that was needed. When the corpse of Rachel Diaz was found just hours later, the regrets began to pile up. A phone call from an unregistered mobile directly to the Met described where the body could be found. It was curled in the foetal position, frozen to brittleness, and tied in a heavy gauge industrial waste disposal bag. It had been left in a public plastic recycling bin, next to an array of glass and wood refuse equivalents. Not only did her person have several identity items intact, there was the dreaded message of grievance.

‘R.A.G.E. - Rejection-And-Grotesque-Exclusion’

This was surely another turning point, they were identifying themselves as a group, dumping a body when it suited them, in a busy public place, and critically this woman was the first relatively young victim. The others in both London and Newcastle were either recently ‘retired’ from their offending remits or much older prime targets. When the Met contacted Rachel Diaz’ place of work, they discovered that she was the chief executive of a major hospital trust in the city, and they were informed she was on leave in her birth country for a week. They weren’t expecting her back from Portugal until after the weekend. Reverberations were felt in CT, and even tremors reached Newcastle. Some kind of polite three-way parlay would now become inevitable. The timing of such a meeting wasn’t ideal for Buchannan but he still felt he was in a position of relative strength. He could wait for London’s opening gambit

The media were in overdrive; with the latest debriefings from the Met, they were sitting in virtually the same vantage position as all of the combined detective expertise on the case. They could entertain the public with all manner of permutations without the ultimate responsibility of having to clean up the mess of claim and counter-claim.
Buchannan happily feigned reluctance as he finally agreed to visit the Capital.

*

Chief Constable Buchannan called his team together to bring them up to date with developments in London. He cut straight to the chase. “This business of Rachel Diaz transferring from the Portuguese health service to a plum job in the NHS cannot be ignored. It could be a total red herring but nobody believes that. We must redouble our efforts at this end, because it’s risky to assume the attacks in the northeast have already served their purpose. Regardless of what the Met has been pushing about no links of the London killings with ours, we have to accept we’re looking for the same perpetrators. It’s better to be wrong and have the right outcome than the reverse. DI Moseley, get yourself on to the background of Rachel Diaz, go back to Portugal and ferret out everything you can about her, from childhood to grave. I’m going to London tomorrow to mingle with the self-appointed intelligentsia of criminology. It’ll be a building of bridges pantomime of ‘oh yes you are, oh no you’re not’ crap, but the shit is on a certain impact trajectory with somebody’s fan, and it’s not going to be ours. Are we all clear on the immediate task ahead? Good, screw the overtime budget, make it happen. We must be the ones delivering the breakthrough.”

Cath’s voice wobbled as she responded. “Sir, I think it would make more sense for Bradley to go back to Portugal as he already knows how the land lies there, particularly with this Storey clan, and I should be here to oversee other stuff, including anything you might want to be actioned while you’re in London.”

“No, forget the rest of the Storey family for now, I’m going to disclose enough information to knee-jerk the Met
into a countrywide search for Frances Graham and Victor Storey. Let them get their hands dirty for a change, and I want you to come back with the works on Rachel Diaz, because the Met won’t let me near anything they find about her position as head of a hospital trust. Despite this olive branch they offered me, they still have to keep me out of whatever was covered up years ago. There are far bigger heads to roll than mine. Anyway, Bradley will handle your job while you’re away, he can report to me from here just as you can from your jolly in the sun.”

There was an air of an imminent crescendo in the station auditorium. Buchannan’s words were a timely reminder that it could still come crashing down on them. Once he’d left the office, Cath said to the rest, “You all heard it. I’m out of here tomorrow. Bradley you may as well start taking responsibility for Kieran and Grace. It’s a great opportunity to fall flat on your arse. Good luck. One word of advice - delegate, and do what you’re best at, knitting together pieces of the jigsaw even if they don’t seem to fit at first glance. I have to admit you’ve been right about the Storey family, they have to be up to their necks in this, and Frances Graham could represent their rallying cry.”

“Thanks, boss. Was he serious about the overtime budget?”

“Bradley, only you could have come up with a comment like that at a time like this.”
The only flight with free seats was an early morning holiday shuttle with a considerable contingent of young women heading to a hen party in the Algarve. Once above the clouds and with the seat belt signs switched off, Cath resorted to her headphones and tried to drift off to make up her lack of sleep over the last few weeks. Her mind drifted to Simon Blanchard. She’d asked him to stay in touch because she felt so sorry for him when he braved the scene at the old family home. Had Jennings found Jean Michel’s will? Had Simon stayed in the UK or gone back to California? And, this young man was seeking so many answers for his own questions. She put a note on her phone to contact him when she got back. Turning her thoughts to Rachel Diaz, she was uncomfortable with straying on to a patch which the Met would see as theirs, and it was surely no mean feat to find people who’d treat her enquiries as confidential. All she had time to do before leaving was ask Kieran for a pointer to where her childhood began. He’d come up with two schools, the first in Villamoura, and the second in the airport city of Faro. She decided to check out the latter before hiring a car to travel to Villamoura.

* Buchannan fiddled with his phone while trying to bite off part of a semi-stale East Coast train sandwich, almost knocking over his coffee in the process. He felt his first priority in London was to come across as ultra-defensive, after all the meeting was called by them, whoever they turned out to be. The last thing he wanted was to be sucked into their current whirlpool. It was already certain that some of their personnel were going to gravitate to the
centre and then disappear forever. They would likely try to set the tone by the questions they’d ask, and he mustn’t fall for any of their self-declared threadbare inventory of relevant strands of inquiry. *He knew, that they knew, that he knew,* that they had a much more important secret to protect, a genie which was damn close to escaping the bottle. A parochial defensive attitude was, he reiterated to himself, the shield from which he could surprise them with questions to which they would assume *he* already had answers. He asked for fresh coffee to help mentally lay out the order of these questions. When he was totally happy with this he committed the final order to a small piece of notepaper. The only factor he felt he couldn’t plan for was the personnel he’d face at the outset. If the movers and shakers welcomed him right off the bat, he might have to adjust his own objectives, as they were much more practised in hiding body language giveaways. Whoever met him from the train would be a clue as to why they really wanted him to forfeit the comfort of a ‘home’ venue.

*Bradley felt slightly disoriented, having the authority he always dreamt of, and it felt like a dauntingly hot potato. In his own signature style he reacted by prioritising a foray into the unknown as opposed to tidying up what they already knew.

“Grace, you should work with Kieran on filling in a blank which I overlooked when I was in Portugal. Gladys Storey became Mrs Walton, but I never heard a single word from any of the family about her husband. You know, where he actually was. There was no sign of him on this conurbation where they’d all lived, and I was told the house had been sold soon after Gladys’ death.”

“So, what is the point you’re making?”

Kieran answered before Bradley could elaborate.
‘If Michael Storey’s brother and Frances Graham had motive, then so did this Walton character. They acted as one when they left the UK, so it’s not much of a stretch for them to do the same thing in gaining revenge.’

‘Precisely,’ uttered Bradley, ‘and we are looking for a group of perpetrators, not a lone wolf.’

Grace shrugged her shoulders and then nodded in agreement, at which point Bradley announced he was off to see Connor Jennings.

When he presented himself at the S.O.C.O. chief’s office, he was met with a look of consternation. ‘If it’s about the paint flakes I’m…’

‘Well, not the actual flakes, I recall that you had a theory about why two of their vehicles would collide so heavily in a boggy field.’

‘Ah, yes, we searched the area just beyond the spot where you found the paint flakes, but I’m not sure it helps us. There was a freshly dug patch and when we pulled back a few inches of soil we exposed part of the corpse of a horse. The tests showed it was a different breed to the one harnessed to the ‘rack’ apparatus.’

‘Really? But surely that is significant.’

‘In what way?’

‘Unless I’m mistaken, we established that the harnessed horse belonged to one of the allotment owners.’

‘True, so?’

‘It wasn’t brought to the site by the killers. That could have been its grazing patch at night and maybe the perps didn’t know that. They might have been surprised by a second horse. Was it untethered?’

‘It wasn’t harnessed to the apparatus but there was another tether just a few yards away.’

‘So, this could have caused the crash?’

‘I suppose so, and this infers exactly what?’

‘We didn’t ask the owner of the horse if they were both his. If it was he might have assumed that the second one
had escaped from its tether or been let go by the killers so that it couldn’t interfere in their precision operation.”

“Your need to be more explicit I’m afraid, I don’t think like a detective. I’m not into fantasy.”

“We should ask the allotment owner why there were possibly two horses that night and if there were, what exactly did he think happened to the second one. Jesus, some of these allotment owners actually have sleepovers in their sheds because of thieves purloining their crops or their animals. This guy might have seen something he didn’t think was relevant, or worse still, he may have told uniform and they didn’t think it was important. It would be a total pisser if we missed something here. I’m assuming you haven’t spoken to the horse owner about the buried one?”

“That’s true, it was on my list but low priority.”

“Ok, Connor, let’s just keep this between us until I’ve spoken to horse-man.”

“With pleasure, another one bites the dust.”

*

Kieran had supplied Grace with the marriage details of Gladys and John Walton, including their addresses at the time. They both lived with her parents, presumably because they couldn’t afford a place of their own at the time. Gladys’ parents had passed away since then but the mother of John Walton was in a care home. The equity in her property was being sucked up by the council as part of her care costs. When Grace checked out the family residence there was no one living there. Moving on to the sheltered accommodation she found Elsie Walton in rather poor health. She knew her son had left Portugal and the last communication she’d had from him was a couple of weeks ago.
“I think he said he was looking at a property in Gateshead, but he mustn’t have found anything suitable, because he would have come to see me. You see, he doesn’t like the council taking our family home which my husband had worked so hard for. In those days a shipyard worker couldn’t afford anything other than a small terrace house. You said you were from the police, has something happened to my son?”

“We don’t know, Elsie. We just want to talk to him, and the rest of the Storey family never mentioned where he went after his wife died.”

“Well, they wouldn’t tell you if they did know, they’re a funny bunch. John has one of these mobile phone things but he hardly ever answers, so I gave up trying. Just as well because I can’t hear so well on the telephone with all the crackling noise.”

“Do you call him regularly?”

“Not so much now, about once a week.”

“So, when you talk with him doesn’t he say where he’s calling from?”

“No, but he says he’ll be visiting me again soon.”

“Ok, do you have his number? We might be able to find him and pass a message on if you’d like that?”

“I don’t think he’d like me to be talking to the police.”

“Ok, but if something has happened to him it might be better to know about it. You know, if he’s in some kind of trouble or had an accident. It’s strange that he hasn’t called for a few weeks. He’s not in trouble with us but he could help us to clear up something we missed during our visit to Portugal where he was living with his wife.”

“Oh, well if you think it’s best to find him and tell him I’m not feeling too well at the moment, it might get him to come and see me. I’d like that very much, he’s my only son you know.”

Elsie gave her a little blue book full of phone numbers and addresses, many of which had already been struck out
as having passed on. Grace wasted no time getting back to the station. She resisted the urge to ring John’s number before checking for the provider, monitoring the location, and preparing a surprise party for Mr Walton.

*

The omens weren’t good. As he alighted from the train, Buchanan recognised the woman, even though she was in plain clothes for a change. The pickup lady was only one rank down from the pinnacle of the Met. He began to wonder if this was much more serious than he first thought. Not much conversation took place on the way to HQ, both of them seemingly keeping their powder dry.

Things took a decidedly better turn when the reception committee was revealed. CT were represented only by Niall Osborn, no ‘Marjorie’ or ‘Jerome’. The Met contingent easily exceeded double figures, but the head honcho was absent. There were no agenda sheets or writing implements on the twenty foot long table and the room was devoid of the usual audio-visual equipment. The first choreographed move took shape when Buchanan was ushered to a seat which failed to place him in an appropriate fifteen-to-one meeting position. He affably ignored the humiliating gesture, smiling politely and asked for a decent coffee.

*

Cath had encountered a mixed bag of success and distraction. The secondary school which Rachel Diaz attended in Faro remembered her as an exceptional pupil with the ‘world at her feet’. They said she’d chosen to go into medicine right there in the city. Her subsequent career in the Portuguese health care system was well documented, as was her ascent to associate director of the equivalent of
an NHS trust. Her specialised area was oncology and she’d authored several papers outlining breakthrough drugs targeted at several tumour types. By contrast the view in Villamoura was anything but complimentary. The primary school headmaster and friends who knew her best painted a picture of a ruthless opportunist. This came across as rather strange to Cath, pigeon-holing a child so bitterly. Eventually, a few of her class teachers put a different slant on this, saying much of the negativity was really targeted at her parents, who were undisputedly self-centred. However, her co-director of the hospital group in which she worked said Rachel’s stellar rise was more than helped by PR airbrushing of her previous achievements, notably suppression of at least one disastrous drug trial, leading to horrendous side effects.

She contacted Buchannan, suggesting he called her from a public phone. As soon as she’d divulged everything she’d been told, he asked her to get back to Newcastle as soon as she could.
Bradley had only just run the allotment owner to ground in Finchmoor when his phone vibrated. “Grace, is it important? I’m speaking with a witness.”

He soon changed his tone. “Bloody hell, listen, just get as much backup from uniform as you can muster, I’ll get back there pronto.”

He turned to Ned, the allotment owner, once again. “Right, where were we? Oh yes – the side road, you mentioned it already.”

“Aye, I told the coppers when they were here that mornin’ like. I was sleepin’ here that night, cos there’s been a spate of thefts recently. I woke up because I heard a loud bang. It was black dark when I approached the field like, but these two blokes were arguing, and maybe they saw me, cos they scarpered back to the vehicles and drove off.”

“So, they weren’t in the field at this time?”

“No, the gate is at the far end of the field, they must have driven out by then, the side road leads on to the main road to Consett, you see. I thought they’d had a bump on the side road. I could see the silhouette of one of the horses and I thought the other one must be lying down somewhere in the field. It wasn’t till the body was found the next morning that I realised the two vehicles had even been in the field and the little horse was missing. I did tell one of your people all this but I’ve heard nowt from them.”

“I’ll look into this for you, Ned. Did you get an idea of what kind of vehicles they were?”

“Aye, I said one was a white van and the other was one of them four-wheelers. It looked orangey-red in the street lights. Do you think they pinched the little horse?”

“I’m afraid not, Ned. Our forensics people found it buried near the gate. Look, I’m sorry about this and I’ll
send someone out to see you if we find these bastards, we’re still looking for them.”

“Mind, I’ll wring their bloody necks if you get them.”

*

Grace and Kieran had between them triangulated John Walton’s phone to a supermarket car park in Gateshead. The backup team was armed just in case the target was also tooled up. Bradley arrived and told Grace it was her gig. She was obviously surprised, but briefed the senior uniformed officer, insisting that firearms were absolutely a last resort. They wanted this man unharmed as he was the first named suspect they expected to arrest. The officer ignored her.

As the unmarked police cars swung into the car park Bradley spotted a parked white transit van. They cruised slowly past it and confirmed there was no driver in position. Then it was blocked in by two other police cars. Grace barked out instructions on her walkie-talkie device. “Leave the cars where they are with the engines turned off. Assembly of alpha units at the back entrance, beta at both sides of the front automatic doors, and remember, weapons holstered please. Bradley and myself will check the inside and keep you all up to speed. We have a photograph from Walton’s mother so it shouldn’t be too difficult to spot him. I’ll give adequate warning when he’s heading to the exit from the checkout. Any questions?”

The senior uniformed officer chuckled to himself before tapping Grace on the shoulder. “You haven’t done this before, have you?”

“Well…”

“I give the instructions for deployment of my men and when to ready weapons. I’ll accept your distribution concept but we only need three personnel at most to the rear. The remainder will take up positions out of sight and
you don’t need to know where. I also advise that you do not go inside the building which is full of people who could become hostages if chummy was alerted by detectives with walkie-talkies. I’d like you to stand at the front entrance and hand signal me when he comes out. I don’t need to ask if you have any questions, that’s how it’s going to be done.”

Grace shot an angry glance at Bradley and mouthed a string of profanities.

The drama however, didn’t live up to expectations. It was Grace who broke the vigil. She walked up to the senior uniformed officer and handed him her communication device. “I’m going inside with a trolley. Our man might not even be in the supermarket. There are other shops nearby and he could have just used this car park out of convenience. We could be standing around here for hours.”

Bradley admired the way she delivered this riposte and said it might be better if they went inside parading as a couple.

“In your dreams. It’s my gig, remember. I want you back at the white van in case he strolls across from B&Q and bulldozes one of our cars out of the way while we are fixated on the bloody front door of the supermarket. Go on, get to it, DC Bradley.”

“Good point, Ms Sander-Fenwick, happy to oblige.”

Grace wandered the aisles for a few minutes and as she turned a corner with a half full trolley, she loitered next to the restaurant section. There he was, John Walton, sipping a latte and reading a newspaper. Leaving her trolley on its own she returned to the front door and signalled the senior uniformed officer. She had a highly sarcastic smile on her face when she said he was alone in the coffee shop.

“Well, not entirely alone, he’s got the local Metro rag for company. He’s in blue jeans and a light grey shirt with Newcastle Falcons plastered all over the front. That’s the
local rugby team in case you didn’t know. I’ll leave everything in your hands then.”

She walked calmly in the direction of Bradley and was greeted with, “No luck?”

“Good luck actually, they’ll be out in a minute. Mr Walton doesn’t look like he could hurt a fly. We can question him together at the station, and before you try to pull rank again, you owe me one.”

*

Bradley’s updating of Buchannan was a timely boost of the Chief Constable’s poker hand. He’d been slightly confused by the London lot’s approach in trying to extract more information about the first two victims in Newcastle. There was little effort on their part to talk about anything else. He deduced that equated to ‘dead men don’t talk’, reminding himself of the old adage that the actual victims of homicide could be characterised as ‘silent witnesses’, except in this case there weren’t really any forensics or pathology evidence to speak of. Thus, Jean Michel Blanchard and Henry Beck could be categorised as ‘status contained’. When Buchannan had tried to bring William Jordan and Rachel Diaz into the discussion it was politely rebuffed. Even when he asked about the cause of death in Rachel’s case, he was told – in good time. He could only conclude that their concentration on the transcripts of interviews with Evelyn Murray and James Wilkinson were fishing trips to reveal more about their outstanding worry over the spouses, as former players in the pharmaceutical industry. Loose ends which they would not want to turn into loose tongues. Buchannan’s strategy needed slight adjustment. He knew that with the obvious connection between the attacks, he wasn’t going to be able to refuse cooperation, so as he’d already refused Seamus West as a liaison point in Newcastle because of his knowledge of
how things worked there, and invited Niall Osborn instead. This bought more time before he’d have to disclose what he knew about Rachel Diaz and that they actually had a suspect in custody in the form of John Walton. He left the meeting having agreed to a visit from Niall Osborn two days hence.

*

John Walton was a meek individual and yet he didn’t look at all concerned at his arrest. Bradley cautioned him and said he had a right to have a solicitor present.

“No thanks.”

“Are you sure?” asked Grace, “These charges are very serious.”

“There’s no need. If I’m honest it’s a relief that it’s all over.”

“That what’s all over, John?” enquired Bradley.

“You want to know about the van.”

Grace stopped him there. “We can come back to that. You were listening to the charges weren’t you? You’re suspected of being an accessory to ABH and homicide.”

“Ok, but I still don’t need a solicitor.”

Bradley and Grace looked at each other in disbelief. After a break and a quick consultation they resumed.

“Mr Walton, can you tell us where you live?”

“At the moment I’m sleeping in the van.”

“Your mother told me you’re looking for a house in Gateshead, is that correct?” said Grace.

“How did you find my mother? She’s got nothing to do with any of this. I’m not going to talk about her.”

“But you are looking for a house in Gateshead?”

“Yes.”

“Where was your previous address?”

“Abroad.”

“In Portugal?”
“Yes.”
“You lived there with your wife?”
“Yes, until she died. Then I had no reason to stay.”
“But you did stay with the rest of her family, didn’t you?”
“I’m not saying any more unless I can get police protection.”
“Protection from what?” asked Bradley, “or from whom?”
“You seem to have all the answers, so you must know that.”
“We have evidence which points to the Storey family.”
“In that case you should know why I’m asking for protection.”
“Look, John,” replied Bradley, “it will be in your own interests to tell us everything you know otherwise the charges could extend to first degree murder of several people.”
“Charges mean nothing if I’m dead. I want it in writing that you’ll offer me and my mother protection.”

The interview was suspended for a second time.

* 

With Buchannan and Cath due back any time, the anticipation was palpable. Was this the beginning of the end or just the end of the beginning? Either way they had one suspect and Bradley in particular was salivating at the prospect of more when they interviewed John Walton again. They’d held him overnight and he didn’t seem to mind one bit. Kieran had collated everything he’d found about the extended Storey family and made copies for the whole team, plus one for the Chief Constable.

The stage was set and Buchannan wanted this out of the way before Niall Osborn arrived. Apparently, Seamus West was quite affronted when he found out he’d been
struck out of a reunion type sabbatical in the north. Word had reached Buchannan that ex-DCI West was floundering in his new role, he just couldn’t get used to not telling all or even being economical with the truth. No surprise that this information had come from ‘Marjorie’, and could in fact be a false attempt to becoming Buchannan’s new best friend. In the greater scheme of things he didn’t seem to think it mattered, unless certain elements of the cover up were accidently revealed, in which case it could also be a form of insurance policy on London’s part – association by compliance.

Cath was first to get to the station and had an hour or two longer to digest the recorded content of the first two interviews with John Walton. Her input would be free from the complications of the murders in London, prosecuting only the interests of the Newcastle force and the people who’d got the case to the point of fracture if not totally cracked. She was aware of Buchannan’s meeting in London, and harboured slight doubts over his personal agenda.
Cath and Bradley took the lead with Buchannan poised to intervene if necessary. Grace and Kieran joined him in the screen room. This time there was a legal brief present even though John Walton had again said he had no use for such an aide.

The usual procedure of naming the participants began and still Walton looked relaxed.

“Mr Walton,” began Cath, “can I just clarify that you formerly lived in the same conurbation in Portugal with your wife, and the rest of her family?”

“Yes, that is correct.”

“And Frances Graham?”

“Correct.”

“We understand your wife was originally diagnosed with cancer in Newcastle.”

“Yes.”

“Did she undergo treatment in Portugal?”

“Yes, we’ve already talked about this.”

“Was the cancer your wife had the only reason the entire family moved over there?”

“It was, but it was all Michael Storey’s idea, nobody else really saw the point, even my wife was sceptical.”

“So, why did you all agree to move?” said Bradley, pointing at Walton, “if none of you except your wife could benefit, yet she wasn’t too keen?”

“You wouldn’t need to ask that if you knew the family. They came across as the chosen ones, righting wrongs that pissed them off. Michael never truly got over being forced out of his job by Henry Beck. And so he decided to fight this injustice from outside the UK. Victor backed him up out of necessity, even though he didn’t really want to live overseas either.”
Cath then posed a question which Walton declined to answer. “Was Michael the sort of man who’d seek revenge by hurting people?”

Bradley simply said, “Well, yes or no?”
“I asked you for protection and unless you guarantee that, you can lock me up for as long as you like.”

Bradley persisted, “So who is it you’re afraid of, Mr Walton?”
“No more talking unless I get protection.”
“We’d have to know exactly who we’d be protecting you from,” countered Cath, “surely you can see that. When you say protection, do you mean a safe house?”
“And a new identity.”

This brought Buchannan into the proceedings. The session was paused while they conferred outside the room.

The Chief Constable seemed to see an opportunity. “Look at this from a different angle, DI Moseley, this man is bursting to unload and is shit-scared if he does. He’s already told you he’d like bed and breakfast here if you were to offer that. He must be prepared to tell us something which puts his nemesis away, whoever that is. It’s the only risk worth taking for him because if we don’t collar the person he’s afraid of he thinks he’s a dead man anyway. Tell him that he’ll be charged with accessory to murder at the very least and we can arrange for him to be in a different prison to his bogeyman. It’s take it or leave it.”

Cath wasn’t happy with that and began to annoy Buchannan. Bradley asked for one more attempt at Walton before they made any commitment. He went in alone and didn’t restart the recorder. The brief objected but Bradley managed to get out his question.

“What is your profession, Mr Walton?”
“I don’t have a job.”
“Ok, but what did you do before you left for Portugal?”
“I was a civil engineer.”
I can see now why you didn’t really want to leave the UK. Thank you.”

Bradley joined Cath and Buchannan again and snapped his fingers. “He admits the white van is his, it’s almost certainly the one which was involved in the Finchmoor killing. He simply isn’t fazed by going down for assisting in a homicide. Why was he there? Does he strike you as a killer? I agree with the Chief Constable, boss, he knows the whole story.”

After another break and debate of thirty minutes they agreed to offer him protection for full disclosure, but only if he didn’t get a custodial sentence himself. It had to be one or the other and that meant a complete confession of his part in the attacks. Walton duly signed up for the deal. The interview was suspended for two hours while the paperwork was prepared and had been run past the station’s legal expert.

Crossing the Rubicon

This session included Buchannan from the start, causing apprehension for Cath, as she turned on the recorder and trotted out the names of those attending, then finally stated which charges supported the need for John Walton to help with their inquiries.

“Mr Walton, can you begin by telling us why you’re so concerned for your own safety, and how this relates to the attacks on Evelyn Murray, James Wilkinson, Jean Michel Blanchard, and Henry Beck.”

“It all began when my wife, who was known as Gladys Storey before we were married, was told she had an incurable type of cancer. Her brother, Michael Storey was head of the administration department of a Newcastle hospital trust. Amongst his regular duties of keeping costs within budget, he had some influence in which drugs were procured for specific conditions. Michael was frequently at
odds with the then director of the trust, Henry Beck. With society demanding more care for conditions such as obesity, narcotics dependence, smoking related disease, and general care for an increasingly ageing retired contingent, Michael and Henry Beck became bitter enemies. Beck was a pragmatist and would go with the flow, whether or not politicians were taking on board the rising anger from the hospital staff. He was weak, and was blatantly looking after number one. Michael was an idealist, and couldn’t accept such compromise of patients who had no self-inflicted conditions. He made his feelings clear to Beck, but he didn’t stop there. He galvanised overwhelming support from the workforce to address this ‘cart before the horse’ blindness as he saw it. Beck went to the governing panel of the trust and had Michael sacked. Instead of fighting this through a tribunal, he wanted to take the route of a civil case against Beck, not wanting to bring disrepute on the trust itself, because he felt the reasons given for his dismissal were fabricated. When the news of my wife’s cancer was confirmed things took a different turn. Michael became totally obsessed with bringing down Beck but from a neutral country, so that UK political interference would not be an issue. He came up with Portugal because he was aware of ground-breaking research on cancer treatment for my wife’s condition. Typically, Michael used his life savings to buy property for all of us to move there. Of course we had money from sales of our UK homes, but that would be gradually consumed by the cost of this new treatment. It was a hell of a step into the unknown, but we all wanted to help my wife, to give her some hope. You can’t put a price on something like that. Michael’s wife, his brother Victor, and myself were grateful for this gesture but deep down we had visions of the treatment not delivering and, what then? “They were nervous times and Michael’s case against Henry Beck was at an impasse. The European Court of
Justice was a very slow moving leviathan of an organisation, and the costs were escalating. It came to an abrupt head when the Portuguese treatment centre told us that my wife wasn’t responding the way other patients had, and recommended cessation. Michael refused to accept this and pleaded with the consultant to give it more time. It was to no avail and my wife deteriorated rapidly. She thanked her brother with all her heart for giving her the chance to beat this awful condition. Michael was distraught and went into a tailspin when she died. It had all been for nothing. At that time I was aware that Victor was becoming a problem, it was his sister as well, but unlike Michael, he found his outlet in anger. They had words frequently about what to do after the funeral, and that’s when I realised I had to get away from Portugal. Michael was always the one for taking the non-violent route, Victor challenged him on this ‘appeasement’ approach. I had noticed previously that Victor read reams of books on vigilante philosophy, the mafia families, and groups like ‘The Guardian Angels’ from a few years ago. The bitter feud between the brothers touched all of us. Michael’s wife wanted him to drop his legal case and spend more time with their sons. Victor started to beat up his wife and began seeing other women, and Frances Graham, who’d been a pivotal example in Michael’s case told him everyone should go home and forget about trying to hold higher powers to account. It all came to a head when Michael suffered a massive stroke. He became vegetative, unable to communicate but for gestures of nodding and shaking of the head. Looking after him single-handedly effectively took his wife’s life away from her, but she wouldn’t hear of letting him go into care after he’d done so much for others. That’s when I announced my departure, and unexpectedly faced my first threat. Victor said he was going to do what his brother had constantly shied away from. People were going to pay. He showed me a little notebook Michael had kept of potential
witnesses for his legal case. There were two types, those who could back him up in his claims, and those who’d been guilty of malpractice or turning a blind eye to it. At first, I thought he was joking, but he mentioned the care home in which my mother was living and told me I was either part of the solution or part of the problem. When I asked what use I would be in his mission of revenge, he surprised me again by saying it was my engineering expertise, and that this was my chance to break new ground. He said he’d convinced Michael’s wife to ask that awful question of her husband. Tearfully, Michael nodded when the subject of ending it all was put to him. He wanted to relieve his own suffering, presumably a combination of his incapacity and failure in his attempt to change the morality of decision making in medical care. He often used to say that people did not realise just how precious the NHS was, and were unconsciously allowing it to be turned into a wealth-related service.

“I was obliged, along with Frances and the rest of the family, to say farewell to Michael, followed by Victor placing a pillow over his face for what seemed like a hell of long time. Victor removed the pillow and thanked everyone, but never shed a tear. I learned later that he’d talked Michael’s wife into giving him control of the family finances. I’m sure you can guess who I need protection from now.”

Ever the one for dwelling on the detail, Bradley ignored the question and asked one of his own. “So, just for the record, Mr Walton, are you saying that your part in these attacks was confined to designing the torture apparatus?”

“That is correct, well, designing, making and delivering what he wanted.”

Bradley pressed on. “So, you delivered the apparatus to the Millennium Bridge, Vindolanda, Morpeth, and Finchmoor?”
“I did, oh I know what you’re getting at. I didn’t set any of it up, he had other people I had to instruct. He would never have trusted me to employ the damn things.”

“And what about the murder in Chelsea?”

“I refused to do any more specialist work for him, and he said he only needed a replica of a genuine rack apparatus. I made it but didn’t deliver it, he picked it up.”

Buchannan had heard enough of this line of questioning and reverted to the Finchmoor case. “You had a bump with another car when delivering your invention to Finchmoor. We know you hit a red Range Rover, we’d like the registration number.”

“It wouldn’t help you. He always used hire cars and used a false name. Believe me this guy is very thorough. He leaves nothing to chance. Look, before you picked me up in Gateshead, I was only waiting for my mother to pass away before I was going to hand myself in to the police. If Victor Storey can do what he has already without being caught, do you seriously think he would fail to get past an old ladies’ care home security? This guy’s rage has no limits. Are we done?”

Buchannan replied, “You’ve got a bed for the night, we’ll reconvene tomorrow. And we’ll keep an eye on your mother’s home.”
There was an implication in what John Walton told them. Buchannan had called the interview to a halt for good reason.

He asked the team to analyse what they’d heard while he made a call. When he finally got through he asked for the top man by name. After he was told that person wasn’t taking calls at the moment, he ramped up the stakes, irate at being treated as if he was reporting his bike had been stolen. “This is Chief Constable Buchannan from Newcastle regional police force. I assume you are aware of two recent murders which the Met is investigating and part of that process is working with my people. Unless you put me through to the man I asked for, you will be entirely responsible for your organisation missing a crucial opportunity to detain a suspect whom we have been told was responsible for both killings. I’ll wait half a minute and then terminate the call.”

“Please hold, sir.”

It took fractionally longer than the thirty seconds but he got his man.

“Hello, Buchannan, did I hear right? You have someone who may have been involved in these NHS killings?”

“Not quite, I have someone who confessed to being responsible for making the apparatus for the crimes. He has given us the name of one person who was involved in the actual murders. His name is Victor Storey. He lives in Portugal, but as the last killing was so recent, he’s probably still in the UK. I’m sending you an email with a photo of this man and a likeness of him provided by the victim of the first attack in Newcastle. We have alerted our regional airports, sea ports, and rail stations. He’s probably in a hire vehicle or holed up in London if he hasn’t finished his killing spree. We’re detaining the maker of the apparatus
indefinitely for the present, so I may be able to pass more information to you tomorrow. Time is of the essence if we’re to prevent him from disappearing into the mist.”

“I see, well, we’d better close the call and I’ll set a manhunt in motion. Many thanks, Buchannan. Call me again tomorrow regardless of whether your suspect coughs up any further information.”

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**Romulus and Remus**

Buchannan set the pace. “Now, Mr Walton, correct me if I’m wrong, but what you inferred in your testimony yesterday, amongst other revelations, is that Michael Storey had nothing to do with these attacks. Nothing whatsoever?”

“That’s right. Look, Michael was a true gentleman, and if he had a fault it was his trust in other people. His generosity of spirit was boundless. He was the polar opposite to Victor.”

“I see, but how did Victor decide on who was to become victims? Surely they were all people Michael knew from his line of work.”

“Indeed, but as I said yesterday, Michael wanted to set things right, but with due legal process. He had a little notebook with every detail about these people. He and Victor had a hell of a disagreement about whether those on the list would ever face consequences via civil lawsuits. You have to know this man to get an idea of how manipulative and ruthless he can be. Michael’s wife was preyed upon relentlessly by Victor to end her husband’s suffering, and although it could be considered as compassionate, how could he insist that all Michael’s loved ones must witness him taking his brother’s life? There was a wildness in his eyes as Michael’s chest heaved one last
time. Victor subsequently took everything he’d always coveted from his brother. We all knew that was really what he wanted, to become the head of the family, like a bloody Godfather. The notebook was the first thing he took. I have to admit, I found it strange that Victor didn’t kill the first two victims. I can only imagine that it was some kind of recognition in Michael’s notebook that they were indirectly involved, but I was expecting the spouses to suffer the ultimate punishment. It was probably Victor’s twisted mafia mentality, honouring part of his brother’s wishes. He couldn’t wait to get on to those he felt were responsible for refusing to authorise treatment of his sister in the UK. That’s what triggered his burning desire to make the world see the wisdom of punishment for disloyalty. That’s when I first knew he was going to make demands of me, his sister’s husband.”

There was an uncomfortable silence before Bradley asked the question everyone else had on their lips.

“So, Mr Walton, did you ever see this list yourself?”

“Of course, Victor had to brief me on all kinds of detail to make these bloody contraptions of death. I constantly tried to play for time, knowing my mother’s heart was going to give out soon. It’s only going to be a matter of weeks, or so they tell me.”

Buchannan was quick to pick up on Bradley’s thrust and decided it was unavoidable. “In that case, you have seen the names of future victims?”

“I wondered how long this would take, and that’s why I pushed so hard for the protection. Once I told Victor I couldn’t design any more specialised apparatus because my mother was on the pathway, he responded in true mafia style. He admired my loyalty to my mother and guts in standing my ground on her behalf. He accepted my offer to make a few ‘standard’ racks to move ahead with his plans quickly. I did know about the London targets, this Mr Jordan was responsible for the recruitment of Rachel Diaz.
Between them Victor apportioned the blame for the loss of my wife. The Portuguese woman was leading the treatment group in which my wife was one of her ‘lab rats’. To add insult to injury, Victor blamed Mr Jordan for extending this woman’s influence to the UK, and his own brother Michael for putting Gladys in her care in the first place. There are only two other names I was allowed to see, because Victor had accepted I was in temporary retirement, expecting me back after my mother passed away.”

The team collectively froze, waiting for Walton to continue. He didn’t, and they could almost feel his shame. Buchannan slapped the desk top and in a barely audible demand brought the interview to a knife edge moment. It seemed as if this was a question too far for Walton. He stuttered and began mumbling to himself, at which point Buchannan reminded him that if he wasn’t given a custodial sentence for his part in the attacks he would be safe. “The chances of you walking free are absolutely minimal, so that’s your safety net. You did pledge to tell the whole story and if you don’t it’s a deal breaker.”

Walton swallowed uncomfortably. “Ok, but you need to realise that these things have been organised for some time and I have no idea when they are actually planned to happen.”

Buchannan was beginning to lose patience. “Get on with it, man. We have to stop this fucking maniac. Spit it out.”

“Michael felt politicians were complicit in allowing the general policy of deciding the fate of those needing treatment to be outsourced. Not just for cancer, for all conditions. He particularly disliked the way N.I.C.E. played God on the basis of cost effectiveness, not on the plight of the patients. The department of health itself was his other concern, outsourcing such power over life and death to unelected quangos. He saw this as abrogation of duty. You can imagine how fired up Victor felt about this. You need to protect the head of N.I.C.E. and the Health
Secretary, or better still neutralise Victor Storey. He won’t have delivered his message until these people have been eliminated.”

Buchannan knew just how fanciful this was going to sound to both the Met and CT. He left the interview room, telling Cath to add what they’d just heard to Walton’s written statement and get him to countersign it. When the rest assembled in Cath’s office, the mood was subdued. This looked like the end of their involvement but it didn’t feel like having solved the case, although in reality they had. Such a shocking revelation was tinged with a little sympathy for what Michael Storey had tried to achieve, and a touch more that as a potential whistle-blower he hadn’t survived to see his mission completed. However, it was back to reality, the paperwork had to be in place in extra short order.

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Buchannan’s call was taken immediately and he disgorged what John Walton had said. He focussed on the clear and present danger to the lives of a minister of the cabinet and the chief executive of an organisation sitting smack in the middle of government edicts and pharmaceutical company greed. The reaction wasn’t too surprising.

“How reliable do you think this information is?”

“I’m not calling you to offer an opinion, I’m reporting the content of a confession of a suspect. If it’s advice you’re seeking, I would still go ahead with the manhunt for Victor Storey, even though two more targets have been named by our suspect. If he was to get wind of us being on to him, it might drive him into our arms at the exits from the country. My only reason for this call was to discharge my duty within the force.”
“Mm, I’ll have to consult with my colleagues before taking precipitous action with no intelligence to back it up.”

“Good luck with that, I hope your colleagues aren’t burdened by concerns over what might emerge if this Victor Storey is arrested, because our suspect has already signed his own death warrant if he isn’t. It’s a tough call, but I’m sure the Met will make the right one.”

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Kieran raised his hand during the analytical picking over of the bones of Walton’s confession. “We didn’t ask him about Frances Graham.”

“Shit,” said Cath, wondering whether Buchannan should be involved now that the London connection had been cemented by the revelations, “ok let’s do it now.”

Walton shook his head again when he was asked about a legal representative. Cath left the recorder off.

“I’d like to find and speak to Frances Graham, where is she?”

“I don’t know, but she’ll be wherever Victor is, she’s well and truly under his spell.”

Bradley added his own query. “Are we supposed to believe that just the three of you carried out these attacks? I mean, you didn’t participate in the actual torture. I find this extremely hard to believe.”

“Sure, Victor had the notebook. There were names in there which Michael had promised to help if he won his case. Some of them were just as obsessed with meting out real justice rather than settle for a rap over the knuckles for those they believed to be responsible for the premature deaths of their family members. I didn’t know these people personally, but there were more than a dozen. Frances will know them all.”
“Are they all from this region? Because they are accessories.”

“They were more than that, some of them had to be taught by me on how to work the apparatus to achieve just the right level of agony for the victims. They are murderers.”
If only… the Met had already warned the Health Secretary that they were mounting twenty-four hour security to cover the threat to his life. Sadly, they hadn’t made it in time to deliver the same message to Kirsten Villiers. Divorced for several years and without any children, she’d channelled all her energy into her career. Reaching the top hadn’t been foreseen by her rivals for the job, all of whom had at least on paper, better credentials. It was therefore seen as a blatant political decision. Claims that those making the selection ‘knew she’d endorse their way forward’ in dealing with the coming storm, were rife, and strangely never denied.

The Met had despatched officers to N.I.C.E. HQ, only to find she hadn’t turned up for work and not called in to say why. Something she’d never do. They moved quickly to the leafy neighbourhood in Kensington where she lived. Nothing seemed untoward until they checked the rear of the period property. A ladder had been left leaning to an upstairs landing window. There was a large perfect circle cut out of the glass. Entering the house, armed officers discovered nothing else to suggest a break in, but knew that wouldn’t turn out to be true. They called HQ and reported a probable abduction.

Niall Osborn’s trip north had been aborted as soon as the chief of the Met had passed on Buchannan’s tip off that the two people they all wanted were likely to be in the capital. He was redirected to work alongside the Met with immediate effect. CT’s expertise in monitoring various social media sites and their field agents’ edge in undercover operations was thought to be a valuable assist to uniformed and plain clothes Met operatives. Especially as there were now two strands to the strategy – a manhunt and an abduction.
Buchannan now regretted waiting overnight to resume questioning John Walton before alerting the Met. The crucial revelation of the final two names in Michael Storey’s notebook, which had now become Victor Storey’s obsession, could have been extracted at least twelve hours earlier.

Cath’s team were suffering from withdrawal symptoms, not having any obvious tasks in which they could assist in tracking down Victor Storey and Frances Graham. The mental vacuum was even worse, as Bradley coined a new name for himself – a detective eunuch. Just to ease the tension, he suggested to Kieran that they could go through hospital records again. “John Walton didn’t know the dozen or so relatives of sufferers that Michael Storey had promised to help if he won his legal case. If we can find just one of them we might be able to figure out the whereabouts of our two suspects. I don’t think they could realistically get to ‘off’ the Health Secretary without an elaborate escape plan. We know this guy is meticulous and a tenner says he has at least a couple of these assistants with him.”

Kieran was all in for such a trawl and Cath was relieved they could at least do something to keep up morale.

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The Met hierarchy was bracing itself at the imminent probability of being led to another corpse when everything turned on its head. Instead they received a ransom ultimatum.

‘Unless our instructions are followed to the letter Kirsten Villiers will pay for her immoral implementation of a *pay or go away* policy, based only on statistics rather than the needs of individuals. She was able to marginalise treating patients as numbers on a balance sheet, so she will
surely know what it feels like to be in the liability column now. You will receive clear instructions very soon and any attempt to intervene with a negotiator will trigger her execution. Do not make the mistake of thinking you can thwart the inevitable, this offer only buys you a fixed period of time – nothing more’

‘Exclusion in Twenty-Four Hours’

This message had also been forwarded to many media outlets simultaneously. The exposure which Michael Storey had fought for was being acted out in the living rooms of the world. For the public it seemed inconceivable that the authorities wouldn’t come up with a plan to counter such a terror threat. That wasn’t a view necessarily shared by the people at the sharp end of preventing executions of two people, one of which the terrorists already had in their grasp.

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Having been made aware of this ransom message, Bradley and Kieran intensified their efforts, aided by both Cath and Grace. They abandoned any hope of retrieving classified data with such a time deadline hanging over them. They went directly to the hospitals in the region which already had the expertise in oncology services in place when the Sanstrogen trials were conducted. The hospital staff were very helpful, delegating personnel to look up the records in the specified time period. Bradley and Kieran were first to pull out a potential candidate, and they agreed that Kieran would continue to search while Bradley visited the family address associated with the trial subject. Cath and Grace had drawn a complete blank and decided to join Kieran where there was still hope of
another hit. Three hours had passed when Bradley reported a dead end and headed back to join the others.

Meanwhile, the promised instructions arrived at the Met, but were apparently withheld from the media.

‘Our requirements are very straightforward, and monitoring your response is verifiable for us from a distance. The Health Secretary must address the media to deliver an admission of failure many years ago when there was ample evidence to warrant a proper inquiry into a cover up of the disastrous effects of a cancer drug known as Sanstrogen. There was suppression of how pharmaceutical companies’ greed and government compliance conspired to utilise an organisation which was designed to write off certain patients’ lives to save money. Yet they continued to fund treatment of those who only had to kick their habit, or stop gorging on foods which set them on course to become clinically obese. It was all marketed as saving our NHS, but implicating its employees in an abandonment of the fundamental Hippocratic Oath. This cover up concerns the government of today, and needs to become transparent for all of this country’s citizens to judge for themselves. After all, this policy which was to save our NHS is actually in ruins right now, so it was all for nothing, except for the families of those it sentenced to death. Kirsten Villiers has been injected with a well-known Bio-toxin overdose, so you are confronted with the question of whether this would be a cost-effective use of resources to save one person, who just happens to be part of the organisation which specialises in playing GOD. She can be saved but only if the broadcast is open and honest. If that is what happens you will be sent the coordinates of Kirsten Villiers’ whereabouts. If not, you will still receive them and find her body’.

An emergency cabinet meeting was convened to discuss every implication of doing nothing or complying with the ultimatum. As a guest of this meeting, ‘Jerome’ offered a
view that this could be a ploy to assassinate the Health Secretary by placing him in a known location, offering up an opportunity to deploy explosive devices. There was more dilemma in the air than cohesive thinking. During the stalemate, the media presence, and consequential demands on the Prime Minister to stop wasting time, grew inexorably. Nineteen hours remained, but that said nothing about how long it would take for a commonly prescribed therapeutic neurotoxin to become fatal when injected as a significant overdose. Botox was like cancerous tumours insofar as they could be quite benign or catastrophic, depending on the quantity involved and the reaction of the subject. A lottery of sorts, or a challenge to government willpower together with medical science.

Deadlock persisted until ‘Jerome’ made his second chess move, proposing that it should really become a full blown Cobra session, claiming that certain ministers had not undergone any training or preparation for such a situation. He got his way and five people left the room. A comfort break ensued and this allowed the head of security for the entire Westminster ‘bubble’ to ask the PM to step aside for thirty seconds.

“Sir, it may seem presumptuous of me, but my remit covers the safety of personnel, privacy, and property within this great institution. Threats may arise from out-with the country, indigenous sources, or even from the citadel itself. You may not know that I was ‘promoted’ to this post from counter-terrorism many years ago, and my new post is by necessity, apolitical. I was transferred out of CT with two other people to stop a scandal being exposed. Turning this critical meeting into a Cobra session is no bad thing in itself, but it will mean a heavier presence of CT ideology. If you can extend the comfort break by five minutes, it will give me time to spell out what the stakes represent for some of the participants. I realise we are facing a deadline but there is more than one agenda here.”
“Very well, get my PA to summon me to my office before we re-convene.”

Closing the door behind him, the PM urged brevity with the clock continuing to tick. “This has to be good, we must have some response to this threat even if it turns out to be an empty one.”

“Of course. That is exactly my concern. During my time in CT I was involved in the Sanstrogen fiasco. So were two of the participants in your meeting. They will want you to do nothing other than tough it out. Apart from Sanstrogen causing major concerns over its effectiveness for all recipients, its side effects were played down. However, the manufacturer, Morgan-Blanchard, had already engineered the Sanstrogen molecule to react with another drug, giving a symbiotic effect which could best be described as a truth drug. Our two CT people presently attending your meeting were salivating at the prospect of being able to use a magic wand to extract information from terror suspects. They ignored the blindingly obvious pitfall that such a drug would be more dangerous than useful if we weren’t the only ones to have it. They couldn’t be persuaded to back off its covert trial inclusion in the general Sanstrogen battery of tests, despite me telling them that a giant pharmaceutical company would not block supplies to our enemies. It was comparable to social media corporations’ uncooperative attitude to blocking hate and terror recruitment posts. The alpha-numeric coding of participants allowed for the subjects of this experimentation to be voluntary, well-rewarded and secrecy-bound individuals. Then the nightmare manifested itself when several of them became slobbering, zombie-like shadows of themselves.”

“All of this is confusing me, why hasn’t anyone, including my predecessor, told me about this before? Look, I have to go.”
“Because the reports are not declassified for another ten years, by which time ‘Jerome’ and ‘Marjorie’ will be retired in a swanky villa in the Med, and, after taking European citizenship, able to prevent you from extraditing them. If these reports were published today they’d be facing a long prison sentence, never mind losing their livelihood.”

“I see… I’ll have to take this into account, but I still feel I should be seen to be doing something about this poor woman whose life is hanging by a thread. Get me some kind of confirmation of your allegations and hand it to me. This meeting will go on all night if it has to.”

“That’s not going to be easy, sir, but think about it, what do I have to gain by telling you this? I’ve actually got a hell of a lot to lose.”

“Mm, the threat itself may or may not be a hoax, and negotiating with terrorists may or may not be acceptable, but exploding a stink bomb like your revelation, although it may be perceived by the people of this country as a brave decision, could also look like an attempt to shift responsibility.”

“Yes, of course, but this ‘terrorist’ group which made the threat wants the Sanstrogen scandal exposed, and if that does happen, they are in for a shock, as even they don’t know about the truth drug, so you could gain respect from every angle except CT. I do understand it’s a gamble, as is anything in politics – and I already said I have to remain apolitical, but I am allowed to condemn unpunished treachery.”
The meeting dragged on painfully slowly. Some other participant must have had the ear of the PM, as he set a cut-off point of fifteen minutes.

“We have to allow time to organise the broadcast studio as demanded by the message received. Rather than the Health Secretary taking responsibility for what is said to the audience, including the abductors, I will do so. I can’t hide behind someone who doesn’t know the whole story.”

The room filled with murmuring and people shifting in their seats. The Health Secretary breathed a sigh of relief and ‘Marjorie’ asked for a glass of water.

“That would be a mistake, Prime Minister,” stated ‘Jerome’, in a matter of fact tone, “the message was very specific. These people want publicity, and they want the Health Secretary to speak to the nation, but you need to be able to agree or contradict whatever he does say, depending on what happens next. I earlier said it would be a risk to put anyone in the firing line for these anarchists, but I’d rather it was the health secretary than the PM.”

This was summarily brushed aside and the PM authorised the preparations to begin. If contempt was as visible as smoke, the austere old cabinet office would not have offered a breathable atmosphere.

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The next family Kieran had circled in the hospital records had an address in Newcastle suburbs. Old Benwell overlooked the river Tyne and wasn’t so far along Scotswood Road after exiting the dense city traffic. It began to look like another blank until the elderly homeowner mentioned that his daughter who’d died during the Sanstrogen trials was a twin.
“Joanna was a twin. It’s hard to get your head around one of the siblings being diagnosed with cancer, and said to be genetically vulnerable to the condition, but the other wasn’t. They said he could be afflicted later in life, but Ryan hasn’t had any problems as yet, touch wood. He has lived with a kind of guilt, asking why Joanna and not him. He became more and more agitated after every check-up and then told he was clear. We argued about this and he eventually said he needed to move away from Tyneside. This was hard for us, losing him in this way, but he does visit us every year on the anniversary of his sister’s death.”

“Where does he live now? I’m sorry, maybe I’m being too intrusive.”

“No, it’s ok, and this was a long time ago, and time does have a healing effect of sorts. But, we never saw our son as someone who could settle in London. He always says it keeps his anger under control, being as far away from where Joanna died. He hasn’t even told us if his latest test was clear.”

Bradley thought about this on the way back to the hospital. He had a puzzling mental picture of Ryan Curtis which persuaded him to air a remote possibility with the team.

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When the PM appeared in the TV studio, it took the nation by surprise, but filled Victor Storey with seething anger. However, he slowly calmed down, regaining the overall focus of the campaign. It finally crystallised when the Prime Minister proudly told the interviewer that nothing short of a full independent review would be authorised to investigate the Sanstrogen trials. Victor barked out instructions to the rest of his group and said he’d wait for them in a side street off Battersea animal refuge.
The PM had completed his broadcast but not quite finished congratulating himself on such a polished, statesman-like speech when he was handed a transcript of an email sent from an unregistered mobile. It had been posted to all social media platforms and it was aimed at the Prime Minister.

‘This was not our demand. You have made a serious mistake. The time for our demands on you in person were for another day. That will still happen. We promised you coordinates where you would find Kirsten Villiers, and we keep our word. They are at the bottom of this message. Unfortunately she has been given a second overdose and this will prove fatal. Next time, comply exactly with our instructions.”

Victor Storey told Frances Graham she should get the others to walk drunkenly along the pedestrian side street while supporting Kirsten Villiers’ drugged hulk and sit down on a public bench. “Then tell the others to go back to our safe spot and wait. I’ll wait here for exactly two minutes before I join you, make sure Villiers is propped up on the bench. Then you can leave. When I know from my phone that the message has begun to spread I’ll follow you back.”

Victor didn’t have long to wait and waved a passer-by to come close. “I’m terribly sorry to ask you, but my daughter is suffering a diabetic fit and she’s lost consciousness. I’ve used her last glucose tablets, so I have to get more right away. There’s a pharmacy around the corner, so could you please stay with her for a few minutes? I have to avoid her going into a coma. Please, I don’t have much time?”

The woman put down her shopping and nodded sympathetically. Victor thanked her profusely and dashed toward the junction. The incident had attracted a crowd of onlookers by the time the Met arrived in force. Paramedics followed their convoy and found Kirsten Villiers with a barely registerable pulse. Despite their best efforts she
failed to respond and was taken to the pathologist an hour later.

The PM had gone from an astute judge of the situation to a gibbering apologist in the time taken to wash off his interview makeup.

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Cath listened to Bradley’s gut feeling that it was worth following up on Ryan Curtis. “You’ve been on a good run recently, but why are you so hot on this? That is, apart from us not having anything else to keep us engaged with this case. We do have other investigations to look at.”

“It was just the way his father welled up when speaking about Ryan’s guilt over his sister’s death. It sounded a bit like all those World War Two veterans who left friends on the battlefields of Dunkirk and D-Day. They always mention their guilt over coming home when others didn’t. It struck me that Ryan may have felt he could assuage some of his guilt by fighting Michael Storey’s cause through Victor’s vigilante actions, you know, to deliver belated justice.”

“Ok, go and see Buchannan and if he feels the same we can at least ask a few favours of our friends from the Met.”

It didn’t take much to convince Buchannan, especially as he was still feeling regret at not passing crucial info on Kirsten Villiers sooner. “Well, well, Bradley. It’s a fair shout. I assume you’re going to continue with this line of checking out victims’ families from back then. You’re right, some of them must know more about this Victor Storey’s intentions, at least more than John Walton did. Leave this Ryan Curtis to me. I’ll pass this on to my contact at the Met, and you should be ready to go down to London if they are receptive to this approach. After all they should recognise that all the pertinent information on this case has come from us, and that even applies to their victims.”
The press, as always, are masters of adaptability when situations change - the rabbit turns and thinks about chasing the dog for a change. The PM was immediately put on the spot with regard to whether the death of Kirsten Villiers meant it was even more urgent to conduct an independent review of the Sanstrogen saga, or more likely to trigger further killings. He was visibly showing signs of uncertainty, which only served to fuel more questions. He asked for patience, saying there was to be an imminent meeting with counter-terrorism, after which he would make a further statement. Two people were quite pleased with the outcome, and especially the prospect of a slimmed down meeting with a vulnerable Prime Minister.

In the meantime Victor Storey was sketching in the finer details of the next step in his crusade. Adjustment was necessary because of the PM’s meddling. Regardless of any independent inquiry sham, which would in all likelihood fudge any inference of wrongdoing, the focus had to be kept on the hypocrisy of the major players who constituted or supplied our revered health service. This was an inconvenience to the cause rather than a setback as long as it could be rearranged quickly. He summoned his most trusted cohorts to meet. Frances Graham was asked to round them up.

Kieran had kept his foot flat to the floor with three computers on separate tasks and managed to dredge up two more family names from the Sanstrogen trials. More importantly, he’d been doodling around with the alphanumeric codes. He’d never been happy with only figuring out the names, date of birth, and other personal stuff. There
were multiple surplus digits with no logical explanation as to what they represented. With the help of his ‘dark web’ friend he managed to unlock more data. It was fortuitous that the two new names he had extracted actually confirmed that the trials were much more complex than was first thought. It jumped out at him that condition zero rating for patients were treated differently. One set was rated on response to tumour reduction in numeric terms and the other was ascribed with only a pass or fail, some were even taken out of the trials after just a few days. His persistence finally paid off when he began to investigate the individuals for each sub-group rather than think of them as a single group. All patients who had been described as cancer sufferers had dosage levels of Sanstrogen displayed on a regular predetermined schedule, whereas the VS (Voluntary Subjects), as they were annotated, were simply deleted and their personal data appropriately modified to a status of either resistant or compliant. Something wasn’t right, this wasn’t drug trial lingo. So, Kieran suggested that Bradley should speak to both of the new families he’d pulled out, because although he’d assumed they would both be based in the northeast, he was wrong.

Declan Bradley was only too happy to hear news that his gut feeling hadn’t ushered him up a blind alley, and he set off to North Shields, near the mouth of the Tyne, before moving on to Solihull, not far from England’s second city.

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The new meeting had hardly got going when ‘Jerome’ asked the PM to set out the terms under which he and ‘Marjorie’ were mentioned to the media.

“Well, I thought that would be obvious, this situation may be on a smaller scale than vehicles mowing down pedestrians on Westminster Bridge, but it nevertheless is
driven by terrorists. It isn’t merely civil unrest. You are responsible for monitoring acts of terror, but I seem to recall that you’re also charged with devising plans to prevent it.”

‘Jerome’ would not retreat. “True, but you weren’t prepared to heed our advice at the previous meeting, and it is that kind of rashness which places us where we are now. Do I take it that you are more amenable to whatever we recommend now?”

“Yes, maybe,” declared the PM, taking a deliberately long time to imbibe a glass of water while still staring directly into the eyes of the CT chief, “so perhaps you could begin the session by indicating whether there are any documents, classified or otherwise, which could help us all understand precisely what it is which makes these terrorists tick. Surely, there is some procedure in your organisation which covers such threats. I mean, it’s what you do isn’t it?”

‘Jerome was sufficiently ruffled by this assertion that he waffled untypically. “You may be right, well, you are right about procedures, but as far as individual threats are concerned, I’m afraid that I can’t recollect any precedent to this case. It is new ground we find ourselves in, but I take your point that we should look into what you said. However, classified means what it says, so I suppose we can check to see if there are any similar incidents which are almost ready for declassification. Good point.”

“Mm,” muttered the PM, “what I was really getting at was if there was news tomorrow of a new technological threat emerging with the power to take down this country in a single manoeuvre, would that justify looking through classified material relating to what we already knew about research on this killer weapon?”

‘Jerome’ nodded, very weakly and unconvincingly, but didn’t answer the question.
The media just would not let go of the bone, they sniffed corruption, and were always on the lookout for conspiracy. It also had some effect in shifting public condemnation of the killers toward mistrust of their elected government, regardless of any political persuasion. Maybe this lack of trust would never have emerged if the future of the NHS hadn’t been at the heart of the whole saga. The wind of change couldn’t be ignored by the Prime Minister, and it began to sink in that his own future hung in the balance. He summoned the head of Westminster security to his office.

“I sensed some discomfort in the two people you mentioned when we last spoke. I merely alluded to the need to know the full story of the Sanstrogen fiasco, and there was a wobble, which turned into a perspiring upper lip when I queried classified material. I don’t think they believe I know anything specific, so I let them off the hook for now. So, I need some definitive proof of what you told me. If this whole deception you claim to be true happens on my watch, I want to be the one who exposes it to the nation. We can’t look at evidence here, so we will need a reason to be together off-site when you are in possession of your evidence.”

“That isn’t going to be easy, sir, but I still have a few contacts. It cannot be a straightforward appeal for help. The way things work is similar to organised crime, I’ll need to throw in a piece of meat for the wolves to fight over. I need to be approached rather than be seen to be seeking help. Leave it with me, sir.”

* 

Bradley’s first port of call in North Shields was answered immediately the door was opened. The Simpson
family consisted of one old lady with a Zimmer frame. Her husband had passed away four years ago and she was waiting to pass into full time care in sheltered accommodation. She was able to confirm that they had lost their daughter during the drug trials, but it was clear from the short conversation that Sanstrogen was the last hope, and thus they felt no animosity toward the NHS.

The West Midlands was a different kettle of fish. Edward and Mary Harrison had three offspring. The eldest son was now studying medicine in Johannesburg, Their daughter Connie fell victim to Sanstrogen side effects in the worst possible way – lesions, internal organ disintegration, and gradual loss of sight in one eye. The person of interest however, lived in London, having moved there relatively recently. Carl, sadly had been diagnosed a year ago with Hodgkin’s Lymphoma. Bradley was told by the tearful parents that he was undergoing treatment in the capital, but like his deceased sister, the condition was categorised as terminal. The father also added that Carl had taken his sister’s death very badly and as a result been influenced by some bad people. He couldn’t remember names but knew they weren’t from Solihull.

Bradley called Cath immediately and after she’d relayed the details to Buchannan, authorisation was given for him to head on to London.

“Listen carefully, Bradley,” barked Buchannan, preening at another chance to belittle those who’d rejected him as a dinosaur, “I’ll be travelling down to meet up with you. I’ll make hotel bookings for us and text you the details. Don’t discuss anything with anybody until after I join you. You’ve got that, right?”

“Yes, sir, err… see you then.” He heard the line disconnect.

*
Victor Storey addressed his group over concerns they’d raised following the PM’s failure to adhere to their demands.

“We mustn’t allow this to derail our plan. I know that some of you are worried about the manhunt aspect. Yes, it has come sooner than we expected but now that they believe we are all in London, perhaps it’s time for some of you to move out of the capital. We are now within sight of the final round of our task and it needs to be accelerated because of the PM’s folly. We only have need for the inner core of four people to act out the finale, so to the rest of you, I salute your loyalty to the cause and I’m confident we have made a difference, even before the finishing touches are added. The loss of your loved ones cannot be undone, but perhaps future generations may benefit from your dedication to expose the backroom killers. You’ve helped to put things into perspective. Killing someone by allocating a crossed box instead of a ticked box is legal, yet if a suffering individual craves euthanasia they are breaking the law. With a cocktail of statistics and political correctness, it is legal to pander to drug addicts, alcoholics, smokers, and obese people, ignoring that free treatment is there in the form of stopping doing something, unlike non self-inflicted conditions which require doing something to alleviate naturally occurring fatalities. Statistics are worshipped to the most ludicrous extent with diabetes. The general public are given the wrong message. Because type two of the condition is spiralling out of control, and is often caused by lifestyle choice it gets centre stage funding, even though it can be reversed by changing that lifestyle. By contrast, type one diabetes is a death sentence without insulin, which isn’t a cure, merely a stay of execution, yet the funding is amorally infinitesimal in comparison. Type one diabetes can develop from type two by neglect, whereas type one is more often than not developed by genetic deficiency or viral attack of the pancreas. The
pharmaceutical companies make a fortune from their products, but what is the point of all this research if N.I.C.E. rule that they can only be dispensed on a cost-effective basis. Who are these people who decide these issues? We are entitled to question this practice of discrimination to underpin the profits of the pharma companies. The NHS are complicit in part by administrating such policy. We want the creation of an NHS owned research unit for pharmaceuticals to avoid proven examples of the big private corporations blocking the NHS from prescribing alternatives which are a fraction of the cost. All that stands in the way of this is political will. I’m reiterating all of this because whatever happens to the four of us who are charged with the final phase, the rest of you remain as torchbearers to the movement. To the barricades my friends.”

The group quietly divided, reinvigorated in their crusade to truly shed light on state injustice by administering their own injustice, all the while underlining that every life is equal, not graded by money or any other arbitrary scale.

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With the PM having taken the spotlight off the Met, they were able to reflect on the manhunt pretty much to the exclusion of all other aspects of the case. Their real problem was the lack of UK based information on the only two targets they had likenesses for. Normally, there would be stuff such as bank accounts, national insurance numbers, and records of TV licences, hospital appointments, and even council tax payments. Everyday living information had been missing for several years. Buchannan’s call was therefore like a gift from the gods. The chief of the Met took the initiative after hearing what Bradley had discovered.
“Well now, Chief Constable, you haven’t given me names, so I assume you’re looking for something in return if I’m to be given them.”

“That sounds crude the way you put it. I ask no favours for myself or the Newcastle force, only advice on how to deal with a couple of people in CT. Again, it’s nothing personal, simply appropriation of guilt where it belongs.”

“Tell me more, I’m hooked already.”

“You deal with CT on an everyday basis, and that’s normal with the current terror threat from Jihadi groups who are intent on hurting the west. However, other things can disappear under the radar when the focus is in only one direction. CT won’t have made you aware of the fact that these suspects landed back on our doorstep several times in recent years. They needed advance planning time before the start of these attacks we’re all investigating. CT did a casual survey of what we’d found after the first two attacks. And then left saying there was nothing for them to investigate. They don’t ever do that. It was only when the attacks shifted to London that they ramped up their interest again, and they planned to raid our case notes again. I managed more by good luck than anything else to avoid that. To me, this smells fishy, I’m certain their first trip wasn’t to see what we’d achieved, but rather what we hadn’t. It’s the same reason they cancelled their recent request to revisit us; the action had switched to your bailiwick. I’ve thought about this to the point of obsession, and it can only be because you’re conducting a manhunt for people they don’t want found. The additional names I’m about to give you could be the proof, because they have remained as UK residents. I’d like you to find them, as I’m sure you would, but you need to protect them, and that’s all I ask.”

“Your call is timely, Chief Constable. We also have issues with CT, which I don’t have time to elaborate upon. Suffice to say that if we can find these people, they will
remain in custody with us for as long as it takes, and CT will not be allowed to interview them unless I’m present. Do we have an agreement?”

“Just one sticking point, CT can’t interview them unless both you and I are present.”

“No problem, but it means that you’ll have to be here on very short notice whenever we need you.”

“I’d counted on that being the case. I’ll book a long stay in a nearby hotel. I can run my Newcastle duty from here via my Superintendent, he seems to have nothing else to do and it gives me a chance to evaluate him on a temporary basis. Right, the two individuals are Ryan Curtis and Carl Harrison both relatives of people who died after being treated with this Sanstrogen drug a few years back. Curtis is from the north and Carl is from the west midlands. Their home addresses are on this report, but I’m sure they are staying somewhere in London, most probably with Victor Storey and Frances Graham.”

“I won’t forget this Buchannan. Stay in touch, but use the number I’m texting you in future.”

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The PM had finalised his thoughts on the next step, subject to what he’d get from the Westminster chief of security. He was poised to declare that in order to ensure transparency the independent inquiry would have to include access to any classified files which were deemed relevant. He realised he was putting himself on collision course with law makers, but if it uncovered malpractice of sufficient gravitas, he’d be hailed as being a nemesis of corruption, whereas if this surfaced by another route, he’d be obliged to fall on his sword. The one thing he felt he couldn’t control was any further maverick response from the abductors of Kirsten Villiers.
It was all ready to go. Those helpers not involved in the final demand had departed the capital. Victor insisted on going over every detail one last time with Frances. She was asked to recite it by heart, one section at a time. The four of them then took their individual equipment and separated. This was a last minute precaution in case the manhunt was to find Victor or Frances. They each headed for the location of their particular task, having synchronised their watches. Frances was entrusted with code words to orchestrate the show.

Buchannan met up with Bradley and they repaired to the hotel bar. He informed his detective constable of part of the plan. “The Met are taking over the baton on finding these two men you identified as probable allies of Victor Storey. You’ve played a major part in this success, Bradley, and it won’t go unrewarded. Now is our time to observe rather than set the pace. When the Met apprehend Curtis and Harrison, we will be involved in their interrogation. It would however be prudent for us to confine our input to the laws which we’re supposed to uphold, anything else, such as political consideration, is not the business of the Newcastle force or the Met, and that will pass to others. I’m only telling you this to avoid any conflict with any other organisation. If you do have any of your legendary hunches or theories, run them past me first. Don’t even fart without my permission. Got it?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good, let’s have a few Greenland prawns and a bottle of white Burgundy to mark your stellar performance.”
The PM agreed to meet with the Westminster chief of security in one of his residences well away from Downing Street. The news was hopeful yet frustrating.

“It’s going to take a little longer, sir. I’ve had a couple of nibbles but not at the level of authorisation we need. Passing this kind of request up the line is very dangerous, so it’s going to be a waiting game.”

“I’m not really in a position which offers the luxury of time. The media are all over this now, not just in this country. They can sometimes be annoying when there’s nothing to hide, but if you fail to dig out this proof of conspiracy before the bloodhounds, I become the first to resign. There are grave risks in a situation such as this, but I’d rather go down fighting for something I believe needs to be exposed than survive to become complicit in such deception. You have twelve hours before I make legal challenges to obtain these classified files transparently.”

“Sir, I have to advise against that course of action. It will only guarantee that your successor will be chosen on the basis of denying everything. There will be an inquiry with a remit of concluding there is no case to answer.”

“Maybe, but I can’t be part of that. I have children for god’s sake, so all things considered, if I don’t hear from you within twelve hours I’ll trigger plan B.”

An unexpected twist landed in the middle of the various mini-plots as hatching time approached. A Swedish journalist had been following the Newcastle attacks on the internet. Although she was more interested in them than the London murders, because she’d lived in the northeast for several years, she couldn’t help seeing a connection with a scandal in her own country. Separated by only a year or so
from the UK trials of Sanstrogen, a lesser known pharmaceutical company, Scandfors-Nobel, had trialled a new cancer drug. They had an injunction slapped on them immediately, backed up with claims that it breached patent rules. The drug was claimed to have been developed from direct modification of the Sanstrogen molecule. Despite the wrangling over this claim, the Swedish company published their interim results of the trials. The product, Norasten, had an impressive benefit rating in halting several types of cancer and demonstrated minimal side effects. It was also shown to be less stressful for patients than most other competitive drugs when dosages were gradually built up. What caught the eye of the Swedish journalist was the subsequent aggressive takeover of Scandfors-Nobel by Morgan-Blanchard. A giant swallowing a minnow doesn’t make too many waves in world financial newspapers and even less on televised channels. When Catrina Eriksson looked further into archived information, she discovered that Norasten had been withdrawn not long after the acquisition of Scandfors-Nobel. She’d tried to contact the most senior officer in the Newcastle force, eventually being diverted to Cath, as Superintendent Gibson was out to lunch. She took Catrina’s number and said Chief Constable Buchannan would call her back within a few hours.

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When the Met armed response squad broke into the address they’d been given for Ryan Curtis, the apartment was unoccupied. However, there was a plethora of evidence that he was involved in the ongoing attacks. Amongst these finds was a map of London with over twenty locations marked with crosses within a circle. They were well spread out but lacked any further notation as to what they represented. Were they attack locations which had previously been marked with only a circle, then
discarded with a cross? Could they be meeting venues, to ensure there was no pattern which could be monitored? Forensics began their trawl for evidence which might shed clues on other possible explanations. When the team leader interviewed neighbours they were told they hadn’t seen the occupant for over a week. He kept a low profile but the neighbours said he did match the photos they had of Ryan Curtis.

It was a similar picture at the last known address of Carl Harrison, with a couple of exceptions. There was no map on the wall, but they did find a memory stick in a bedside drawer. It was marked ‘Cross Checks’.

Relaying this back to HQ, they were instructed to get the memory stick back immediately. One operative was left to speak with neighbours and was asked to believe the apartment hadn’t been occupied for the last three months, and that none of them recognised pictures of Carl Harrison. This testimony was not considered to be helpful in progressing the manhunt.

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As Cath hadn’t been apprised Buchannan’s precise movements she had trouble getting him to answer her calls, and voicemail had not elicited any response. She switched her attention to Bradley, and when he heard the outline of Catrina Eriksson’s claims he said, “Just give me the number, boss. I’ll find him, he’ll be in one of the bars around the hotel. I’ve got nothing better to do until the Met reel in Ryan Curtis or Carl Harrison.”

“Ok, but she’s only going to wait another fifty minutes or so before her publication goes to print. If you can’t find him quickly call me back and I’ll call her back. I’ll tell her Buchannan is in a meeting with the Met and he’s authorised me to ask her to get the next flight to London. We can’t afford to let this lead go.”
“I’ve got it, speak to you soon.”

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The atmosphere in CT was growing tense. The noose appeared to be tightening. So much in fact that tempers were starting to fray. ‘Jerome’ had to bear in mind that ‘Marjorie’ could take him down with her if he tried to shift total culpability to her. Conversely, she couldn’t blow the whistle on him without seriously embroiling herself to the point of prosecution. In order to steer any form of inquiry into the Sanstrogen affair away from the parallel truth drug experiments, they had to work together. This was going to be difficult because they had both tried to cajole Niall Osborn into siding with their individual accounts of what happened back then. He was smart enough to decline any involvement with either of them, or taking a step toward false testimony of having any knowledge of the existence of a truth drug.

As the senior officer, the onus was on ‘Jerome’ to manage this period of ‘standing on the edge of an abyss’. Reluctantly, he concluded that the only option left was to hire a discreet hitman. There were a few in the ranks of CT, but he couldn’t risk further complications. He knew a retired mercenary from an infiltration group which fought in Syria with the Peshmerga. He set up a meeting in Brighton. One necessary element of this slippery slope was to have a rock solid alibi in place well before the event.

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Bradley had found Buchannan at last. He didn’t recognise the person with whom he was sharing a drink, so he apologised but asked the Chief Constable to step outside for a moment.
“Sorry, sir, but there’s been a development, I need to speak with you in private.”

Buchannan seemed to be annoyed but didn’t make a fuss and excused himself. “This had better be good, Bradley, I’m in the middle of being debriefed by the Met regarding the manhunt.”

“Right, I’ll be as brief as I can. DI Moseley gave me the number of a Swedish journalist who has some very relevant data on this case. It does stray into political stuff but I think you’ll want to hear what she has to say. Here is the number, and apparently she’s only going to be available for about another seventeen minutes. I’ll get out of your way now, sir.”

“Fine. Is that it?”

“Oh shit, I forgot, DI Moseley said she’d authorised this woman to fly to London as soon as possible. If this source is accurate it could wrap this case up altogether.”

“Generally I don’t trust journalists but I do trust Moseley. Ok, make yourself scarce and I’ll be back at the hotel in short order.”

Buchannan managed to get through to Catrina Eriksson at the second attempt. The conversation was a little stilted at first, as a voice without a face can sometimes be.

“My name is Buchannan, Chief Constable Buchannan, am I speaking with Ms Eriksson?”

“It is Catrina Eriksson, yes.”

“I understand you spoke with one of my officers, Detective Inspector Moseley. She asked me to call you back.”

“Yes, thank you. She also said I should come to London to talk face to face. I am busy looking at flights to do that.”

“I see, well I’d appreciate hearing more about what you’ve found in relation to our investigation before you get on an aeroplane.”

“I explained that to Inspector Moseley.”
“Yes, but I’d like more details, I’m intrigued by the connection of Morgan-Blanchard to this Swedish company and the drug trials. Can you elaborate on names of people involved and dates?”

“I can do that, of course, but this is very sensitive information and I would like to have some discussion with you about ensuring exclusivity of my story.”

“You mean you want this to be your scoop?”

“Yes, that is the word I was looking for, a scoop.”

“I think that could be possible if your information is completely verifiable, but after initial disclosures the rest of the wolves will fight over the scraps. Can we proceed on that basis? We will have to trust each other, or you could just publish what you have and refer to what’s going on here. I also have information which is sensitive, so maybe a meeting is the best way forward. What do you think?”

“I agree. I will make my flight booking and let you know when I will be there. Goodbye.”

Buchannan wasn’t going to share his intent to meet Catrina with anyone else. To that end he rang both Cath and Bradley to insist they also kept completely shtum about the Swedish journalist until he said otherwise. Cath fortunately hadn’t mentioned it to either Kieran or Grace, so it was down to Buchannan himself to keep Bradley on a tight leash. He headed back to complete the latest situation update from the Met regarding their failure to apprehend Ryan Curtis or Carl Harrison. It was internally perceived as a minor setback rather than the ball having been dropped. Buchannan considered whether it offered up another dimension to the bigger picture, if Catrina Eriksson was to publish her story without mentioning his name until later in the saga.
Epicentre

In the past few weeks the media searchlight had been waving from one theme to another. Homicide and impotent police, distant posturing by politicians, silence from the security service, dragging of grievances into the public psyche, and last but not least an underlying feeling of facades being erected and shifted to limit damage. The scent of a conspiracy of sorts was also crawling from unpleasant to pungent. Hinting but not printing had been the watchword. That was about to change.

Zero hour was almost upon them. Coincidentally, the PM was just beginning his carefully worded presentation of what was going to happen, not knowing that it wasn’t.

Victor Storey stood outside the gates to the houses of parliament bubble. He read his daily newspaper and wondered what the headlines would be tomorrow. There was a mischievous look in his cold, calculating eyes. Had it all been worth it? Would his brother have eventually been proud of him? Would this finally harness public anger and channel it to action? Would he be judged as just another mentally frustrated anarchist? Did he care? He looked at his chronometer and breathed deeply while he awaited the code from Frances.

* 

The meeting participants had been further reduced to concentrate minds on the priority issues. The PM, Foreign Secretary, Home Secretary, Chief of the Met, and ‘Jerome’ were joined by the Westminster head of security. His presence was justified by the blackening mood of social
media, principally toward the Health Secretary, who was excused due to his need for medical treatment. A blatant case of taking him out of the firing line. The mere presence of one of his old adversaries unsettled ‘Jerome’. It also made him wonder if he should have delayed his decision on ‘Marjorie’.

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She was taking her normal morning jog along the embankment, looping back through traffic and pedestrian walkways to her home. At the end of her street a junction had temporary traffic lights and a notice that work was due to commence. The lights weren’t working properly and a car turned into the street, supposedly not knowing of the malfunction, just as ‘Marjorie’ crossed the road while looking at her watch. It was a quiet street but there were a few people out and about, including two paid witnesses of the driver. ‘Marjorie’ was hit from behind with enough force to throw her over to the other side of the road until her momentum was interrupted by a lamppost. An ambulance was called immediately followed by police. Several bystanders saw the accident, including the two hirelings, and their statements pretty much concurred as to the fact that neither the permanent lights nor the temporary ones were working properly. Nobody accused the driver of going at an excessive speed and he sat at the kerb, continually retching but producing no vomit. The car registration was noted and he was taken to hospital with ‘Marjorie’. She was badly injured but conscious, complaining that she had no feelings in her legs.

*
Buchannan was on his way to the airport while Bradley was kicking his heels in the hotel, and he decided to have his hair cut while the boss was away.

Catrina’s flight was on schedule and they found a quiet snack bar to decide on where would be the safest option if she was going to show Buchannan hard copy of her findings. The Chief Constable settled on getting her a room in his own hotel once it was obvious that there was a large pile of paperwork to peruse. They left the airport and hailed a taxi, and during the ride he phoned Bradley to tell him to reserve a room for Catrina. The rest of the journey was confined to small talk about where she lived in Sweden and how much she’d enjoyed living in Newcastle for a while.

* 

Victor Storey was shaking after receiving the code from Frances. He strolled up and down the approach to the parliament gates until he found himself a circular space free of people, with a diameter of approximately ten metres.

He glanced skywards as if looking for his siblings, a tear trickled in a winding course to the side of his mouth, and he asked for forgiveness. A flick of his lighter was rapidly surrounded by nascent petrol fumes when he shed his overcoat, the clothing underneath having been pre-soaked in petrol. The ignition was spectacular, freeze-framing the thickening crowd around him. Like a cut scene from the Wicker Man, he combusted with a ferocity which was meant to dissuade any have a go hero from saving him. His burnt effigy slumped to the ground without the flames abating and security personnel dashed towards him. Throwing their jackets over Victor Storey eventually doused his blackened corpse, and the medallion which had been hanging from his neck rolled across the paving, revealing only his name.
The news of this sacrifice, acted out right next to the democratic nucleus of the nation, quickly siphoned up to the PM, who briefly explained why he had to suspend the meeting.

*

The reverberations of Victor Storey’s demise hadn’t yet displaced all of the planned written headlines, when Ryan Curtis received his code. It was precisely fifteen minutes later than the one sent to Victor Storey. Spring Gardens, close to Charing Cross, is the London office of N.I.C.E.

Ryan, unlike Victor, fell to his knees rather than reaching for the sky. Except for that, it was a replication of the first sacrifice. The same shrieking bystanders, the same whooshing ignition, the same frustrated rescuers. It took a little longer for security personnel to attend the charred body and find the individually engraved medallion. Again the PM was apprised of the discovery of another target of the manhunt. The participants of the meeting scratched their heads thinking of where the next Guy Fawkes was going to appear. They came to the correct generic conclusion but not the specificity of location.

*

Great Maze Pond isn’t an address which would equate to a household name, but Guy’s Hospital is. A centre of excellence for cancer treatment seemed fairly obvious in hindsight. And hindsight was what this grievance was all about. On the stroke of thirty minutes after Victor Storey’s spontaneous combustion, Carl Harrison faced the main entrance and stared defiantly into his own personal abyss. A slow smile heralded the spark which became the point of no return. The searing heat did cause minor burns to those nearest to him as his body capitulated to gravity. Typifying
human behaviour, several of the by-passers closest to Carl Harrison threw over him anything they felt would help to stifle the flames. The security men from the hospital had to prise the medallion from one hand of the smouldering corpse.

Fear was building in the meeting with news of the third suicide in half an hour. They braced themselves for the fourth to arrive in another fifteen minutes. It didn’t happen. Confusion filled the room and then the meeting was abandoned with no future session penned in until further notice.

The PM sat in the empty office and seriously contemplated his own future. Privately, he frantically yearned for a means of going on the offensive, but how? Regretting his initial action in dealing with the ransom messages, he wasn’t sure who he could turn to.

The puzzle of why the fourth suicide had not been reported was suddenly revealed. Frances Graham had turned herself in to the Met, exactly one hour after the first sacrificial gesture. The Met hurriedly arranged secure containment of Frances after making sure she had been strip-searched. To the horror of those officers performing this degrading necessity, Frances’ body illustrated how her grotesque facial distortions were pretty much dwarfed by what they saw on her naked body. One of the female officers refused to continue and left the cell. Frances had only revealed her name and her instruction by Victor Storey, to hand herself in. She refused to utter another word until she could see the top man. A strange demand in the thoughts of some who’d attended the meeting with the PM, and had been apprised of her voluntary surrender.

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‘Jerome’ was reeling in the car taking him back to CT. He had received a message from one of the hired witnesses
to the car accident that – ‘Black Hawk’ was down but not

gone.

‘Shit,’ he muttered under his breath, scarcely able to
take in another situation over which he now had no control,
‘I’ll have to go and see her as soon as I’m officially
informed she’s been hurt.’

Ten minutes later he was struggling to contain his bowel
movement, sitting on the office thunder-box, when his
name was called out, presumably because they’d looked
everywhere else for him. “What the hell do you want?
Can’t a man get a moment of peace anywhere in this
wretched place?”

“Sorry, sir,” said the voice, “we’ve only just heard
‘Marjorie’ has been admitted to hospital, and she’s in a bad
way.”

“Oh, no… what a swine of a day this has been. Has she
had a cardiac problem or something?”

“They said she’d been hit by a car at some roadworks
near her home. That’s all I know.”

“Damn. Ok, thanks. I’ll be there as soon as my ablutions
permit.”

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Buchannan and Bradley had seen the news on TV and
were both totally perplexed by what had happened.
Buchannan broke off from his discussion with Catrina and
called Bradley to meet up with them. As soon as he was
ushered into her room, his eyes gave away the game. She
was, in his broad experience, one of the most attractive
women he was sure he’d never get close to. And what a
voice, as she shook hands and introduced herself. He was
already miles away from a moment ago when he’d knocked
on the door.

“I’ve told Catrina I really do have to go to the Met, and I
want you there as well. We’re pretty well through what
she’s uncovered back home in Sweden, and it’s going to blow the lid right off this case. I know that I said we should keep out of the political stuff. Well that’s not going to happen now. Catrina, do you mind taking care of yourself for a couple of hours and then having dinner with us?"

“Not at all, I need to take a shower anyway.”

‘So do I’, thought Bradley, beginning to lose the battle with his hormonal balance.

They left in a taxi, navigating the short ride without being confronted with gridlocked streets. Buchannan told Bradley to give the driver a generous tip and marched to the impressive reception.

“I believe you know me by now, this is DC Bradley from my division.”

“Yes, of course. I’ll print out ID cards for both of you.”

It took another seven or eight minutes for someone to come to reception and collect them, by which time Buchannan was almost frothing at the mouth. A first in Bradley’s experience. The elevator delivered them to the high altar of police work. Another first for Bradley, it was turning out to be a good day to rid himself of a bad hairstyle. Buchannan fidgeted uncharacteristically until the Met Chief appeared.

“Are we sure this is the woman we’re looking for?”

“Indeed,” replied the Chief, “but prepare yourself for photographic images the like of which I’ve never seen before. Apart from that, she has all of her ID documentation, plus those of the three men who killed themselves today. I don’t need to tell you that there is no hiding place now. We have to get her to reveal the whereabouts of the rest of this ‘cult’.”

“Maybe,” said Buchannan coyly, “however, you may wish to hear what I’ve recently been apprised of in the context of this cult, as you’ve referred to them. It shocked me, and I’m sure it’s going to increase the sales of Imodium beyond the expectations of any drug company.”
“On a day like this, Chief Constable, I’m prepared to believe the Earth really is flat.”
Frances Graham sat quietly in the interview room, prepared for whatever they might throw at her. She felt more empowered than at any time during her post-cancer life. She declined any kind of refreshment and made eye contact with all three guardians of the law sitting opposite. Having already cautioned her and suggested she should have legal counsel at her side, which was politely refused, they began. The Met Chief was monitoring proceedings on screen.

“Ms Graham, were you in any way connected with the three suicides in London yesterday?” said a senior Met interrogator.

“Yes and no.”

“Could you confine your reply to either yes or no, please?”

“No.”

“Are you confused by the question?”

“No.”

“So, is it yes or no?”

“Both.”

Buchannan leaned forward and smiled. “Can you say why it’s yes and no?”

“Yes.”

“Good,” said Buchannan, looking directly into the sad, tired eyes of Frances, “I’d like to understand more about what happened yesterday. We thought you might have been the next to set fire to yourself.”

“That wasn’t the plan.”

Buchannan continued to probe gently. “Of course, the plan. Can I ask, what was your role in the plan?”

“To send the codes.”

“Ah, the codes, so you knew what your friends were going to do?”

“Yes.”
The Met interrogator indicated he was fine with Buchannan taking the lead.

“Frances, you must have been sad when you sent the codes.”

“Yes and no.”

“I thought that might be the case,” replied Buchannan, nudging Bradley’s knee under the table, “this was planned a long time ago, wasn’t it?”

“Yes.”

Bradley caught on quickly, the Chief Constable wanted Frances to feel there was at least some shred of empathy with her cause. After all, she was visual proof of how hope of being cured can be turned into an unimaginable pit of despair.

“Frances, I’m DC Bradley. “Did you want to follow Victor, Ryan and Carl’s example yesterday?”

“Yes.”

“So, if it was the plan not to do that, there must be a reason. Is that what you are supposed to talk about?”

“Yes. It’s important.”

“I’m sure it is,” agreed Bradley, genuinely wanting to hear her explanation, “you can talk about this now if you want, we can ask our questions later. Would that be better for you?”

“Yes.”

“Ok, Frances, where do you want to start?”

“When I first met Michael.”

“Michael? Michael Storey?”

“Yes, he tried to help me after I was so poorly with the drug.”

Buchannan asked her to say the name of the drug.

“It was Sanstrogen. It didn’t seem to be working and it gave me lots of pain. I couldn’t get any sleep. The doctors said it would get better soon. I was sure at one point that I had died, but they told me when I woke up that I had been unconscious for two days, and they could now reduce the
amount. Because I had been told at the beginning I only had months to live, I just kept believing that I might get better. It did begin to make my tumours smaller but I started to get rashes all over my body. These rashes turned into scars and swollen lumps. They stopped giving me the drug and said they couldn’t do anything more to help me. I started to feel less pain, but my body and face looked awful. They just kept me in hospital to try a treatment for the lumps. My family asked to see Michael and he looked at my notes. I was then moved to another ward and put under the care of a new doctor. After a few more weeks Michael arranged for me to see another specialist and after that I went home, but Michael said he wanted a proper inquiry into my condition because the cancer hadn’t killed me and I had no more malignant tumours. Michael said my original dosage was much higher than it should have been. Not long after that he was sacked from his job, but he said he would fight the decision and promised me I would see another specialist, but in another country. Michael was the only one from the hospital who tried to help me. I didn’t want to move to Portugal but I couldn’t bear the way I looked, so I went with him and his family. When he found that the specialist in Portugal had also been giving people Sanstrogen type drugs, he became ill himself, and not long after that he suffered a stroke. When he died, I suppose I died in a way. If it hadn’t been for his brother Victor, I would have come home. Victor wanted people to know something was wrong, the drug had so many side effects which were never explained, and so many people didn’t get any better, then died. I wished I had died. Victor said we owed it to Michael to tell the British people what had happened. Apart from my condition, he’d lost a brother and a sister because of this drug. He said it was wrong that nobody had been blamed for not being honest about the tests, and it would never happen unless we made it happen.”
Buchanan noticed Frances’ hands shaking rapidly and asked if this began after the Sanstrogen trials. She nodded and said it would go off when she stopped bringing back all those bad memories. The interview was suspended for half an hour.

On resumption, Buchannan asked Frances if she could now talk about the events of yesterday.

“Yes. Victor had decided to do things this way because all three of them had recently been diagnosed with cancer. Victor had kept his bad news to himself until we started the campaign. It was the same kind which killed his sister. He didn’t want to suffer the way she did, but he was still furious that they denied him the same chance I had back then. He wouldn’t have accepted but it was never offered. He knew that there’s a new drug in America which works for that type of tumour, but N.I.C.E. said it was too expensive, and that’s why it wasn’t used here. He would have paid for it himself, but even selling the properties in Portugal would only have covered about half of the full treatment, and houses aren’t selling so well there at the moment.”

“So,” said Bradley, trying to stifle a cough, “were the three men who died yesterday the ones who carried out the attacks in Newcastle and London?”

“Not exactly, I helped with the kidnapping, Victor, Ryan and Carl did the… you know, the… I’m sorry.”

“They did the killing? Is that what you were trying to say?”

“Yes.”

“And what about John Walton?”

“Oh yes, but John only made the contraptions, he didn’t want to but Victor bullied him. He was Victor’s sister’s husband, you see. Victor said he had to do his bit.”

Buchannan wanted this all tied up as soon as possible. Time was still likely to affect the fate of many people, culpable officials and future patients. “What about others
who were loyal to Michael or Victor? There were many more relatives of those who lost loved ones in the Sanstrogen trials.”

“Yes, but they have gone away now. They just helped with hiring vans and things, buying food and cooking for us. They helped as much as they could with expenses but it wasn’t a lot. Again, Victor didn’t want them to just forget what had happened, and shouted at them to get off their backsides and do something. They were glad when he let them go.”

“One last thing then, Frances.” Said Buchannan, “We need this to be crystal clear in your statement. Only Victor, Ryan, and Carl actually committed all of the murders. You and John Walton assisted them in both of the murders in London, and the attacks plus the murders in Newcastle. And you helped with the kidnapping in London.”

“That’s right. It’s all explained in his diary. That’s why I handed myself in.”

“Diary?” queried Buchannan, “what diary?”

“He wrote everything down so people would read the whole story one day.”

Bradley couldn’t contain himself and in a reflex response, almost knocked Buchannan’s coffee cup over.

“And where is it? This diary?”

“In a safe place. Victor told me to say nothing about that until we find out what will be done to let people know about what the drug companies, N.I.C.E., and the NHS did in those trials, to hide what really happened. That has to be done not just promised before I am allowed to tell you where his diary is. He wanted me to be the one to tell you this because people can see what happened to me. Victor said a picture tells its own story.”

The interview ended and Frances was taken back to a holding cell. Buchannan felt his hand was a fraction stronger now. It was time to enlighten the Met chief with a little Swedish cocktail.
Bradley felt a tad out of place at this ethereal level. Just him, Buchannan and the Numero Uno, of the policing pyramid in the UK. He didn’t really know why he was there. Well, he knew about Catrina, and was very attracted to her, but had only heard the headlines of what she knew, presumably selectively disclosed by Buchannan. It wasn’t often he told himself to keep his mouth shut, that task usually fell to other people. So, why wasn’t Catrina here? He didn’t want to ask, he didn’t want to screw up his career, and he most certainly didn’t want to screw up the one and only chance of having a drink with her, if he could somehow shed the burden of Buchannan.

The Met chief thought he was echoing Buchannan’s relief at finally wrapping up the case.

“Congratulations to you Chief Constable, and your team of course, including err…DC Barkly here. I do have to speak with the PM, so can we keep this brief?”

“Thank you, actually his name is Bradley, easy mistake to make. But, if I were in your position, I’d postpone your call to the PM for another day. There are some sinister things going on and it connects with something Frances Graham referred to in the interview.”

The Met chief was apprehensive, he was certain that Frances Graham’s confession had put the case to bed, subject to what this diary had in store “Isn’t it more important to find this diary? We’ve been lucky not to get dragged into the political quagmire, it could easily have gone the other way.”

“That’s exactly what I’m trying to say. The media have been circling like vultures, and so far they haven’t picked up any proof of their allegations of malpractice. What would you say to proof that implicates CT and your
organisation in unlawful use of so-called truth drugs to obtain confessions?"

“I beg your pardon, listen, if we are to continue this conversation I’m going to ask your DC to leave.”

Bradley began to realise why he was there.

“I’m afraid I can’t accede to that, I need a witness that I’ve disclosed what has come to my attention. I can help you to distance the Met from any wrongdoing, but that requires not just a passive independent inquiry such as the type the PM promised, it needs to be a root and branch trawl of relevant classified documents. I’ve always felt that if you have to take sides, make sure you can enter the fray on the front foot. The PM’s future could be at stake here, not as a direct transgressor, but by not going as deep as is required to restore faith in democracy itself. I’m not being melodramatic, as you will see when we speak to our Swedish journalist. Her name has to be kept out of this while she’s in this country.”

“Actually I’ve been told of rumblings in CT about something similar, but I dismissed this as conspiracy theory obsession. The rumour is that someone is trying to find their way into classified documents with inside assistance. No names, no specific files mentioned, just an urgent time frame. When can we speak with this journalist?”

“As soon as I’m satisfied you can provide a safe place to talk. Not in London though, as you’ve just confirmed, these rumblings in CT are of serious concern. Let me know your preferred meeting point tonight if you can, otherwise we may find we’ve been overtaken by the same disclosures, but with a different spin. Urgency is the watchword.”
Catrina Eriksson waited at her hotel reception area patiently. She betrayed signs of nervousness, particularly with her locked laptop case tethered to her wrist, as if it was a beloved pet. Continually glancing at her watch when there was a gigantic clock hanging over the reception desk told its own story.

Taxis were coming and going frequently, causing her to crane her neck in the hope of recognising the occupants. Finally, they arrived, well at least Bradley had been despatched to collect her for the onward journey.

“Hi Catrina, please follow me, we have a car waiting to take us to a place of privacy. Sorry we are a little early but we do need to have enough time to explore all aspects of what it is you want to tell us.”

“Fine, let’s go then.”

Once inside the taxi, and having got through greetings, she asked who the third occupant was and where they were going. Buchannan shook his head. “All in good time. You have eaten I presume? I hope so because we really need to get to our venue as soon as we can.”

“Yes, well, a light snack.”

Buchannan nodded toward the driver and his eyes gestured to the others that the meeting hadn’t yet commenced. Bradley was helpful in launching into small talk to fill the void, talking about the likely outcome of a football match which was apparently due to start quite soon. The rest of the journey was suitably boring for the driver, who’d put on a set of earphones. Thirty minutes later, the taxi pulled up alongside the football stadium which had previously been mentioned, and they all got out. Bradley tipped the driver and the taxi sped off.

“Catrina, let me introduce a senior officer from the Metropolitan Police. I haven’t disclosed any of what you
told me as yet, nor your surname. These details can emerge as and when we’re all comfortable with each other’s position. So, I’ll now hail another cab for the short journey to our meeting place. This may all seem a little melodramatic but you never truly know if you’ve been followed.”

Silence then prevailed for the five minute journey to an apartment block overlooking the Thames. The penthouse was eight floors up and the view over the river with the sun nudging the horizon was quite spectacular. Buchannan set the scene by asking Catrina to outline why she was seeking an exclusive situation for a story in the UK, when what she was about to disclose was really a minor scandal in Sweden.

“My name is Catrina Elise Eriksson. I first came across the story of Frederick Sven Larsson when I met my future husband, Bo Willem Larsson, the nephew of Frederick. As I was training to become a journalist, my natural curiosity was always going to get me into trouble. When Bo told me about his uncle’s work and how he’d been persecuted, I said I wanted to help. However, Frederick forbade me to stir things up again, and Bo said if we went against his uncle’s wishes it could affect my acceptance into the family.

“Frederick was a very prominent researcher in his university days but really shot to fame when he joined Scandfors-Nobel. His discoveries relating to cancer treatments and subsequent formulation of drugs which could recognise and convert malignant cells to benign ones, saw him acknowledged as one of the foremost in the world. It was widely expected that he’d be awarded a Nobel Prize later in his life.

“I refused to give up my investigation into what went wrong, I just stopped talking about it to Bo. I followed the trail in secret. The story wasn’t so big outside Sweden because the sinister part was hidden inside the public
outcry against Scandfors-Nobel in general. When Morgan-Blanchard flexed their muscles and took legal action against their tiny Swedish competitor, the management in Stockholm buckled under the threat of very heavy penalties if patent law had been breached. Despite Frederick’s impassioned plea that there was no infringement, the big bosses would not risk a fine which could sink the company. Norasten, their most successful drug was withdrawn and it seemed like the problem had gone away. But when the Swedish Health Service complained that equivalents purchased outside the country were astronomically more expensive, an internal government inquiry was set up to investigate claims of profiteering. Because the freedom of information situation in my country is rather more forgiving than in the UK, I was able to access documents which cast shadows over the terms of Morgan-Blanchard’s acquisition of Scandfors-Nobel. Not only was the national health authority being ripped off for imported cancer drugs, in fact the directors of Scandfors-Nobel appeared to have accepted less than par value for selling their shares. The compensation, as you will see from my documentation came with the inflated number of Morgan-Blanchard shares received. Two main areas of investigation arose from these ‘fraudulent’ transactions. First, would Scandfors-Nobel have lost the alleged patent law breach? And second, how much money had been unnecessarily drained from the Swedish Health Service, which was by then heading for bankruptcy?

“Despite having documented judgements from several experts, I was continually shut out of discussions as to whether this could be taken further. My relative inexperience was always quoted as the excuse for letting sleeping dogs lie. Then everything changed, because Bo, who was by then my husband had let some of this slip to his uncle, and Frederick tried to take his own life. Luckily, his wife realised in time he’d taken an overdose of
medication and he was rushed to hospital. When news of this broke, all of a sudden news editors began to contact me because I was part of Frederick’s family. It wasn’t yet about justice, it was just a juicy story, magnifying tragedy instead of tracking down facts. However, it did generate sufficient interest to attract the real movers and shakers needed to take on the case.”

At this point, the Met chief revealed his name to Catrina, saying this was all very interesting but he failed to see a connection to the UK attacks currently under investigation.

Catrina responded. “Well, that should become obvious when I rewind to the point where Frederick Sven Larsson was taken out of the Swedish company, shortly after the Morgan-Blanchard acquisition, ostensibly to bolster research in the UK, but in reality to silence him over the Norasten saga. When Morgan-Blanchard rebranded their Sanstrogen product because of its tarnished reputation, it was a simple derivative of Norasten, but sold at the Sanstrogen price. The UK NHS was now being, dare I say, the next health service to be shafted by this company. But there is more.”

Buchannan wanted something clarified. “So Catrina, are you saying that this Frederick Larsson was complicit in this immoral price-fixing?”

“Indeed, but I would use the word blackmailed rather than him blindly implementing Morgan-Blanchard’s wishes. When he was still in Sweden, he was given an ultimatum. Stay there and be fired for potentially breaking patent laws, and see his lifetime objective of a Nobel Prize extinguished, or move to the new parent company in the UK and get their total support for the Nobel honour. Frederick admitted to me after his suicide attempt that although he’d agonised over this moral dilemma, he could not resist the lure of everlasting fame. However, he was unaware at the time that a secret programme was about to
complicate things in a way which would force him to reconsider everything. Morgan-Blanchard refused to give up on the original Sanstrogen formula, because so much research capital had been invested in the brand itself. They told Frederick to tweak the formula and set up a new trial programme for patients who were going to die anyway, it would be a last hope, and it would be voluntary. There were plenty of volunteers, apparently. But Frederick was then informed of a secret parallel programme for the UK counter-terrorism department. Some earlier work to save the Sanstrogen brand had unexpectedly indicated properties of a ‘truth drug’. He was told to conduct tests on patients supplied by this counter-terrorism organisation within the cancer trials of this new Sanstrogen brand. In other words, the same drug was given to cancer sufferers and suspected terrorists. Frederick finally came to terms with his obsession, and realised this was a step too far. He resigned with immediate effect and returned to Sweden, where he was hated by now. His life has been one of a recluse since then. It was only after his suicide attempt that he asked to see me and said he had kept every single report, communication, and instruction during his time at both companies. He still has the originals in a safe place, but I have with me copies of each one. There is even a statement from the patent office all these years later that Norasten did not infringe their rules. This was a perfect storm created by Morgan-Blanchard’s PR people. Frederick is a broken man, but does want to set the record straight, without trying to deny his own guilt. If I was to convince my editor to run with this story only in Sweden, it would still leave the door open for long enough to let Morgan-Blanchard and your CT people construct feasible denials. Frederick isn’t the only one who can be blackmailed. If the story breaks here first and my editor is happy that we are part of the exclusive, I’m sure the people of the UK will be happy to see this exposed without the usual censorship. Both
countries have to report the same facts. And, who knows if this practice extends to other countries?”

The silence was deafening. Buchannan could tell that the Met chief was shocked, yet he’d already admitted that similar rumblings had emerged from his sources close to CT regarding classified documents. Rather than begin a different discussion on the vagaries of the secret service in front of a foreign journalist and a provincial detective constable, he delivered the obvious question.

“Can we see these documents and reports, Catrina? All of them, from Frederick’s time at Scandfors-Nobel to Morgan-Blanchard, to the alleged CT ‘patients’?”

“Yes, of course, but we need to have some headline agreement along the lines of the exclusivity I mentioned. If this is not possible I will return to Sweden tomorrow.”

The Met chief asked if Catrina and Bradley would repair to a neighbouring coffee bar for no more than five minutes so that he and Buchannan could discuss the best way to ensure the exclusivity which had been requested. Catrina responded positively but firmly.

“Yes, I recognise how tricky this might be, but please understand that I’m risking my personal life here. Frederick accepts that he will be vilified, but the rest of the family will blame me for that, and it might mean the end of my marriage. However, one person isn’t more important than my country. Life is littered with tough choices. Five minutes then.”

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Buchannan tried to distract himself from the imaginary visualisation of the Met chief’s transparent head, with its intermeshed cogs rotating one way and then the other. He sensed there was some mealy-mouthed compromise on its way. He glanced at the apartment décor while the statement was hatching and concluded this apartment was just one of
the trappings which needed protection if you happened to be in his position. When it did come, the proposal was a total surprise, ludicrous yet intriguing.

“I recall telling you that I’m obliged to give an overall update to the PM on our progress. Well, it occurs to me that we are in a strong position to claim the threat of more attacks is minimal, now that we have Frances Graham locked up. That side of things is pretty much neat and tidy, with one exception.”

“And that would be,” asked Buchannan, getting slightly restless.

“She said that Victor Storey had some kind of posthumous message ready to be delivered. That could be embarrassing, depending on what is in it. She won’t tell us whether that is the case, but maybe she can trigger its release even when locked up. My guess is that it’s ready to go if the others don’t hear from her soon. We need to find out.”

“True,” said Buchannan, “but we still have to deal with the bigger problem if Catrina goes solo with her proof. Sorry, I said we, when I actually meant you!”

“That’s correct, unless you join me in taking this forward.”

“Join you? How does that work?”

“My deputy has wanted to step down for a couple of years now. She has been a fantastic servant but wants to see her grandchildren grow up. This seems like an opportune moment to let her retire. How would you feel about replacing her?”

“Christ, I didn’t see that one coming.”

“Look, Buchannan, I know you got short-changed recently when you were expecting a move to CT. This offer would put you at some advantage in sorting those bastards out. Think about it urgently, I really do have to see the PM.”
“So, if this goes tits-up you have a ready-made scapegoat. Mm, I’m not sure the timing is right.”

“It never is, but we both take a risk, and we are both tied to the outcome. I wouldn’t survive if it blows up in our face. My appointment of you would be considered a massive error of judgement. Well?”

“Do I get to handle CT directly?”

“As far as the Met’s statutory involvement is concerned, yes. I have to share our concerns with the PM as to whether he will delegate to us special temporary status to investigate CT directly. Remember, his arse is also on the line here, it’s a question of judgement for all of us.”

“When you put it that way it makes sense. And it would be logical for me to be present when the facts are put to him. If he disagrees, I’m out. I won’t rely on second-hand verbal promises.”

“Fine, let’s do it. Call Bradley and tell him to take Catrina back to the hotel. Say we have an agreement in principle and we’re taking it to the highest authority in the land right now.”
Crossroads

The Prime Minister issued instructions that they were not to be disturbed. Bradley had been assigned to babysit Catrina, and would have been delighted to do so but for her revelation that she was married.

There were only three options facing the participants of the meeting, turn left, continue straight ahead or turn right. However, a complicating element was that none of them allowed for a reverse gear. Great emphasis of this needed to be right at the front of their minds even though it was no longer an option to do nothing. The PM kicked off proceedings.

“As I see this situation, we have to establish a pecking order of priorities to precede an action plan. Dealing with questions about the attacks is an issue which is already out there – it’s a known and quantifiable risk. However, I’d like to get that out of the way before we engage in any other fallout which may arise from our statement on where that investigation stands right now. Please begin.”

The Met chief passed the ball to Buchannan to explain the links between the Newcastle attacks and the London murders, not just that they were perpetrated by Victor Storey, but a summary of why they were carried out in such a brutal way.

“Prime Minister, some of this is now clearly established fact, yet there is still little known about what is in a diary which is apparently a first-hand account of Victor Storey’s motive. His chief collaborator in this is already in custody, having handed herself in. This was obviously part of Victor Storey’s meticulously sculptured long term plan, because as you know, he took his own life rather than suffer a
lingering death from cancer. We’re acutely aware that this is intended to garner sympathy with respect to his own criminal actions while simultaneously generating seething anger toward the establishment. Until we know what’s in this diary, we cannot quantify the damage it could bring about, and we have reason to believe Frances Graham doesn’t need to make contact with any remaining members of Storey’s gang for this to find its way to the media ahead of us getting our hands on it. We need to find a way of flushing this out, and I think we may have hit lucky on that score. My esteemed colleague here can sketch in the delicate balance involved with government, the Met, and CT. My own views are less important in this triangular relationship, but I’m more than happy to comment if that is felt necessary.”

The Met chief made a cogent summary of the session with Catrina Eriksson, declaring her demands for releasing her proof of wrongdoing in both Sweden and the UK.

Buchannan was first to detect a knowing look on the face of the PM.

“Fascinating,” said the PM, as he considered this new information, smiling while he retrieved a document from one of his files, “it’s quite a coincidence that a source close to CT has confirmed that there is serious consternation over the growing probing by the media regarding classified files from the very same period your journalist speaks about. As yet, and despite my pressing this source, no progress has been made to penetrate the closed rank tactics of the secret service. However, if this journalist can bring a new dimension to the poker game…I’m intrigued. Proof from outside the UK will be damaging across the board, including myself, but being first to expose the misdemeanours will be key. I can foresee the CT problem receding, as there will be those whose very survival will be uppermost in their minds, and those whose opportunity for power will never be closer. Call it what you like – whistle-
blowing or backstabbing, it will divide them. We need to worry about the media now. They could undo any scheme we come up with, particularly if they find even the smallest crumb of unsubstantiated connection of shameful behaviour of CT with the historical Swedish scandal back in the day. And they will find something unless we can act first. I’m pretty much convinced we must agree to the journalist’s demand, and you must find a way to coerce this Frances Graham woman to furnish you with this damned diary. Are we agreed?”

Buchannan and the Met chief nodded in unison, the former with clear enthusiasm, and the latter with guarded discomfort.

*  

Meanwhile, Niall Osborn had visited ‘Marjorie’ on numerous occasions, willing her to regain her memory as well as fighting off bouts of unconsciousness. He was acutely aware of ‘Jerome’ only having seen her once, and guessed the swine was relatively relaxed about the grim prognosis. Virtually every other colleague had stopped visiting her, but unlike her boss, they were genuinely heartbroken.

The head nurse in intensive care pulled Osborn to one side. “Before you go in, there is some good news. She was conscious for quite a long time during the night. She’s very tired, so please don’t pester her to talk, just sit and let her become familiar with her surroundings. The consultant is due to see her in an hour. It would also help if your colleagues continued to stay away for now.”

“Well, sure… I mean that’s fantastic…I’ll make sure she doesn’t get more visitors until you say so. In fact I may just not mention this good news unless I hear of anyone intending to come and see her. Thank you, nurse…I was beginning to lose hope.”
This, together with the covert probing into classified files, allegedly by the Westminster chief of security, was beginning to impact Osborn’s thinking. He had never trusted ‘Jerome’ or ‘Marjorie’ implicitly, she was a tricky customer at times but stood by her confidants resolutely, whereas ‘Jerome’ had the DNA of a slithering reptile. In the days since the accident Osborn had harboured a gut feeling that the witness statements were virtually carbon copies of that of the driver. He’d called on the services of a private investigator, a long time personal friend, to look into this via contacts in the police. In view of the hospital development, he called his friend.

“Hi Jeff, have you made any progress on the accident yet?”

“Not with the police, I’m afraid. However, you may be interested in the car itself. It was a hire car, and the plods didn’t seem to think that was unusual, so I followed it up. The guy who hired it gave a false name and address, and so did the driver. The police are chasing this up now, but I got CCTV footage from the hire company and when they pointed out the guy who hired the vehicle I ran some checks with a contact in facial vector tech, and this man has a record as long as your arm. Aggravated robbery, forgery, identity fraud, and ram-raiding from way back. The hire company have now pushed the police into action because they have a wrecked vehicle but no punter to screw.”

“Ok, I appreciate this, mate. It might be wise to back off now, I have an idea on how to take it on from here. Take care, and let me have your bill as a bona fide invoice.”

*

Bradley asked Catrina why she thought her husband might consider their marriage to be inappropriate if her story could clearly be seen to be true.
“Surely Bo would understand that his uncle was in no way an innocent bystander in these scandals. He can’t pretend that the man didn’t know what he was doing. It’s no excuse to say he was simply protecting his family, when he was really looking after himself.”

“I know all that, but the Larsson family is steeped in parading their impeccable reputation for setting examples others should follow. It goes back many generations and no black sheep are tolerated. If I thought for one moment Bo would see his uncle as a coward I would have some hope of our relationship surviving. Frederick took years to admit to himself that he was a coward but the family can’t disown someone as famous or notorious as he has become. So, everyone else in the dynasty has to rally around him. Bo won’t be allowed to stay with me and retain his inheritance. I suppose this issue has taught me that he doesn’t love me enough to sacrifice significant wealth to stand by me.”

“He must be stupid then, or a hypocrite. Sorry, I shouldn’t have said that. It just seems so unnecessary to live a lie if one of the consequences is hurting other people. Can I get us another drink or do you want to get some rest before my boss gets back?”

“I wouldn’t mind another glass of wine. Now that I seem to be close to an agreement with your people on exclusivity. Who knows, the end of one long road might lead to the beginning of another. I’ve pretty much decided a change of life isn’t such a bad thing. Once I accepted the inevitable, freedom to do what I want has become quite appealing. You should tell me about your work, I’m tired of thinking about my own previous mistakes.”

“I think you’d need a bottle of wine rather than a glass if you were to hear about my sad existence. I don’t really have a life outside my job. Pathetic, isn’t it?”

“Make it a bottle then.”
Buchannan eventually made it back to the hotel. Bradley and Catrina were still in the bar and a little worse for wear due to the amount of wine they’d consumed.

“Well, Catrina, I see you’ve been celebrating already. Just as well we have the green light to go with your exclusivity, so we need to think about which media organisations in this country should be chosen to share this scoop with your Swedish employer. I have to take Bradley with me to the Met, so can you think about this while we’re gone? It will only take us about an hour, but please don’t contact your boss in Sweden until we’ve agreed the partner publisher or there will be no deal, is that clear?”

“We already know that Chief Constable, so I’ll take a shower and get dressed for dinner in your absence.”

“Excellent, right Bradley, we have to get the whereabouts of that diary from Frances Graham, and quickly. That is another factor which could scupper our deal with Catrina.”

“Ok, in that case we’d better get going, but I’ve had too much to drink for driving.”

“I could see that from reception, we’ll take a cab. Just don’t screw up this interview with Frances Graham. Tread carefully.”
Square Pegs and Round Holes

Although Niall Osborn had no solid proof, his instinct led him to believe that ‘Jerome’ was involved in the near fatal incident with ‘Marjorie’, if indeed he wasn’t the architect. He wasn’t confident that anyone in CT could be trusted to protect ‘Marjorie’ once it was known she was steadily recovering consciousness. He agonised over this because he was now sure the intention was to kill her, and that would surely become even more important.

Two options headed his list. The most unpredictable one was to question ‘Marjorie’ herself regarding why ‘Jerome’ might want her silenced. The second, and more feasible route was however littered with clear and present danger to himself. Despite that, he chose to go that way, as at least he could share his burden with someone else in the event of his own disappearance. He contacted the Westminster chief of security via the man’s own solicitor, hoping this would ‘guarantee’ client confidentiality.

*

Frances Graham was taken aback at the prospect of another interview with Buchannan and Bradley. She was confident in Victor’s assurance that handing herself in, and then following his instructions would be her final involvement. Victor wasn’t here now, and she was adrift without his voice. She protested at being taken to the interview room, verging on hysteria. Perhaps it could have been Bradley’s partial inebriation which came over to Frances as sympathy, nonetheless it worked. She settled,
and asked why she had to regurgitate all of her bad memories yet again.

“There isn’t anything left for me to tell you. I’m ready to face my punishment for what I’ve done, and the sooner the better.”

Buchannan let Bradley continue to lead the session.

“Now then, Frances, you know that isn’t true. You did tell us about Victor’s diary, and how it would explain a lot about why he did what he did, but how are we supposed to uphold the law if we aren’t able to read what Victor has written?”

“You will be able to read it, with everybody else in the country. You just have to wait.”

“So, how will everyone else hear what Victor wrote?”

“From the television.”

“And do you know when? I wouldn’t want to miss it.”

“I’m not allowed to tell you that.”

Buchannan spoke at last. “Frances, it doesn’t really matter whether we, as police, agree as individuals with Victor’s decisions, it’s our job to catch those who break the law. I can see that Victor, and particularly his brother Michael, felt that some people in high office broke some unwritten law during this scandalous drug trial. They are probably right, and we have to look into that. I can tell you that we have started already. You see, we just catch the law breakers, and some other people take them to court, and then it’s up to a jury to decide most criminal verdicts. I’m telling you this only because, although we cannot condone what you and Victor did, there may still be a chance to punish some of the people you blame for the scandal. It would be a real pity if you and Victor received no public sympathy because you didn’t help us to find these people. And I’m sure, as you will be, that Michael would have done it this way. We would like your help to get answers from the diary which can be used to confirm information we already have. We don’t want you and the rest of your
friends to be the ones suffering the entire punishment for what happened. It’s precisely the same way as Michael would have sought justice. His name should not be tarnished by his brother’s actions, nor should we fail to bring these people to account using the law. Please think about this. Can you at least give us some idea how long we have before the content of this diary becomes public knowledge? If it happens before we can arrest certain people involved in the scandal, we cannot protect Michael’s good name.”

“I’m all mixed up now. Can you really help to save Michael’s reputation? I didn’t agree with Victor’s way, but he convinced all of us that there was no legal way to make our feelings known to everybody, and that what happened to us could happen to them. If I had known the police would help like you said I would have come to see you sooner. All I can say is that unless I speak with the remaining friends who left London, the television people will know in two days from now, on Michael’s birthday.”

“Thank you,” said Buchannan, drooling at the prospect of averting a PR disaster, “and I’m sure you will think more about what I said and tell us what’s in the diary if you want to sleep well tonight. Michael deserves your support. We’ll come and see you again in the morning.”

*  

‘Jerome’ had somehow been alerted to ‘Marjorie’s’ gradual tendency toward extended periods of consciousness, albeit not the full up to date situation. Niall Osborn had continually corrected the perception of media reports that she was on the road to recovery. He was invited to speak with ‘Jerome’.

“I hear you have been visiting our dear colleague regularly, so I’d rather listen to your prognosis than follow the redtops’ guide to how she’s doing. I’m just sad that,
like almost everyone else, I’d given up hope that we would ever see the real ‘Marjorie’ again.”

“Yes, but I should warn you that the various reports on her condition are based more in hope than reality.”

“Oh, that is at odds with my understanding. I’d heard she had recovered consciousness more frequently.”

“That’s true, but only for spells of about three or four minutes per day. The consultant is concerned that she isn’t able to stay ‘awake’ for longer each day. In fact he’s so worried that they are moving her to a specialist private unit to avail of a new breakthrough therapy. He says it’s imperative that this is done now, otherwise she will in all likelihood become completely unresponsive within a few weeks.”

“Christ, that’s bad. In that case I should go and see her now. I’ve been remiss here, Osborn. I’ll clear my desk and get over there within the hour.”

“Too late, sir. She’s already on her way.”

“Right, so where is this new therapy unit?”

“I forgot to ask, but I’ll ring the consultant and find out, and when we can visit.”

“Good man, let me know as soon as you can.”

*

The PM summoned the Westminster security chief to his office. There was a sense of urgency in his voice.

“This fishing trip within CT you’ve been conducting may not be needed now. I believe we may have an alternative. So, I suppose it would be prudent to wrap it up and back off.”

“That’s quite a strange coincidence, sir. Only a few hours ago I was contacted by my solicitor, telling me that a senior officer in CT wanted to speak with me urgently, and under no circumstances was I to speak to anyone else about
it. Had you not raised the issue, I would have respected his wish.”

“Well, in that case you’d better see what it’s all about, but do it as soon as possible and report back. We don’t have much time before control of this situation will slip from our hands.”

“Will do, sir.”

*

The remaining members of Victor Storey’s crew who’d dispersed to locations outside London were becoming restless. They had been ‘programmed’ to release the diary on Michael’s birthday, but every passing day had them thinking that they should be home in the northeast, not circling the capital just to be able to hand the diary over to the chosen TV companies. Victor had insisted that risking postage could potentially convey the hallmarks of a hoax. They all had a copy, and would pass them on in a time gap of one minute per copy. Although none of them had confronted Victor with the outside chance that the later ones could be arrested, if the first TV organisation which had been selected then decided to alert the police expediently. Roland Ferguson had drawn the short straw and was to hand in the final copy. He was relentless in trying to persuade the others that Victor couldn’t visit repercussions upon them anymore, and questioned the need for them to be personally responsible for physically delivering the copies. He pressed for sending them by courier, which would not rely on mail delivery, but could still guarantee receipt on the symbolic day. Roland felt he was gradually winning the others over.

*
Niall Osborn knocked on the office door, he could hear talking. ‘Jerome’ was on the phone but shouted for him to enter. “Thanks for getting back to me so soon. I’ll be there at the agreed time. Yes, Osborn, what can I do for you?”

“I’ll come back if you’re busy, sir. It was just the address for ‘Marjorie’s’ new therapy unit.”

“No, no, that won’t do, let me have it, I’ll try to fit in a visit later today.”

“Well that’s going to be complicated. The specialist has insisted that any visitors should see her before he begins the treatment. He wants nobody else to distract her for at least a week after the first session, which he wants to get on with this evening.”

“Well then, I’d better rearrange my day. ‘Marjorie’s’ recovery is more important than indulging the frivolous person I’ve just agreed to meet with. Leave it with me, and thanks for the address. Does this specialist have a name?”

“Of course, it’s Dr Stefan Winkler, the best there is in his field apparently. I checked him out.”

“Good to know she’s in capable hands, thank you, Osborn.”

*

After a sleepless night, Frances Graham still couldn’t decide what to do. Her loyalties were agonisingly split between the two brothers. Michael had always treated her with kindness and respect. Victor had bullied her into acceptance that Michael was a dreamer, and that action would be the only salve to banish her ghastly memories, a permanent cleansing of her mind. But they were both dead now, so she tortured herself with a hypothetical question – if she could bring one of them back, who would it be? She asked to see Buchannan and Bradley again.

*
Niall Osborn had unintentionally boxed himself into a very tight schedule. The meeting with the Westminster chief of security had been at his own request, and he could easily be wrong about ‘Marjorie’. He was also highly conscious of time constraints over which he had no control. Searching for a compromise yielded only one acceptable option. He called to see if his meeting in Westminster could be brought forward by an hour. Showing up in person accentuated his nervousness but it did induce the man himself to come and see what the fuss was about.

“Sorry about the short notice, but I have a serious problem to discuss with you and something else has cropped up for later today. I’ll be as brief as possible.”

They retired to an empty office and Osborn began to explain his dilemma.

“As you’re familiar with how CT works from your previous employment there, I’ll cut to the chase. I’ve got level two clearance with respect to classified documents. Not as high as either ‘Jerome’ or ‘Marjorie’, but enough to negotiate with ‘wardens of Hades’. I have a copy on my phone of the protocols supposedly followed in the Sanstrogen trials, and more importantly those subsequently overwritten. The official line is, as you will know, only the last pronouncement has the official stamp of validation. This left ‘Marjorie’ in a difficult place. What is clear is that a truth drug was offered to CT and a clandestine means of testing it arranged by the pharmaceutical company. What will be disputed is who in CT authorised what. And that’s where the discrepancy exists. ‘Marjorie’ confided in me a while back because of her concerns that ‘Jerome’ wouldn’t hesitate to sacrifice her without remorse. That’s when I took these photos. Just as well, because the first of the two documents has been removed from the files. I have reason to believe that ‘Marjorie’s’ accident was in fact planned. I can no longer trust anyone in CT or the Met, so I wanted to
ask if you can help out with back up to protect her? I can’t do it twenty-four seven.”

“Ok, send me the photos, I’ll put a couple of guys on watch for her.”
Niall Osborn was on his way to the address which he’d given to ‘Jerome’. He was sweating profusely as he pulled into the drive, and he quickly swerved around the building and parked out of sight. All he had to do now was wait with a sightline to the front door. An hour passed and he began to think he’d been overly optimistic. Another eight minutes and he decided to head back, but then, he heard the drone of a car engine changing down a couple of gears.

The two men emerged from the vehicle and looked puzzled. Osborn recognised one of them from the Met investigation of ‘Marjorie’s’ accident. He took several snaps from his vantage point including one as they tried to enter the building when the doorbell failed to produce a nurse, a doctor, or anyone else. He also captured the registration number of the car before firing several rounds from his handgun. The bullets were sprayed into the sky and the two men ran for the cover of their vehicle. Osborn was ready for this and pumped a load of lead into the two tyres facing him. He shouted for them to exit the car and lie face down on the ground. As they complied he approached them.

“Who’s in charge here?”

“I guess that wouldn’t be either of us,” wisecracked the taller of the two.

“Good, then you stand up and phone whoever is, and tell him that the job is done. ‘Marjorie’ has been taken care of. If you don’t do this now there’s still a bullet left for each of you. It’s your choice, make the call or I’ll remove you without trace from the planet. Ten seconds and you die.”
The taller man grappled for his phone and pressed the speed dial. It rang several times before ‘Jerome’ answered. The conversation was short, barely acknowledged as Osborn grabbed the phone and switched it off.

“Now then, scumbags, piss off before I blow your balls off. This never happened, right?”

“If you say so, we’re good with that.”

“Fine, vamoose then – one – two – three…”

They jumped into the car and Osborn smiled. “You have to leave the car, hoof it on foot now…four - five – six…”

The two men sprinted up the drive without looking back. Osborn then called the Westminster chief of security and reported the vehicle number and on which main road the fugitives could be intercepted. “You need to hurry, these guys will probably look for a bus stop. The local service is hourly, you have thirty-eight minutes if it’s on time. The car is still here and I’m pulling out the distributor to disable it altogether. I take it that you still have watch on the hospital, and ‘Marjorie’ is safe?”

“Indeed, have you got the phone with proof of the call to ‘Jerome’?”

“Affirmative, I’m on my way back.”

*

Buchannan disclosed the delicate balance confronting them. Catrina queried what it meant for her agreement.

“It simply means that you won’t have an exclusive if these assistants of Victor Storey take it into their heads to break the circle by exposing his diary before your editor in Sweden can go to print. And that in itself relies on us persuading the TV companies to hold everything until we’re sure it’s all in place, but we can’t trust them not to leak the big picture if they see that as being in their best interests. I’m sure you understand this, being a journalist yourself. Look, in order to save precious time, come with
us to the Met and speak with Frances Graham. She’s the only person who has any chance of delaying this diary being given to the TV people. For reasons you’ll have to trust me on, that would be really problematical for us. Can we go?”

“Yes, so I guess I should bring all my evidence and laptop?”

“Correct.”

They sped from the hotel to the Met and the Chief was waiting in the interview room with Frances.

“You wanted to talk to us, Frances. Well, here we are and we don’t have much time. Can I introduce Catrina Eriksson, she has proof of wrongdoing in the Sanstrogen trials which has caused you so much pain. It will also ensure that Michael Storey’s allegations are judged to have been accurate, thus bringing all those involved to account. I will do my best to see that he is appropriately honoured for his part in trying to challenge previous judgements within the law, unlike his brother. Whatever you decide to do will affect whether I can speak up on your behalf as someone who was, although a coerced accessory to murder, prepared to express remorse in helping the police.”

Catrina displayed the numerous reports which would become public knowledge. As the tears welled up, Frances nodded her willingness to do what she could.

Buchannan then delivered his own deadline.

“We can’t wait a moment longer, Frances. Victor’s diary will be published in the way he planned, but it has to be in our possession today. We can’t wait until tomorrow for that. We can still get it to the TV people tomorrow, but we must have it today.”

“I’ll have to call all seven assistants and tell them that there has been a change of plan. They should return to London immediately and hand me their copies.”

“Bradley was on tenterhooks. “How do you know they will go against Victor’s instructions?”
“Because they all know that Victor was meticulous in his planning. He had to have plan B for everything. They know I was supposed to open Victor’s final letter to me today.”

“And where is this letter?” shouted Bradley, having to be calmed down by Buchannan.

“In a safety deposit box, together with his original diary. It’s here in London.”

The already frantic buzz kicked up a few notches as they all piled into a liveried Met limo and headed for the security company.

“You do have the access code, don’t you, Frances?”

“It’s in my head. But what about the other seven copies?”

“Yes,” admitted Buchannan, “that is a concern, but if we get this diary in time we might be able to publish it before they turn up to the TV studios. If that becomes possible we don’t even need to prevent them from handing their copies in as planned, it could actually be to our advantage. But, we mustn’t get ahead of ourselves. Let’s get the originals and then decide.”

A Met officer had returned Frances’ phone to her so that the calls could be made if needed. It surprised all of them when it rang. Frances answered the call gingerly.

“Hello? Frances?”

“Yes. Is that Ben?”

“Yeah, where the hell have you been? I’ve been trying to reach you all morning. I left you several voicemails.”

“Sorry about that, I’ve been ill with the flu. What’s the problem?”

“It’s bloody Roland, he’s so hot-headed. We’re all set to come back to London tomorrow, but he got pissed off that we aren’t getting any personal gain out of slavishly following Victor’s orders. He left for Newcastle this morning, to see if he can squeeze a big fat fee out of the regional rag.”
“He’s an idiot, is he driving up to Newcastle?”
“Yes and he’ll probably get there tonight.”
Bradley mouthed something to Frances.
“Ok, Ben, give me his number again.”
“His phone number? You already have all our numbers.”
Bradley shook his head and gesticulated steering the car.
“No, Ben, his car registration number.”
“Oh, ok, we got all the hire cars from the same company, hang on I’ll get the list… yeah here it is. I’ll text it through. So, do we go through with our plan tomorrow or do we wait until you’ve spoken to Roland?”
“Just stick to the plan, I’m sure I can get Roland to turn around. It’s my problem, and thanks for the call, Ben.”
They all breathed a sigh of relief, audibly.

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Reputations were hanging in the balance. Some could be enhanced, others spinning into free-fall, and but a few populating the neutral zone. Timing, leaks, and legal loopholes were likely to cross paths in the hours ahead, and perhaps the most damaging of all, individuals failing to keep promises made in good faith.

The first to emerge cast a huge shadow over the outcome. Frances insisted she should call Roland the rebel to give him a chance to reconsider his mercenary intent. Buchannan refused to sanction the call.

“Frances, it’s safer for us to put out an APB to intercept this man. He’s already proved to be unreliable and if you give him advance warning he will simply go AWOL. We can’t risk that. The first thing we have to do is set the search in motion and then retrieve the original diary.”

The silence carried tangible foreboding. She responded. “Chief Constable, have you ever been in a position to be denied a second chance? I can tell you it is such a
destructive feeling. I was both lucky and unlucky – I got my chance and it turned into a nightmare. But the worst phase in the process was having no hope. I know Roland, and I have to give him the benefit of the doubt. If you won’t let me do that, you can start the manhunt, but I won’t give you the security code for the original diary.”

Buchannan weighed the odds of preventing Roland reaching Newcastle before being apprehended, and the instruction Frances gave to the other six who had copies. They were not going to act until tomorrow, but what if one of them called Roland after Ben had debriefed them about his conversation with Frances. Roland could be tipped off unintentionally. He also began to speculate on the value of having the original diary before Catrina gave her editor the green light to publish. Perhaps there wasn’t anything in the diary which would contradict or question the proof Catrina had furnished. On balance, Buchannan felt that first strike was crucial. If the public was expected to be open-minded, and the media didn’t twist the revelations too much, the establishment could be seen to be proactive at worst.

“You have to make up your own mind on the diary, Frances. Don’t forget, when all of you, Roland, Ben, and the other five are prosecuted, your cooperation will be considered. If you decline then it won’t only be Roland who doesn’t get a second chance, you’ll have the others on your conscience. We’re going to let you think about that for fifteen minutes, then the die will be cast, we will proceed without the diary.”

Frances was left in the room alone. Buchannan and the Met chief asked Bradley and Catrina to give them a minute’s privacy.

Buchannan addressed his potential future boss.
“What’s it to be?”
“I think you’re right. We should trigger the publication now. I’ll speak to the PM and you can get on with intercepting this Roland.”
“Fine, I’m guessing I should organise the manhunt through your existing deputy, and she’ll know the score.”
“Unofficially, of course.”
“That’s good enough.”
The pinball had been launched. Roland’s vehicle was spotted at a service station just north of Doncaster. The officers in the marked police car confirmed the registration with HQ and were told to wait for the driver to return to the vehicle before apprehending him. Roland seemed totally unconcerned by the approach of the two officers until they asked him to produce his driving licence. He did so and asked what the problem was.

“Just come with us to our vehicle, sir, we’ll explain everything in due course.”

He seemed compliant and walked toward the police car. When they bundled him into the back seat he began to complain that he had a deadline to meet in Newcastle.

“We know that, sir, but you have to come with us first. And we believe you have a copy of a diary which is of interest to our people in London.”

“Yes, it’s in the hire car. Well, I should say a copy of it is.”

“Right, then we’ll have to retrieve it before we take you to the station.”

“Sure, but can I ask why you want it?”

“We don’t know. We just need you to hand it over.”

“Suit yourself, but it won’t do any good. I sent a copy of that copy to my contact in Newcastle by courier. Just belt and braces, if you know what I mean.”

When this message was relayed back to the Met chief he immediately interrupted the PM, who was showing signs of intransigence over pushing the button. The message seemed to clear the fog and Buchannan was advised to speak with the three chosen TV companies after Catrina
had established verification from her editor that going live in Sweden was imminent.

*

The Westminster security chief had, albeit with some assistance from Buchannan, and the about to retire deputy Met chief, persuaded the CT hirelings it was in their best interests to cough up corroboration of who they called at the request of Niall Osborn. The phone records and this testimony led to the arrest of ‘Jerome’. Charges of conspiring to injure ‘Marjorie’ were brought against the hirelings, and ‘Jerome’ was facing an additional one of attempted murder. Niall Osborn was present at the interview and admitted he’d passed copies of classified files to the Westminster chief of security, which implicated ‘Jerome’ in a serious breach of CT protocol. Osborn also placed on record that he acknowledged he may be facing disciplinary action himself for his unorthodox means of ‘blowing the whistle’ on a fellow officer. He maintained that he’d weighed up the prevalence of the law of the land over secret service statute, and felt he had to do the right thing. He also said in front of ‘Jerome’ that ‘Marjorie’ was now doing well in hospital and would soon be able to add her testimony to his own. ‘Jerome’ stared blankly at the ceiling and visualised his place in the sun suffering spontaneous ignition.

*

Frances Graham was told about Roland’s deviousness, and that he was on his way back to London. She was also acquainted with the new timeline for publication of Catrina’s story. Buchannan expressed sympathy for her predicament.
“So Frances, you must now accept that the diary becomes irrelevant, unless we release its content as part of a prosecution of the entire Sanstrogen saga through the courts. Although I have no idea what’s in there, I believe you would want Michael Storey’s legacy to be one of a pioneer in defending those who could not defend themselves. Surely that’s more important than protecting a man who isn’t fit to be mentioned in the same breath as Michael. Roland will face his own fate whatever else comes to light.”

Frances wept profusely, looked Buchannan straight in the eyes and asked for a pen and paper. She wrote down the code and asked to be left alone.

*

The news broke over all three UK channels within minutes of the event in Sweden. The movers and shakers awaited response, initially from social media and then from respected commentators. However there was one more chapter to unfold.

*

David and Goliath

‘To those who are prepared to listen, you will know by now I took my own life. I had to be prepared to do that in order to take aim at others for whom I had no respect. This offering is in no way intended to make a plea for my aberrant behaviour to be rationalised as revenge. There is a bigger issue at stake. To begin with perspective, I urge you to consider the countless numbers of people who’ve been consciously or unconsciously sacrificed for the ‘greater good’ in military confrontation. I had to get into the minds of those who accepted that responsibility and thus carried
its moral burden. It’s all very well to think one knows what it’s like to take such responsibility without really **feeling** how the constant inflow of the increasing death toll changes a person. That is why I needed to **feel** the distress of harming selected people, some of them I hoped would be rescued, as long as their loved ones would share their pain. Others were terminated because I **felt** they were more culpable of indifference to the numbers of subjects who’d died because of their decisions. I had to know what it was like to treat them as anonymous casualties of my philosophy, just as others were of theirs. In my obsession to understand the nuances of such responsibility, I had to consider my targets as numerical references on a computer screen. Knowing their names could not be a distraction.

‘Sadly, I was disappointed that I could not seem to divorce my objective from the implications of its actions in the way I’d hoped. I should have had at least an inkling that the noble end justified the means. It did not. Therefore I’m afraid I merely feel like a callous murderer. This brings me to the ultimate aim of this campaign. My brother told me over and over again that this was how I would feel. So, he was vindicated posthumously. Michael and I were philosophically united with respect to the cause of the malaise in our midst, it only diverged with how to bring this concern to the public domain, and force some degree of change. My brother’s death was caused by his frustration that nobody would listen. At that time I **knew** I was right to do it my way. Both my sister and I shared a gene which rendered us vulnerable to certain forms of cancer. She died a slow and painful death having been denied drugs proven to have been successful in alleviating the pain and extending life. The decision was purely justified as not being cost-effective. My brother didn’t carry this gene threat and he began his campaign on behalf of all patients who were abandoned by the NHS, his employer. He wasn’t only ignored, his employment was
terminated for having the effrontery to rock the boat. He spent his entire pension pot on this cause, a selfless crusade destined to fail. Because he had an inside track on how the NHS works, Michael was able to ferret out damning evidence to support our endeavours.

‘It distilled down to three sectors. The one with the most influence is the pharmaceutical producers of the magic bullet treatment, and critically, how much they cost. The second element is the malignant organisation known as N.I.C.E. The raison d’etre is at best rather woolly, but at worst very sinister. It doesn’t need to be that way, and it could become an asset were it not for its perceived role as an outsourcing of cost control. It could be re-designated as a day-to-day functioning artery of the NHS, not the pharma police. The link of these organisations is of course, the NHS itself. It’s a leviathan in its own right. There has to be some way to prevent our dedicated NHS being devoured by a predator and a scavenger. There was a philosopher who once said a civilisation often falls from within before it is conquered from without.

‘I need to make it clear that although the NHS is pivotal in this triangle of conspiracy, my brother and I do not lay generic culpability at their door. Unlike the pharma companies and N.I.C.E., the NHS only harbours a sparse contingent of traitors. The others have a charter of exploitation running through their psyche, deliberate by the pharma giants, conferred to N.I.C.E. Still, the traitors need to be cleansed from the NHS, and I have begun the process. It would be reassuring to see people who have taken some form of the Hippocratic Oath to be at the apex of the organisation as well as the lower ranks. Bean counters are all very well for telling us how many beds are free or how many staff we can’t recruit, but for many of us, their compassion gene has been miscopied. It would not be the most disadvantageous recommendation for the NHS to revert to the way it was run at its conception, self-
determining. If we were granted a referendum on Brexit, why not the NHS? Unlike Brexit, which changes everything from economics, through political persuasion, and culture, I would venture to suggest the NHS would receive objective, unified support from the public, because we should all be equal under its care. If some such heart-searching does not occur, we may regret allowing even more outsourcing such as N.I.C.E. For this to proliferate and metastasise our beloved health system, it will condone a shift to private profit-driven ownership by default. National ownership does not have to mean financial irresponsibility. I suspect this issue does have a divide but it is between the people of this land and their elected representatives. It’s a potato which is incandescent in the view of the government and should be left alone. It’s a dereliction of duty of the highest order. Trust the electorate on this. Have some humility and correct your course, consider how in retrospect it was so obvious we had to abolish slavery when at the time it was purveyed by many that it represented mutiny. Redeem yourselves. That is my challenge to you, Prime Minister.

‘Both Michael and I wanted to tackle the hypocrisy of the pharmaceutical companies as the immediate priority, then reign in the autonomy of N.I.C.E. by implanting its influence into the skeletal functions of all hospital trusts. Finally, the NHS is suffering from auto-immune deficiency, and it’s plain to see that you have limited time to address this. Doing nothing should qualify our great nation to be categorised as having a third world mentality. A seismic shift is needed, but rather than dismiss this with the current defeatist attitude, take the first tiny steps. There are many examples of what will follow if you do not engage with the electorate, on arguably the most acute ulcer which is devouring the very cement of society. Banking and sport are the prime examples for analysis. On the one hand reward for failure, on the other corruption,
both driven by greed. Both also flashing a red warning light of unsustainability. Why is it then that nobody suspects pharmaceutical companies would stoop to such avarice? There are examples of how to tackle the NHS conundrum. Supermarkets display well-known brands but offer their own at lower prices. High street pharmacies are even more pertinent, selling prime price medication alongside their propriety alternatives. It is by no means impossible to screw down the pharma giants’ profit margins by prescribing NHS manufactured equivalents. It is not rocket science, we have the knowledge, but we do not seem to have the political will. If we don’t get off our backsides and begin to nudge the trajectory of the incoming asteroid, there will be unimaginable consequences. After all, without our health what do we really have?

‘The philosophical sermon is at an end. It only remains for me to confess my guilt, explain why I sentenced myself to death, and offer you the catalyst for action if you have the stomach for it. I needed to be punished for my crimes, and I chose not to become a burden on the state by languishing in prison. I also rejected caving in to cancer so that suffering would precede a pointless death. This action would provide me with an opportunity to challenge the status quo during my truncated life.

‘Most important of all, I want to turn this rant into a petition, as was intended by my brother. It was conducted by Michael. He did it in his own way. As there exists a loosely agreed commitment that one hundred thousand names on a petition would mean the issue would become the subject of a parliamentary debate, he has done exactly that. However, unlike an online petition which takes a cross-section of society into account, and the various pitfalls of online manipulation, he produced the appendix which I offer you now. It contains one hundred and seventeen thousand signatures, solely NHS employees.
This had to be done in a somewhat clandestine way and by Michael alone. He spent over thirteen years personally collecting the views of these people without trying to influence their thinking. They work as consultants, surgeons, nurses, ambulance drivers, paramedics, porters, telephonists, and every other function in the organisation. The names and addresses are all there. Some will have died, left the NHS, or gone into private medicine. That in itself is an indictment of your handling of the National Health Service. Despite the desperation to recruit staff such as nurses, we can’t fill the positions because those already in the job feel only pressure of workload and abject abandonment when mistakes are made because of it. Please see this as a standalone legacy of my brother, he tried, unlike me, to do it the right way. I sincerely hope my actions have not prejudiced his appeal for an honest debate in the House of Commons as to how we can steer our precious NHS to a different path. Prosecuting any wrongdoing of the pharmaceutical companies and N.I.C.E. is but a symptom, not a salvation.

Victor Storey.

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As Buchannan delivered this final package to the PM, he detected a quandary. To him the furrowed brow indicated a problem and an opportunity for the PM. Because the pinball was now at rest and the overlay of this diary was of itself not overly damaging to the current Prime Minister, it could be ignored and the case closed, or it could be utilised to sculpture something constructive from a pit of horror. He left it in the hands of the elected establishment without any great hope of change. Time would tell.
He then reconvened with Bradley and Catrina. They made arrangements to travel to Newcastle together. During her visit to the ladies’ room, Buchannan told Bradley that he would be leaving the northeast, and one of the things he had to do was ‘arrange’ for Declan Bradley’s promotion to Detective Sergeant before he departed. “I have no timescale, but rest assured, it will get done.”

During the short stay Catrina had in rediscovering Newcastle, she had taken the lead in cementing their friendship. Bradley had tried to apologise several times for her being unfaithful to her husband, but it was waved away with a smile. “You never know, Declan, I might soon be divorced. And anyway, in Sweden we have a different concept of being unfaithful. Your people seem to uphold monogamy as a pillar of virtue. We do not confuse physical attraction with fondness of the heart. One is likely to be transient, the other is long lasting. If Bo and I were happy to live together again and I said one of my needs was to have sex with other men, it would not cause bitterness, just a calm discussion, and a decision as to whether it would work. He would probably accept you are better at sex than him, even if there wasn’t much difference. I hope I haven’t ruined my chances of seeing you again when I come back here on vacation.”