

Nick

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the
Writer

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Chapter One

“I can't believe how full of shit that dog park is becoming,” exclaimed Sam as she burst through the door. “People just don't give a damn!”

I gawped at her from the safety of the couch. Sam was normally a quiet, reflective sort of person not given to outbursts. I slowly lowered the protective rampart that was my laptop screen.

“Umm, do you mean that literally or figuratively?” I enquired. “As in the dog park is literally full of shit or simply that the place is no longer emotionally satisfying for you or Molly?”

“I know the difference between literal and figurative,” she said caustically, “and I meant it literally. The place is full of literal shit.”

“I see,” I said and thought about it. “So are you saying that people no longer give a damn and as a result are going to the toilet in the dog park?”

“Of course not,” she said with an edge to her tone of voice. “They don't give a damn about their dogs shitting everywhere. They're supposed to clean up after their dogs but they aren't anymore.”

“Ahh, now I follow you,” I said. “Yes, I can see how that would be annoying.” I looked around but Molly was nowhere to be seen. Certainly she wasn't at the other end of the leash that Sam dangled threateningly in her hand. “Umm, did you leave Molly there?”

“She's in the back yard,” said Sam and gave the leash a vicious twirl. The metal end snagged on the corner of a bookshelf and knocked a couple of small brass ornaments off. “Ooops. My bad.”

She bent to pick them up and return them to their proper place then turned to me with a quizzical expression.

“Can't you do something about it? It is a health hazard, after all, as well as being disgusting.”

“Me?” I said, taken aback. “What do you expect me to do about it? Go

round the entire dog park with a trowel and a paper bag?”

“No, of course not,” she said, hanging the leash on the coat rack so she didn't do any more damage. “People would label you as a dog-gooding busybody. As it is they already think you're a weirdo. Can't you do some of your you know?”

“My you know?” I said, knowing exactly what she meant but pretending I didn't. “What do you mean exactly?”

“You know,” she said slumping into the couch beside me. “Where you waggle an eyebrow and mutter under your breath and things happen.”

“You know I can't do things like that,” I said putting the laptop on the small table beside the couch. “It isn't allowed.”

“But who would find out?” she said, leaning back against the arm of the couch and lifting one leg onto my lap. “If anyone notices they'll just think the Council's been in and cleaned the place up.”

I put my hand on her leg and started to stroke it gently which was usually what she wanted when she put her legs on my lap. She lifted the other one up as well and her face started to relax.

“Molly's outside?” I asked, looking at Sam as an unpleasant smell started to make its presence known.

“Yes,” she said, closing her eyes. “She wanted to go talk to the cat next door.”

As if in confirmation of this Molly started to scratch at the door to the back yard. Cautiously I looked at the sole of Sam's trainer and the reason for the smell became clear.

“Umm, you've got poop on your shoes,” I said apologetically. I don't know why I was being apologetic but it seemed the right thing to do.

“Oh shit!” exclaimed Sam, somewhat appropriately if inadvertently. Her body went rigid for a moment as she rapidly came out of her relaxed state and grabbed her foot with both hands. She twisted the

offending foot around so she could see the sole then swore in some strange tongue.

“There's some on the carpet as well,” I said pointing to the smudge.

“Grrr,” she growled and Molly stopped scratching at the door. “That bloody effing dog park!”

“Don't worry,” I said extricating myself from the tangle of her legs. “I'll clean it up.”

“You mean with ...?” and she awkwardly tried to waggle an eyebrow.

“No,” I said, heading for the kitchen. “I mean with washing up liquid and a cloth.”

“Oh,” she said and pulled the trainer off without undoing the laces. She carefully put it on the floor, sole up, then pulled off the other one. It seemed clean enough so she threw it across the room in the general direction of the bathroom door then jumped up.

“Let Molly in as well, would you?” she asked picking up the dirty trainer.

“Sure,” I said, coming back with a roll of paper towels and a wet cloth. I cleaned up the four dirty little patches while Sam scrubbed the sole of her trainer under the shower. I tossed the dirty towels in the bin and rinsed the cloth then squeezed it dry.

“Catch,” I said and threw the cloth at her as she emerged from the bathroom.

“What?” she said as the cloth splatted against the wall in a soggy way then slid down leaving a damp trail. She looked up from the trainer in her hand and glanced behind to see what the noise had been.

“Could you put that cloth in the laundry basket for me?” I asked.

“Sure,” she said and picked it up. She disappeared back into the bathroom and re-emerged with a handful of toilet paper. I let Molly in

and she bounded over to greet Sam like a long lost friend. Sam dried the wall as best she could then leaned through the doorway to toss the toilet paper inside the toilet.

“So why can't you do things like that?” she asked, going back to the couch.

“What?” I called from the kitchen where I was washing my hands. “Can't hear you over the tap.”

“I said I want you to make love to me four times tonight,” she said.

“Can't hear you,” I called back knowing there was no way I'd have the energy for that kind of activity. Twice would be more realistic and only then with a decent nap and a large bowl of cereal with extra sugar in between.

“I asked why you can't do that,” she said.

“I'm not as young as I used to be,” I said, coming back in with wet hands.

She frowned then realised I had heard her after all.

“Nooo silly,” she said. “I meant the dog park. Why can't you clean it up surreptitiously?”

I sat down on the couch beside her and she put her legs on me again. Molly disappeared to inspect her food bowl in case something had magically appeared.

“I've told you before,” I said and put my wet hands on her legs. She squealed and kicked out but didn't take her legs away.

“Tell me again,” she said before hitting me with a cushion. “I still don't understand.”

“It's really not that complicated,” I said, sliding my hands over her now bare feet. “Historically people like me were respected and sought after but since the Industrial Revolution and the growth of scientific

materialism we've become ostracised and denigrated. If I clean up the dog park someone will notice and people will talk. The world is full of non believers these days."

"But couldn't you do it in the middle of the night or something?" she asked.

"Sure," I said, "but there's always someone watching and a man in the dog park in the middle of the night will only attract attention. That's why the Guild passed that rule because they know as well as I do that these things never go wholly undetected. There's no point in risking discovery for something as trivial as cleaning up dog shit."

"I s'pose," she said a little grumpily. She pouted sulkily and wrinkled her nose. "Couldn't you go in the middle of the day when there's no one around? If you took Molly no one would be suspicious."

"Of course they would be," I said. "Everyone knows Molly's yours so if I took her questions would be asked. Besides, all the people who go to the dog park know what state it's in and if it suddenly has no poo in it they'll immediately jump to conclusions and fingers would be pointed at me. You said yourself people think I'm weird. Do you really want the Empirical Police turning up and arresting me for anti-empiricist activities?"

"No, of course not," she said, "but it seems such a small thing. It's only dog poop."

"From little acorns giant oaks do grow," I said, "or at least they used to. Can't you see that if I do something small and anti-empirical it could potentially lead to a backlash against the entire community? We'd be hunted down and burnt at the stake again. It's not so bad for us but innocent people might get caught up in it and if they get burnt to death it's permanent. Maybe even you and there's no way I'm risking that. Say what you like but I value you more highly than a pile of dog shit."

"What a lovely thing to say," she said ironically. "Do I get flowers with that?"

“Sure,” I said and looked around to make sure no one was watching. We were alone in our house but you never know. I flicked an eyebrow and moved my little finger in a certain way and tried to disguise both by making it look like I was scratching my face. Then I put my arm over the arm of the couch and pulled out a bunch of roses wrapped in cellophane. If anyone had seen and reported me I'd be able to say I'd bought them earlier and hidden them. I even had a receipt although I wasn't sure if the price was right. It had been a long time since I'd actually bought roses and a penny three farthings for a bunch wasn't realistic in this modern world.

“Ohhh they're lovely,” crooned Sam as I handed them to her. She buried her nose in them and inhaled their rich scent. “I'll go and put them in some water.”

She slid her legs off my knees and went into the kitchen. I heard her unwrap the cellophane and scrunch it up then the opening and closing of cupboard doors as she searched for a suitable vase.

“Is it really such a risk?” I wondered. “She's probably right, people will just assume the Council came in and cleaned up.”

Sam came back in carrying the roses in a cut glass vase half full of water. She looked around the room then went over to one of the bookcases and cleared a space on the top shelf. She deposited the vase and spent a few moments arranging the roses while I reflected how happy she seemed and how much I loved making her happy. She stepped back to appraise her floral display then stepped forward again to twist one rose a little so it pointed a little more to the front. Satisfied she came over to the couch and bent forward to give me a long kiss. She was a little off balance so as she pushed on my shoulder to get upright again I pulled her forward and she fell on top of me and giggled. We played around a little and kissed some more then I pushed her up.

“Come on,” I said, getting up as well. “Get Molly.”

“What for?” she asked, a small frown creasing her lovely face.

“We're going to the dog park,” I said.

“But she’s already been,” said Sam, her frown deepening.

“She needs the exercise,” I said, heading for the front door. “She’s getting fat.”

“No she isn’t,” said Sam indignantly then she must have realised what was going on since I rarely go to the dog park. “Ohhh, I’ll just put some other shoes.”

Sam gave a little bark and a couple of snuffles and Molly rushed excitedly out of the kitchen where she’d been lying beside her food bowl. She ran over to the front door and started jumping up and yapping excitedly as though she’d never been to the dog park before.

“Tell her to calm down,” I said as Molly tried to bite my knee. She wasn’t tall enough but it was still a little irritating.

Sam snuffled again and Molly looked at her then sat on the floor. If dogs could pout sulkily she’d have done that.

“Great,” I said and took the leash off the coat rack. I tossed it to Sam since I don’t have any dealings with dogs directly and she caught it deftly in one hand while balanced on one leg trying to put her shoe on with the other hand. She wobbled and had to put down the foot with the shoe half on to steady herself. I got the car keys off the little key rack above the half bookcase beside the door and waited while Sam sorted out her trainers then brushed her hair and checked all her clothing was presentable before clipping the leash on Molly’s collar.

“Do we need anything at the shops?” I asked, my hand on the door handle, “since we’re going that way.”

“Not really,” she said, “unless you want mushrooms with your chops tonight. We’re out.”

“Pork, lamb or capra?” I asked.

“Capra?” she exclaimed. “Goat? This is England. We don’t eat goats.”

“Sorry, my mistake,” I said. “I was thinking of something else.”

“Oh don't give me that,” she said, putting her hand on her hip and giving me a look. “I know you, remember. Did you have a flashback?”

“Not a flashback as such,” I said sheepishly. “More a lack of focus. I used to eat a lot of goat.”

“I'm sure they're lovely,” she said, “but we're having lamb chops. Mushrooms?”

“Yes please,” I said, annoyed with myself for my lapse. “Can we have those potato things as well?”

“Croquettes?” she asked and I nodded. “Sure, there are some in the freezer.”

“Awesome,” I said. “Come on, let's go.”

Sam clicked her teeth and Molly jumped up excitedly and started barking again.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” asked Sam, pausing in the doorway.

“No,” I said. “It's a stupid idea but I'm going to do it anyway. Anything to make you happy.”

“But what if someone calls the Empiricists?” she asked, worriedly.

“They won't,” I said confidently. “I have a plan.”

“Ahh goody,” she said, the worried look on her face disappearing. “I'm a Virgo. I love plans.”

“I know,” I said, trying to think of a plan. “Let's go.”

“What is the plan?” she asked, holding the car door open for Molly to climb in.

“I'll tell you when we get there,” I said, putting the key in the ignition. Hopefully I'd have thought of one by the time we got there.

“You know I don't like surprises,” she said, getting in the passenger seat.

“Really?” I said, faking surprise. “But wasn't marrying me the biggest surprise of all?”

“Well, that's true enough,” she said. “I was all set to marry Trevor then you came along. I didn't even have to change any of the arrangements, just the groom and some of the invitations. That really was a surprise.”

“Well then,” I said as we drove off. “After that, clearing up a little dog poop shouldn't come as much of a surprise at all.”

“You haven't got a plan, have you,” she said, looking at me sideways.

“I sort of have a plan,” I said. “Just missing a few details.”

“I do hope you know what you're doing,” she said. “I'm leaving you if you do get burnt at the stake. Come back as often as you like but I won't be getting back with you.”

“You say that now,” I retorted, “but you know damned well you'll come running if I do.”

“Yeah, damned fool that I am,” she said, squeezing my hand. “I really should have listened to my mother.”

“Why?” I asked, pulling into the road where the dog park was. “What did she say?”

“I don't know, I wasn't listening,” said Sam. “But I'm sure it would have been good sensible advice.”

“Who's that?” I asked, spotting someone rather large. She was sitting on a bench like a hunched over walrus, playing with a mobile phone and ignoring her three dogs.

“Bugger,” said Sam, seeing her as well. “That's Karen.”

“Shall we come back later?” I asked, pulling up near the gate.

“She’s usually here for ages,” said Sam. “That’s why I go early so as to miss her. No, let’s get this over with. We don’t have to stay long.”

She got out of the car and let Molly out from the back seat. Molly rushed over to the gate and started barking and the three dogs ran over to see what all the noise was. I got out of the car myself and sauntered over as Sam let Molly inside and the four dogs stood there for a while, sniffing each other’s bits.

“Hiya Karen,” called Sam.

“Hey Sam,” called back Karen. She heaved her bulk off the bench and started waddling towards us, phone in hand.

“This is my husband,” called Sam as I pulled a paper bag from the dispenser bolted to the frame of the gate. It looked rather small so I pulled out two or three more. “He’s off work today.”

I looked up at that since I very rarely work then realised it was Sam’s way of explaining why I hadn’t been to the dog park before.

“Hey,” I said, by way of greeting.

“Hello,” said Karen. She didn’t sound particularly friendly but since I had no desire to be friends with her I wasn’t bothered.

She turned and looked as a large truck rattled past and one of her dogs gave chase. I took the opportunity to make a nearby dog turd move into one of the bags. Sam noticed me and moved to stand beside Karen so she wouldn’t turn round again. I took the opportunity to move off in search of more of the offending objects.

Sam was right. There were a lot of them and my three bags were full surprisingly quickly. I walked back to the gate and deposited them neatly in the garbage bin near the gate and got some more bags. Karen’s three dogs were now fighting amongst themselves and Molly was wandering along the perimeter, sniffing to check who’d been there since she last visited. Sam and Karen were deep in conversation about

something or other which involved Karen waving her phone around a lot. I had no desire whatsoever to join them so I resumed my own wandering around the dog park and the four bags I held behind my back got steadily fuller.

“Oi!” exclaimed Karen a few minutes later. “What the bleedin’ hell you doing?”

Surprised I turned to look at her. She was hurrying towards me as fast as she could which, to be honest, wasn’t that fast at all.

“Excuse me?” I said.

“I seen you,” she said breathlessly as her face started to go red from exertion. “You’re picking up all this dog shit and putting it in them bags, int ya.”

“Umm,” I said, very conscious of the half full bags clasped tightly behind my back. “Well, someone has to. This place is disgusting.” I decided to go on the attack. “I haven’t seen you clearing up after any of your three.”

“Ere, you’re one of them bleedin’ anti-empiricals int ya,” she screeched and waved her phone threateningly at me. “I’m calling the bleedin’ cops!”

Chapter Two

"I really shouldn't have done that," I said ruefully when we got home. I hung Molly's leash on the coat rack and ran my fingers through my hair.

"So why did you then?" asked Sam going into the kitchen, closely followed by Molly. "You did say you weren't allowed."

"I know," I said following her in as well. "And that was a classic example of why it's not allowed. People get upset. Do you really think she will report me?"

Sam paused with her hand on the fridge door. "No, I doubt it. After all she has no real proof and everything's such a drama for her that she'll be ranting about something else by the time she gets home and she'll have forgotten about it."

She got the chops out and put them beside the cooker then sighed and leant on her hands looking out the kitchen window.

"You don't need to impress me, you know," she said quietly.

"I wasn't trying to impress you," I said, matching her quietness. I went over to stand beside her. "I just wanted to make you happy, that's all."

"Oh Nick," she said, putting her hand on mine while still staring out the window. "It was stupid of me, I know. I just forget what it's like out there and everything seems so normal here with you and I forget just how nasty people can be."

"Don't blame yourself," I said, giving her a hug. "I didn't think she'd notice. What I should have done was waited until she'd gone then start to clean the place up. I just got blasé and carried away. Come on, stop worrying about it. It's done and nothing will happen, you'll see."

She twisted to face me and squeezed me tightly then abruptly pushed me away.

"I'll get on with dinner," she said. "Will you feed Molly?"

“Sure,” I said and went to pick up her bowl.

I put the bowl on the kitchen table and fetched her dog meat from the fridge. Watched intently by two large black eyes, I cut off a few slices and chopped them up then scraped them into the bowl. Molly's nose started to flutter and twitch as she tried to work out what she was going to get even though it was much the same every night. I put the container back in the fridge and added some of her biscuits from the bag on the shelf.

“So what do we do if she does report it?” asked Sam, getting some veggies out of the fridge.

“Simple,” I said, putting Molly's bowl on the floor. She rushed over and began to devour it, her long tan coloured ears getting in the way. “We make it absolutely clear you knew nothing about it. If the empiricals do try to make a thing about it there's no evidence beyond the say so of an unreliable witness so it's unlikely they'll do anything to me but they mustn't involve you. You haven't got my resources.” We'd tried a couple of times to put a cloth around Molly's ears so they didn't get in her food while she ate but she kicked up such a fuss that we gave up.

“Surely they won't believe I'm married to you but have no idea?” she said.

“It happens all the time,” I said, leaning back against the edge of the table. “Partners of criminals often don't have any idea. You read about it in the papers every now and then. I seem to remember there was a man in Switzerland, I think it was, or Austria who kept a woman prisoner in his cellar for twenty years or something like that. She even had a couple of children by him but his wife never knew. He told her the little noises she heard were rats so she never went down there.”

“Oh yeah, I remember reading something about that,” exclaimed Sam, pushing the chopped veggies into a steamer. “That was quite a while ago though. Wasn't his name Alpenstrom or something?”

“Something like that,” I said, “but I don't remember now. I don't even remember how he was caught.”

“Me neither,” said Sam with a small frown. “I do remember thinking his wife was either incredibly stupid or involved in some way. How could she not know?”

“She may well have been both,” I said, “but people are generally very good at denying the obvious. You’re a good example of that.”

“Me?” said Sam, looking up from turning the chops under the grill to look quizzically at me. “What am I in denial about?”

“Well, not you exactly,” I said, pulling a chair from under the table and sitting down. “The people around you. Whenever you talk to Molly or another animal they just assume that you’re doing meaningless pet talk like any other owner and not actually having a real conversation. If they actually used the empirical techniques they’re so fond of they’d see but they don’t. They have a particular mind set and only go outside it when they’re forced to. That man’s wife probably assumed he was right when he said it was rats and whenever she heard any noises after that she just put it down to rats since that was what she was expecting. After all, it’s far more likely there are going to be rats in the cellar than sex slaves.”

“Well, I suppose,” said Sam, not looking entirely convinced. “Although I don’t have real conversations with Molly. I can do the vocals and the facial expressions but my nose is nowhere near sensitive enough to communicate through smell and there’s a lot of her body language I haven’t mastered yet. There’s a lot of subtleties in it and some things I’ll never be able to do because I’m not a dog. I can’t prick up my ears, for example, or wag my tail.”

“You seem to do well enough,” I said as Molly started searching the floor around her bowl for scraps she might have missed.

“Well enough, I suppose,” said Sam, sitting in the chair opposite me across the table. “I’d probably be in trouble if I ever, oh I don’t know, ran with a wolf pack or something, but with one on one I seem to get by but then again, dogs are pretty easy.”

“How do you mean?” I asked.

“Hmm? Oh, they’re open and trusting,” she said, watching Molly snuffle around the floor, “and their language reflects that. Cats on the other hand are a bugger. I can only get so far with cats then I come up against a barrier of inscrutability and deception. It’s in their basic vocal language as well as their body language.”

“I’d have thought you’d be able to cope with that, given your ancestry,” I said teasingly.

“I’m part Japanese, not Chinese,” she said hotly, “and only a small part at that.” Then she saw I was teasing and gave me one of her beautiful smiles. “But yes, you’re right in a way. There are subtleties of meaning in both Japanese and Chinese that simply don’t exist in English or the other Latinate languages.” She paused for a moment reflectively. “Cats are more like the Chinese than the Japanese though because the meaning of what a Chinese says varies with their facial expressions and body language. Cats are like that. A cat can seem to be saying it’s happy on the surface but fifteen layers of meaning below that it can be telling you it’s angry and is about to slash you with a claw. Or vice versa. Very difficult to talk to, cats.”

She jumped up to check on dinner and Molly abandoned her food search and went over to the front door with a purposeful air. Even I knew what that meant so I got up and fetched her leash.

“Just taking Molly out,” I called.

“Dinner’s almost ready,” called back Sam.

“Only be a minute,” I called back and nudged Molly with my knee.

Even though she was pretty intelligent as dogs go she still hadn’t grasped the fact that the door wouldn’t open if she jumped up and pushed her front legs against it. We went outside and I meandered along the pathway beside the drive while Molly ran from one side to the other sniffing in search of I knew not what. Then she rushed over to a rose bush and squatted while I paused and studied the sky. Business complete we both went back inside.

“Go and wash your hands,” said Sam, putting our plates on the table.

“What for?” I asked. “I only touched her leash.”

“You were handling those bags of poo at the dog park,” she said. “Wash your hands.”

“Oh yeah,” I said and went and washed my hands.

“It's going to rain in the morning,” I said when I came back. “Around 8 but won't last long. Maybe a couple of hours but no more.”

“So you'll be taking the car?” she asked, putting a little salt on her food.

“Will I?” I asked in surprise, raising an eyebrow in mute query. A small brass incense holder fell off the top of one of the bookcases and I sighed in annoyance and decided to leave it where it was until I'd finished my dinner. “Am I going somewhere?”

“It astonishes me sometimes how you can have lived so long and acquired so much knowledge and yet forget so much,” said Sam drily. She speared a piece of lamb with her fork then put it in her mouth and chewed while staring challengingly at me.

“It's because of that not despite it,” I said. “There isn't much room left in my head for trivia. Where am I going?”

“You have your annual meeting with Conan,” she said. “You remember him? Your boss? The one who paid for this delicious meal which was, incidentally, prepared by your loving and devoted wife.”

“Who is worshipped and appreciated above all other things,” I said hurriedly. “This is truly one of the most exquisitely prepared lamb chops I have ever encountered.”

“So I'm just a thing to you, am I?” she said, her eyes flashing with no trace of Asian inscrutability. “A robo-chef?”

“A poor choice of words,” I conceded. “I was, of course, referring to things in the ethereal and meta-physical sense not the tawdry material sense. I don't have your way with languages. How many have you

mastered now?"

"Mastered? Oh perhaps thirty or forty," she said and the flashing in her eyes changed to show she was not really insulted, just teasing.

I reflected that she was in many ways cat-like in her layers of communication and smiled lovingly at her which usually seemed to work. The key word there being 'seemed'.

"So it's been a year already, has it?" I asked. "I wonder what he wants to talk about this time."

"You'd better go and find out," she said. "It might be important."

"Never has been before," I replied. "I think he just has these meetings to check I'm still alive."

"And are you?" she asked, scraping the last morsel of meat from the bone.

"Am I what?" I asked.

"Still alive," she said.

"As far as I know," I said. "I have a budget so I must be. The University wouldn't give a budget to a dead person."

"Ohhh, so you don't remember Professor Akroyd then," said Sam, watching me eat the last mouthful.

"I do as it happens," I said as she reached over and took my plate. "But she wasn't technically dead. It was a clerical error and the cleric in question has since been defrocked."

"Oh piffle," she said standing up. "All the clerics have been defrocked not just that one. They were deemed non-empirical and require to recant. You know that."

"And a sad day it was too," I said. "But Professor Akroyd isn't dead, or so they tell me. She's been in some sort of hibernation after an

accident in her lab. They're calling it a sabbatical."

"I still think she's dead," said Sam, heading for the kitchen. "It's been more than ten years. Surely if she was in hibernation someone would have found a way to bring her back?"

"You'd think so but that's not how University politics operates," I said, following her in case there was going to be some pudding for afters. "She'll only be revived if her vote is needed for some committee or other. Until then her deputy controls the budget and has the final say on how it's allocated. Her day to day living expenses are doubtless covered by petty cash. Is there any pudding?"

"There's some cheesecake in the freezer," she said. "Help yourself."

"What flavour?" I asked, heading for the freezer.

"There's some cherry left and an entire pecan and rose," said Sam. "Blanche made it."

"Which?" I asked, pausing momentarily with my hand on the freezer handle.

"The pecan and rose," she said dumping the dishes in the sink.

"The cherry sounds good," I said, opening the freezer.

"I thought you liked pecan nuts," said Sam.

"I do," I replied, searching for the cheesecake, "but I doubt there'll be any actual nuts in it. Blanche is a bio-chemist post-grad so what she actually used is anybody's guess. I'll stick to supermarket cheesecake."

"Oh get over yourself," said Sam slapping my backside. "Whatever she used won't kill you. You're immortal."

"That I am decidedly not," I said retrieving the cherry cheesecake. "I may be destined to live a long time but not forever. I'm happy to take my chances with supermarket cheesecake which has known additives and has been eaten by thousands if not millions with no obvious side

effects. Blanche's cheesecake could have literally anything in it. It could even be part of her research. You know, some new serum or something which she couldn't test on mice for ethical reasons."

"I don't know how you've managed to survive this long," said Sam, pulling out the pecan and rose cheesecake. "You started out as an alchemist. You must have tasted some really weird concoctions in your time."

"Well, that's true," I said, using the bread knife to saw through the frozen cherry cheesecake. "But we didn't have the range of chemicals in those days. I mean, chemistry itself hadn't even been invented."

Sam took the bread knife off me and wiped it with a cloth before attacking the pecan and rose. She managed to hack a thin slice off the end and left it sitting on a side plate.

"Are you really going to eat that?" I asked. "Knowing full well Blanche made it?"

"Of course I am," she said. "If only to show solidarity with Blanche. It's not her fault she can't cook." She put both the cheesecakes back in the freezer and slammed the door. In a good way, I was pleased to see, not angrily.

"Whose fault is it, then?" I asked, putting mine in the microwave for a few seconds to take the crisp iciness off.

"I don't know that it's anyone's fault," she said. "Some of us just pick it up easily and others seem to lack the knack. She does OK in her lab though so you'd think she could cook since bio-chemistry and cooking are much the same thing."

"I rest my case," I said just as the microwave pinged. "Do you want a fork?"

"Please," she said, looking at her cheesecake. It was such a small slice it was already almost defrosted.

I pulled open the cutlery drawer and pulled out a couple of small

forks and handed her one. She just stood there so I started to eat mine while watching her.

“Well?” I asked, three fork-fulls later.

“Well what?” she asked, still looking at her cheesecake.

“Aren't you going to eat it?” I asked.

Her eyes narrowed then she made a quick 'ruff' sound and Molly came running into the kitchen. Sam used the fork to scrape half her cheesecake into Molly's bowl and, after a couple of suspicious sniffs, it disappeared.

“Ruff, grrr?” asked Sam.

Molly looked at her and raised an eyebrow then wrinkled her lip to bare her teeth on one side then wagged her tail on one side only.

“That's cheating,” I said.

“Well, you got me worried,” said Sam.

“What did she say?” I asked, finishing my cheesecake.

“It's too sweet for her,” said Sam as Molly bent her head and retched onto the kitchen floor, “but it doesn't seem harmful.”

“So why was she sick?” I asked. The little pool of vomit looked to have blood in it but that could have been whatever colourant had been used to simulate roses.

“She doesn't like nuts,” said Sam as Molly looked up at her and yapped plaintively.

“OK,” I said, putting my plate in the sink. I got some paper towels and some anti-bacterial surface spray and started to clean up. “So you reckon that cheesecake's all right?”

“Sure,” said Sam and forked the rest of the cheesecake into her mouth

then spat it out again. It landed on the floor not far from where I was cleaning up Molly's vomit. "Sorry. I wasn't expecting it to be salty as well as sweet."

"Salty?" I said, looking up at her much the way Molly had. "Who on Earth puts salt in cheesecake?"

"Blanche, by the look of it," said Sam, taking the pecan and rose cheesecake out of the freezer again. Molly looked at it, blinked twice then ran into the lounge.

"You're going to have some more?" I asked, squirting anti-bacterial spray liberally over the floor.

"No, I'm chucking it," said Sam. "It was disgusting."

She lifted off the swing top from the bin because it always fell off otherwise and dumped the cheesecake.

"So, you're taking the car tomorrow?" she asked, putting the lid back on.

"To see Conan the Barbarian?" I asked. "I suppose so, since it'll be raining."

"Why do you keep calling him Conan the Barbarian?" she asked.

"Because he's Dean of Humanities and Social Sciences," I said, lifting the top off the swing top bin to toss in the dirty paper towels. "How much more barbaric can you get?"

"You're such a snob," she said. "Will you give me a lift into Cambridge? I said I'd look at some translation work that Sergey Vanofov wants doing."

Chapter Three

“So where do you want me to drop you?” I asked as the windscreen wipers on my old BMW i5 fought to clear the rain. It had started slightly earlier than I’d predicted, by about 5 minutes, and was a little heavier.

“You know the old Zebra in Maid’s Causeway?” asked Sam. “Near there would be great.”

“Sure,” I said. “No problem. It’s only a couple of streets from where I’m going. So what does Sergej want translated?”

“I’m not sure,” she said. “All I know is he has some Israeli scientific reports he wants translated into Russian but I need to see them first. Science isn’t my thing so I may not be able to if they’re too technical.”

“Oh I’m sure you’ll be fine,” I said. “Don’t undersell your talents. And don’t forget he’s one of the richest men on the planet so make sure your fee is appropriate.”

“I know he’s rich but he isn’t stupid,” she said, tying her hair back into a ponytail. “If I quote much more than the going rate he’ll find someone else. After all, Hebrew to Russian isn’t particularly difficult. That job I did for the Library at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London was a lot worse, Archaic Sanskrit into Swahili, and I’m not convinced I got it completely right. The problem here is the scientific terminology although with a bit of luck the Israelis used the English or German terms.”

“How do you keep track of all these languages in your head?” I asked. “Don’t you get words from different languages mixed up?”

“I’ve no idea,” she said. “I think it’s probably something to do with context but I don’t know. I don’t really read the words anyway. What I see are concepts or meanings in a line. I only really deal with words when I’m writing down the translation.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Ohh, how can I explain?” and she gazed out of the window at some very wet pedestrians for a few moments. “Umm, well, take for example, the sentence 'The cat sat on the mat.'. When I read or hear that I don't see the words in whatever language they're written in. I see more the ideas, that of a cat sitting on a mat which is independent of the actual words although that's over simplifying it because there are other aspects like tenses and subject/object orientation like 'the mat that the cat was sitting on' or 'the cat will have sat on the mat'. Anyway, I get the sense of what it is then just write down that sense in whatever language it's supposed go in to. I can't do literal translations a lot of the time because often one language simply doesn't have a corresponding word. I'm sure you're familiar with that in what you do.”

“Actually yes,” I said. “A lot of what I do simply doesn't exist in any language so I make up a lot of terms to try to explain things to the students but they have to feel it since words alone aren't adequate. Still, we're almost there. You want to text me when you're done?”

“I could get a taxi,” she said as we waited at the traffic lights. “I don't expect I'll be long. It'll just be a quick scan to see if I can translate the stuff. If I can I'll take them home and work on them there.”

“Oh I won't be long either,” I said. “Most likely he'll give me a lecture on budget cuts and how hard he fought for mine then tell me what the figure is then send me packing. That's what usually happens although the lectures are getting longer. He does like the sound of his own voice.”

“Don't you care about your budget?” she asked as the lights turned green.

“Not really,” I said. “My biggest problem is spending what little they give me so the bean counters don't ask questions. I've learnt over the years the trick is to spend about 1% more than the budget. If I spend too much or too little they start muttering about audits.”

“You do lead a strange life, don't you,” said Sam giving me a sideways look.

“To you, perhaps,” I said blithely, “but it isn't strange to me. Here's The Zebra.”

I pulled over and we kissed before she half opened her umbrella in the car and nearly took my eye out. She apologised and got out and one of the rib tips caught in the surround of the window as she tried to open it fully while shutting the door. I muttered a quick incantation so she didn't get wet while struggling in the rain then cancelled it when she got the umbrella fully open. If she was too dry when she turned up for her meeting people might get suspicious.

I pulled away and turned into Emmanuel Road, heading for Pembroke Street. Conan Fitzpatrick, my boss, had his office in an old building that had once been a storage facility for Corpus Christie College and which had been converted into offices in the 1960s. From the outside it was a distinguished early 18th century structure but inside it was a garish nightmare of out-dated modernist office space with dirty beige partitions and worn nylon carpets that caused small electric shocks whenever you touched anything.

As luck would have it I found a parking space nearby and hurried over, using my copy of the previous year's School of Humanities and Social Sciences 'Formalisation Of Desired Outcomes; Planning For The Future' meeting minutes to keep the rain off. I hadn't attended the meeting nor had I bothered to read the minutes but they served quite well as an umbrella as the cover was laminated. The future was going to happen whatever the minutes said.

Conan's secretary wasn't there when I turned up outside his office but his door was slightly ajar so I pushed it open and wandered in. He looked up from his artfully strewn desk and sighed to show how overworked he was.

“Hello, Nicholas,” he said. “I trust you are well?”

“As always, Conan,” I said, sitting down in the single chair in front of his desk. He twisted his head to read the rain spattered cover of my minutes and sighed again. “Where's Mary?”

“She's gone to get us coffee,” said Conan. “As you'd know if you ever

read any of my memos we're no longer permitted to have kettles or other electrical cooking equipment in individual offices. We now have an official kitchen."

"I read all your memos with great attention," I lied. "They are the highlights of my day."

"How I wish that were true," he said and put down the piece of paper he'd been holding.

"So what's my new budget?" I asked, hoping we could get this over with quickly.

"I'm afraid it's not quite as simple as that," he said, leaning back and looking mournfully at me. His jowls wobbled a little and he reminded me of a bloodhound somewhat past its prime. It struck me that he must be nearing retirement as he seemed to have been around for a long time.

"No, it never is," I said and crossed my legs.

"Excuse me," said Mary coming in with a tray. She put it on the small side table near Conan's desk and shuffled out again, pulling the door closed behind her.

"Coffee? Perhaps a croissant?" asked Conan getting up. He liked the ritual of giving his visitors refreshments personally. He seemed to think it put them under some sort of obligation to him.

"No thanks," I said. "I've not long had one."

"You don't mind if I do?" he asked.

"Oh help yourself," I said generously. It amused me to think that might put him under some sort of obligation to me.

I sat silently and watched as he slowly poured some coffee into a tea cup then added milk and two spoons of sugar. He stirred the cup three times precisely then took it back to his desk.

“You have met Professor Audrey Carmichael, have you not?” he asked after settling himself.

“I don't think so,” I said. “Who is she?”

“My successor,” said Conan, frowning sternly at me. “Come on, Nicholas. Surely you know I'm retiring? The selection process ended weeks ago.”

“Ahh,” I said, none the wiser. “That Professor Audrey Carmichael. I thought the name was familiar.”

“You really should pay some attention to the business of the School,” he said scowling at me.

“I daresay I should,” I said, “although it's never seemed particularly relevant to me. So you're retiring, are you? Got any exciting plans?”

His thin lips twitched in what might have been a smile but he ignored my question.

“Professor Carmichael has raised one or two issues with me regarding what can only be described as the somewhat anomalous position of your Department within this School,” he said.

“Yes, I've never really understood that myself,” I said. “But Professor Gardie was most insistent that Praecantatology not be included within the Sciences back in the 1870s. His view was that my field was more related to the Humanities so I ended up here.”

“Quite,” said Conan. He touched his coffee cup but it was still too hot so he left it on the desk. “Well, it's not entirely clear to me where your field lies within the present structure of the University so I imagine there is little likelihood of your Department being moved to another School. Perhaps Science might be more appropriate but I understand that you have moved on from pure alchemy.”

“Perhaps it's you who should pay more attention, Conan,” I said cheerfully. “I haven't taught alchemy for ages.”

“Quite,” said Conan. “And it is the matter of teaching that we must turn to. How long have you been with the University, Nicholas?”

“Ohh, now let me see,” I said, surprised. “Ahh, I was invited to join some ten years or so after that spat at Oxford when two of the scholars were hanged by the local townfolk and a number of other scholars fled to Cambridge and set up their own university. When was that? I don’t quite remember.”

“1209,” said Conan drily.

My mobile phone pinged but I ignored it.

“Ahh, yes,” I said. “That was a good year for wine. Quite sunny but wet as I remember. So that means I’ve been here since 1219 or thereabouts.”

“I don’t suppose annual birthdays mean that much to you any more,” remarked Conan.

“Not really,” I said. “Does it still bother you?”

“It did take a while to get used to the idea,” he admitted. “After all, when I became Dean of the School it came as quite a surprise to discover I also had oversight of a Department that has no apparent existence, no prospectus, very few students and only one lecturer who had been in the job since the university’s inception.”

I smiled in what I hoped was a sympathetic way.

“I found it easiest to simply treat you and your Department just like any other,” he added then steepled his fingers and made his face more serious. “You were invited to teach alchemy, were you not?”

“That’s right,” I said. “The new university only had a basic curriculum of grammar, rhetoric and logic so they cast around to find something that would distinguish them from Oxford and found me. I thought the idea had merits so I moved to Cambridge and I’ve been here ever since. Of course, arithmetic, music, geometry and astronomy came along not long afterwards. Where are you going with this?”

“Professor Carmichael did pose a question which I was unable to answer to my satisfaction,” he said. “You have been here a remarkably long time and in that time how many students have you had?”

“Oh I couldn't possibly say,” I said, taken aback again. “No one started keeping any formal records until the mid 1700s.”

“But you've been the sole person within the Department for the entire time,” said Conan. “Make an educated guess.”

“Umm, perhaps three or four hundred,” I guessed. “Mine is a very specialised field.”

“Three or four hundred students in eight hundred years,” said Conan heavily. He let the silence build for a few moments then pulled a piece of paper towards him. “And how many, would you say, in recent years?”

“Oh that's easy,” I said. “None.”

“Quite,” said Conan. “None. Not one. The last, in fact, graduated in 2001.”

“But she did graduate with full honours,” I said hurriedly. “She was a very able student. Lovely manners too as I recall.”

“And to what do you attribute this sudden drop in numbers?” asked Conan. “After all, your average has been one student or so every two years until this century.”

“Statistics can be so misleading,” I said. “An average tells us very little. After all, throughout the entire fifteenth century I had only two students because of the extreme risks. As you know student enrolments are by invitation only and under the present circumstances, which are broadly similar, I am reluctant to extend such an invitation to anyone suitable.”

“And there we reach the crux of the situation,” said Conan. “The present climate of empiricism has put your field of witchcraft into jeopardy and your enrolments have declined to nothing.”

"I'd prefer you didn't use the term witchcraft," I said, leaning forward. "It's been brought into such disrepute. I mean, even politicians bandy the word around when they're accused of corruption and so on. They scream witch hunt at every opportunity. No, the correct and more formal term is sorcery, as is reflected in the name of my department."

He looked puzzled at that so I pointed out that Praecantatology is, at root, Latin for the study of sorcery, not witchery.

"It doesn't matter what it's called," he said irritably and it struck me that I might have offended him. Being a sociologist he probably hadn't studied Latin and felt I was putting him down. "The essential point is that the present political and social climate is antagonistic to witchcraft or sorcery or whatever you choose to call it and as a direct consequence you have no students and no prospect of any in the foreseeable future."

"Just one moment there," I said firmly, holding up a finger. "I've been arguing for centuries now to include divination within the curriculum so it is wholly inappropriate to claim something is foreseeable when no resources have been provided to put such a claim on a professional footing."

"Oh use your common sense, man," said Conan heatedly, jerking forward so his hands slapped down on his desk. "Do you seriously think that public opinion is going to change in the short term?"

"Time is relative," I said, "and opinion changed against us very quickly. It could just as easily change back again. A lot can happen in a hundred years and ..."

"A hundred years isn't short term," said Conan flatly.

"Speak for yourself, mate," I thought but held my tongue. One thing I had learnt in the last millennium was diplomacy although that had also changed over time. A couple of hundred years ago I'd have just challenged him to a duel to resolve whatever the problem was. For all their defects duels were a quick and lasting way of solving problems.

"So what are you saying?" I asked instead.

“Are you sure you won't have a coffee?” he asked. “Perhaps a croissant, even though they'll be cold now?”

“No, thanks” I said and sat back to wait.

“As you know I've fought for your position tooth and nail for the last thirty years,” he said pompously, “and kept you free from all the political machinations that go on in this institution.” I nodded to show my gratitude for this even though it was completely untrue. He'd throw me under a bus if one ever came this way. “But, alas, I am retiring.”

“You will be missed,” I said, matching him lie for lie.

“Thank you,” he said. “My successor, Professor Carmichael, sadly does not share my feelings however. She is of the view that every department within the School should contribute not just to the academic stature of the University and the learning experience and welfare of the students who, after all, make their mark in the wider world as ambassadors of ours, but also to the economic fabric of the establishment.”

“So basically you're saying the Department has to make a profit?” I asked.

“If you must be so crude, yes,” said Conan.

“Or what?” I asked. “You can't close the Department down. The Royal Charter granted by Henry III is in perpetuity.”

“Not entirely,” said Conan, smiling for the first time. “Our legal advisers say that it can be ended by a proclamation of King William.”

“Ah,” I said, uncomfortably aware that my safety net just might be disappearing.

“But don't worry,” said Conan happily. “The present social and political climate also makes it highly undesirable for the King to do so. It would be tantamount to him conferring legitimacy on your kind by admitting your existence and that cannot be permitted.”

I breathed a sigh of relief.

“But there is nothing in the original Charter about changing the role of the Department,” he added maliciously. “After all, you’ve done that yourself several times. Now, to avoid all the unnecessary administrative difficulties of moving you to another School, it would seem advantageous to re-classify your current department within the School of Humanities and Social Sciences to one that is more in keeping with both the ethos of the School and the broader social sphere.”

“To what, exactly?” I asked suspiciously. This meeting wasn’t turning out quite the way I’d expected.

“Please do not misunderstand me,” said Conan, picking up his coffee at last and giving it a final stir. “I advocated most strongly with Professor Carmichael to keep you and your Department in its present role.”

“Doubtless with great success,” I said, a vague feeling of apprehension stealing over me.

“Alas, no,” said Conan, beaming at me. He sipped his coffee. “Professor Carmichael is of the opinion that there is no feasible justification for including your department within the Humanities but there is a case for inclusion within the Social Sciences, limited though it may be.”

“And what is that?” I asked.

“She suggested,” said Conan and he paused while he put his coffee down carefully, “that perhaps your talents and background might better suit you to teaching Superstition and Mythology as a sub-department within Media Studies. Your Department would be renamed appropriately, of course.”

Chapter Four

Being a considerate and thoughtful person Sam was standing across the road from The Zebra when I arrived so I didn't have to do a U turn. It wasn't raining so much now so she closed her umbrella and tossed it on the back seat with her briefcase before getting in the front without getting more than a few drops on her.

“Sorry I took so long,” I said. “I got your message while I was still with Conan and couldn't get away.”

“It's only water,” she said, undoing the buttons of her raincoat before putting on her seatbelt. “So, how did it go?”

“Not that well,” I said, pulling out into the traffic. “Old Conan's retiring apparently.”

“Don't tell me,” she said. “They want you to be the new Dean?”

“Oh there's no chance of that,” I said. “No, the new Dean's already been appointed. That's what he wanted to talk about although I think he really just wanted to gloat.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, her face falling. “Are you in trouble?”

“He thinks I am,” I said as I turned left at the lights onto the Fulbourn Road. “It seems the new Dean has been asking questions and isn't too happy with my student numbers.”

“But you don't have any students, do you?” she asked.

“And therein lies the source of her discontent,” I said. “She wants to make me teach some sort of nonsense as part of Media Studies and Conan wanted to be the one to break the news to me.”

“Why doesn't he like you?” asked Sam, putting her hand on mine on the gear stick.

“Doubtless there are a multitude of reasons,” I said, moving my hand from the gear stick to her knee, “but I think it boils down to the fact

that he's mortal and I'm not. I think he resents having to retire while I carry on as though he wasn't there."

"Ah," she said. "Yes, I can understand that. I'm not sure I've really come to terms with it myself."

"At the risk of sounding cruel and hard-hearted," I said, shifting my hand back a little higher up her leg, "that's the way it is and we just have to get used to it."

"I know," said Sam, "and I've tried to focus on the fact that you'll always be around for me and not die of old age before I do. I keep telling myself that I'm the lucky one because when I'm old I'll still have you as my hunky toy boy but, oh, I don't know."

"But what?" I asked, checking the rear view mirror before looking at her. She was staring out the windscreen but seemed to be looking inward.

"Oh ...," and she gave a sort of half shrug then a forced laugh. "I mean, well, I guess when I hit my fifties and I'm getting old and decrepit you won't love me anymore." She turned her face anxiously towards me, searching my face.

"There's no risk of that, my love," I said softly. "You'll always be beautiful to me."

She smiled and grasped my hand tightly.

"And I worry about you," she added. "One day I'll be gone and you'll be left with the pain of that for a long long time. It's not like you'll die a couple of years after me."

"Well I might," I said. "Accidents can happen but that's simply the way life is. Everyone, mortal or not, loses loved ones and has to carry on. It's very hard at first but time dulls the pain." I took her hand and kissed it then had to drop it quickly as the car in front braked unexpectedly.

"I suppose so," she said with a trace of false cheerfulness. "Anyway,

there's nothing we can do about it and the important thing is to make the most of our time together. What are you going to do to stop them making you do media studies?"

"Absolutely nothing," I said. "Conan thinks it's going to happen because he wants it to happen but it won't. She's got this bee in her bonnet about me now but when Conan leaves and she's got to deal with all the bickering and day to day politics of the big departments with their massive budgets and thousands of students she'll never find the time to do anything about me. I'll just disappear into the background again and get lost in the rounding errors. If I kick up a fuss I'll just be reminding her I exist. I guarantee she'll have forgotten all about it after a few days."

"Won't Conan start the ball rolling if he's enjoying it so much?" she asked.

"I doubt it," I said. "He'll be much more inclined to savour the anticipation and leave all the actual work to this Carmichael woman. He's always followed the path of least resistance. Anyway, even if it all does come to pass, so what? I get a few students foisted on me and we'll spend our days chatting then I'll give them all a pass and everyone'll be happy. One day, when the climate is right, I'll find someone suitable and teach them the arts but Carmichael will be long gone by then. Tell me how it went with Sergey."

"Oh that went fine," she said. "I had a quick scan through the papers and they're all fairly straightforward. Mostly reports and analyses of UFO sightings and encounters. There is one which is a technical report on the atmosphere of one of the moons of Saturn but that's mostly full of graphs and tables of numbers which don't need translating."

"UFOs?" I said, puzzled. "Sergey's a businessman with an interest in science which is why he funds research here in Cambridge but why UFOs?"

"I can't tell you," she said. "I'm sorry but he made me sign a non-disclosure agreement and if I tell anyone what's in the reports I could be sued for millions."

“Which only makes me more curious,” I said, pulling onto the driveway of our house. “What you should have done was make up some cover story that makes it look very dull and uninteresting. In fact I'm surprised Sergey didn't do that himself.”

“Maybe he did,” she said, getting out of the car. “Maybe the non-disclosure agreement is intended to distract attention away from what he's really up to. Ohh, thank God it's stopped raining.”

“You really shouldn't say things like that,” I said. “It's dangerous. Someone might overhear you.”

“Damn, I'm sorry,” she said, trying to look contrite but not succeeding. “It just slipped out. Anyway, there's no one around.”

I gave her a reassuring smile and collected her briefcase and umbrella from the back while Sam went to fetch Molly to take her out to the toilet. She was barking hysterically even though she couldn't see us because her sense of smell was so acute she knew Sam was back. She didn't particularly react to me coming back from somewhere but if it was a stranger her barking was more aggressive. I opened Sam's umbrella to drip dry in the hall and dumped her briefcase beside her desk in her study then went to put the kettle on.

“Postman hasn't been yet,” she reported when she and Molly came back in.

Molly ran over to sniff me and check I really was who she thought I was then turned her back on me and ran back to Sam.

“Probably has but there was nothing for us,” I said. “I've made you a coffee.”

“Thanks,” she said and sat down at the kitchen table. “You know you said 'when the climate is right'? You were talking about the empiricists, weren't you?”

“You mean in the car earlier?” I asked and she nodded. “Yes, but they'll calm down in time.”

She put her hands around her coffee mug to warm them and gazed into its murky depths.

“That's why you have no students, isn't it,” she said. “It's too dangerous for them.”

“That's right,” I said, wondering where she was going with this.

“But you used to have, didn't you?” she asked, looking up at me.

“Yes,” I said, “not many as most people don't have the aptitudes or inclinations, but a few.”

“So what happened?” she asked. “I was thinking about this a few days ago. I'm pretty sure there were no empiricists when I was young and no one minded if anyone said 'Thank God' or 'Jesus Christ!'. Maybe I'm just remembering my childhood as always being rosy but I'm sure it was different then.”

“It was,” I said, “and it's always changing. These things go in waves and historians sometimes give them names like 'The Renaissance' or 'The Reformation'. I've no idea what they'll call this one.”

“But what changed?” asked Sam. “I don't remember anything changing but I'm pretty sure it has.”

“That's because you're still young,” I said with a smile. “You've only just reached your thirties so the causes of all this happened before you were born.”

“I don't remember anything about it in school, though,” she said.

“That's because they don't teach current affairs in school,” I said. “Maybe in another decade or two what happened will be far enough back to start appearing in history classes, maybe longer.”

“But what happened?” she asked. “You used to have students and not be afraid of being reported, didn't you?”

“Up to a point,” I said. “What I do has always been feared but there

was a time when it was all out in the open then the various religions took hold and for a time we were persecuted then that eased off and we came back although that was a couple of hundred years ago.”

“I’m talking about now, in my lifetime,” said Sam. “What happened recently?”

“Oh that’s pretty easy,” I said. “Artificial Intelligence or AI as it was usually known.”

“What’s that?” she asked, a slight frown on her face.

“It was all the rage before you were born,” I said, “and it’s what its name says. Intelligence created artificially, using computers.”

“You mean like the one I’ve got?” she said.

“Absolutely,” I said. “Computers are great tools which is why we still have them but someone had the bright idea of trying to create a computer that could learn on its own rather than be programmed.”

“Wow, OK,” she said. “And that didn’t work?”

“Just the opposite,” I said. “It worked too well.”

“You’re not making sense,” she said.

“You sound just like my students,” I said with a laugh. “They were always saying that.”

“Maybe if you explained it better,” she said.

“I’m sorry,” I said and put down my mug. “Let me see, umm, well at first the attempts at machine learning were laughably absurd and no one took much notice but they improved and started to be put into simple manufacturing systems to reduce labour costs. After all, computers don’t need pay rises, don’t go on strike or take holidays and so on. It all made economic sense. Then they got even better and started to be put into all sorts of things. People investing on the stock markets started to trust their AI systems more than their own

judgements. AI was put into communications satellites and mobile phones, not just washing machines. Courts started to use AI for sentencing criminals, maps started using AI to find the shortest routes from A to B. A lot of people were getting very excited about the possibilities of AI and how it could take over all the irritating mundane jobs people had to do. At the same time a lot of other people were getting pissed off because their jobs were disappearing or they were afraid they would.”

“Yes, I can see that,” said Sam. “I’ve seen some old science fiction movies on TV.”

“TV’s another area for AI,” I said. “At first it was used to predict what people wanted to watch and choose what to offer them. Then the TV and film studios came up with the idea of using AI to mimic popular actors so that films and shows could still be made with big stars even after they’d got old and died. Car manufacturers started trying to use AI to make cars that could drive themselves and so on and so on. After a while a lot of people started getting worried about the future. Maybe AI would even take over and turn humans into a race of slaves serving some vague nebulous machine.”

“So people rejected this AI stuff and became empiricists?” she asked.

“Actually no,” I said. “There was so much money to be made that people’s fears were ignored. What really changed things was gossip.”

“Gossip?” exclaimed Sam. “Why would gossip change anything?”

“You know the Internet, don’t you?” I asked. “I don’t use it myself but I’ve heard lots of people go on it to talk to each other about all sorts of things.”

“Yeah, it’s called social media,” she said. “I’ve used it a bit myself.”

“Well, that’s at the root of all the change,” I said. “Social media.”

“OK, you’ve lost me,” said Sam. “What’s social media got to do with AI?”

“I'm not really certain,” I said, “since I've never used it, but from what I hear social media had a lot of AI built into it to learn from human behaviour, mainly to collect information for targeted advertising and to manipulate people by controlling what information they were given.”

“I don't follow,” she said, frowning.

“Well,” I said, “if you showed some sort of interest in something on social media the AI systems would pick that up and force feed you with more of the same and cut back on other things. So if you liked, ohh, I don't know, cute dog videos you'd be offered endless cute dog videos and never anything about, say, goldfish.”

“Well that makes sense,” she said. “I don't imagine many dog lovers are into goldfish as well.”

“That was the thinking,” I said, “but it wasn't just pets. After a while people who showed any sign of being, say, racist or sexist, even if it was only as a joke, started to get racist or sexist information pushed onto them and anything anti-racist or anti-sexist got suppressed.”

“But that's terrible,” she said, looking affronted.

“Yes but it also fits human nature,” I said. “People like things that confirm their thinking and don't like things that challenge it.”

“I suppose,” she said, “but what's this got to do with gossip?”

“It's everything to do with gossip,” I said. “People love to gossip but who gossips about nice things or good things? People like to gossip about who's sleeping with who or who's stealing from their employer and things like that and social media, powered by AI, made that gossip global and impossible to avoid. And then there were conspiracy theories.”

“I've heard of those,” said Sam. “That's, like, those stories of people being drugged and waking up to find their kidneys have been stolen, isn't it.”

“Yes,” I said, “but it was a lot worse than that. Tens of thousands of conspiracy theories swarming over the internet almost brought America to civil war as each side of the political divide spread more and more conspiracies about how evil the other side was.”

“So what stopped it?” she asked. “If all these AI systems were pushing all this stuff how did it get stopped?”

“Someone started a conspiracy theory that the conspiracy theories were being created by AI systems,” I said. “I know it sounds absurd but it spread like wildfire and all the hidden fears people had of machines taking over or even just taking their jobs came to the surface. They were furious that not only were they being manipulated but that they were being manipulated by machines. There was a massive backlash of public opinion and governments hurriedly brought in all sorts of legislation to ban AI systems and it nearly caused global economic chaos. The stock market, for example, was found to be actually controlled by AI systems making buying and selling decisions thousands of times faster than any human could and operating entirely on their own. When those systems were taken away the stock market became chaotic for quite a while. Manufacturing, medicine, the legal system, banking, almost everything suffered as a result but the key thing is, the ordinary people who'd been at the receiving end of all this started to reject everything that they couldn't directly experience for themselves and that, at the end of the day, is empiricism. If you can't see or experience something yourself directly then it isn't be true.”

Sam just stared at me.

“People started demanding for evidence for things,” I continued. “Someone would claim something on social media about the latest conspiracy theory or an MP would say something and instead of blindly accepting it other people now demanded proof it was true and, of course, there generally wasn't any. There was no evidence that the President was part of a global child sex trafficking ring or that immigrants were destroying the economy or whatever.”

“But surely that's a good thing?” said Sam. “Isn't it?”

“Absolutely,” I said, “except it didn't stop there. Backlashes have a nasty habit of going too far and instead of just doing away with conspiracy theories and making politicians more accountable it also got rid of the good side of AI not just the bad. Automated fraud detection, for example, died a death and new cures for diseases that were going to be found never got found. But it went further than that. Religions suddenly became an anathema when people started to ask why they needed to simply have faith and believe unquestioningly. Why couldn't the religious leaders produce any hard evidence? Were religions really just more conspiracy theories designed to manipulate people? It's the same with me and all the other sorcerers. We can't produce scientific evidence of magic. It simply doesn't exist within the scientific realm because most of what we do is contrary to the so called 'laws of nature'.”

“Right,” breathed Sam. “So that's why we don't say things like 'Oh God' any more.”

“No, not really,” I said. “Expressions like that have been used by non-believers for centuries because they've become embedded in the language. When most people say 'Jesus Christ!' when they hit their finger with a hammer it's not a statement of religious belief, it's more of a swear word. The thing is, in the face of immense public opinion, governments all around the world were forced to bring in all sorts of anti-non-empirical legislation to prevent anyone who still tried to spread conspiracy theories or religious or extreme political views or anything that couldn't be scientifically demonstrated. Many, including Britain, set up special sections in their police forces to track down and prosecute anyone who shows non-empirical beliefs. The trouble is, it's now got out of hand. You and I know that when you say something like 'Thank God it's stopped raining' that you are just expressing pleasure using an age-old phrase but to fanatics it's a statement of your religious beliefs. However, when your livelihood depends on it, as it does with the members of the Empirical Police, you can get pretty fanatical.”

“Now I get it,” said Sam, sitting back. “It does make a certain kind of sense. You think the pendulum will swing back the other way?”

“Definitely,” I said. “These things have a certain momentum and

people will calm down in time. Religions will come back first, I think, because they're a source of comfort to many whereas sorcery scares people but even AI will come back sooner or later. We just have to wait it out."

"How long, do you think?" she asked.

"Hard to say," I said, looking towards the front door as the doorbell rang, even though two walls were in the way. "Are you expecting anyone?"

"Only Haley but she's not coming round until this afternoon," said Sam. "I'll get it."

She got up and went to the front door with Molly close on her heels. I opened the fridge to see if there were any leftovers to snack on.

"Hello," I heard Sam say. "Can I help you?"

"Empirical Police," said a female voice and I jerked back in alarm, knocking some eggs from their tray in the fridge door. "Can we come in?"

Chapter Five

“Umm, yes, of course,” I heard Sam say as Molly started barking. “Come in. Be quiet Molly, down. Excuse me, I’ll just put the dog in the bedroom. She’s scared of strangers. Just a sec.”

I shut the fridge and stepped over the eggs. They could wait 'til later. In the hallway a tall, thin woman with shoulder length straw blonde hair was looking through the lounge door and a stocky young man with a crew cut was standing in the front doorway as though to block it.

“Hello,” I said, politely. “Did I hear you say you're police?”

The woman jerked back and stared at me. Now I saw her face I realised she was more gaunt than thin.

“That is correct,” she said, looking at me with cold eyes. “Sergeant Gwyneth Bailey, Cambridgeshire Constabulary, Empirical Division.”

“That's a bit of a mouthful,” I said, “but I suppose you get used to saying it all the time.”

Her thin lips didn't so much as twitch although her eyes got a little colder.

“This is Constable Clive Barnard, also CCED,” she added, waving something the size of a credit card at me. She seemed to put a certain emphasis on the CCED so I guessed she hadn't been amused by my remark. “And you are?” Constable Clive thingy also flashed his credit card but I ignored him.

“Are those identity cards?” I asked.

Gwyneth sighed slightly then stepped forward and held out the card. It had Cambridgeshire Constabulary in large letters across the top and I could see a small photograph of her face.

“Feel free to telephone and check,” she said.

“Oh, I believe you,” I said, “although I probably shouldn't. I'm Nick March.”

“And the lady who answered the door?” asked Gwyneth as Sam came back downstairs. Molly had stopped barking and was now audibly scratching frantically at the bedroom door to get out.

“I'm Sam March,” she said with a faint but discernable waver in her voice.

“And Molly is the dog?” asked Gwyneth. “A white and tan spaniel?”

“Yes,” said Sam, staying on the last step with her hand on the banister. “She's a King Charles spaniel.”

“What seems to be the problem?” I asked.

“We're just making some enquiries, sir,” she said in that special way that the police have. There was no trace of respect in the 'sir', just suspicion and unspoken accusation. “Perhaps if we went into that room there,” and she pointed into the lounge, “we'd all be more comfortable.”

“If you like,” I said.

She stepped back to let me go first so I went in and she followed. Clive waited for Sam then followed her in. He stayed in the doorway while the rest of us sat down.

“You are married?” asked Gwyneth, staying on the edge of the armchair so she didn't get too comfortable.

“Yes,” I said, sitting on the couch with Sam. “For almost two years. Do you want to see the certificate?”

“Not at the present time,” she said. “Your occupation, Mr March?”

“I teach at Cambridge University,” I said. “You can check that with Conan Fitzpatrick. He's the Dean of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences.”

“And you, Mrs March?” she asked.

“Doctor March,” said Sam. “I run my own business, I do translating.”

“Translating of what?” asked Gwyneth.

“Primarily manuscripts and papers for the University,” she said.

“That would be Cambridge University?” asked Gwyneth.

“Generally,” said Sam, “but I’ve been getting more work from other universities recently.”

“Would these be medical documents?” asked Gwyneth.

“I’m not that kind of doctor,” said Sam. “I have a doctorate in modern languages, hence the translating.”

“I see,” said Gwyneth. “Does anyone else live here?”

“No, only the two of us,” I said.

“And the dog, Molly,” said Gwyneth. “Do you have any other pets?”

“No,” I said. “She has a dog license if that’s what you’re here about.”

Gwyneth’s lips twitched in what could, if you were being charitable, be described as an attempt at a half smile.

“I’m sure she does,” she said. “You don’t strike me as the sort of people who would slip up on a detail like that.”

“Interesting choice of words there,” I said. “Slip up. Are you accusing us of something Sergeant?”

“Not as yet, no,” she said. “But we have had a report involving someone by the name of Sam who frequents the off leash dog area at Fulbourn with a white and tan spaniel who was seen associating with a male who may have been performing non-empiricist activities.”

“Oh yes,” I said. “And you think that's us?”

“Let's just say our enquiries are still ongoing,” said Gwyneth. “This person known as Sam and the dog Molly are believed to live in Struggle Vale and you are the first we have visited. There may be another Sam and another spaniel called Molly at one of the other three houses.”

“There aren't,” I said. “We know them all. This is the only Sam and Molly in the area.”

“I'm sure you have no objection if we check on that,” said Gwyneth. “Do you go to the off leash area at Fulbourn?”

“I don't,” I said, “but Sam goes most days.”

“Why?” asked Gwyneth. “You seem to have a reasonable amount of land here for the dog to exercise.”

“But no other dogs,” said Sam. “Molly needs to socialise and, besides, she likes to chase cars. If we let her loose here she'll probably get run over as we only have a low stone wall. At the dog park she can chase all the cars she wants but she can't get through the fence.”

“I see,” said Gwyneth. “And you never go, Mr March?”

“Very rarely,” I said. “This report, it came from Karen, did it?”

“I really can't say,” said Gwyneth. “Why would you think it did?”

“Only I was at the dog park yesterday, as it happens,” I said. “Karen was there and she got upset because I cleared up some dog poo.”

“And why would she get upset about a thing like that?” asked Gwyneth.

“She thought I was clearing up after her dogs,” I said, “so I'm guessing she thought I was in some way accusing her of something. People can be strange about that. What did she say I was doing? Dog poo doesn't seem the usual business of the Empirical Police.”

“No, that would ordinarily be a matter for the Council,” said Gwyneth. “How long have you lived here?”

“About 25 years,” I said. “Sam's only been here since we got married.”

“Struggle Vale's an unusual name for a village, isn't it?” said Gwyneth.

“I imagine there was once a minor battle here,” I said, “although this isn't a village, it's a hamlet. I do know the name Vale is a bastardisation of Villa. There used to be a large villa somewhere around here but it was destroyed, apparently, in World War 2. A stray German bomber got lost and dumped their bombs directly on top of the place.”

“So this is not the villa?” asked Gwyneth. “It's big enough.”

“Oh definitely not,” I said. “This used to be a barn. It was converted to a house back in the 1980s, I think. The villa itself was somewhere to the south.”

“And the other three houses in the village, I mean, hamlet?” asked Gwyneth. “What were they?”

“The large one on the road was the original gatehouse,” I said. “The Parry's live there and they moved in, oh, eight or nine years go. The other two were ordinary tenant houses, I think.”

“I see,” said Gwyneth. “You picked up the dog poo with your hands?”

“No,” I said. “I used paper bags.”

“But you used your hands?” she asked. “Not a trowel or one of those sticks with a grab on the end?”

“No,” I said. “I picked up the poo with my hand inside a bag then turned the bag inside out.”

“Which would have involved bending over,” said Gwyneth. “The claimant says you did not bend over.”

“She had her three dogs with her,” I said. “They were fighting and I’m sure her attention was elsewhere when I bent over. How else would I have picked the stuff up?”

“How else indeed,” agreed Gwyneth. “How old are you Mr March?”

“Ahh, 40,” I said.

“And you, Mrs March?” she asked, glancing over at Sam.

“30,” said Sam.

“That’s quite an age gap,” observed Gwyneth.

“But not excessive,” I said, “or do the Empirical Police consider a ten year age gap to be anti-rational?”

“Not at all,” said Gwyneth. “Who people choose to marry is not our concern. You bought this house at a young age, Mr March. Where did you get the money?”

“I’m sorry?” I said. “What do you mean?”

“You said you bought the house 25 years ago,” she said. “You would have been 15 at the time. How did you pay for it? I don’t imagine it was cheap.”

“It may have been only 20 years,” I said, realising my mistake. “My parents died and I inherited everything. I sold the house in London and moved up here.”

“Ah yes, London prices would have easily covered it and left a fair amount over as well,” said Gwyneth. She got up and went to look out of the window. “Why here though? Delightful though the area is I wouldn’t have thought it would hold much interest to a 20 year old man, still less to a fifteen year old boy.”

“I was a student at Cambridge at the time,” I said. “I fell in love with the area and when my parents died I had no desire to move back to London.”

“Yes, it must have been a struggle,” said Gwyneth. “The hamlet would seem to be appropriately named after all.”

“Perhaps,” I said, wondering if I'd managed to cover myself well enough.

She turned and walked back to where she'd been sitting.

“Well, thank you,” she said. “I imagine this has all been a misunderstanding.”

“Yes, definitely,” I said in relief and got up as well.

“Come along, Constable,” she said. “We mustn't waste any more of Mr and Mrs March's time. I'm sorry. Mr and Doctor March's time.”

“Actually it's Doctor and Doctor,” said Sam getting up, “unless you'd prefer the more formal Professor.”

“Ahh, my apologies again,” said Gwyneth, heading for the door. “Oh, one last question if I may?”

“Yes?” I asked.

“When you were a student at Cambridge,” she said, “what did you study?”

“Oh, umm, chemistry,” I said.

“So you are now a doctor of chemistry?” she asked.

“Um, yes,” I said, sensing a trap.

“Good, good,” she said. “Very rational, chemistry. Very empirical.”

“Definitely,” I said. “The very epitome of empiricism.”

“So, if you don't mind me asking, why is it you are on the faculty of the School of Social Sciences?” asked Gwyneth. “I'm not a social scientist myself but I don't see much call for chemistry there.”

My brain momentarily froze but Sam, bless her heart, came to my rescue.

“He teaches the history of science within the Humanities,” she said.

“Ahh,” said Gwyneth, watching me very closely. “Yes, that would explain that. Who did you say was Dean of the School? Conan ... ?”

“Conan Fitzpatrick,” I said. “Do you want his phone number?”

“Oh I’m sure we’ll be able to track him down,” said Gwyneth and she smiled for the first time. I noticed she had very long incisors and they gave her smile a predatory vampirish look. “Goodbye, Doctor March, Doctor March.”

“Doctors March,” I said absently, opening the front door.

“I’m sorry?” said Gwyneth, losing her smile.

“Oh, um, the more usual way of addressing both of us together is Doctors March,” I said. “It’s less of a mouthful.”

“Quite,” said Gwyneth. She gazed at me for a few moments then abruptly went outside, closely followed by her Constable.

“Bugger!” I exclaimed when I’d shut the door and wrapped my arms around my head. “Bugger, bugger, bugger.”

“What’s the matter?” asked Sam watching them through the narrow window beside the door.

“I stuffed that up,” I said. “What are they doing?”

“They’re getting in their car,” she said. “Why did you tell them you bought the house 25 years ago?”

“Because I’m a bloody idiot,” I said. “Have they gone yet?”

“No, they’re just sitting there,” said Sam. “You should have told them you bought the house 10 years ago. That’s what you told me when I

first visited and I thought nothing of it.”

“I know,” I said. “I have no idea why I said 25 years. I should have realised I didn't look old enough to have bought a house 25 years ago. Thank you for saying I taught the history of science, though. That was a life saver. My brain froze.”

“Ahh, they're just off,” she said.

“Which way are they going?” I asked. “Towards the gatehouse?”

“Yes,” she said, “they're pulling into the drive ... oh.”

“Oh? What oh?” I almost yelled and pushed her out of the way so I could see.

“They did a U turn. They're heading back towards Cambridge,” she said.

“Shit!” I said vehemently. “Shit, bugger, bugger, shit! They're not going to talk to the Parry's.”

“This doesn't look too good,” said Sam. “Do you think she will check with Conan?”

“Yes,” I said, running my fingers through my hair. “She looked the sort to check everything.”

“What will Conan tell her?” asked Sam, heading up the stairs to retrieve Molly before she dug her way through the bedroom door.

“Oh, he'll only confirm I'm employed within the School,” I said, heading for the kitchen. “It's University policy not to divulge anything else about staff or students unless there's a court order.”

I saw the mess of broken eggs and swore again before circumventing it and going over to the kettle out of habit then sat down. Moments later there was a thumping from the stairs and Sam and Molly burst in. Sam came over to sit at the table and Molly went to lick up the broken eggs.

“I’m more worried she’ll check with the Land Registry,” I said. “I registered this place as a separate dwelling in 1941 and the records will show it’s not been sold or transferred since.”

“Ahh,” said Sam. “In your name?”

“Stupidly,” I said. “I should have done it anonymously through a lawyer but it was chaotic when the old place got bombed and most of the lawyers were in the army.”

“Well, the names could be a coincidence,” said Sam slowly. “I’m sure lots of places have been owned by someone with the same name before.”

“And not been sold in between?” I asked. “That’s one hell of a coincidence.”

“Records do go missing,” she said. “The fact that there’s no Registry information isn’t proof of anything. Certainly not of anything anti-empiricist.”

“But it’ll mean a lot more enquiries,” I said. “That bloody woman might easily get a court order to get my employment records from the university.”

“Why would a court grant access to employment records over a housing issue?” asked Sam.

“I don’t know,” I said, “but it won’t take long to look through the University Prospectus and find that History of Science isn’t in the Humanities.”

“Actually it is,” said Sam with a wry smile. “I checked when you first told me of your, um, background. I thought it might be easier if anyone asked what you did.”

“Did anyone?” I asked. “Before today I mean.”

“Of course,” she said. “Do you honestly think my parents and friends didn’t want to know something about the man I was going to marry?”

“I wondered why no one asked when I met them,” I said. “I thought they were just being tactful.”

“They were,” she said. “I told everyone you were very touchy about being a failure as a scientist and having to teach history of science instead. No one wanted to hurt your feelings so no one ever mentioned it.”

“Gee, thanks,” I said ruefully. “So your dad thinks I'm a failure, does he? That explains a lot.”

“Oh don't be silly,” she said, ruffling my hair. “I told them you were a great success teaching history, just that you saw yourself as a failure. My dad thinks you're very clever. Not as clever as me, of course, but clever enough to keep me interested and happy which is really all he cares about. Mum thinks you should have given me a baby by now and she won't be happy until you do but that's another matter.”

“I suppose,” I said. “Hey, you don't think that woman will dig into the history of Struggle Vale, do you?”

“I doubt it, why would she?” asked Sam.

“In search of evidence I'm an anti-empiracist,” I said.

“What does Struggle Vale have to do with that?” asked Sam.

“Because Struggle's a bastardisation of Stregoni,” I said gloomily.

“Now what are you talking about?” she asked.

“When I first came to Cambridge,” I said. “I lodged with someone in the town for the first few years then, when I decided to stay, I bought about a hundred acres here and built a house. It became known locally as Stregoni's Villa and over the centuries it got bigger and outhouses and the Gatehouse were added.”

“So what,” said Sam. “It's just a name.”

“No it isn't just a name,” I said. “The locals knew I was Italian and

that I was a sorcerer so the name Stregoni caught on since it's Italian for sorcerer. The locals thought it was funny calling it the Italian sorcerer's house in Italian. Made them feel more important with me in the neighbourhood. It took a couple of centuries to morph into Struggle Vale.”

“Ahh,” said Sam. “So you think if Gwyneth looks into the name she'll connect it to Karen's complaint? You think that'll be enough to take you to court?”

“No,” I said, “but it'll be enough to make her start digging into my background and get a court order. She had the look of someone who doesn't give up easily. She might even find out my real name.”

“Your real name?” exclaimed Sam. “You mean you aren't Nicholas March? You've been lying to me?”

Chapter Six

“Oh there's no need to get alarmed,” I said, hearing the tone of her voice. “It's nothing sinister, just my original Italian name which is Niccolo Marchese di Forteza Campagnoli which I anglicised to Nicholas March, ohh, back in the sixteenth century I think it was.”

“Marchese?” she said with a frown. “You were a marquis?”

“Only a very minor one,” I admitted. “Ours was a small branch of a minor family that once did a favour to someone of importance and got a title in return. Not that it did them much good but their main claim to fame was the tenacious grip they had on their titles through thick and thin. It's completely meaningless now. The thing is when I bought this land it never occurred to me to use a different name so if the police look into it they'll see it and wonder why Nicholas March is living on land owned by Niccolo Marchese since the fifteenth century and try to make a connection.”

“That's a bit far-fetched, isn't it?” asked Sam.

“To you, maybe,” I said, “but you're not looking for anything. The police, on the other hand, are. We've been brought to their attention and once a suspicious mind latches onto something it tends to keep digging until it finds something. If they can find a way to make a connection they'll make that connection and use it to lead them to something else and there are bound to be inconsistencies in my records. It was much easier way back because very few records were kept and those that were were spread far and wide and difficult to access. With modern bureaucracy and computers there's vast amounts of information about everyone which is easy to access and correlate and they'll find my name keeps cropping up since records began but there's never a record of my death. There aren't even any medical records.”

“Hmm,” said Sam and thought for a few moments. “Surely you mean you not we? Not that I'm trying to disassociate myself from you but isn't it you they're suspicious of?”

“I hope so,” I said, “but I'm sure they'll also be considering the

possibility that it was you doing the sorcery and I was just holding the bags.”

“Oh,” she said, frowning. “Maybe they’ll also wonder if Karen made a false accusation to cover herself.”

“They might,” I said. “If she’s being accused of something they might wonder if she’s trying to blame us but don’t forget I actually did use a little bit of sorcery to pick up the poo and if they don’t simply dismiss it out of hand they’ll do some digging and make some connections. The thing about records is that no one ever looks at them unless there’s a reason and my stupid mistake over how long I’ve owned this place is just the sort of thing that could start them looking. I still can’t believe I said that. I have no idea what came over me.”

“We all do stupid things from time to time,” she said, reaching across the table to take my hand.

Molly had finished licking up the last of the mess of eggs on the floor and inspected every piece of shell for any lurking traces. She must have sensed the atmosphere in the kitchen because she whined and came over to sit pressed against Sam’s legs. Sam put her other hand down to pat her and we sat in that tableau for a while, each thinking our own thoughts.

“So what are we going to do?” Sam asked.

“I don’t know,” I said heavily. “If it was just me I wouldn’t do anything but it’s you I’m worried about.”

“But what if you get arrested?” she asked.

“That’s the absurdity of it,” I said. “Every now and then they try to have these purges of witches and whatnot but they never work. For some reason the authorities can’t grasp that what makes them pick on us is also what makes us invulnerable to them. Take the Inquisition for example. It never seemed to occur to them that a genuine sorcerer or witch could never be arrested and forced to confess under torture or be burnt alive. All they ended up doing was arresting and executing tens of thousands of innocent people, mostly women, whose only

crime was not being well liked by their neighbours. A genuine sorcerer would have simply blocked the people who were trying to arrest them and walked away. Have you ever read the *Malleus Maleficarum*?"

"I've never even heard of it," said Sam. "What is it?"

"It's a book," I said. "Also known as 'The Hammer of Witches'. It was written by a German clergyman called Heinrich Kramer in the 1480s and appeared to be a manual on how to deal with witches but it wasn't really. Heinrich Kramer was a fanatic misogynist who was obsessed with sex but hated women because of how they raised lusts inside him and he wanted to exact revenge on all women which is why he wrote it. It was his idea to categorise witchcraft as heresy and he recommended the extensive use of torture on women to force confessions so they could then justifiably be burnt."

"You are joking!" exclaimed Sam. "Surely the Church would never condone such a thing?"

"That's the irony of it," I said heavily. "The Pope banned it and the Inquisition forbade its use but the book was one of the early books to be published using print technology and got widely distributed throughout Europe. The ordinary civil courts picked it up and thought it was official Inquisition practice and started to implement it themselves without ever asking themselves why, if this person was a genuine witch, she did nothing to protect herself. Their lack of logic still astounds me. Anyway, as I was saying, they can't touch me but they can get at you. If they manage to get hold of you without me around I won't be able to protect you."

"So what are you saying?" she asked.

I sighed and sat back in the chair. The wooden slats felt hard and unyielding, much like prison bars although I'd only ever once been in prison and then the only bars had been high up and too small to lean against.

"You've heard of the Gestapo?" I asked after a few moments.

"Of course," said Sam, looking at me strangely. "What've they got to

do with anything?"

"How about the KGB?" I asked. "The Stasi, the Mukhabarat?"

"What are you talking about now?" she asked, starting to look worried.

"Those are just some of the recent governmental organisations," I said. "How about Warriors For Whites here in Britain, BdeV in Holland or Protege Nuestro Camino in Spain? They were semi-unofficial groups, state sponsored but on the quiet. They all had one thing in common. They were willing to stop at nothing in support of their ideology. Arson, vandalism even torture and sometimes murder, whatever it took. They had no mercy, no empathy, no remorse. I'm very much afraid the Empirical Police are similar."

"Now you're just being alarmist," said Sam emphatically. "The police don't kill people. There are laws against it."

"True," I said, "but what happens to the so called anti-empiricals who get arrested? They never seem to be heard of again."

"They go to prison," said Sam, frowning. "I don't know how long for but that'll be why they're not heard of, not that I know anyone who's been arrested for anti-empiricism."

"Do they?" I asked. "Can you be sure of that?"

"Are you trying to scare me?" she demanded. "Cos if you are, stop it! I'm worried enough as it is without you chucking in conspiracy theories."

"I suppose," I said, subsiding. "But that does raise an interesting question. When does speculation become a conspiracy theory?"

"This isn't the time for philosophical debate," said Sam angrily.

"True," I said, leaning forward and taking her hand. "I'm sorry. Will you forgive me?"

“Oh, don't be silly,” she said, pulling her hand away. “What are we going to do?”

“I think we have to go away for a while,” I said. “If we stay here they'll keep digging but if we just disappear they'll give up after a while. They're over-worked and under resourced and other things will take priority, so long as we aren't a constant visible reminder. When things have quietened down we can come back and resume our lives.”

“But won't they simply start over again when we reappear?” asked Sam.

“Not if we take precautions,” I said. “I've been far too complacent. I should have periodically created new identities but since nothing really happened here in Britain I let things slide. If we go away for a few months, maybe a year, we can start again. Different names, another house somewhere else. I'll need to stay on at the University but it's easy enough to hide there. It won't matter if my research is put on hold for a while.”

“Isn't that being defeatist?” she asked.

“Think of it more as a holiday or a sabbatical,” I said. “Why deliberately provoke things?”

“I suppose,” she said and sighed. “But where will we go? The police can easily track us if they want to.”

“I don't know for the moment,” I said, “but we can't take the car, obviously.”

“How about my parents?” asked Sam. “They could put us up for a while.”

“First place they'd look,” I said. “We need to go somewhere well away. Maybe even abroad.”

“And what'll we do for money?” she asked, “or are you planing on magicking up everything we need? We can't use our credit or debit cards,”

“Ahh, that’s one thing I have got covered,” I said, holding up a finger. “I may have been complacent but I haven’t been totally unprepared. I’ll be back in a moment.”

I jumped up and went through the lounge to the door beside the downstairs toilet which led down to the cellar. It was, as always, cold and damp down there and the weak bulb did nothing to chase away the cobwebs and mustiness but there, hidden behind a rack of dusty wine bottles, was a smallish package neatly wrapped in plastic and thick with dust and mouse droppings. I retrieved it and hurried back up. Sam was still in the kitchen, absently stroking Molly’s head and staring into a corner.

“I’ll miss this place,” she said, hearing me come back in. “I haven’t been here long but I love it already.”

“We can always sell it,” I said, “then buy it back again under our new identities.”

“Won’t people still know us as the Marchs?” she asked.

“We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it,” I said. “There are ways.”

“Oh god, not plastic surgery?” she said grumpily. “I like how I look now. I don’t want to change into someone I don’t recognise.”

“It’s more a matter of creating an illusion,” I said, dumping the package on the table. “Doesn’t need to be permanent, although it can be.”

“Hmm, we’ll see,” she said. “What’s that?”

“About £100,000,” I said, getting a knife out of a drawer. “I’ve always had some emergency money just in case and I’ve kept it fairly current, what with inflation and currency changes. It started out as a small bag of silver pennies, now look at it.”

I sliced open the plastic and we both looked at the neat bundles of £50 notes.

“Well, that should last a while,” she said after a few moments, picking one up. She counted it. “That’s five grand and there’s, what, 22 of them so assuming they’re all the same that’s, umm, £110,000.”

Molly put her paws on the table and sniffed the notes but they didn’t smell interesting so she dropped down again and padded over to her water bowl.

“I’ve also remembered a chap I used to know,” I said. “He lives in Winchester, or used to anyway. I’m sure he’d put us up for a couple of days while we sort ourselves out.”

“Winchester?” said Sam, tossing the bundle of notes back onto the pile. “That’s a long way. How will we get there?”

“Train,” I said. “If we get a taxi to the station and get some tickets to various places the police won’t know where we’ve gone.”

“I suppose,” said Sam. She sighed. “So this is really happening?”

“I’m afraid so,” I said. “I’ll just give him a ring and see if it’s OK.”

I went into the lounge to get my phone and came back into the kitchen scrolling through my contacts.

“No!” said Sam suddenly. “Don’t ring. They might be tracking us already.”

I stared at her for a few moments then slowly put my phone down on the table and pushed it away.

“This could be awkward,” I said, staring at the phone. “I don’t even know if he’s still at the same address. We can’t just turn up unexpectedly. He might have moved or have a houseful of guests.”

“There’s bound to be a public phone at the station,” said Sam. “Call him from there.”

“Good point,” I said. “Good thinking. Go and pack a few things, enough for, say, a week. We can get more clothes when we need them.”

"I'll need my laptop," she said, not moving. "I've got all that work to do for Sergey."

"Seriously?" I said. "We're going on the run and you plan to keep doing your translation work?"

"I'll need something to do," she said, "and it'll feel more like a holiday if I do. Besides, I've said I'll do it and I hate going back on my word. Are you leaving your laptop behind?"

"Definitely not," I said. "I've years of research work on there and it'll all be incriminating evidence."

"Well, then," she said. "If you can take yours, I can take mine. Anyway, we'll look more normal if we're on the train with our laptops. We'll just be people going to a meeting or something."

"I suppose so," I said. "OK, then. Go and pack a few things."

She didn't get up. Instead she just looked around the kitchen slowly.

"What about all the food in the fridge?" she said. "And the freezer. We can't leave them running because of the fire risk and all the food'll go off."

"Actually it would make things easier if the place did burn down," I said. "I wonder if we can make it look as though we died in the fire?"

"We'd need some bodies," she said, looking levelly at me. "Who were you planning to kill?"

"OK, probably not the best idea," I said. "It's only food, does it matter?"

"It seems such a waste," she said, getting up and looking in the freezer. "There's got to be three or four months worth of food in here."

"So leave them running," I said. "Go and pack."

"But what if there's a power cut?" she asked.

“Then the food'll go off,” I said. “Pack.”

“But it'll attract mice and rats and things,” she said. “I don't want to come back to a house full of rotten food and rats. Just think of the smell!”

“This is getting silly,” I said. I thought for a moment then muttered something inaudibly and waved my hand. “There, problem solved.”

“Where did it all go?” she asked, staring into an empty freezer.

“I'm not sure,” I said. “Somewhere in the cosmos. The fridge too. Go and pack.”

“Why've you never done that when it needed defrosting?” she asked. “It would have saved a lot of time.”

“I never bothered to defrost it,” I said. “You were the first one to do that.”

“You are unbelievable sometimes,” she said. “Freezers need to be defrosted when the ice builds up too much. They become inefficient otherwise.”

“Can we forget the bloody freezer?” I said irritably. “It's empty and defrosted, what more do you want? Go and pack.”

“OK, OK,” she said with a rare flash of irritation. “Don't shout at me. I've never had to go on the run before.”

“I'm sorry,” I said, going over to hug her.

“Can I take some books as well?” she asked.

“Sure,” I said, “but don't forget you've got to carry them. We can always get some more. There are book shops everywhere.”

“I suppose,” she said, still hesitating.

“Go on,” I said, giving her a gentle push. “Pack a few things then we'll

be off. I'll call for a taxi. Don't forget your charger.”

She reluctantly moved away and headed upstairs, Molly, as always, following her. I phoned for a taxi, reflecting that it wouldn't really matter if the police traced us to the station, then turned my phone off. I'd need to take it as it had phone numbers and addresses and other useful information in it but I didn't want its signal being tracked. I went up to pack a few things myself.

“We'll drop Molly off at your parents' on the way to the station,” I said, going into our bedroom and seeing Molly curled up on the bed watching Sam anxiously. “I'm sure they won't mind looking after her for a couple of weeks or so.”

“I'm not leaving her,” said Sam, looking up from her packing. “She's coming with us.”

“Don't be silly,” I said. “Dogs aren't allowed on trains.”

“Yes they are,” she said. “So long as they're on a leash.”

“Are you sure?” I asked. “I thought they were banned.”

“Only on aircraft,” she said, folding some more clothes and putting them in the suitcase. “Trains, buses and coaches are fine.”

“Oh,” I said. “But she'll only draw attention to us. We'll get lost among all the other people but if the police start asking about two people with a white and tan King Charles spaniel we'll be remembered and they'll quickly find out which train we were on and where we got off. Especially if she does a wee on someone in the train. She can't use the toilets. We have to leave her behind. Surely you can see that.”

“I'm not leaving her behind,” said Sam stubbornly and a steely look came into her eyes. “I've had her since she was born and she'll get depressed if I leave her behind.”

“She's only a dog,” I said. “Dogs don't get depressed.”

“That shows how little you know Mr Big Shot Know It All,” snapped

Sam. "We talk all the time. She'll pine and her heart will be broken."

"Oh Sam," I said, going over to her. "She can't go. A dog will be just too difficult to cope with, especially if we end up going abroad."

"I'm not leaving her behind, Nick," exclaimed Sam. "If she doesn't go then I don't go."

"Oh for crying out loud," I said testily. "This is ridiculous!"

Sam gave me a long look then ostentatiously started to unpack.

"OK, OK," I said, holding up my hands. "I give up. She can come."

"Oh Nick, thank you, thank you," cried Sam, throwing her arms around me.

"Let me breathe, woman," I said breathlessly, trying to ease her grip on my chest. "I need to think."

"What for?" asked Sam, letting me go. "What's there to think about?"

"We can't take a dog," I said. "She'll draw attention, like I said."

"But you said we could take her," said Sam, suddenly looking very worried and aggressive at the same time.

"We will," I said, "but not as a dog," and I crossed my fingers behind my back, hoping this would work. I hadn't tried it for three or four centuries.

"What are you talking about?" demanded Sam as she looked anxiously at Molly. Then she screamed. "Who the hell is that on the bed? Where's Molly?"

Chapter Seven

The girl lying on the bed leapt off in alarm and tried to scramble under the bed. There wasn't enough room so after three or four attempts she ran up to Sam, bent over on her hands and feet, and tried to jump up, pawing frantically at Sam's chest and waist, whining loudly. Sam pushed her away roughly and hurriedly retreated behind a chair in fright. Frustrated the girl ran awkwardly over to the door and started scratching at it with her fingernails and whining continuously.

"Molly, sit!" I commanded in my best dog trainer voice.

Molly took not the slightest notice which wasn't surprising as she had never taken any notice of me before, beyond a half wag of her tail when I fed her.

"What the hell!" cried Sam. "Who the hell is that?"

"She's Molly," I said as Molly squatted down and peed on the carpet from her anxiety. "Tell her to sit or something. Calm her down."

"Molly?" exclaimed Sam. "You mean she's Molly? My dog?"

"Yes," I said as Molly started to yap loudly and jump up at the door. I was beginning to find it difficult to think from all the noise and felt my own agitation rising. "Calm her down. Please!"

Sam looked from me to Molly and back a few times in confusion then said "Molly, sit," a little weakly.

Molly paused momentarily in her yapping and jumping to look over at Sam then resumed her scratching at the door.

"Say it in dog," I said, hurrying over to Sam. "She's panicking. Calm her down."

"In dog?" said Sam, frowning at me. "You mean that girl's a dog?"

"Yes," I said. "She's Molly, your dog."

Sam opened her mouth a couple of times then made a deep not quite growl in her throat. Molly paused in her jumping and scratching and looked over again. Sam made that not quite growl sound again and Molly whined, watching Sam intently, with one arm still raised against the door. Sam raised an eyebrow then blinked and snuffled and Molly slowly dropped her arms and squatted on her haunches, every muscle of her body tense and quivering. Her eyes looked very worried.

“Good girl,” said Sam from the safety of behind the chair, trying to sound calm and reassuring. “Very good girl.”

Molly relaxed a little and cocked her head to one side, still intent on Sam.

“Go and pat her or something,” I said quietly, relieved the noise had subsided to tolerable levels.

“Are you serious?” said Sam, watching Molly as intently as Molly watched her.

“Yes,” I said. “Let her smell you. She needs reassuring.”

“What?” exclaimed Sam, twisting her head to look at me.

Instantly Molly jumped up again and started to scratch the door although this time it was less frantic and her whining was a little quieter.

“Trust me,” I said. “That's your dog. I just made her look human. Go and pat her or something.”

“You made her look human,” said Sam flatly. She stared at me for a few heartbeats then looked over at Molly. “Jesus frigging Christ!”

She repeated her almost growl then the blinking and eyebrow stuff when Molly looked over. Molly subsided on the floor again, watching Sam anxiously. Sam slowly walked over and patted Molly on the head. Molly twisted her head back and sniffed Sam's hand then started to lick her fingers.

“What has he done to you?” said Sam and sat heavily on the floor beside the girl. She climbed her way onto Sam's lap and started to lick her face while Sam hugged her.

“I want you to know I'm very uncomfortable with this,” said Sam, gently pushing Molly's face away. “I don't cuddle naked women as a rule.”

“Perhaps you should,” I said, back in control of myself again now everything was quiet. “I've always found it very relaxing.”

“I'm not a dirty old man like you,” she said and made a gentle snoring sound. Molly looked her in the eyes and tried to wag her non-existent tail. “There now, Molly, good girl,” she crooned and stroked the girl's head then scratched her at the base of one of her long ponytails.

“She's fine now,” said Sam, looking up at me. Molly looked at me as well and sagged back against Sam. “You'd better explain what's happening here.”

“It's very simple,” I said, going round the chair to sit in it. “We can't take Molly with us as a dog so I made her look like a human. It'll be a lot easier that way and the police won't be looking for three people.”

“You could at least have put clothes on her,” said Sam. “Shouldn't she have a fur coat or something?”

“Fur coats are part of a dog's structure,” I explained. “Humans don't have fur coats as such which is why she doesn't have one, except for the head which is why the girl Molly has tan hair and ponytails on either side that look like Molly's dog ears. This is what Molly would look like if she was a human. Round face, slightly pop-eyed, flat-chested and so on. You've got loads of clothes so she can have some of yours, although I suppose I shouldn't say she has tan hair. Tan is a colour for dogs. Since she's human now she'd be a brunette, I suppose.”

“But she's still got a dog's brain?” asked Sam as Molly slowly climbed off her lap and went over to jump on the bed. Sam watched her with a small frown on her face.

“To be honest I don’t know,” I admitted. “I have done this a few times before but I’ve never studied the long term effects. Either way, at the moment she has only her experience and instincts as a dog to guide her so you’ll need to explain as best you can what she’s going to have to do. We can’t have her peeing on the train the way she did just now.”

“Oh damn,” exclaimed Sam and jumped up. “I forgot she peed on the floor. I need to clean it up.”

“All taken care of,” I said, clicking the third finger of my left hand against my palm. “We can pass her off as retarded but she’ll still need you to explain the basics of human behaviour to her.”

“Molly’s not retarded!” exclaimed Sam as Molly lay on the bed with her chin on her hands and her eyes flicking between us. “She’s very intelligent.”

“For a dog, yes,” I agreed, “but not for a human. How old do you think she is?”

“This Molly or my Molly?” asked Sam, going over to sit on the edge of the bed. Molly rolled over and, after a moment’s hesitation, Sam reached out and started to gently scratch her belly.

“This Molly,” I said.

“Mid teenager, I’d say,” said Sam. “Fifteen, sixteen or thereabouts. My Molly was two and a half.”

“Which fits,” I said. “They say one dog year is seven human years so she’s probably around seventeen. Let’s run with that. Actually, thinking about it, it’s good. We can say she’s our daughter.”

“I’m thirty,” said Sam, looking a little aghast. “What’ll people think when they find out I have a seventeen year old daughter?”

“Say she’s fifteen,” I said, “and you’re 35.”

“You think I look in my mid-thirties?” said Sam hotly.

“No,” I said hurriedly. “You look in your mid twenties and people will be impressed how young you look.”

“Hmm, maybe,” said Sam subsiding. She looked down at Molly, still lying there on her back with a contented look on her face. “She’s quite pretty,” she mused. “Not as cute as Molly but she’s attractive in a strange sort of way as a human. I don’t think I’ve got anything that’ll fit her though.”

“She doesn’t need to be dressed like a model,” I said, “and teenagers are known for looking scruffy. Do you want to finish packing? The taxi will be here any minute.”

“What shall I do with this?” asked Sam, holding up Molly’s collar. “Oh no! Do I still have to take her out on a leash? It’ll look really weird walking round with a teenage girl on a leash. Someone will be bound to report us for kidnapping or child abuse or something.”

“You’re going to have to explain that to her,” I said, getting up to retrieve an overnight bag from the top of the wardrobe. “She must stay with you all the time and never run off. Bring her collar and leash with you, though. I’ll have to make her a dog again at some point.”

“OK,” said Sam thoughtfully

She got up and carefully put Molly’s collar in her suitcase then went to rummage through her wardrobe while I packed a few odds and ends into my overnight bag.

“This should be OK,” said Sam, pulling a blouse from a hanger. “I haven’t worn it for years. It’ll be too small for me now. And this.” She took out a fake leather jacket and held it up. “It’s the sort of thing that’ll look fine if it’s a bit on the big side.” She tossed them on the bed and rummaged some more. “But I can’t find any skirts or trousers small enough. They’ll need taking in and there isn’t time. Oh, and shoes, she’ll need some shoes.”

She gazed despairingly at Molly who was now lying on her front with her eyes closed.

“Ahh, I know!” said Sam and hurried over to her chest of drawers. “I’ve got some old yoga pants, they’ll do. It won’t matter if they’re a little loose.”

She found them at the back of a drawer and tossed them on the bed as well then went to inspect her collection of shoes.

“No, there isn’t time,” she muttered.

“Time for what?” I asked, zipping up my overnight bag.

“To teach her how to wear heels,” said Sam. “She’s going to have to wear flats and I don’t have ...”

“There’s the taxi,” I said as the sound of a faint car horn from outside penetrated through to the bedroom. “I’ll go down and tell him to wait. Don’t be too long, OK.”

“OK,” said Sam absently.

I took my overnight bag down and went outside. Sure enough there was a taxi waiting with its middle aged driver leaning nonchalantly against the bonnet. I’d been slightly worried it may have been the police again.

“Taxi for March,” he said when he saw me emerge.

“That’s us,” I said. “We’ll be a few minutes yet. My wife’s still packing.”

“They always are, mate,” he said with a grin. “Meter’s running though. Going off on holiday, are you?”

“Yes,” I said. “Bit of a break from the daily grind.”

“Always go to Marbella meself,” he said, leaning through the window to pop the boot. “Where you going?”

“Oh, um, Scandinavia,” I said improvising.

“Nice,” he said then nodded at my BMW. “That your motor?”

“Yes,” I said, putting my bag in the boot. “Bit far to drive though.”

“Too bloody right,” he said. “And I wouldn't want to take a nice motor like that on the ferry. Get all scratched, it will. Them car ferries is a bugger, all right.

“That's what I thought,” I said.

“Says here you're only going to the station,” he said, peering at the display on his dashboard. “Ain't you flying?”

“We're staying overnight in London,” I said then mentally kicked myself for saying that. “I meant Luton. We'll take the train there and fly out in the morning.”

“I didn't know flights went from Luton to Scandinavia,” he said, scratching the back of his neck.

“Umm, it's a charter,” I said. “I'll just go and see how the others are going. Won't be a moment.”

I hurried back inside and remembered the stash of money in the kitchen. It was still there, of course, so I stuffed a couple of wads in my pocket then wrapped the rest of the money up tightly in the plastic.

“Forgot to put this in my bag,” I said, going back outside.

“Ere, is that plastic?” said the driver, coming over to look at the bundle. “Cor, ain't seen real plastic in years. Where'd you get it?”

“Oh, it's an old family heirloom,” I said, hastily stuffing it in my bag. “It's a gift for my friend in, umm, Stockholm.”

“Worth a bob or two, that,” he said. “Nice bit of plastic. A whole bag is it or just a sheet?”

“Umm, it's a bag,” I said, “but it's pretty torn now. Wouldn't be of

much use to anyone.”

“I s'pose,” he said. “Meter's still running.”

“I daresay it is,” I said, pushing my bag to the back of the boot.

“What on earth is she wearing?” muttered the driver. “Kids of today, huh?”

I turned round to see Sam and Molly coming round the side of the house. Molly was walking very awkwardly with a curious unbalanced gait which was quite understandable as she wouldn't be used to walking upright. More curiously though was how she looked. The black leather jacket was a couple of sizes too big and mostly hid the pale blue silk blouse which was fine. The wrinkly fluorescent pink yoga pants admittedly looked a little incongruous but it was the thick woolly yellow bed socks covered with black and white pandas and the expensive looking red trainers with white flashes that stood out. They just looked downright strange.

“Molly,” I heard Sam say in a low warning voice then she growled almost inaudibly and put her hand on Molly's shoulder. It was too late though because Molly had seen the taxi driver and dropped onto her hands. She ran over barking as loudly as she could.

“Effing hell,” exclaimed the driver and jumped inside the taxi in alarm. The window went up smoothly as Molly tried to stick her head inside and bark in his face.

“Grrow ruff!” exclaimed Sam hurrying over. “Riff riff.”

Molly subsided onto her haunches and looked sideways up at Sam.

“I'm sorry,” said Sam to the taxi driver. “She's had a bad day.”

The window cracked open half an inch or so.

“Is she bleeding psycho?” demanded the taxi driver. “I ain't driving no bleeding nutcases nowhere.”

“It's all right,” I said in my best placating voice. “She's a lovely girl, just that she gets nervous of strangers. Say hello to the nice man, Molly.”

I made some finger gestures to Sam behind my back, hoping she'd get the message but she didn't. Molly stayed on her haunches, looking up at the taxi driver with her tongue hanging out and panting slightly. She wuffed encouragingly.

“Umm, she just wants to sniff your hand,” I said, thinking that if the police ever questioned the local taxi drivers this man would remember every single tiny detail.

“You bleedin' joking, mate?” exclaimed the driver. “I ain't putting my hand anywhere near that, that, whatever it is.”

“She's just a child,” I said. “Her name's Molly. She's just, umm, a little neurologically diverse and she's playing a game. Just pretend she's a real dog and she'll love you forever.”

“How old is she then?” demanded the driver staring through the window at Molly.

“Fifteen,” I said just as Sam said “Sixteen.”

“She'll be sixteen tomorrow,” I said hastily. “That's why she's so excited.”

“I ain't having that nutter in my taxi,” exclaimed the driver forcefully.

“Just play along with her and she'll be quite happy,” said Sam. “She'll just curl up on the back seat and go to sleep.”

“I'll just put your bags in the back, Sam,” I said as Molly barked sharply at the driver. He scowled down at her and made no move to open the window any further.

Just to make a point I slammed the boot shut rather loudly and Molly jumped up and backed away a little. She whined and looked at Sam.

“We're ready to go,” I said, going round to the driver's door. I pulled two fifty pound notes from my pocket. “There'll be a decent tip in it for you, of course.”

The driver looked at the notes then at Molly but didn't otherwise react so I pulled out another fifty. The window slid down about halfway and he cautiously extended his hand towards Molly.

“Nice doggy,” he said with a very strange expression on his face.

Molly jumped up and came over, this time fully upright as Sam had been making facial expressions at her, and sniffed the driver's hand. I could see he was visibly restraining himself from jerking his hand back so I waved the three notes casually.

“So are we all good?” I asked.

He tried to speak and had to clear his throat.

“Yeah,” he said on the second attempt. “All good.”

“Great,” I said and pulled out another two fifties. This was proving to be an expensive taxi ride. “And you won't go telling anyone about this, will you? After all, it won't be good for Molly's rehabilitation program if rumours get spread.”

“Rehabilitation program,” he said, still staring at Molly sniffing his hand. “Yeah, right, no. I won't tell no one. Not like they'd effing believe me anyway. Bleeding girl pretending she's a dog, I ask you. What, she a druggie or something?”

“Great,” I said, tucking the £250 into his top pocket. “She was never here, OK? You just took a nice middle aged couple to the station, didn't you. Nothing unusual.”

“Speak for yourself,” sniffed Sam quietly as she opened the rear door.

“Yeah, yeah, nice middle aged couple,” said the driver. “No kids, no pets.”

“Wonderful,” I said as Molly jumped in and started to lick the back of the driver’s neck. He froze and Sam coaxed Molly to the other side of the back seat with one of her dog treats. “I’ll just go and lock the house.”

“Hurry back,” said the driver, staring fixedly in front of him with his shoulders hunched. “Ain’t got all day, like.”

Chapter Eight

“Oh,” I said in surprise after I paid off the taxi and turned around. “It's changed.”

Although I hadn't travelled by train for a long time I knew the engines weren't steam anymore as I'd seen modern trains on TV but I hadn't expected the station to have changed as well.

“What has?” said Sam, keeping a firm grip on Molly's hand. Molly was looking around anxiously and shivering slightly.

“The station,” I said. “It's been modernised and looks completely different. I wonder where the ticket office is?”

“Actually, I'm not sure there is one,” said Sam. “The last time I was here I got my ticket from a machine. They're over there, just round from the entrance.”

“OK,” I said. “You lead, I'll follow with the bags. Don't let go of Molly. She's liable to run off.”

Sam gave me a look then headed off with Molly very close to her. Most people took not the slightest notice of us but two or three smiled at Molly's outfit and one shook his head in despair.

“Damn!” exclaimed Sam when we found the ticket machines. “They only take cards or phones. Now what do we do?”

“There's got to be somewhere for people who've only got cash,” I said as Sam gave Molly a sharp jerk to stop her sniffing the ticket machine. I looked around for a porter or someone to ask but there were none in sight, unless they didn't wear uniforms anymore. “Excuse me?”

An elderly woman fumbling with a mobile phone a couple of machines away looked up and saw me looking at her.

“Yes?” she said in a querulous voice.

“Is there anywhere we can get tickets using cash?” I asked.

“Ohh, I don't know,” she said, looking a little lost herself. “The ticket office used to be further along but I don't know if it's open anymore.”

“Ah, thank you,” I said. “Down that way?” and pointed off to the left. She nodded.

“Down there, where it says 'Enquiries',” said a man at the machine just beyond the elderly woman. He snatched his ticket from the machine and glared at me as though I'd done something wrong. “You can't miss it.”

“Thanks,” I said but he was already marching off.

“No one uses cash these days,” said the elderly woman sadly and looked down at her phone. “I have such trouble with this thing. It was so much easier when I didn't have to tap things.”

I saw the fingers of her hand were bent and crooked with arthritis and felt a wave of sympathy. I wondered what people who'd lost their fingers did. Maybe there was a special phone designed just for them.

“Thanks,” I said again and turned to find Sam and Molly had already moved away and hurried after them.

“You get the tickets,” I said, pulling a handful of notes from my pocket and stuffing them in her hand. “I'll find a phone and ring Monty.”

“OK,” she said and looked nervously at the Enquiries office window. It had bars and there was a man sitting behind the bars staring intently at his phone.

“Won't be long,” I promised and headed off.

It didn't take long to find a public phone, in fact two of them side by side, and only seconds to discover that it, too, only took cards or mobile phones. Apparently the days when you put a penny in the slot were long gone, not that I had any pennies.

“Why on earth would anyone use a mobile phone to pay for a call from a public phone?” I said out loud, staring at the damned thing

with hatred. "Why wouldn't they just call from the mobile?"

"Beats me, mate," said the man at the other phone as he hung up from his call. He turned to walk away and I grabbed his sleeve. He snatched his arm away and stared at me. "What?"

"Would you do me a favour?" I asked, holding up my hand to show I had no bad intentions. "I don't have my cards and I need to make a call. Would you use your credit card to pay for it for me? I'll give you some cash."

I waved a £50 note at him invitingly and he laughed.

"Nice try, mate," he said. "Bugger off."

I blinked in surprise as he walked away, chuckling to himself.

"Now what?" I thought as I loitered for a minute or two but no one else came over to use the phones. Disconsolately I walked back to the Enquiries office, dragging the suitcase on its little wheels behind me, to find Sam and Molly weren't there.

"Oh frigging wonderful," I muttered, looking around.

The station wasn't crowded but there were still a fair number of people milling around and it was obvious neither Sam nor Molly were anywhere in sight. I turned to look at the man behind the bars but he was engrossed in whatever was on his phone again.

"Maybe they've gone onto the platform," I thought and went over to look at the timetable display. The next train to London was leaving from platform 3 so I made my way to platform 3 and scanned it. They weren't there either.

"Where can they have got to?" I wondered, starting to get worried.

I made my way back to the lobby again and headed for the phones in the vague hope they'd gone to look for me. They weren't there either. It crossed my mind that maybe the police had been keeping a watch on the station and taken them into custody so I hurried out the front

to the street to see if there was any sign of a police car. There were several taxis and ordinary cars but no sign of a police car. I looked up and down several times then pulled out my phone and debated whether or not to ring Sam. It was a risk but she might have got lost looking for me.

“Don't be stupid,” I muttered and pushed my phone back into my pocket. “She's been here a lot more recently than you have. She won't be lost.”

I hurried back into the lobby and looked around again then back onto platform 3. Still no sign of either of them.

“This is getting ridiculous!” I exclaimed, now quite tense with worry. “Why didn't she just stay near the ticket machines like any sensible person?”

I half ran back towards the ticket machines, the suitcase rocking dangerously from side to side, but she wasn't there.

“Damn it!” I said and stopped in the middle of the lobby.

“Oh, there you are Nick,” said Sam behind me. “I was wondering where you'd got to.”

I whirled round and there she was. Molly gave a faint woof in greeting but stayed very close to Sam. The station must have been very big and confusing for her.

“Where the hell have you been?” I demanded, my worry and relief making me sound angry.

“Molly needed the toilet,” said Sam, frowning.

“I'm sorry,” I said, giving her a hug. “I just got scared when you weren't here.”

“Molly couldn't wait,” said Sam. “This place scares her.”

“So how did it go?” I asked.

“Not too good,” she said and my worry started to rise again. “I’m going to have to teach her how to use a toilet.”

“I meant with the tickets,” I said, reflecting that it would be unreasonable to expect a dog who was used to going wherever it happened to be to suddenly know how to use a human toilet even though, for some reason, I had.

“Oh right,” said Sam. “I got tickets for Glasgow, Liverpool, Manchester and Cardiff,” and she pulled a wad of tickets from her pocket, “as well as London. The man thought I was very strange so I told him we’d been at a wedding and I was getting everybody’s tickets home. He lost interest after that.”

“That was good thinking,” I said admiringly.

“What shall I do with the others?” she asked. “Chuck them in a bin?”

“Umm, no,” I said. “Hang on to them. They might come in useful if we have to change our plans. Let’s go onto the platform. The train will be here in a few minutes.”

“Can I get something to eat first?” she asked. “I’m famished. There’s a place over there.”

“Isn’t there a dining car on the train?” I asked.

“Which century do you think we’re in, Nick?” she asked with a laugh. “There haven’t been dining cars for years. You want anything?”

“I’ll come with you,” I said.

“No, you stay here with Molly,” said Sam. “The smell of all that food will get her all excited.”

“Right,” I said and took Molly’s other hand. Sam let go and walked off and Molly tried to follow her.

“No, Molly,” I said, pulling her back. “Stay.”

I nearly said 'sit' but caught myself just in time. It was faintly possible that Molly might actually sit on command this once and that would look very strange. As it was she whined a little and gave a couple of short urgent barks and several people turned to look at her. I felt very conspicuous and was sorely tempted to make us both invisible.

We missed the train as Sam was gone for quite a while but it wasn't a problem as there were trains every twenty minutes or so. What was a bit of a problem was that when Sam came back Molly got excited and broke free from my hand. She rush over to Sam excitedly, wiggling her bottom excessively which caused someone to wolf-whistle. When she got to Sam she ran round her a couple of times then started to sniff at the paper bag Sam was carrying. I noticed people were beginning to give us a wide berth as they walked by.

"We're going to have to work on this," I muttered when Sam had calmed Molly down again.

"What do you think I've been doing?" asked Sam testily. "It'll take a while for her to learn new ways, even though I've been trying to explain to her what to do. It isn't easy for her, you know, especially as she never wanted to do this. It's not like you even asked first."

"Yeah, sorry," I said with a grimace. "I suppose I should have explained before I changed her. So, um, what did you get?"

"I got us some sandwiches and cartons of coffee milk," she said, handing me the bag. "And I got some chicken nuggets and a bottle of water for Molly, although she can't have them until they've cooled down a bit."

"That should keep us going for a while," I said. "Did you pay for them with cash?"

"Yes," she said as we went to platform 3. "I had some left over after getting the tickets. The girl did look at me a bit strangely."

"People don't seem to use cash much any more," I said. "I'm so used to using cards that I hadn't realised."

The train arrived, much to Molly's consternation, and we got on. At least Sam and I did. Molly refused point blank.

"She's scared of trains," I said to the couple waiting to get on as I got off again and picked Molly up bodily. She squirmed but I didn't let go and shoved her inside.

"Quite," said the man, politely. He looked at his wife and she looked at him then they both went to another carriage.

Molly happily curled herself up on the seat once it was clear that Sam was staying and not leaving her to face this ordeal alone. I put our bags in the overhead rack then lurched as the train started to move. Molly gave a nervous yelp at the clanking noises as it pulled away then she settled down with her nose pressed against the window. Sam sat beside her and I sat on the other side of the separating table.

"So is it OK if we stay with Monty?" asked Sam.

"I don't know," I said. "I couldn't ring him. The phones would only accept card payments."

"Ahh," said Sam. "So you don't even know if he still lives in Winchester?"

"That's right," I said. "We're just going to have to chance it. If he's moved we'll find a hotel or something and think of something else. I know some other people but it's going to be difficult to contact them."

"Couldn't we just get another phone?" she asked.

"It's not that easy," I said. "You need photo ID to get a phone so the police will find out the new number pretty quickly if we use either of our names."

"Can't you just magic up another driver's licence?" she asked. "You've done that before, like when you needed a birth certificate so we could get married."

"That was different," I said. "Most of the time bureaucrats ask for

documents just to see them but they don't check them. With a new phone the licence is checked by their computers. I can make a licence easily enough but there's no way I can create a matching record in some computer database. It's the same with credit cards."

"So how did you get your phone and credit cards then?" asked Sam.

"They were given to me by the University," I said. "Officially they're in the University's name, not mine."

"And your driver's licence?" she asked. "Surely the University didn't give you a driver's licence as well?"

"No, that's in my name," I said, "but it's not a real one."

"You're joking!" she exclaimed. "You mean, all this time you've been driving round on a fake licence?"

"Shhh," I said waving my hands. "There's no need to tell everyone."

"But what if you get caught?" she hissed.

"Why do you think I drive so carefully?" I asked.

"I thought that was your nature," she said, "although if I ever had thought about it I'd probably have put it down to being the University's car as well."

"Well, there is that," I said, "but if I was pulled over for something the police would check my licence and find it wasn't real so it's safer not to get pulled over."

"So that's why you usually let me drive," she said. "Oh well. Hey, why don't we go round some graveyards and look for someone who was born around the right time but died young? That way you could get a copy of his birth certificate and use his name."

"It's a nice idea," I said, "but I'd still have to take a driving test so it would be weeks before I could use it to get a phone. I wouldn't be surprised if the government checks births against deaths anyway since

it's such an obvious way to get a new identity. After all, it was described in great detail in that book, *The Day of the Jackal*, so they've probably changed the system. It was quite a while ago, before computers."

"Oh," she said, looking deflated. "I haven't read that."

We sat for a while just gazing out at the countryside then she stirred and rummaged around in her shoulder bag.

"I picked this up at the station," she said, pushing something over to me. "It's a map of the London Underground. I think this train goes to King's Cross but I'm pretty sure the train to Winchester will be another station so we'll have to use the tube."

"Couldn't we just take a taxi?" I said, taking the map.

"I suppose," she said, "although the money will run out sooner or later so we should try not to waste it. So, what, we're just going to turn up on Monty's doorstep and hope he still lives there?"

"Yes," I said. "I can't think of any other option for the moment."

"And, assuming he does still live there," she said, "you think he'll let us stay with him for a few days?"

"That's what I'm hoping," I said. "I know it's not a good situation but it never occurred to me that I wouldn't be able to use a public phone."

Molly looked up sharply as someone walked along the aisle. Her nose wrinkled as she tried to sniff them but, with Sam's hand resting on her back, she didn't bark.

"So how well do you know him?" asked Sam. "I don't think I've met him, have I?"

"We did invite him to our wedding," I said thoughtfully, "but now I come to think of it I don't remember him turning up. Maybe he was out of the country or something."

“Oh great,” said Sam, a touch sarcastically. “We’re just going to turn up at the door of someone who couldn’t be bothered to turn up for your wedding and ask to move in. Maybe he’s out of the country again or hasn’t come back yet.”

“It’s possible,” I said, “but he’s also a bit strange.”

“Strange?” said Sam sharply. “Strange in what way?”

“Ohh, not in any bad way,” I said. “He just lives in his own world. Most likely he got the invitation and put it aside and forgot about it. I’ve known him for, ohh, twenty or twenty five years. I met him at the University when he came up for a lecture on something or other. We got talking afterwards and I gave him some old coins I’d picked up over the years. He collects them, you see. We stayed friends and whenever he came to Cambridge he stayed with me.”

“OK, so he’s likely to be willing to reciprocate,” she said. “So what is he? An absent minded reclusive coin collector or something?”

I opened the bag of food Sam had got and passed her a coffee milk.

“In a sense,” I said. “He’s no academic but he’s got wide interests, particularly in history. He works in a bank or something. Do you want the chicken and mayonnaise or the ham salad?” I held out one in each hand.

“A bank?” said Sam, reaching over to take the chicken mayonnaise sandwich. “Do you think he’d be able to get you a bank account and credit card in a different name?”

Molly’s nose came away from the window and she looked longingly at Sam.

“I don’t know,” I said, a little taken aback. “I don’t think we’re that friendly. Anyway, aren’t there rules against that sort of thing?”

“Probably,” said Sam. “It was just a thought.” She put her sandwich aside and reached for the cardboard box of nuggets. “So does he know about you?”

“No,” I said. “He just thinks I’m a chemist with an interest in coins as well.”

“OK,” said Sam. “Um, I don’t know how to tell Molly to use her fingers since she doesn’t know what fingers are so I’m going to have to show her how to eat with her fingers. Keep an eye open in case anyone comes past, will you?”

Chapter Nine

“Would you mind hanging round for a bit?” I asked the taxi driver. “I’m not sure anyone’s home so we may need a lift to a hotel.”

“Most assuredly,” he said with a gleaming smile and a nod of his turban.

“You and Molly wait here,” I said, twisting to look at Sam in the back seat. “I’ll only be a few moments.”

She nodded and Molly just stared at me, her nose crinkling at the unfamiliar smells.

There was an old wooden gate in the middle of the overgrown hedge that separated the house from the road. Several slats were missing and one hinge was held in place by a wire coat hanger twisted around the post. I carefully eased the gate open and made my way along the flagstones. The garden had once been well tended but the neat flowerbeds were no longer neat and needed some intensive weeding and the grass hadn't been cut for quite a while. I'd never been to Monty's house but he seemed the type to be as fastidious with his garden as he was with his appearance which made me wonder if he'd moved out. The house itself, a two story stone cottage, looked in reasonable condition but it would take many years of neglect for the stones to need repairs. The paint on the wooden window frames and eaves could have done with a fresh coat or two though. The place had a faintly desolate look although there was a muddy pair of wellington boots beside the front door which stopped it looking totally abandoned.

I used the old brass door knocker in the shape of a lion's paw to knock three times and couldn't help noticing there was a dent in the wood from where the knocker had hit it repeatedly over the years. Very little happened although a sudden alertness come over the house. I stepped back to look over the front of the house just in time to see the edge of a curtain in one of the front windows slip back into place.

I had my hand on the lion's paw to knock again when the door opened. Startled for some reason I kept hold of the paw for a moment

before letting go and the knocker dropped back down with a wooden thunk. The door creaked melodramatically then stopped part way as the bottom scraped on the floor. A woman's face appeared. She looked to be only a little older than Sam although her hair was scraped back into a severe ponytail.

"Hello?" she said, peering round the edge of the door.

"Ah, hello," I said, stepping back a little so she didn't feel crowded. "Is this the house of Montgomery Warwick?"

"Yes," she said. "Are you the plumber? You don't look like one."

"I'm not a plumber," I said. "I'm a friend of Monty's. Nicholas March. I'm sorry to just drop by without warning but I ran into a problem with the phone. Is Monty in?"

She frowned at me then her face suddenly brightened.

"Ohh, Nick March," she said, pointing a finger at me. "Yes, I've heard of you. You're from Oxford, aren't you. Monty stayed with you when he was up there. Come in, come in."

"Close enough," I said as she yanked on the door to get it over the uneven flagstone. "Cambridge actually."

"The door's sagged a little on its hinges," she said apologetically as she got it fully open. "Monty's having a nap at the moment but I'm sure he'll be delighted to see you."

"Actually, my wife and our dog are waiting in the taxi," I said, pointing my thumb over my shoulder. "Is it all right if they come in as well?"

"Of course, of course," she said. "Delighted. Go and get them. Oh, I'm Melanie, Monty's daughter."

"Delighted to meet you," I said holding out my hand. She gave it a firm squeeze.

“I’ll go and put the kettle on,” she said and hurried away.

I opened my mouth to express my thanks but she was already disappearing through a doorway so I turned and went back up the path and through the gate.

“It’s all good,” I said to the taxi driver as I pulled out my wallet. “They’re home. How much do I owe you?”

“£72.35,” said the driver, pointing to his meter.

“Here’s a hundred,” I said giving him two fifties. “Keep the change.”

“Ahh most generous,” he said, giving me the benefit of his teeth again. “And here is my card, sir. Please be calling me for all your transportation needs, whatever the time or the weather, isn’t it.”

“I’ll make a point of it,” I said, tucking the card into my wallet without looking at it.

He popped the boot of the car then jumped out to help me unload our bags. Sam got out from the back seat and Molly followed awkwardly.

“Stay here,” I whispered, “pretend to be busy.”

Sam gave me a look then quietly growled at Molly who was sniffing the hedge. Molly jerked back and stared at Sam with a pleading expression. Sam ignored her and started to rummage through her shoulder bag.

“No, no, it’s OK,” I said urgently lunging at the driver as he started to carry the suitcase towards the gate. “I can manage, thanks.” I took the suitcase out of his hand. “I need to get something out first. A gift.”

“Ahhh,” he said and beamed again.

I laid the suitcase down and started to unzip it as he got back into his taxi and drove off. I waited until he was out of sight before getting out Molly’s collar and leash.

“Chuck me those clothes,” I said as Molly reverted to being a King Charles spaniel.

She sniffed the clothes as Sam picked them up then hurried over to the hedge to see who else lived in the neighbourhood. Sam grabbed the collar with one hand and shoved the clothes at me with the other then leapt on Molly before it occurred to her to go exploring.

“Thank God for that,” she said when Molly was safely back on her leash. “I thought you might keep her as a girl while we're here. So this is the right place?”

“Yes,” I said zipping up the suitcase again, “although I don't know if we can stay yet. Monty's asleep so I've only spoken to his daughter. Fortunately she knew my name.”

“Do I look OK?” asked Sam, straightening her clothes and running her fingers through her hair. “Am I presentable?”

“More beautiful than ever,” I said, giving her a quick kiss. “Let's go in.”

“Hello?” I called as I went in the front door but not too loudly as I didn't want to wake Monty.

“Just go in the lounge,” said Melanie, appearing in the kitchen doorway. Her eyes took in the suitcase and my overnight bag but she was too polite to say anything. “Hello.”

“This is my wife, Sam,” I said, doing the introductions. “This is Melanie, Monty's daughter.”

“Hello,” said Sam as Molly started to sniff Melanie's ankles. “Delighted to meet you.”

“And that's Molly,” I added as Sam pulled her away.

“What a delightful little doggie,” said Melanie, bending over to pat Molly. Her tail started wagging furiously as it always did when a human showed her any attention.

“Would you prefer tea or coffee?” asked Melanie.

“Tea would be lovely,” said Sam. “I’m parched after all that travelling.”

“You’ve come all the way from Cambridge?” asked Melanie, ushering us into the lounge. “Oh, just leave your bags in the hallway. Are you on holiday?”

“Kind of,” I said. “Umm, this is a little embarrassing, actually. I was rather hoping Monty would let us stay for a night or two but I didn’t know ... I mean, I was under the impression he lived on his own.”

“Here?” said Melanie, suddenly tense. “You mean you didn’t ... oh.”

“We can easily stay in a hotel, Melanie,” said Sam quickly. “I’m sure there are plenty in Winchester.”

“Yes,” said Melanie. “There aren’t any here in Martyr Worthy, of course. It’s only a tiny little place but there are lots in Winchester itself. Ordinarily you could stay here, of course. We’ve plenty of room being four bedroomed but ...” and she petered out, looking confused and worried.

“It’s absolutely not a problem,” I said. “It’s my own fault for turning up unexpectedly. I really should have phoned or sent an email or something. I do apologise.”

“I’ll just get the tea,” said Melanie. “I need to ... I’ll get the tea.”

She hurried out of the lounge and I looked at Sam and she looked at me.

“There’s something going on,” she whispered.

“What?” I whispered back, having reached the same conclusion but hoping Sam’s intuition might have an answer.

“I don’t know,” she whispered unhelpfully.

“I hope you don’t mind,” said Melanie, coming back in with a tray

with a teapot and four mugs, “but we’ve only got English Breakfast tea even though it’s mid-afternoon.”

“That’s wonderful,” said Sam. “Can I help?”

“If you wouldn’t mind fetching the milk and sugar from the kitchen,” said Melanie, putting the tray on an occasional table. “Would your doggie like some water or something?”

“I’m sure she would,” said Sam smiling, “although in the kitchen would be better. She sometimes gets a little messy and I wouldn’t want your carpet getting wet.”

They both headed off to the kitchen with Molly close behind Sam so, for want of anything better to do, I sat down then got up again to inspect the bookcases. The room was tidy but a little dark as the sun was the other side of the house. Adding to the gloom were several tall dark heavy looking wooden bookcases with surprisingly few books on them. The way they were arranged suggested there had been a lot more books in the past but someone had taken them away and not bothered to rearrange those that were left. Still, those that were there reflected Monty’s wide interests as literary classics were mixed in with cheap novels, a few textbooks on aspects of mathematics and science and a smattering of popular science books. Another bookcase, the only one fairly full, had books on history and an entire shelf of reference books on coins, ancient and modern. Between the bookcases, except for the wall with the windows, were several framed art prints and a display of Roman coins encased in acrylic. Strangely, between the door and the fireplace, was an empty space where another picture had once hung. There was a rectangle of lighter coloured wallpaper to mark where it had once been.

“I was just admiring your collection of books,” I said as they returned, minus Molly. “Quite varied.”

“You’re a chemist, aren’t you?” asked Melanie as Sam sat down on the three seater couch.

“For my sins,” I said.

Melanie didn't respond. She just looked inside the teapot then gave it a swirl. I noticed there were several teabags inside which surprised me a little. On the rare occasions when I'm obliged to drink tea people usually put the bags directly in the mugs and save the teapot for leaf tea. Melanie had another look inside before deeming that the tea was, in that indefinable way the tea drinkers all seem to share, ready to be poured. Not being much of a tea drinker I can only assume that it's based on colour rather than consistency but how you can tell the colour of tea inside a black teapot I've no idea. Perhaps it was by the aroma?

"How well do you know my father?" asked Melanie as she poured the tea.

"Not especially well," I said, sitting next to Sam on the couch. "We met at a lecture in Cambridge several years ago and found we had some interests in common, particularly on the historical side. He was especially interested in some old coins I had so whenever he came to Cambridge he stayed a night or two with me."

"And when did you last see him?" she asked, handing Sam a mug of tea and pushing the jar of sugar towards her.

"Ohh, it has to be at least three years," I said. "Sam and I got married nearly two years ago and she's never met him."

"Well, I think you'll find him a lot changed," said Melanie quietly as she handed me my tea. I added several spoons of sugar to try to disguise the taste.

"In what way?" I asked.

"He was quite ill for a while," said Melanie. "I came back to look after him then, well, I had my own troubles so it seemed easier all round if I just stayed here. There's plenty of room and money's a bit of an issue now so, well, yes."

"Was Monty seriously ill?" asked Sam as Melanie took her tea to an armchair. The fourth mug was presumably for Monty when he woke up.

“Yes,” said Melanie. “He’s still not right and he’ll probably never fully recover.”

“Oh dear,” I said, grimacing in sympathy. “Poor chap. What was it?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “He went away for a while then came back a dreadful mess.”

“But what do the doctors say?” asked Sam.

“They’ve checked him over and can’t find anything,” said Melanie, stirring her tea. “They say it’s psychological.”

“Ahh,” I said. “Has he seen a psychiatrist?”

“We’ve made several appointments,” said Melanie, “but got nowhere.”

“You mean he has some unknown mental health issue?” I asked in surprise. “I thought they had these things pretty well tied down these days.”

Melanie looked indecisively from me to Sam then back again. Molly trotted in from the kitchen and jumped up on the couch beside Sam but Melanie didn’t notice. Then she sighed and put her tea down untasted on the floor beside her.

“Oh this is ridiculous,” she exclaimed and scowled. “You might as well know. Everyone in Martyr Worthy knows so you’ll hear soon enough if you stay for any time. They’ll say they want to warn you but they’re just being spiteful. Monty never did anyone any harm but to hear them talk you’d think he was the cause of everything bad that happens. Bastards. I hate them. I hate them all!”

She looked as though she was about to burst into tears, and out of the corner of my eye I noticed Sam preparing to jump up to comfort her, but she held herself in check. Whatever the problem was, it wasn’t new to her.

“Ahh,” I said, not knowing what else to say.

“What happened?” asked Sam softly.

“You know Monty,” said Melanie, staring at Molly who was resting her head on Sam's thigh. “He was interested in everything but that's all it was, just interest. He never actually did anything, well not much, but they arrested him, you see. They arrested him for just being interested in things.”

“Right,” I said, the penny dropping. “He was interested in the wrong things, I suppose?”

“Yes,” said Melanie. “OK, he did run a website on Wicca but it was more of a historical thing than anything. People would post questions and other people would answer them, that sort of thing. He was never involved in any of the actual spell-work of Wicca, never went to any of the gatherings or took part in any of the rituals. He just had an interest in how it developed historically.”

“So the Empirical Police arrested him for that?” I asked.

“More or less,” said Melanie, suddenly looking drained and tired. “That's why they started investigating him anyway.”

“And they found more?” asked Sam, glancing at me.

“Yes,” said Melanie quietly. “They found some people in the village he'd done Tarot readings for, years and years ago. That's when they came back and arrested him.”

“Oh dear,” I said. “Um, did they arrest you too?”

“Me? No,” said Melanie. “I was married and living with my husband. We had a farm on a few hectares thirty miles away. I didn't find out for a week or so, just before the hearing.”

“So he was convicted?” I asked.

“Of non-empiricist activities,” said Melanie. “All those bastards in the village were there, loving every minute of it. Jesus I hate them! He was sent for re-education.”

“I've heard of that,” I said. “Isn't it just some one on one counselling and a few lectures on the benefits of fact based knowledge? Then they let you go if you promise never to do it again?”

“That's what we thought,” she said, “so when the lawyer said he could cut a deal if he pleaded guilty we thought it would all be over quite quickly. After all, Dad never really was a practitioner. He was a bit upset that they took most of his books away and that poster of the elemental spirits but he said he had plenty of other books to hold his interest so he pleaded guilty and went off to be re-educated.”

“And he came back sick?” asked Sam.

“Yes,” said Melanie. “He looked fine but something was missing inside. I don't know what they did to him but ... You know what he was like, don't you Nick? Always with his head in a book or spouting on about something he'd just discovered? When I brought him back he just sat in that armchair and stared at the wall. He hasn't touched any of his books or gone out to look for more. In fact he hasn't gone outside at all, not even when those sods gathered outside and threw rubbish and stuff at the house and chanted horrible things. It was like he'd had his mind taken away.”

“Oh Jesus,” I said shaking my head. “How long ago was this?”

“Two and a half years,” said Melanie. “Nearly three.”

“And he's still like that?” I asked.

“He's improving,” said Melanie. “He still hasn't touched any of his books but he's been talking again for over a year. He's even started asking some questions but only about things that are scientific. Did you know him when he went through that Aztec phase, Nick?”

“Only towards the end,” I said. “When I first met him he was starting to develop an interest in Hinduism and trying to make connections between Hinduism and the Aztecs.”

“Well, he never talks about any religions now,” she said.

“Who doesn't?” said Monty appearing in the doorway.

I barely recognised him as he stared at me for a few moments.

“I've seen you before,” he said. “Do I know you?”

Chapter Ten

I wasn't able to speak for a few moments. The Monty I knew was a big man, a one time rugby prop forward who'd got even bigger in later life from too much rich food and not enough exercise. A genial, hearty man, full of enthusiasms and dapper in his tailored suits. This man was a parody. Although still a long way off being emaciated he was decidedly shrunken and the skin of his face and neck hung in loose folds. His clothes were at least two sizes too big and he'd shuffled into the lounge wearing slippers. Worse, however, was his expression. In place of his usual happy inquisitive demeanour he looked like a man who'd battled depression and lost. He also needed a haircut. Unusually Molly, who generally greeted everybody with expressions of rapture, stayed on the couch watching his every move. Not antagonistic but wary.

"It's me, Monty, Nick March," I said gently, getting up to greet him. "You remember me? You've stayed at my house in Cambridge several times and I gave you some old coins for your collection."

"Ahh, yes, Nick," he said, making a visible effort to dredge something up. "Yes, I remember you. You've got that big old rambling place out at um, um ..."

"Struggle Vale," I said.

"That's the place," he said, brightening up. "Yes, remember it clearly. Roses still doing well, are they?"

"Yes, they're thriving," I said. "Can I introduce you to my wife, Sam?"

"Your wife?" he said, holding out his hand to Sam. I noticed it trembled slightly. "Have we met before?"

"No, we haven't," said Sam, taking his hand for a brief handshake. "Nick and I have got married since your last visit but I've heard lots about you. It's a pleasure to meet you at last."

"Charmed, my dear, charmed," said Monty and fell silent as he visibly wondered what to say next.

“Would you like some tea, Dad?” asked Melanie.

“Tea, yes, yes please,” he said. He shuffled over and sat heavily in an armchair as Melanie poured him some tea. “Sit down, sit down. No need for formality here.”

Sam and I sat down abruptly and he gazed at us for a few moments.

“Here's your tea, Dad,” said Melanie putting it on the table beside him.

“Ah, thank you, my dear,” he said glancing up at her before returning his gaze to me. “Well, well, well, old Nick, eh. What brings you to this neck of the woods?”

“We were just passing through,” I said. “Thought we'd drop in and see how you were doing.”

“Nick and Sam were hoping to stay the night,” said Melanie. “Do you feel up to it?”

“I really should have telephoned first,” I said, reluctant to encroach on Monty now. “We'll stay at a hotel in Winchester.”

“Nonsense,” said Monty with a touch of his old vigour. “Delighted to have you. Stay as long as you want. We don't get visitors anymore. It'll be a treat having visitors, won't it, Melanie? There's a spare bed still in the back bedroom, isn't there, or did we sell it? I don't remember.”

“We've still got the beds, Dad,” said Melanie.

“I'm sorry to put you to any inconvenience,” I said. “We didn't know you'd been ill. Really, we'll be fine at a hotel.”

Monty looked questioningly at Melanie and she gave him a small smile and nodded.

“It's OK, Dad,” she said quietly. “They know.”

“Ahh,” said Monty and thought for a few moments. “Perhaps a hotel

would be better then. Don't want you associating with known subversives and getting into trouble.”

“That's not an issue at all,” said Sam firmly. “We just didn't want to put you to any trouble but if you're happy for us to stay here, we'd be delighted. Won't we, Nick.”

“Of course,” I said.

“Then that's settled,” said Melanie. “Did you sleep well, Dad?”

“Hmm? No, not really,” he said heavily. “Had that damned dream again.”

“Oh dear,” said Melanie. “I thought it had stopped. You haven't had it for at least a month.”

“I thought so too,” said Monty and reached for his tea. “Damned bloody monkeys.”

“You're dreaming about monkeys?” I asked, intrigued.

“Yes,” said Monty after taking a sip. “Whole bunch of the blighters.”

“Were they sitting round the table again?” asked Melanie.

“Always do, my dear, always do,” said Monty, scowling.

“Dad keeps having this dream,” said Melanie when she saw Sam looking at her. “It's always the same. Eight or ten monkeys are sitting around our dining table in the other room eating then when dad goes in to chase them away the floor opens up and they all fall through the gap.”

“Fascinating,” said Sam because she always found dreams to be just that, especially mine for some reason. “What sort of monkeys are they?”

“I don't know,” said Melanie just as Monty said “chimpanzees”.

"You're dreaming about a group of chimps sitting at your dining table?" she asked. "What are they eating?"

"Dinner," he said. "They're eating dinner. Roast beef, potatoes, the works."

"How odd," she said thoughtfully. "And the floor? Does a hole appear or is it more of a fissure?"

"A fissure?" he said and gave a sarcastic laugh. "More like a bloody abyss. The whole table and all the monkeys fall into it. The back half of the house, too."

"And you?" she asked. "Do you fall in the hole as well?"

"No," said Monty. "I'm always standing in the doorway watching but I don't fall in, fortunately."

"Why fortunately?" I asked.

"I'm guessing the abyss is either full of flames or goes down forever," said Sam.

"How do you know what's in my dreams?" said Monty, staring at her suspiciously.

"I don't" said Sam, "but the floor and walls of your house falling away and either endless depths or fires underneath is a common dream when people feel their world is falling apart. Given what you've been through I'm not at all surprised you're having it."

"And the chimps?" I asked. "What do they mean?"

"I have no idea," she said. "I've never heard of people dreaming of chimpanzees before. Umm, did you want to be a zoo keeper or a big game hunter or something?"

"Not that I remember," said Monty. "Even if I had why would I dream about monkeys?"

“It was just a thought,” said Sam. “I wondered if maybe your dream represented the loss or abandonment of something you’d always wanted to do but I guess not.”

Molly jumped up and put her front legs on the back of the couch so she could look out of the window. Her body was rigid with tension and her nose was quivering.

“So is it just a dream?” asked Sam, “or is it more of a nightmare?”

“I don’t think it’s a nightmare,” said Monty, “or not in the usual sense. I don’t wake up screaming or drenched in sweat or anything like that.”

“But it disturbs your sleep?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said and glanced at Melanie. “I fall asleep and have the dream which keeps waking me up over and over. Some nights I don’t get much sleep at all but other nights I don’t get the dream and I sleep better.”

“How strange,” said Sam just as Molly started barking frantically and trying to hurl herself through the window.

“What the devil?” exclaimed Monty, dropping his mug. Melanie leapt up, either to deal with the spilt tea or in alarm at Molly.

“Molly, be quiet!” exclaimed Sam also leaping up. She grabbed Molly and tried to calm her.

“Whose dog is that?” asked Monty in surprise as Melanie disappeared to the kitchen to get a cloth.

“It’s Sam’s,” I said. “We brought her with us.”

“Good lord,” he said watching Sam calm Molly down. “Probably saw a fox. We get a lot of them around here. What’s she doing?”

“Oh just calming Molly,” I said.

“Unusual technique,” he said watching Sam closely. “Never seen

anyone calm a dog like that before.”

“Sam's good with animals,” I said as Melanie returned and started to mop up the spilt tea.

“What's all that?” she asked.

“Looks like the girl is talking to the dog,” said Monty.

“Um, no, not really,” said Sam as Molly quietened. She hopped out of Sam's arms and lay back down on the couch as though nothing had happened. “I just have little ways of quietening her.”

“Seems to have worked,” remarked Melanie. “Remember Duke, Dad?”

“Old Dukie?” exclaimed Monty. “Ohh damned fine dog he was. Beagle, don't you know. Came from good fox hunting stock but the very devil when he got wind of a fox. He'd bark like anything and try to break through the windows. Never could shut him up. Had to wait until he'd calm down by himself which could take hours. Dreadful noise.”

“I think Sam would have been able to quieten him,” she said, giving the floor a final dab with the cloth. “It's almost like she can talk to dogs.”

“A very useful skill,” said Monty. “What were we talking about?”

“Chimpanzees,” I said.

“Why were we talking about chimpanzees?” he asked, frowning.

“We were talking about your dreams,” I said.

“Were we?” he asked absently. “Is there any more tea?”

“I'll make a fresh pot,” said Melanie. “Would you like another, Sam? Nick?”

“Yes, please,” said Sam. “That was lovely.”

“I don't suppose you have any coffee?” I asked.

“Sorry, no,” said Melanie. “Umm, we can't afford coffee anymore. It's too expensive.”

“Tea will be just fine then,” I said smiling and hiding my horror at having to drink more of the stuff. I resolved to buy them a jar or two as soon as possible.

“So you're still at the bank?” I asked.

Melanie paused in the doorway.

“Dad was sacked,” she said. “Soon as the EPs came round they dumped him. Didn't even wait for a conviction. Bastards!”

“Never liked the job anyway,” said Monty heavily which wasn't true. He'd told me several times how much he enjoyed the intricacies of international finance.

“Ahh, that's a shame,” I said. On reflection I dare say it was inevitable. No bank would want a convicted anti-empiricist, even one who'd only dabbled on the fringes of the esoteric, getting involved in negotiations with foreign governments and multi-national corporations. It could only foster the mistrust that was never far from the surface. “I wanted to ask your advice about something.”

“Surely you're not dabbling in the money markets, are you Nick?” asked Monty. “Clever as you are I don't think you've got the right kind of twisted mind for it.” He winced and rubbed the back of his neck.

“Are you all right?” asked Sam.

“Just a bit of a pain in my neck,” he said. “It comes and goes.”

“How long's that been going on?” I asked.

“Since he came back from re-education,” said Melanie, reappearing in the doorway with the teapot. “You used to get a lot of headaches, didn't you, Dad.”

“If you say so,” he said. “I don't really remember.”

“It's unfortunate,” said Melanie. “He can't remember anything of what happened when he was away so it's difficult to know what to do to help him.”

“You said earlier you've been trying to find a psychiatrist,” said Sam, leaning forward to give our mugs to Melanie.

“With no success,” she said. “It's like the entire profession is boycotting us.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Ohh, well, to begin with we got a referral from our GP,” she said. “I made an appointment then the day before it happened they rang up and cancelled. Said they didn't have any room for any new clients so I went back to the GP and got another referral. The same thing happened. Then I rang one without a referral, intending to go privately. I made an appointment then they cancelled, just like the others. I must have tried, ohh, a dozen or more and each time the same thing happened. They make an appointment for Dad then cancel.”

“How very strange,” said Sam.

“And going privately would be very expensive,” I said. “I imagine Monty hasn't found another job?”

“Who'd touch an old crock like me?” he asked. “I couldn't remember how to tie my own shoelaces for a long time and who'd give a job to a convict anyway?”

“So how are you managing?” I asked.

“Dad's on a disability pension,” said Melanie, “which was strange in itself since we hadn't applied for one. I was going to for him but hadn't got around to it as we were still living off his savings but then a letter arrived saying it had been approved and the money started going into his account.”

“That doesn't sound like the government I know and love,” I said, frowning. “I thought they viewed the unemployed and disabled as work-shy layabouts.”

“I know,” said Melanie, swirling the teapot again. “But I wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth and argue about it. When the money started coming through I put in an application for a carer's allowance and that was approved without any questions being asked, other than those on the form, of course.”

“So you're getting by, then?” I asked, thinking about the beds they may or may not have been going to sell and whatever else they had sold. No doubt all Monty's personal investments had gone.

“We manage,” said Melanie, starting to pour out the teas again.

“So what was it you wanted to ask me?” asked Monty, watching Melanie.

“Is it possible for a bank account to be in someone else's name?” I asked.

“Of course,” he said. “There are millions of bank accounts out there which aren't in your name.”

I had to laugh. This was more like the Monty I used to know.

“No, I meant is it possible for me to open an account I can use without anyone knowing it's me,” I said.

“Technically no,” he said, “but there are ways, of course. Why?”

“I'm trying to get by on cash at the moment,” I said, “and I'm finding it very difficult. That's why I couldn't ring you before we arrived. The public phones won't take cash anymore.”

“And you can't use a card?” he asked, looking puzzled.

“No,” I said. “My cards have got my name on them.”

“Hah!” he exclaimed, and thumped his knee with his hand. “I always thought there was something odd about you, Nick. So you're on the run, are you?”

“What do you mean?” I asked as Melanie froze while passing me a mug of tea. She was watching me very carefully.

“You don't want to leave a trail,” he said. “Why else would you use cash?”

“I just find it more convenient at the moment,” I said hurriedly. “I found some cash stashed away in the cellar that I'd forgotten about and I don't want to put it in my account and pay tax on it, that's all.”

“Why don't you just get a pre-paid debit card?” asked Melanie.

“What's that?” I asked as Sam leant forward to listen.

“It's exactly what it says it is,” she said. “You go to any post office or newsagent and buy a pre-paid debit card. They put onto it however much you're paying over and then you use it just like any credit card except you've put the money up front.”

“I've never heard of those,” I said. “How long have they been around?”

“Ohh donkeys years,” she said. “As long as I can remember.”

“They were introduced for tourists,” said Monty. “It was so a tourist could buy a card with the currency of the country they were going to visit on it but pay in their own currency. It saves them all the international transaction fees and makes it easier to plan rather than dealing with ever changing exchange rates. Businesses found them very useful as well. It meant they could give a card to an employee and control their expenses when they were on overseas trips.”

“I haven't been overseas for a long time,” I admitted. “I've never thought about these things.”

“I've been abroad quite a few times,” said Sam. “I've never heard of them either.”

“Are you an academic as well?” asked Monty.

“Sort of,” said Sam. “I’m a linguist. I have a small business doing translations of academic papers for people at the University.”

“That’s probably why then,” said Monty. “You academics tend to bury your heads among the groves of academia and forget the real world exists.”

I smiled because the so called 'unreal' world was just as real as the real world but let it pass. We don't talk about these things generally, except amongst ourselves and Monty wasn't one of us.

“So we can get these cards at any post office, can we?” I asked. “Do we need any identification or anything?” It would certainly make life easier if we could.

“Not unless they’ve changed the rules in the last few years,” said Monty. “They’re just a more efficient form of cash. Only if you do get one don’t put too much on it.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“It would be suspicious,” he said. “Maybe a thousand or two but ten or twenty thousand would be telling everyone you’re up to no good.”

“Ahh,” I said and pursed my lips.

Melanie laughed.

“I think Nick was planning on a lot more than a thousand,” she said. “Aren’t you, Nick?”

“Not at all,” I said. “A thousand will be more than enough for the time being. Umm, can you add more later?”

“Of course,” said Monty. “And there’s nothing to stop you going to several post offices and getting a couple of cards at each.”

“Sounds like a plan,” I said.

“Don't forget your tea, Nick,” said Melanie. “So why are you on the run? You can tell us, we'll never report you.”

“Nick isn't on the run,” said Sam suddenly. “I am.”

Chapter Eleven

“No, Nick,” she said, forestalling what I was about to say as Melanie stared at us in blank astonishment. “They already suspect.” She dug her fingernails in my thigh to add emphasis, which hurt. “After all, Monty and Melanie are at risk here, harbouring us.”

“Used to like going to the harbour when I was a boy,” ruminated Monty as he absently swirled the dregs of his tea. “Liked to watch the boats going out to sea. Fancied myself a bit of an explorer, not that there was much of the world left to explore.”

“Not that sort of harbour, Dad,” said Melanie. “We’re talking about Nick and Sam staying here.”

“Oh, right,” said Monty. He looked up and puffed his cheeks out. “Yes, Nick and, um, um, yes. Of course they can stay here. Where else would they stay?” He suddenly clicked his fingers. “Molly, that’s it. Yes, Nick’s wife.”

It would have been funny if it wasn't so sad. I wondered what they'd actually done to him and, of course, who exactly 'they' were.

“Molly’s the dog, Dad,” said Melanie patiently. “Nick’s wife is Sam.”

“I thought Sam was the dog,” said Monty, frowning. “Molly’s a damned fool name for a dog.”

“Molly’s a girl dog, Monty,” said Sam, her voice matching Melanie’s for patience.

“Ohhh,” said Monty. His frown morphed into puzzlement. “What were we talking about?”

“Why Nick and Sam are here,” said Melanie.

“Right,” said Monty. “Sorry, got a little confused there for a moment. Good, good. Carry on, yes.”

Melanie looked at me and gave a slight shrug of her shoulders. I

nodded a couple of times to show I understood although, of course, I didn't, but I was sympathetic.

“So, umm, what do you mean?” asked Melanie hesitantly. She was no doubt wondering if she'd heard Sam correctly.

“Are we still talking about dogs?” asked Monty anxiously, his eyes switching from Melanie to Sam then me.

“In a sense,” said Sam. “Um, well I told you I am a linguist, which is true. I speak a lot of languages and not just human ones.”

“Hah!” exclaimed Monty triumphantly and slapped his knee. “I knew you were talking to that dog. Never seen a dog calm down so quickly. Wish you'd been here when Dukie was alive. You could have talked some sense into him.”

“What do you mean, exactly, Sam?” asked Melanie.

“Exactly that,” I said. “Sam has the ability to talk to animals. All animals, not just dogs.”

“Well, not all,” said Sam. “I find birds almost impossible to understand and tortoises are so slow I lose the thread.”

“Are you serious?” said Melanie. “You mean like Dr Doolittle?”

“More or less,” said Sam, “but not like Dr Doolittle. He was taught animal languages by his parrot, umm, what was her name?”

“Polly, I think,” I said. “Which is a common name for parrots although I seem to remember her name was actually Polynesia. It's been a long time since I read the book.”

“Yes, Polly,” said Sam. “Anyway, I was never taught. Even when I was a baby and couldn't say anything myself I knew what they meant, just as I did with my mum and dad although being so young I didn't understand much.”

“So you were born knowing every possible language?” asked Monty. “I

find that extremely hard to believe.”

“No, not really,” said Sam, pursing her lips. “It’s not like that at all. If you take human languages, for example, they’re made up of words which are spoken or written down so of course, in order to speak a language I had to learn the words and how to write them. What I mean is that I’ve always understood the meaning of what was being said even though I didn’t know the sounds being used to say it.”

“So, you’re saying that if I say the word ‘dog’ you get the meaning of a canine animal even if you don’t know the word itself?” asked Monty, his eyes now alive with interest. “Or ‘chien’ or ‘hund’ or whatever?”

“Exactly,” said Sam, her face relaxing. “The meaning is the same regardless of whether the word is English, French, German or any other language. I see the meanings, not the words.”

“But do animals speak the same as we do?” asked Melanie. “Surely not.”

“Yes and no,” said Sam. “Some things are the same for all living creatures, like ‘I’m hungry’ or ‘I’m scared’. Obviously dogs and cats can’t talk about philosophy or religion because they don’t have concepts for those things but the basics apply to everything and they all have ways of communicating that to each other.”

“Fascinating,” said Monty, leaning forward. “So you are able to have a complete and meaningful conversation with your dog or, say, a horse or a fox?”

“Only up to a point,” said Sam. “I can follow what they’re saying but I can’t always reply properly.”

“That makes no sense,” said Melanie.

“Actually it does,” I said. “Dogs, for example, use their tails to communicate and Sam doesn’t have a tail. I imagine there are lots of things she can understand but not say back because she doesn’t have a tail to say it with.”

“That's right,” said Sam. “I can toss my hair the way a horse tosses its mane but I can't swish my tail. And, of course, there are things I could do but can't if that makes sense, like sniffing someone's bottom or peeing on their leg.”

“Well, yes I can see that,” said Melanie. “Not in polite company, anyway. I wonder if people used to do things like that?”

“I'm sure they did,” said Sam, “although until I meet someone who does I won't know what it means. Certainly people have all sorts of body language like running our fingers through our hair or spitting. Even handshakes.”

“Spitting?” asked Monty. “What does that mean? I always thought it was just being rude.”

“It means you're not afraid,” said Sam, “or you're full of contempt which is much the same thing. A lot depends on context, of course. Sometimes it can just mean you have a cold or too much saliva or you don't like whatever's in your mouth.”

“You know, that actually does make sense,” said Monty thoughtfully, rubbing the back of his neck again. “When you're afraid your mouth goes dry so spitting shows it isn't dry and therefore you're not afraid. Fascinating. I wonder if anyone has ever made a study of this?”

“There have been any number of studies and books,” said Sam. “I've read a lot of them myself but they all suffer the same drawback. The person doing the study or writing the book is going from observation and interpretation but it's always obvious they don't actually know what the animal is meaning so they often get it completely wrong.”

“So you're saying you are unique in the respect?” said Monty sharply.

“As far as I know,” said Sam. “Certainly I've never read anything which suggested someone else knew the animal's meaning and I haven't met anyone who claims to.”

“There's Gris Balingham,” I said. “He claims he can talk to his cows.” I caught Melanie's eye and added “Oh, he's a farmer near our place in

Cambridge.”

“Not really,” said Sam. “He thinks he can because he's been raising cows all his life but you should hear what the cows really think of him.”

“I can imagine,” I said with a snort. “Probably much the same as I do.”

“But why are you here?” asked Melanie. “Surely being good with languages isn't a crime?”

“Yes and no,” said Sam, digging her fingers in my leg again. “Understanding human languages isn't a problem but there's no good solid empirical validity to being able to talk to animals.”

“But isn't it easy enough to hide?” she asked.

“Yes,” said Sam, “but, ah, I got careless.”

“We had a visit from the EPs this morning,” I added. “They were asking questions about something someone had seen so we thought we'd go away for a while and let things quieten down.”

“Ahh,” said Melanie. “Yes, that makes sense. Although coming here may not have been the best idea as we're already marked as counter-empirical. Once word gets round you're here you'll be watched, far more closely than any other tourists.”

“Yes, I was thinking the same,” I said. “I confess I had hoped to stay for a week, perhaps more, but I'm thinking maybe only a night or two would be better.”

“I wonder if it's a form of synaesthesia,” muttered Monty.

“It might be an idea to go abroad,” said Melanie, ignoring him. “I've heard that some of the eastern European countries are more tolerant of, umm, different perspectives.”

“It's an idea,” I said, “although I'm reluctant to at the moment. What's

a form of synaesthesia, Monty?”

“Molly's gift,” he said, rubbing his chin.

“You mean Sam's gift?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said absently. “It could be a rare form of synaesthesia, you know. There are similarities.”

“What's synaesthesia?” asked Melanie.

“It's when someone hears colours instead of sounds, isn't it?” said Sam.

“How can you possibly hear colours?” asked Melanie. “This is becoming absurd.”

“I don't think it's actually hearing colours,” I said. “After all, sounds are vibrations in the air picked up by the ear whereas colours are light waves picked up by the eye. The ear can't receive light waves and the eye can't receive sound waves.”

“So what is it then?” asked Melanie.

“The brain,” said Monty. “It's all in the mind, you see.”

“I'm sorry,” said Melanie softly. “I think his mind's wandering again.”

“Umm,” I said, feeling faintly embarrassed, “how about going up to Scotland, Sam? Fancy going for walks beside a loch or two?”

“I'm perfectly all right,” said Monty forcefully. “Don't mollycoddle me, child.”

“Well, you're talking nonsense,” said Melanie. “How can you hear colours in your mind? You're just being silly.”

“Well synaesthesia isn't well understood,” I said, feeling sorry for Monty. “What are you thinking, Monty?”

He glared at Melanie as if defying her to shut him up. She shrugged and touched the teapot to see if it was still warm.

“There are no colours in nature,” he said, turning his attention back to Sam and me. “All light is just different wavelengths and those wavelengths have no inherent colour. The human mind simply interprets those wavelengths as colours to make life easier.”

“But surely red is a colour?” said Sam. “It’s the colour of blood.”

“No,” said Monty. “Red is what the mind interprets the wavelength of the light reflected off blood is. I’ve no idea what that wavelength is but we see it as red.”

“But what about all the other colours?” asked Sam.

“They’re just wavelengths,” said Monty. “Think about it for a moment. Nick, you know something about the physics of light, don’t you?”

“A little,” I said. “It’s not my field but I’ve picked up bits and pieces over the years.”

“So what happens when light waves from two sources meet?” said Monty.

“That’s one of the interesting things about light,” I said, wondering where he was going with this. “They don’t mix. They stay separate. That’s why you can cross two torch lights in the night sky and still have two beams.”

“That’s exactly right,” he said. “I’ve got a book about it somewhere. So what would happen if you shone a beam of red light with a beam of green light?”

“You’d still have red and green beams,” I said. “They don’t mix.”

“Exactly,” he said. “So what would happen if you crossed the beams, say on a wall?”

“You’d get a patch of yellow,” I said.

“But how is that possible?” he asked. “The red beam is one wavelength and the green beam is another wavelength and the two beams don't interfere with each other so how is it possible you see yellow?”

“Umm,” I said, trying to think it through.

“Exactly,” he said happily. “When you shine one beam on the wall the eye sees that wavelength and interprets it as red. When you shine the other beam the eye sees the different wavelength and interprets it as green. When you shine them both the eye sees the two wavelengths and the brain doesn't know what to do so it interprets them both together as yellow. That's why people generally agree on the colour when they see a primary colour but not when it's a mixture of wavelengths, like purplish brownish yellow. Have you heard of the impossible colours?”

“Of course,” I said without thinking. “They crop up a lot in magic.” I could have bitten my tongue off but neither Monty nor Melanie seemed to take any notice.

“They are colours that we see which cannot be created through any combination of wavelengths,” he said. “Like indigo, which is one of the colours of the rainbow except that there is no unique combination of wavelengths at that point in the rainbow. Indigo exists only in the mind, not in the rainbow. In fact, there aren't even seven colours in a rainbow which is why most people can't see all of them. Isaac Newton fixed on seven colours simply because he believed they should match up with his ideas on musical harmony.”

“So are you saying that everything is actually black and we invent colours in our minds to differentiate between things?” asked Sam, focused on Monty.

“Not at all,” said Monty. “Things are only black if there's no light whatsoever. I can't begin to imagine what the world would look like if we didn't invent colours to distinguish between the different wavelengths. Perhaps it would be like trying to listen to a lot of radios at the same time with each tuned to a different wavelength. Chaotic, I would imagine.”

“Actually, that's an interesting difference between light and sound waves,” I said. “When sound waves meet they mix together which actually makes the ear more incredible than the eye. If you listen to people having a conversation while music is playing the ear can separate the individual voices and instruments but no machine has ever been able to do that. The best a machine can do is separate the various frequencies of the mixed wave but it can't separate a voice from, say, a saxophone.”

“A good analogy,” said Monty, “but actually the opposite. Light doesn't mix so the brain is inventing colours whereas sound does mix so the brain separates them. In both cases, however, the ear or the eye simply picks up the wavelengths. It's the brain that does the clever bit. Did you know that cats and dogs can only see certain colours?”

“I have heard that,” said Sam. “I don't really understand why though. Isn't an eye an eye?”

“Ohh my dear,” exclaimed Monty. “You understand me!”

I thought he was going to jump out of his chair to embrace her but he didn't.

“Umm, not really,” she said.

“A dog's eye can see all the wavelengths,” he said. “It's just that, for whatever evolutionary reason, dogs' brains didn't evolve a need to see certain combinations of wavelengths as colours. They still see the wavelengths though.”

“This is all well and good,” I said, “but what's this got to do with synaesthesia?”

“Ahh,” said Monty, leaning forward and holding up a finger in pontification. “Synaesthesia is believed to be when wires get crossed in the brain and the assigning of colours gets applied to other senses. Synaesthetes, I've read, sometimes read written words in different colours even though they are printed in black on a white page. That woman, whatshername, you know, the one who wrote those books about a child wizard, oh, umm, ...” and he clicked his fingers in

irritation.

“You mean Harry Potter?” asked Sam. “J K Rowling?”

“That's the one,” he said in relief. “I read once that she saw Saturdays in silver.”

“How can you see a day in silver?” asked Melanie, going back to her main theme.

“I have no idea,” said Monty, “but apparently she does so I would guess somewhere in her brain the neurons that assign the colour silver are faulty and are misapplying it. I wonder if bats see sounds as colours? How would we go about finding out? Perhaps, Sam, when you next speak with a bat you could ask?”

“I will,” said Sam looking mystified, “although I don't make a habit of talking to bats. Their audio language is too high pitched for my ears.”

“Shame, shame,” said Monty. “Do you suppose if the sounds were pitched down by a machine you'd still understand the meaning?”

“Maybe,” said Sam. “Although it might be like lowering the pitch of your voice a long way. If it goes too deep I wouldn't be able to understand a word.”

“Hmm, quite,” said Monty enthusiastically. “Interesting line of study though, eh?”

“I doubt you'd get the funding,” I said. “It would be seen as too esoteric.”

“You think?” asked Monty. “I would have thought it would be empiricism at its finest.”

“Agreed,” I said, “but you also have to consider people's prejudices. No one's going to publicly support anyone who is trying to find a scientific basis for the things they don't approve of. Just imagine the fuss if you tried to raise money to build a machine that could find God or show that magic is just another branch of quantum mechanics.

You'd be stoned to death before the EPs could get anywhere near you.”

“I suppose,” he said, his enthusiasm rapidly waning. “Oh well.”

“Anyway,” I said. “What's all this got to do with Sam?”

“What's what got to do with Sam?” asked Monty.

“Synaesthesia,” I said.

“Ahh!” he said, getting enthusiastic again. “That was my idea, wasn't it. Yes, it occurred to me that if some people have a neurological predisposition to assigning colours to non-visual stimuli then perhaps Sam has something similar in that she doesn't see or heard words as such but their underlying meanings. After all, she said herself that the meanings remain the same, only the sounds change from one language to another.”

“It's an interesting idea,” I said slowly, “but it wouldn't actually help her. After all, synaesthetes are persecuted as well so her being a freaky synaesthete would only make things worse.”

He grunted and screwed up his face.

“And on that note,” said Melanie, getting up. “I'm going to make us some dinner while you two give some more thought as to what to do. You can't stay on the run forever.”

Chapter Twelve

“I was watching your face earlier,” said Sam as we prepared for bed. “Monty didn't used to be like that, did he?”

I spat some toothpaste into the sink then rinsed my mouth. This bedroom had its own tiny annex in what was probably, judging by its size and position, a former fireplace and chimney. There was a sink and a mirror but no toilet, bath or shower. Those were in the bathroom at the end of the corridor.

“Nothing like that,” I said, emerging and wiping my mouth on the little square facecloth. “He used to be razor sharp and keenly interested in just about everything. Tonight he wasn't even interested in his dinner.”

“I noticed that as well,” said Sam. “Umm ...” She paused the brushing of her hair and looked at me uncertainly.

“Yes?” I asked, sitting on the bed.

“I don't know,” she said and let her hand flop onto her lap. “Do you suppose that he's changed because of his re-education?”

“I can't think of any other reason,” I said. “Melanie said he was fine when they arrested him and worse than he is now when he came back. Logically there would seem to be a connection unless he had some illness while he was interred although I don't know what would cause this. A stroke, maybe, although there were no signs of that in his face.”

“But isn't re-education supposed to be counselling and psychiatric care?” asked Sam. “That's how it's always described anyway. Like anger management therapy.”

“That's what they say,” I said, “although I have heard a few rumours.”

“Rumours?” she exclaimed, twisting to stare at me. “What sort of rumours?”

“Nothing very substantial,” I said, getting off the bed in order to get

back in under the covers. “One or two people have apparently never come back from re-education and I did hear of someone, a woman I think, who came back thinking she was someone else. I never put much store in those rumours but having seen Monty I’m beginning to wonder if there might be some substance to them.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“Well, you’re Japanese,” I said, “at least in part. Haven’t you heard of the brainwashing experiments your ancestors carried out in Manchuria in China?”

“I’ve heard of that,” she said, frowning, “but that’s not a part of Japanese history we’re proud of. Do you think that’s what they are doing here?”

“This is twenty first century Britain,” I said, “not Manchuria or a Communist gulag or one of those other places where they did these sorts of things. We don’t even have anything like the CIA so I find it very hard to believe even though we’re in the grip of the Empirical fanatics. It’s just not the British way. Persuading people to recant is one thing but brainwashing is another thing entirely. Besides, Monty was part of the financial establishment and the British government’s always leaned over backwards to help the City. Brainwashing bankers just isn’t cricket.”

“I can never tell when you’re being serious or not,” she said, starting to brush her hair again.

“Neither can I,” I said. “Yes, I’m sure that things are done during the re-education process and yes, I’m sure the process is more intense for people convicted of more serious offences but Monty wasn’t one of them. He was just a fringe dweller because he was a nosey sod who was interested in anything that was different and caught his attention but he certainly wasn’t a practitioner or even a serious believer in the arcane. I would have found it more likely that they’d arrest him, explain he’d gone a little too far and he’d just apologise profusely and promise never to do it again. He certainly wasn’t the sort to make himself a martyr to any cause, except possibly making money.”

“So what are we going to do about it?” she asked.

“I don't know that there is anything we can do about it,” I said as she slipped under the covers beside me. There was a sudden scurry of feet and Molly crashed into the side of the bed trying to jump up. “Monty seems to be slowly making progress with Melanie looking after him.”

Sam bent over the side of the bed, her foot under my leg to balance herself, and lifted Molly up. She seemed none the worse for her fall although she looked balefully at me for a moment as though it was my fault this bed was higher than ours at home.

“Which reminds me,” I said. “I thought we could leave some money behind when we go, to help them out.”

“That would be kind,” said Sam, arranging herself under my arm. “I couldn't help but notice there wasn't much food in the kitchen but that wasn't what I meant.”

“What did you mean?” I asked as Molly wormed her way into a comfortable spot just above Sam's hip.

“I meant what are we going to do?” she said. “I'm probably on the fringes as well, much like Monty, but you ... well, you're slap bang in the middle, a full blown sorcerer and master of the esoteric. If they'd do what they did to someone on the fringe like Monty, what would they do to you?”

“Nothing,” I said. “They can't do a thing to me and they probably know it. They can't do anything to you either while I'm around. I suspect they're just picking on a few of the people at the edges to make it look as though they're doing something and waiting until the tide of public opinion changes. That's the usual pattern of the British Government.”

“So why go to Scotland?” she asked.

“We don't have to go to Scotland,” I said. “I just think we shouldn't stay here. We can go anywhere but I don't want to bring Monty and Melanie any more trouble. Where do you fancy?”

“I wouldn't mind going to the Lake District,” said Sam, slowing running her fingers over my chest. “I went there with my parents for a holiday when I was 15 and I thought it was a beautiful place but I was too full of teenage angst and rebellion to appreciate it. I'd like to go back again.”

“Then we shall go to the Lake District,” I said, “only not tomorrow, the day after.”

“Why not tomorrow?” she asked, her hand sliding down to my belly.

“I want to go see the Cathedral,” I said, reaching over to turn off the light.

“What for?” she asked, rolling onto her side so she faced me.

“The last time I was here it was a right mess,” I said, twisting onto my side as well. “During the Civil War some Parliamentary troops were stationed there and wrecked the place.”

“Were you one of them?” asked Sam.

“Definitely not,” I said. “Even though the University was staunchly on the side of Cromwell none of the academics got actively involved. No, I passed through Winchester a few years after the War on my way to meet a possible student in Cornwall and was quite shocked at the mess. The troops had smashed all the windows, pulled down a lot of the statues and so on. I know the Cathedral was rebuilt and I'm curious, since I'm here, to see what sort of a job they made of it.”

“You don't think Monty will get into trouble?” she asked, shivering a little as I stroked her back.

“Can't imagine why,” I said. “If we stayed a long time we might attract attention but a couple of nights? Even Monty'll be allowed the occasional visitors. Put Molly on the floor before she gets knocked off.”

* * *

I felt it as I paid off the taxi driver. The faintest tingle of something, mostly in the pit of my stomach. The driver didn't seem to notice anything which wasn't surprising. He just thanked me, made some remark about the rain clouds gathering then drove off.

"It's huge," said Sam, staring at the Cathedral.

"Cathedrals always are," I said. "Haven't you seen St Paul's in London?"

"Of course I have," she said, "and the Tower of London but all the buildings around St Paul's makes it look small and insignificant. This place is huge and look at all the space around it!"

"It's bigger than it used to be, I think," I said. "I don't remember it being this big when I was here for Mary's wedding."

"I thought you said you hadn't been here since the Civil War?" said Sam. "And who's Mary?"

"I haven't," I said, "and I didn't get that close then. I seem to remember crossing the river a little further upstream and there was a rather nice little inn somewhere over there. Probably gone by now."

"Was that where Mary lived?" asked Sam, giving me an indefinable look.

"Mary? Good lord no," I said with a laugh. "I'm not sure where she lived. Buckingham Palace probably. She was the Queen of England, after all."

"I thought there'd only been the two Elizabeths," said Sam as we walked along the path towards the great main doors to the Cathedral. We'd left Molly in the care of Melanie for a few hours.

"Mary was Elizabeth's sister," I said, "or half sister. They were both daughters of Henry the Eighth but with different wives. I forget which came from who but Mary was Queen before Elizabeth. Didn't last long though."

“Why was that?” asked Sam. “Oh! I didn't expect that!”

We studied the sign attached firmly to a stout post planted beside the doors. Frankly, neither had I. I expected it to give the opening hours or something like that, not to say the Cathedral had been deconsecrated and was now run by the Heritage Trust as a building of historical significance. The notice was signed by Deborah Sellin, (former) Bishop of Winchester, which I supposed made it official. It also meant Deborah was also the last Bishop of Winchester, unless the place was re-consecrated again in the future.

“Oh dear,” I said, feeling the tingling more strongly. “Things have got worse than I expected. I didn't think they'd go so far as to actually close down the cathedrals and churches.”

“Do you suppose she's been sent for re-education as well?” asked Sam.

“I doubt it,” I said. “The Bishops of the cathedrals are also Peers in the House of Lords. I don't see any of them getting re-educated. Besides they have to ratify the laws passed by the Commons.”

I looked around but there was nothing obvious that could be generating the tingling. It distracted me because, well, any tingling in your stomach is distracting but also because I was beginning to sense a feeling of power, almost like being near an electrical power station, except that there wasn't a power station nearby unless there was one inside the cathedral which was unlikely. It was possible that it had its own generator although cathedrals don't generally use a lot of power. A few lights, maybe a small computer or two and possibly even some heating or air conditioning would be about all.

“Oh well,” said Sam who felt nothing more religious than a mild inclination towards Buddhism. “Still, it's a lovely old place. Looks like the repairs went well.”

“Yes,” I said, “especially the stained glass. Last time I was here all the glass had been smashed. Do you suppose these were put back together again like a big jigsaw or they got new ones?”

“Wouldn't have a clue,” said Sam, “although they don't look modern to

me. Modern stained glass always looks like Disney cartoons.”

“Well, the Civil War was in the seventeenth century,” I said, “so the rebuilding was probably a long time before Disney.”

“Do you want to go inside?” she asked. “That sign says the opening hours are 9 to 5 so it should be open even though the door’s closed.”

“I’d like to,” I said, more because I wanted to feel if the tingling was stronger inside than outside than anything else.

She lifted the heavy metal ring that was bolted in the centre of one of the doors and pushed. The door creaked and gave way a little so she pushed again, harder, and the gap slowly widened.

“Spooky,” she said, poking her head inside.

“It’s deconsecrated,” I said, “so there shouldn’t be anything spooky. Go on in.”

I followed her into the nave, dimly lit by a row of widely spaced lights suspended high above us and what little came in through the stained glass windows from the overcast outside world. Our feet echoed loudly and all the bare stone made the place feel decidedly cold.

“I’ve never been inside a completely empty church,” she whispered. “There’s always a sense of the priests and so on not far away.”

“I daresay there are a few still here,” I said, my voice sounding over-loud. “If nothing else there’ll be the archives and library and I’m sure someone is keeping an eye on the relics. Just because religion’s been outlawed it doesn’t mean believers have stopped believing.”

“I suppose,” she said. “Is that the font?”

“Yes, it is,” I said, stopping beside her. “It was carved from a solid block of black marble in the twelfth century.”

“Wow,” she exclaimed quietly. “Were you here when they carved it?”

“No,” I said. “I was just reading what it says on this card beside it.”

“It's very impressive though,” she said. “So Queen Mary got married here?”

“That's right,” I said. “She married some Spanish prince, Philip, I think.”

“And you were invited?” asked Sam. “I didn't think you were that important.”

“I wasn't, and I'm not,” I said. “The University sent a delegation but one of them died a couple of days before so I went along instead. After all, there were a lot of concerns about the new Queen.”

“What sort of concerns?” asked Sam. “Or was it simply because a bunch of sexist old men didn't think a woman could do the job?”

“Well, that was certainly a factor,” I said, wandering off along the nave to see how the tingle went. “She was the first ever Queen in her own right but it was more to do with the fact that she was a staunch Catholic and her dad had broken with the Pope and declared England to be Protestant. I went along with the others to see if I could get some indication of her attitude towards witchery and other fields.”

“And what was her attitude?” asked Sam, craning her head to see the ornate fluted arches of the ceiling in the gloom.

“She hated us,” I said. “She didn't get the nickname Bloody Mary for nothing.”

Sam's head jerked back down to look at me. “What do you mean, Bloody Mary?”

“Soon after she got married she started her own Inquisition,” I said, veering off to the left to go around what the sign said was the Reliquary Chapel as the tingling felt stronger that way. “It was based on the Spanish Inquisition so all of us in the esoteric communities were very worried although as it turned out we didn't need to be.”

“You mean she didn't do anything after all?” asked Sam, preferring to follow me rather than go to the right.

“Not to us,” I said. “The English didn't trust the Spanish, after all. Columbus had only recently discovered the Americas in the name of Spain and Edward the Sixth, who came between Henry and Mary, had sent out John Cabot to find the Americas for England. Although Mary set out to uncover heretics, because she didn't trust the Spanish even though she was married to one ... although maybe that was why, who knows. Anyway, even though we were worried it turned out the only heretics she was interested in were Protestants. She didn't give two hoots about sorcerers and the rest. Stephen Gardiner though was a different kettle of fish but he had to follow Mary's orders which was just as well, really.”

“Who was Stephen Gardiner?” asked Sam.

“He was the Bishop of Winchester,” I said absently. The tingling in my belly was now fizzing my blood generally and I knew I'd found a ley line and an unusually strong one at that. “He married Mary and whatshisname. Down there, at the other end of the nave. I knew the guy but fortunately he didn't see me.”

Intriguingly, as far as I could judge by the tingling, the ley line ran the length of the nave but it had also got stronger as I approached the Tomb of Aelfgar which it shouldn't. Ley lines should stay much the same their entire length.

“What to you mean, you knew the guy?” asked Sam. “He knew you were a sorcerer?”

“Yes,” I said. “He was a student at Cambridge before being appointed as an Ambassador to Henry the Eighth to assess the suitability of Anne of Cleves as a wife. Not one single shred of Christian belief in him. The only thing he believed in was advancing himself and grabbing as much power and money as he could. Very clever man, though. Probably the brightest student we had that century, perhaps longer. I nearly invited him to be my student but I realised he simply didn't have the temperament. He'd have used his skills purely for himself. Still, he bitterly resented me rejecting him so if he'd seen me

he'd have created merry hell.”

“What would he have done?” asked Sam, coming up close in a protective way.

“I don't know,” I said, “but he did torture a woman to death trying to discredit Catherine Parr. I forget her name. Anne someone.”

“What?” exclaimed Sam. “Surely back then women weren't a threat? Why would he torture her?”

“Oh some people just like torture for the fun of it,” I said, walking slowly around the Tomb of Aelfgar, “although in this case he was trying to get Anne to incriminate Catherine Parr in a Protestant plot to kill Henry because he was convinced Parr had too much influence over Henry. By turning Henry against Parr he hoped to bring Henry back to Catholicism and strengthen his own position. Being a Catholic Bishop he didn't have much of a role in a Protestant land. Anyway, to cut a long story short, Mary launched a pogrom against Protestants and Gardiner had dozens of people tortured and burnt alive. He even had her half sister arrested although the Lord Lieutenant of the Tower of London refused to execute her.”

I suddenly realised what I was experiencing. This wasn't just a powerful ley line running along the length of the nave, it was a double ley line, meeting at right angles where the Tomb of Aelfgar lay, which was intriguing. I'd never heard of Aelfgar but he must have been someone of great significance to have been entombed at the intersection of two ley lines. Such places are very powerful.

“Askew,” I said, suddenly snapping my fingers. “Anne Askew, that was her.”

“The one about the Protestant plot?” asked Sam.

“Yes,” I said. “Rumour had it that she was so badly broken on the rack she had to be carried to the pyre. Poor kid. Still, Mary didn't last long. She thought she was pregnant but actually had a stomach tumour and died. There was a rumour that a sorcerer in Spain caused that at Philip's request but it didn't work out as Elizabeth became Queen

rather than Philip annexing England for Spain. Shall we go now?"

Now I'd identified the cause of the tingling I wanted to get back to Monty to see if he knew anything about it. There had been a time when he'd got interested in ley lines and he might still remember something of it.

"If you like," said Sam surprised. "I thought you wanted to look around."

"I just wanted to see if the place had been restored properly," I said, "and we can be sure the Heritage Trust will look after it."

"So why've you spent your time walking round this tombstone?" asked Sam. "What's so special about it?"

"I'll tell you when we get back," I said, a little surprised as I'd thought she hadn't noticed. "I want to check something with Monty first."

At least, that was the plan. As it turned out I forgot all about the ley lines and Aelfgar because, in our absence, Molly had been arrested.

Chapter Thirteen

“What do you mean, Molly's been arrested?” I demanded. “You can't arrest a dog!”

“Well, that's what they said,” said Melanie, still a little upset although that was probably more because of the police turning up on her doorstep unexpectedly than over concern for Molly. “Here, see for yourself,” and she thrust several stapled pages at me.

“But didn't you even try to stop them,” said Sam, a shrillness edging her voice. “You just let them take her without even asking why?”

“What was I supposed to do?” cried Melanie, rounding on Sam. “I thought they'd come for Dad again! It was such a relief they were only after that dog.”

“But she's my dog!” exclaimed Sam, getting shriller. “How could you just ...”

“Bugger!” I said loudly, staring at the warrant. “Bugger, bugger, bugger!”

“What?” demanded Sam still staring angrily at Melanie.

“It says here that Molly's been arrested or impounded depending on the outcome of further police enquiries,” I said, turning the page. “Umm, it seems a witness saw Molly change from a young woman into a dog and reported it. Damnation!”

“How could a woman turn into a dog?” asked Melanie as Sam snatched the warrant out of my hands.

“Umm, it's best you don't know anything about that,” I said cautiously. “You didn't see anything so as far as you're concerned two friends of your father's turned up with a dog and that's all there is to it.”

Melanie stared at me for a few heartbeats then backed away.

“What are you?” she said nervously, one hand over her mouth and the

other half raised protectively.

“I’m just a friend of your father from Cambridge University,” I said. “Hold on to that fact and everything will be just fine. Monty’s not going to get into any trouble. Nor are you.”

“Do you know someone called Clive Barnard?” asked Sam, studying the warrant. “The name rings a bell but I can’t remember where from?”

“Clive Barnard?” I said, snatching the warrant back from her. “Who’s Clive Barnard? Where does it say Clive Barnard?”

“He’s the one who saw Molly and reported it,” said Sam. “Look,” and she snatched the warrant back.

The staple gave way and a couple of pages fell on the floor. She ignored them and pointed to roughly half way down the page she had in her hand.

I swapped the one remaining sheet I had with her sheet and studied it while she picked up the other two.

“I know that name,” I said, not that seeing it in black and white made it any more memorable, “but he can’t be anyone from around here, unless he was the taxi driver.”

“A sikh called Clive?” said Sam with a toss of her head. “Don’t be daft.”

“Who’s a sikh?” asked Melanie.

“The taxi driver who brought us here from the station,” said Sam. “He had a turban and everything.”

“Oh,” said Melanie. “And he saw your dog turn into a girl?”

“No,” I said, my mind on people called Clive. “He couldn’t have. The taxi was long gone before ...”

“So it is true,” interrupted Melanie, backing further away.

“Yes, it is true,” said Sam testily. “Get over it, all right? You stressing over nothing isn't going to get Molly back.”

“Turning people into dogs isn't nothing,” retorted Melanie. “In fact it's pretty bloody major!”

“Oh be quiet!” said Sam angrily. “This isn't helping!”

“Umm, Melanie,” I said, trying to be placatory. “Why don't you go and make some tea or something and I'll explain everything once we've got our heads around this, OK?”

She stared at me then turned and half ran out of the room. I heard her feet hurrying up the stairs so she'd probably gone to get Monty.

“Who was that policeman who came to see us yesterday?” asked Sam. “The woman was Gwyneth something but she did say the name of the man who was with her. Was he Clive Barnard?”

“I think you're right,” I said slowly. “Her name was Bailey or something like that and I'm sure his name began with B as well.”

“But if it is him, what's he doing here?” asked Sam, looking worriedly at me. “Oh my God! Do you think he followed us?”

“He must have done,” I said, frowning, “although how he managed I've no idea. It would make sense though.”

“What do you mean, make sense?” exclaimed Sam. “How does arresting my dog make any sense? She's just a dog!”

“Actually, it makes a lot of sense, now I think about it,” I said. “Firstly, I doubt the police would make an arrest simply on the say so of just anyone., but a copper from another district would be a much more reliable witness. Even more so if he was following us.”

“But why Molly?” asked Sam.

“They interviewed us because they thought one of us was an anti-empiricist,” I said, thinking it through out loud. “Then this Clive Barnard follows us and sees a girl turn into a dog so he probably jumped to the conclusion that Molly is a person rather than a dog and she's the one who's the anti-empiricist.”

“Oh how stupid!” exclaimed Sam. “Molly's just a cute little dog!”

“They're not to know that,” I said, warming to my theme. “And that would explain why they reacted so quickly. A reliable witness on the trail of one or more anti-empiricists who actually saw a shape shifting? I'm surprised they haven't surrounded the house.”

Sam stared at me open mouthed for a few moments then hurried over to the window. She gently eased the net curtain back a little and peered out.

“I can't see anyone,” she reported. “Only the hedge. Do you think there are people behind the hedge?”

“Probably not,” I said. “If they're going to keep watch on us they'll probably use a drone. Ahh, do you suppose Barnard was using a drone? That would explain how he followed us from the station without us seeing anyone.”

There was a heavy thump from above and I instinctively looked up expecting to see a drone come crashing through then realised it was probably just Monty getting out of bed.

“Whatever,” I said. “Go and pack your bag. We have to get out of here.”

“Where are we going?” she asked, turning towards the door.

“Anywhere,” I said. “Scotland, maybe, but anywhere will do. They'll realise soon enough that Molly really is a dog and they'll come looking for us.”

“No way,” said Sam forcefully. “I'm not leaving Molly behind.”

“Well, they’re not just going to give her back,” I said as a toilet flushed upstairs. “They think they’re on to something and, as we both know, they’re right. Once they’ve done a few tests they’ll be back.”

“Tests?” exclaimed Sam. “What sort of tests?”

“I haven’t got a clue,” I said, “but for sure they’ll want to know how Molly changed shape so they’ll probably get in a vet or something.”

“You think they’ll give up after doing a blood test?” demanded Sam, her voice becoming shrill again. “Seriously? You think they’ll say ‘oh, this is dog blood’ and leave it at that? They’re going to take her apart trying to find out how she did it!” She said a few words in Japanese which sounded very much like swear words then said something else, still in Japanese, which sounded more like a threat.

“Speak English,” I said, “or Italian or even Latin but not Japanese.”

“We have to get her back,” said Sam, speaking very forcefully and coming very close so she could stare intimidatingly into my eyes. I sensed there was a samurai or two in her ancestry so I backed off a little but she stayed close.

“Come on, Sam,” I said, a touch nervously. “Be reasonable. We don’t even know where they’ve taken her. How are we going to get her away from the cops when we don’t even know where she is? It’s not like we can realistically get a lawyer or anything. Technically they are right.”

“Technically who’s right?” asked Monty, shuffling into the lounge. He was still tying the cord of his dressing gown and looked half asleep.

“The police,” I said.

“Ahh,” said Monty. He shook his head as if to clear it. “So you can turn people into dogs? Melanie wasn’t wrong?”

“They’ve arrested my dog,” said Sam, looking as though she was about to burst into tears, “and my husband intends to do nothing about it.” She put a fairly heavy emphasis on the word ‘husband’ that made it sound like I wasn’t going to be for much longer.

“That's not true,” I protested. “I intend we leave here immediately.”

“And just leave that poor little creature to be tortured by those, those ... vivisectionists!” exclaimed Sam. “I never thought you'd be such a heartless bastard!”

“Oh come on, Sam,” I said trying to put my arms around her. “Please be realistic.”

“Be realistic my arse!” she shouted, pulling away from me. “You're Nicholas March, Professor of Praecantatiology at Cambridge University and Europe's leading practitioner of sorcery and you can't even rescue a little dog!”

“Oh come on now, Sam,” I exclaimed. “Britain's leading practitioner perhaps but not Europe's. There are some pretty top ranking people out there, you know. Particularly in Turkey and ...”

“You're bloody useless,” she shrieked and stormed out of the room in tears. “I wish I'd never married you!”

“Sam!” I called but the door nearly came off its hinges as she slammed it behind her.

“Let her go,” said Monty as I started after her. “Best let tempers cool for a bit.”

“I suppose so,” I said worriedly. I'd never seen Sam like this before.

“Sit down,” said Monty. “Go on. Sit. Sit.”

I wondered if in his mind I was now Dukie but like a good boy I sat.

“Good,” he said. “You too.”

Melanie dutifully sat in the armchair furthest away from me but she didn't relax. She sat rigidly upright and stared fixedly at me.

“I'll be back in a minute,” said Monty and walked out of the room.

He left the door open and I could hear the faint sounds of crying coming from upstairs. I wanted to go to Sam but I knew, in my heart, that that would only make things worse at the moment so I stayed where I was, pinned in place by Melanie's fixed stare like a butterfly in someone's collection.

"Praecantatiology, praecantatiology," muttered Monty as he ambled back in the lounge thumbing through a Latin-English dictionary in his hand. "Ahh, here we are. Praecantator, meaning enchanter, magician, sorcerer, wizard. How interesting. So praecantatiology is the study of sorcery, yes?"

I sighed. This was turning out to not be one of my best days, although it was still some considerable way from being my worst.

"Yes," I said tonelessly.

"Always thought there was something odd about you Nick," he said cheerfully.

"So Nick is a witch?" asked Melanie, her knuckles going white as she gripped the arms of her chair.

"More of a wizard, I'd say," said Monty. "Witches are generally women, isn't that right, Nick?"

"Well, more often than not," I said, "although since the 1960s and the rise of sexual equality there has been a definite shift in the gender bias with a lot more men identifying as witches in preference to the more traditional wizard. That said, there is also sub-strata of people of either sex eschewing gender orientated labels generally. Interestingly the opposite isn't the case. Very few women have opted, as far as I am aware, to be labelled as wizards. Perhaps it's because of the stereotypical wizard having a long beard."

"Quite," said Monty. "I've never yet met a woman who wanted a beard. So, let me try to understand the situation we have here. Your dog is also a sorcerer?"

"No," I said, "and she's not my dog, she's Sam's. She's just an ordinary

King Charles spaniel.”

“And yet the police think she is?” he asked.

“Yes, I think so,” I said, “which is why she's been arrested or impounded. I think they're covering their bases there. If it turns out she's a human shape shifter then it'll be an arrest but if it turns out she's actually a dog then she'll just be impounded.”

“I see,” said Monty. “And Sam?”

“Just a woman,” I said. “Unusually beautiful and talented but not a sorcerer.”

“So it was you who turned Molly the dog into a girl?” asked Monty.

“Yes,” I said and explained about how it was easier to travel with a teenager than a dog and that I'd hoped it would make us less easy to trace.

“Are you dangerous?” asked Melanie with a quiver in her voice.

“Absolutely not,” I said. “I have powers, I admit, but I only use them for good.”

Even I could hear how trite that sounded, like a third rate Batman movie script, but it was true in a pretty fundamental way. When you've lived as long as I have riches and all the other apparent motivations for bad deeds become rather empty. Anyway, if I'd wanted wealth or power I'd have gone into banking or politics like the rest of my family. The abstractions of sorcery had much greater attractions, much like pure mathematics or theoretical physics.

“And why would he harm you anyway, Melanie?” asked Monty. “What purpose would it serve?”

“To protect himself maybe,” said Melanie. “Perhaps he'll turn us both in if he feels threatened.”

I had to laugh.

“I’m more than able to protect myself, and Sam,” I said. “The EPs can’t do anything to me. Even if they put me in prison I’d just walk out again and they can’t kill me. The only reason we decided to leave was because I can only protect Sam if I’m nearby. If they arrested her, for example, while I was at the University they could be very nasty before I was able to find her again.”

“But you could find her again?” asked Monty.

“Yes,” I said, “unless they put her in a room lined with barium ethoxide. For some reason that compound blocks me. I’ve been meaning to do some research into that but I haven’t got around to it yet. After all, barium is a rare metal and the cost of making a room from the stuff would be prohibitive and no one knows except the three of us anyway.”

“So that would suggest you trust us,” said Monty.

“I do trust you,” I said. “Which is why I want to take Sam and get away from here. I have no idea what conclusions the police will reach after they’ve had Molly for a while but I wouldn’t be surprised if they turn their attention back to you again, Monty.”

“Yes, I can see that,” said Monty. He bent over and patted Melanie on her shoulder. “It’s all right, dear. Nick’s not going to do either of us any harm. He’s a bit like me, I suppose, only a lot further advanced.”

“I confess I don’t find that any comfort, Dad,” said Melanie. “Him just being here can cause us grief and I don’t think you’ll be able to cope with re-education again. I don’t think I could handle it even the once.”

“There is that,” said Monty straightening up again. “You know, Nick. I have difficulty remembering things now and this’ll sound stupid but I do remember that I used to remember a lot more than I do. It ... bothers me.”

“I can understand that,” I said. “Which is why Sam and I have to go.”

“Actually, you’re not being very logical for a professor,” said Monty, shuffling over to the other armchair.

“How so?” I asked.

“The EPs know you are here,” he said, “or were. After all, they know Dukie was changed here so they’ll come back whether you’re here or not.”

“Molly,” said Melanie. “The dog’s name is Molly. Duke died years ago.”

“Oh, did he?” asked Monty plaintively, twisting to look at her. “I loved that dog! What did he die of? Did he suffer?”

“He had a heart attack,” said Melanie. “The vet put him down.”

“Oh poor, poor Dukie,” said Monty sadly. “I was wondering where he was.”

“You said I wasn’t being logical,” I prompted.

“What were we talking about?” he asked.

“The police arresting Molly,” I said. “Our dog.”

He stared at me in a lost way for a good ten seconds then his eyes came alive again.

“Yes!” he said. “You’re not being logical!”

“So you said,” I said. I realised I hadn’t heard Sam’s crying for a while and I wondered if she’d stopped and was now packing. “Well? What am I not being logical about?”

“They’ll come here anyway,” said Monty, “whether you’re here or not. It seems to me, you being the leading practitioner in Britain if not in all Europe ... is Turkey in Europe? I rather think it isn’t, you know.”

“It’s not in the European Community,” I said, “but it is part of the continent of Europe. You were saying?”

“I think we’re better off if you stayed,” said Monty. “You can protect us

as well if you and Sam are here but if you disappear somewhere Melanie and I will be arrested sooner or later if only because we know you and, don't forget, this girl to dog business happened here. We're implicated regardless."

I stared at him, wondering why I hadn't thought of that myself. My instinct had been to run in order to protect them and Sam but now he'd pointed it out it was obvious. Me disappearing would only taint them more, not less.

"I suppose," I said after a while.

"Excellent," he said beaming happily, "and we can talk about old times while you're here. Mel, dear, weren't you going to make some tea?"

"Damn!" I said out loud.

"What's the matter?" asked Melanie, getting up but still watching me carefully.

"I was going to get some coffee while we were out," I said.

"Can't you just magic some up?" she asked. "You being a professor of whatever it was."

"Praecantatiology," said Monty happily.

"I can," I said, "it's just that I don't like to draw attention to these things."

"So you'd rather have coffee than tea?" she asked.

"You'll find a jar on the kitchen table," I said. "Black, two sugars."

"Right," she said giving me a funny look.

"I'd better go and check on Sam," I said, getting up.

"Excuse me for asking," said Melanie, coming back into the lounge

with a jar of coffee granules in her hand, “but why can't you just go and get Molly back? You said you could if it was Sam.”

“Um, well, wouldn't it be pretty obvious?” I asked. “After all, the moment the dog goes missing from wherever they have it they'll come back here.”

“They'll be coming back anyway,” said Melanie, “or did you think arresting a harmless little doggie would look good in their performance reviews?”

Chapter Fourteen

“Sam?” I said softly, tapping gently on the bedroom door. “Sam? How are you?”

There was no reply so after a few moments I twisted the handle and pushed against the door. It opened a little with a creak and a pillow hit me in the face.

“Get away from me, you dog killer!” followed the pillow.

“Sam,” I said again, trying to open the door further but the pillow had got itself wedged underneath. “Um, did you brink those silk panties of yours?”

“Go to hell, you sick bastard!” she snarled and her suitcase crashed against the door. It landed on top of the pillow and from what I could see through the gap it was empty. Clearly she hadn't been packing after all.

“Umm, I'm going to try to find out where they've taken Molly,” I said, “but I need your undies.”

I braced myself but nothing happened then I heard her footsteps and the pillow was yanked away.

“What do you mean?” she asked, pulling the door open. Her face was blotched and tear stained but there was hope on her face, mixed with suspicion in her eyes.

It occurred to me that perhaps I should have opened with saying I was going to try to find Molly rather than asking about her underwear but that moment had passed.

“I'm going to the police station to see if she's there,” I said. “It's the most likely place.”

“Oh Nick!” she exclaimed and flung her arms around me. “Thank you, thank you. But won't that be dangerous?”

"I'm going to astral fly," I said when I could breathe again. She let go and I rubbed my chest where her large crystal pendant had nearly broken a rib. "I need something made of silk."

"Right!" she exclaimed and ran across the bedroom to pull out the top drawer of the chest of drawers. She was a little over enthusiastic and the drawer came out completely, throwing the few clothes she'd brought onto the floor. Undeterred she tossed the wooden drawer onto the bed and snatched up the flimsy red silk undies I'd got her for her birthday. She only wore them on special occasions and I was impressed she'd brought them.

"Here," she said, thrusting them at me. "Can I help?"

"Sure," I said, happy that she was happy and engaged again. "Umm, could you bring down a blanket and a pillow?"

"Sure," she said and hurried over to the bed.

I went back downstairs and nearly crashed into Melanie coming up from the cellar.

"Most of our rope is nylon," she said, waving a dirty coil of rope at me, "but I think this is hemp. Will it do?" She saw the panties in my hand and raised an eyebrow.

I stuffed the panties in my pocket and took the rope. It was a bit smelly as well as being dirty but it was hemp so it would do.

"Yeah, that's fine," I said. "I'll also need some salt and some sugar and four bowls."

"I don't know that we've got four bowls," she said, frowning. "Will buckets do?"

"Soup bowls will be fine," I said, "Gold would be perfect or ceramic or even wooden ones if you've nothing else but definitely not plastic."

"We've got some ceramic cereal bowls," she said, "or some glass mixing bowls."

“The ceramic ones would be perfect,” I said as Sam stopped on the stairs behind me.

“Coming right up,” said Melanie.

“So what do I do with these?” asked Sam following me into the lounge.

“Oh, um, lay the blanket on the floor,” I said, moving a low occasional table out of the way.

“Does it need to go east-west or something?” asked Monty, still in the armchair but watching with fascination.

“No, it doesn't matter,” I said.

“And the pillow?” asked Sam.

“Up that end of the blanket,” I said, pointing to one end at random. “Ahh, Melanie, could you put the bowls at each corner of the blanket. Thanks. Oh, do you have some scissors or a knife? I need to cut off a bit of the rope.”

“Sure,” said Melanie. “Back in a moment.”

I poured roughly a tablespoon of sugar into one of the bowls then about the same of salt into another before fishing Sam's undies from my pocket and putting them neatly in a third. When Melanie came back with some scissors I trimmed off an inch or so of the rope and put it in the last bowl.

“So what's going to happen?” asked Sam.

“I'm going to lie on the floor and astral fly,” I said. “I don't know how long I'll be so feel free to do something else while I'm gone. It'll look like I'm asleep.”

“Will you bring Molly back with you?” asked Sam eagerly.

“Sadly no,” I said, sitting down on the blanket. “When I'm flying I'm really just observing so I don't have the power to do anything. I

certainly can't pick her up or carry her but if I can find out where she is we can work out some other way to get her back. The first problem, though, is to find her.”

“I thought you said the police station,” said Sam, frowning.

“That's the most likely place,” said Monty. “Or perhaps the dog pound but I would think they'd take her to the station first. After all, she is a suspect not just a runaway dog.”

“Well, if she's not at the police station I can have a look at the pound as well,” I said, getting up again.

“Why are you getting up?” asked Sam. “Why aren't you looking for Molly?”

“I need a pee first,” I said. “Bladder control gets a bit iffy when I'm flying and I wouldn't want to mess up your carpet. Won't be a moment. Incidentally, I don't know Winchester. Where is the police station?”

“Oh it's in Bag End Road,” said Monty. “Big place, full of police cars. You can't miss it.”

“No it isn't,” said Melanie. “It's in the centre, near the Council Offices.”

“Can't be,” scoffed Monty. “There's nowhere to park in the High Street. Where would they put their police cars?”

“I thought that was a big wine storage place,” said Melanie, frowning. “I'm sure it's in the High Street.”

“Tell you what,” I said, “look it up somewhere while I'm in the toilet.”

“So how does this work?” asked Monty when I came back. “Do you need street directions?”

“No, not really,” I said, sitting on the blanket again. “It's just like flying overhead in a light aircraft. I need landmarks.”

“Hah, I was right,” claimed Melanie, hunched over her phone. “The main police station is on the corner of Tower and High Streets.”

“So what's down in Bag End Road?” asked Monty, leaning over to peer at Melanie's phone.

“Umm, oh that's the police as well,” she said after a moment of scrolling.

“So which one do you think Molly'll be at?” I asked.

“Just a sec,” said Melanie. “Oh, look Dad, that one in Bag End Road is the Transport Division and Workshops. It's right next to the wine place.”

“She's right,” said Monty. “The one in the High Street must be the main police station. I'd think the dog would be there rather than the Transport place.”

“OK,” I said. “I'll try there first. If I can't find her I'll try the other place. How do I get there?”

“Umm, it's a bit awkward,” said Melanie. “Do you want to take my phone?”

“I can't carry it,” I said. “I can't ask directions either.”

“Pretend you're flying,” said Sam.

“Oh, that's easy then,” said Melanie. “Just follow the M3 until you get to Winchester then look for the cathedral which'll be obvious from the air. Then follow the High Street west to Tower Street. The police station's on the corner.”

“How will I know which is the High Street?” I asked.

“Umm, well it runs parallel to the long part of the cathedral,” she said, frowning at her phone. “It looks like it's the second street this side of the cathedral so when you've found that just fly along it until you see the police station.”

“Well that seems easy enough,” I said.

I took off my shoes and laid them neatly beside the blanket then lay down and arranged the pillow comfortably.

“Do we all hold hands and chant or something?” asked Monty.

“You can if you want,” I said, “but there's no need. From your point of view I'll just fall asleep.”

“How will we know when you're back?” asked Sam, a trifle anxiously since she'd just realised I was leaving her as well.

“I'll wake up,” I said. “Wish me luck.”

“What for?” she said urgently. “Is it dangerous?”

“Not at all,” I said, patting the pillow again. “I meant luck in finding Molly.”

“Ohh,” she said. “Good luck!”

“Thanks,” I said. “See you later.”

I closed my eyes and clasped my hands on my chest because it was more comfortable that way. I muttered the relevant incantation under my breath then got up again. Sam, Monty and Melanie were staring with rapt attention at my inert body on the blanket.

“They'll soon get bored with that,” I thought and floated upwards.

When I say I floated upwards I don't mean my body moved. The reality of astral flying isn't anything like in the movies where a ghostly image of me gets up from the body lying on the floor – that's just for cinematic effect. In reality it's only my perspective that moves as there's no substance to it. I see things as though I'm moving but there's no physical body dragging around after me so I can easily move in all three spatial dimensions and not be inhibited by irritating things like walls and ceilings.

I floated up quite a way above the Hampshire countryside although I couldn't go too high as the thick clouds were low. It was probably going to rain soon, not that I would get wet as I wasn't actually there. I hung for a few moments, just below the bottom wisps of a cloud, while I rotated to orientate myself. The M3 was fairly obvious as it was the only major road for a long way and stretched as far as I could see in either direction. I had to think for a moment to remember whether the taxi had turned left after coming off the motorway to get to Martyr Worthy or right. I seemed to remember it was to the right which meant I had to go left to follow the M3 back to Winchester. Fortunately there was a big sign after a few moments saying Winchester was only five miles so I relaxed and drifted a little higher, looking for the cathedral.

When I'd last been to Winchester the cathedral was a huge edifice that dominated the handful of small wooden buildings of the town which, of course, was the whole point of building them so big. The intent was to show the power of The Church and raise awe and reverence in the people. This time, however, the cathedral was dominated by the sprawling metropolis of the city which engulfed the cathedral and made it look relatively insignificant.

Still, the High Street was easy to find and I dropped down to a few feet above a delivery truck so I could read the side street names which turned out to be unnecessary as the police station was very conspicuous. It was a three story building with big glass arches over the windows on the top story and white pillars with POLICE written on them holding sections of the middle story that jutted out over the pavement off the ground. No doubt it had been state of the art architecture when it had been built but now it looked a little seedy and run down. The windows needed washing too.

I rose up and drifted in through the large bay window on the top floor where the two roads met. It was a large office, comfortably furnished and a middle aged man in a smart uniform looked up at me. He had close cropped hair and was definitely thinning on top

"Ahh, there you are," he said and picked up a file on his large but fairly empty desk.

Confused, I jerked back, metaphorically speaking, and passed through a solidly built woman with iron grey hair almost as short as his, although she wasn't balding. She, too, wore a smart uniform and carried a laptop computer. She looked harassed.

"You wanted to see me, Chief Constable?" she said, standing solidly in the doorway.

"Yes," said the Chief Constable. "I'm not too happy with these figures for the next quarter's financial projections for the County."

I wasn't interested in their conversation so I moved away, past the Chief Constable's secretary who was busily pounding away on a keyboard, and into the corridor. There was something about the quality of the carpeting, the colour of the paint and the quietness that suggested this story was almost certainly administrative. Criminals, riff raff and captured canines would never get this high up. I drifted in and out of a couple of rooms just to confirm that they were offices and decided not to bother with the rest. I let the floor swallow me up and emerged into what was obviously the canteen. There were lots of tables and chairs and a long servery with food and steaming urns. Some of the tables were empty, some had only one or two people sitting at them. At one end two tables were pushed together and half a dozen people sat around them, their heads bent over pieces of paper.

"Must be a football pools syndicate," I thought as I glanced at the papers going past. "Is this what we pay our taxes for?"

Beyond the canteen were a lot more offices, all smaller than those on the floor above. Most, in fact, were decidedly cramped and had two or sometimes three desks squeezed in and lots of filing cabinets. People milled around in the corridor and the décor was a little more downmarket. Still, not the sort of place where a dog would be held.

I found Molly on the ground floor. She was in a small room lined with cages of various sizes. She was in a small cage on one side, huddled in a corner and staring worriedly at a large pit bull type dog opposite her in a large cage. The pit bull was leisurely chewing its way through the iron grill of its cage and ignoring the other dogs in various cages although it kept glancing over at Molly in a way that suggested it felt

it was time for a snack. Three of the other four dogs in canine prison lay dejectedly on the floors of their cages and the fourth paced as best it could and kept up a running commentary of short snappy yapping.

“Awesome,” I muttered to myself. “At least I know where she is now.”

I drifted across the top of Molly's cage and she looked up as if sensing something.

“There's a good girl,” I said encouragingly even though she couldn't hear me. “We'll get you out of here soon.”

She gave a little yap as though she had heard me then turned her gaze back to the pit bull.

“OK,” I thought. “She's here. Where is here, exactly?”

There were no windows and only one door so I went through and found I was in a corridor. It had cheap vinyl on the floor and the walls were dull and dingy beige. Clearly I was now in the operating heart of the police station. Just beyond the room with the cages was an iron grille blocking the corridor. Beyond that were a number of rooms on one side with signs saying 'Interview Room 1', 'Interview Room 2' and so on while the single door on the other side said simply 'Despatch'. Out of curiosity I went through the wall and found myself in some sort of call centre with at least fifteen people sitting in front of computer screens and talking into microphones. Clearly this corridor wasn't going to be particularly useful in staging a breakout so I went back through the grille again.

Beside Molly's room was a long room also filled with cages but these were big enough to hold people although only three people were inside the cages. They didn't look like desperate criminals, in fact one looked like a solicitor or an accountant and he was sitting on a hard looking bench wringing his hands and muttering. The other two were lying on their benches, staring at the ceiling. On the other side of the corridor were a pair of swinging doors which led into the main reception area which had a long counter where three police were talking to members of the public while several others sat in plastic chairs waiting their turns. Beyond them were glass sliding doors that

leads to the street outside.

* * *

Monty was snoring softly in his armchair when I sat up. Melanie was nowhere to be seen and Sam was lying on the sofa reading a book.

“I’m back,” I said.

Sam started and dropped her book but Monty continued snoring.

“Nick!” she exclaimed and sat up. “Did you find her?”

“Yes,” I said. “They’ve got her in a cage in the police station.”

“Oh awesome!” she cried happily. “How are you? Did everything go all right? You’ve been gone a long time. Can I get you some coffee? Something to eat?”

“I wouldn’t mind a coffee,” I said, getting stiffly to my feet. “I’m a bit cold. Where’s Melanie?”

“She went to have a bath,” said Sam. “Was she all right?”

“Melanie or Molly?” I asked reflecting that at my age it probably wasn’t a good idea to lie on cold hard floors anymore.

“Molly of course,” said Sam. “Are they feeding her? Did she look lonely?”

“Oh, hello Nick,” said Monty, waking up. “I was just thinking about you.”

“There were some other dogs to talk to there,” I said, deciding not to tell her about the pit bull, “although I didn’t see any food bowls. Hi, Monty. Enjoy your nap?”

“I wasn’t asleep,” said Monty gruffly. “I was deep in thought.”

“Oh poor Molly,” said Sam. “Still, I’ll make you a coffee then you can

tell me how we're going to get her out of there.”

“Ahh,” I said, running my fingers through my hair. “That could be difficult.”

Chapter Fifteen

“OK,” said Sam when she returned with a coffee for me. “So what’s the plan?”

“I don’t actually have one,” I said, a little shamefaced. After all, I still cherished the illusion that Sam thought I could fix anything. “There are some difficulties here.”

“What difficulties?” she asked, sitting down.

“Well, it’s a police station for one,” I said. “There’ll be all sorts of security and, don’t forget, if anything goes wrong we won’t have a few minutes while they call the police. The place is already full of them and it’s manned twenty four hours a day.”

“I can see advantages to that,” said Monty, yawning. He leaned forward and scratched his calf. “They won’t be expecting anything and if something does happen they’ll get in each other’s way and they’ll all be confused until some senior officer takes charge which could take a while.”

“Perhaps,” I said. “The thing is, Molly’s in a cage in a locked room next to their cells and not far from the main reception area and the canteen. I can deal with the locks but getting in and out without being seen will be a problem.”

“I don’t suppose we can just go in and ask for her back, can we?” asked Sam. “You know, like a lost dog or something.”

“There was a case number on a card on her cage,” I said. “That means they’ve got a file on her so they’ll have to do some paperwork to release her and whoever is on duty will see she isn’t just a lost dog. They won’t just hand her over.”

“Oh,” said Sam in a disappointed tone. She frowned and pursed her lips in thought.

“And another thing,” I said. “Whatever we try to do is going to have to be fairly quick as we’re going to have to take a taxi to get there and

back and I don't think the taxi driver is going to be too happy loitering for hours outside a police station while we break in."

"Ah," said Sam, "I didn't think of that."

"You can use our car," said Monty. "It's a bit old but she's still reliable. I think she's fully charged."

"That's not a great idea, Monty," I said. "They're almost certain to have cameras outside so they'll see the car and come after you."

"We could park around the corner," said Sam.

"And they know we're involved already," said Monty. "After all, they did arrest Dukie here so they'll come back looking for him as a matter of routine."

"I know," I said, "and that worries me as well. Whatever happens you're going to get the backlash and the dog's name's Molly, not Dukie."

"I knew that," said Monty sharply. "Just a slip of the tongue, that's all. Anyway, we were talking about that while you were gone. Melanie thinks that if you get Dukie away all they'll be left with is unsubstantiated hearsay, regardless of how reliable the witness is. If we stick to the simple truth that you're someone I used to know from Cambridge but we know very little about you there isn't much they can do to us."

"And using your car for a breakout?" I asked. "Doesn't that make you complicit?"

"You told us you were just borrowing it to go and talk to the police," said Monty. "We didn't know you were going to break in."

I sat back and thought about it while Sam and Monty watched me. On balance he was right since this Clive Barnard chap had followed us from Cambridge so there was no question of Molly being directly associated with Monty or Melanie. If they stuck to their story there shouldn't be any repercussions but it still concerned me.

“OK,” I said, coming to a decision. “We’ll borrow your car and park around a corner and I’ll change the number plates just in case.”

“Can you do that?” he asked. “I mean, magically?”

“Easily,” I said. “Pretty basic stuff. We cover that in the first year at University.”

“I wouldn’t mind doing your course, you know,” said Monty. “Sounds fascinating. Is it expensive?”

“I’m afraid you’re a bit too old to start now, Monty,” I said. “Sorry.”

“Oh well,” he said sadly. “Sam, the car keys are hanging on a hook beside the kitchen door. Would you be a sweetie?”

“Sure,” said Sam, jumping up. “Are we going now, Nick?”

“Hold on,” I said. “We still have no idea how to get inside once we’re there.”

“I thought you said you could get past the locks,” she said.

“Yes,” I said, “but do you really think they’re going to just stand there watching me and not do anything?”

“Umm, can’t you just make yourself invisible?” asked Monty. “Isn’t that a pretty fundamental thing for sorcerers?”

“Yes and no,” I said. “It is possible but it involves bending the light reflecting off the background so it goes around me. Great if I don’t move and there’s only one person watching but it can’t be done quickly enough if I’m moving or the background is changing and impossible if several people are watching from different directions. I simply can’t bend the light in several different ways at the same time.”

“Shame,” said Monty. “Would’ve been perfect if you could.”

“But you could magic up a uniform,” said Sam, sitting back down. “Couldn’t you pretend you’re one of them?”

"I could," I said, "but the people on duty won't recognise me so I'm bound to have to sign in or something and give a good explanation of why I'm there which they'll check. I could change my appearance to look like one of the the cops based there but I don't know what any of them look like."

"Couldn't we hang around until one comes out then you could go in as him?" asked Sam.

"They'd probably want to know why I went back," I said, "and what if that person has to go back in to get something? It would be awkward if we bumped into each other or a friend of his started talking to me."

"OK, maybe this isn't going to be as easy as I thought," said Sam and started winding the end of a lock of hair around her finger as she usually did when deep in thought.

"Didn't you say the cells were next to where Molly is being held?" asked Monty.

"Yes," I said. "The dog room is right next to the cells in fact."

"There you go then," he said. "Get yourself arrested then when you're put in the cell you can go and get the dog."

"Now that's a thought," I said and thought about it. "What would I have to do to get put in a cell straight away? I wouldn't want just a warning or be sent a summons in a few weeks. It'd have to be something they'd arrest me for straight away."

"I don't know," he said. "Why don't you Google it?"

"If they check internet access from this house that would make you complicit," I said.

"And it'd probably only be something that poses an immediate threat," said Sam, "like attacking someone outside the police station. I wouldn't want you to hurt anyone."

"And there's a chance they'll fight back and hurt me," I said drily,

“unless I pick on an old woman or a child.”

“I suppose we could stage a bit of domestic violence,” said Sam sounding rather dubious. “You could pretend to hit me or something.”

“It would have to be pretty realistic,” I said. “I don't expect they'd put me in the cells unless you're actually bleeding and I'm not going to do that.”

“No, it's probably not feasible,” said Sam with a touch of relief in her voice. “And anyway, if you go walking out of your cell all the others will want to go with you which could make things worse. Oh, I know! Why don't you pose as an RSPCA inspector come to do a surprise inspection of their facilities for caring for animals while in their care?”

“That's an idea,” I said, “but do the RSPCA do surprise inspections on police stations?”

“Perhaps in response to a complaint?” said Monty.

“Wouldn't the complaint be handled internally by the police?” asked Sam. “I doubt they'd call in the RSPCA.”

“And they probably don't have any jurisdiction on police stations,” I said. “Like army bases. Not even the police can enter an army base without authority from the base commander.”

“Bugger,” said Sam. “There has to be a way for someone who's not a policeman to go inside a police station without authorisation. What about an electrician?”

“There'd need to be a problem and an authorisation for someone like that,” I said. “After all, an electrician could go in to fix a light switch or something and turn off their entire security system. I'm sure they'd only allow in approved electricians.”

“What about setting off the fire alarm?” asked Monty. “That way everyone would run out of the building and you could slip in unnoticed in the confusion.”

“They won't have a fire alarm button in any of the public areas,” I said. “Some fool would set it off just for fun.”

“OK, phone in a bomb threat,” said Sam. “That should do it.”

“It might,” I said, “but don't the police have people who know how to find and disable bombs?”

“Oh, do they?” she asked. “I don't know. Isn't that the army?”

“Well, aren't the police the people you call if there is a bomb threat?” I asked.

“I suppose,” said Sam tetchily.

“Oh, hello, you're back,” said Melanie, walking in. She looked freshly washed and relaxed and I could smell her bath salts across the room. “How did it go?”

“I found Molly,” I said. “Monty said your car's fully charged and that we can borrow it?”

“Yes and of course,” said Melanie, looking faintly puzzled. “Are you going to get Molly back?”

“Yes,” I said, standing up. “Sam, would you get the keys?”

“Are we going now?” she asked, jumping up as well. “Have you thought of something?”

“Yes,” I said with a grin. “I've had an idea and you're going to love it!”

* * *

“So let me get this straight,” said Sam as we walked to the police station from where we'd parked the car. “You go in and loiter near the door to the back and after a minute or so I go in and start collecting for charity from whoever's in there then ask if I can go and collect from the people in the back offices?”

“Spot on,” I said.

“What if they won't let me?” she asked, looking dubious.

“It doesn't really matter,” I said. “Ask for the Chief Constable's permission or something. The important thing is that you attract the duty officers' attention while I slip in, get Molly and slip back out again. In fact it would be better if you don't go in the back but if you do, collect whatever you can, thank everyone and get back to the car as quick as you can. The main thing is to distract the duty officers until I'm out with Molly. Give me her leash.”

“You don't think anyone will notice you walking out from the back with a dog?” she asked as we paused outside the police station to bolster our nerves.

“Not if you're enough of a distraction,” I said, “which you should be. Keep an eye open for us though. Molly may get frightened by a six foot teddy bear and you'll need to calm her if she is.”

“Yes, I'm not too happy about the outfit,” said Sam, looking up and down the street while tapping her foot nervously on the kerb. “What if I get stuck in the doorway or something?”

“Even better,” I said with a grin to hide my own nervousness. University life doesn't prepare you for raids on police stations. “Make a lot of fuss and it'll be even more of a distraction. Are you ready?”

She took a deep breath, held it then let it out in a big whoosh.

“I suppose so,” she said in a small voice and shrugged.

“Be loud, be bold,” I said and checked to see if anyone was watching. There might have been someone looking out of a window from the Council Offices but I couldn't worry about that. I muttered an incantation and flicked my fingers at Sam.

She staggered under the sudden weight of the costume then started clawing around her face with her teddy bear paws.

“I can't see,” she said loudly. “I can't see!”

“Ooops, sorry,” I said and created some eye holes for her to look through. “How's that?”

“Better,” she said, awkwardly trying to lift one arm. “What's that in my hand? I can't see down that far.”

“Your collecting tin,” I said. “OK, count to sixty then make an entrance.”

“That bloody dog had better appreciate this,” said Sam.

A car went past and she waved experimentally at it. The driver hooted.

“You can explain it to her later,” I said. “I'm going in, OK?”

“OK,” she said, “but be quick. I don't think I can be a distraction for long.”

“Oh, I don't know,” I said with a laugh. “It's a shame I didn't bring a camera.”

“Go,” she said. “Let's get this damned charade over with.”

“Love you,” I said, giving her big hairy orange face a kiss. “It'll all be over in five minutes.”

I went up to the sliding doors of the police station and they parted before me like the Red Sea before Moses, not that that was an apt analogy. There were half a dozen or so people sitting on the chairs waiting, including a young woman with a toddler on her knees and an elderly couple with a small brown terrier sitting on the floor between them. A scrawny scruffy male of indeterminate age with tattoos up his neck was at one of the counters and a small, neat man in a grey uniform with an embroidered patch on his shoulder saying SANE in pale blue letters was at the middle counter. I went and stood in front of the door to the back which was beside the last counter. Usefully the counter was unattended which meant no one was close by. It had an

electronic keypad which wouldn't be a problem as the lock itself would be a simple mechanical one. The keypad was merely an electronic key.

“You effing joking, mate?” exclaimed the scruffy man suddenly. “What do you mean, I don't qualify for a bleeding gun licence?” He thumped his fist on the counter and the security glass quivered.

The policeman just looked at him in that insolent-polite way the police have then calmly got up and went to a filing cabinet against the back wall behind the counters. He pulled open a drawer and rummaged through it before pulling out a single sheet of paper.

“Here's a list of the criteria,” he said, fairly loudly as if to show he wasn't intimidated by the tattooed man. “You don't meet this one, this one, this one, this one or that one.” He put crosses beside each failed criterion as he spoke. That done he slid it under the glass for the man to look at.

Just then the doors whooshed open and I expected to see Sam but instead it was a large lady in a tight leather skirt with stained leggings underneath and a battered leather waistcoat. She had heavily tattooed arms and a thin greasy ponytail. She looked around then went over to the man arguing about the gun licence and grabbed his backside hard.

“Effing can't 'ave one, luv,” he said without flinching. “Bleeding police state!” and he spat on the floor before turning to look at the woman. He must have seen through the glass doors as he added “What the eff is that when it's at home?” loudly and stared.

The doors whooshed again and Sam came in, rather jauntily, rattling her collecting tin like a professional.

“She's collecting for charity,” said the woman around her chewing gum.

“Children In Need,” called out Sam. “Children In Need! Please give generously!”

“She's got a couple of brats you can 'ave,” called the scruffy man, jerking his thumb at the woman beside him, “ain't ya, Shaz,” and she

swore and belted him hard with a backhander.

The toddler on the young woman's lap stared at the giant teddy bear, wide eyed in fright then started crying just as the little terrier launched itself at the teddy bear. The elderly lady let go of its leash in surprise and it hurtled across the floor and sank its teeth into the teddy bear's leg, growling ferociously, every fibre of its little body rigid with aggressive self-righteousness.

“Shit!” shouted the teddy bear and started to dance around the floor trying to shake the terrier off.

The scruffy man started laughing, the toddler added loud howls of terror to its tears and the elderly man tried ineffectually to pull the terrier off the teddy bear. I chose that moment to surreptitiously adjust the tumblers inside the lock and push on the door. It opened just as the policeman dealing with the gun licence application decided to get involved and everyone's attention was on the teddy bear. The door closed behind me with a faint click that was lost in the pandemonium the other side.

There was no one in the corridor so I quickly walked down to the door to the small room where the dogs were housed. It, too, was locked, but that was no problem. I opened the door and slipped inside. It was much as it had been when I was there earlier except that the pit bull had chewed through one of the iron bars on its cage and was engrossed in chewing on another one. Molly looked up, saw me and started yapping excitedly and throwing herself against the front of her cage, her tail and over-long ears flapping madly.

“Hello, Molly,” I said, going over. “Time to go home, OK.”

She renewed her efforts to claw her way through the front of the cage and I put my fingers through the bars to try to calm her. It would have been better if Sam had come in to explain about being quiet but she'd never have got through the doors.

“Quiet now,” I said, stroking her muzzle with one finger. “Quiet now, let me get this cage open.”

I was just about to slide the simple bolt across when I heard voices outside. I froze and waited for them to pass but they didn't. Instead I heard a voice say, quite clearly, "in here" then the sound of a key in the lock.

"Damn!" I muttered. I flung myself into a corner and made myself look like a broom.

Chapter Sixteen

The door opened and a policeman walked in holding a beige manilla folder. Close behind was the grey man from the Reception area carrying a cheap looking animal carry cage. The pit bull stopped chewing for a few moments to assess the threat level then resumed chewing through the bars.

"It's this one," said the cop, pointing his pen at Molly.

"One King Charles spaniel, tan and white," said the grey man, checking his phone. "Looks right to me. Seems a waste of such a cute dog though."

"Ours is not to reason why," said the cop, putting his folder on top of Molly's cage. "Right, let's get the mutt out."

He open Molly's cage and she cowered against the back, snarling timidly. The cop laughed and reached in to haul her out bodily by the scruff of her neck.

"This one's no trouble," he said, stuffing her inside the grey man's carrier. "Not like that bugger there. He'll take your arm off soon as look at you. Look what the bastard's doing to the bars." He jerked his thumb at the pit bull which looked at him contemptuously and growled a warning deep in its throat. "He'd bite through that broom handle without even noticing it. Wanna see?"

"Please say no," I pleaded silently as I felt his hand around my middle.

"Nah," said the grey man indifferently, flicking the catches on the front of the carrier so Molly couldn't get out. She whined and scratched at the wire. "I've seen 'em before."

"Right then, that's that," said the cop, letting go of me. "I'll just note in the file this dog's been euthanised and get a signature, OK."

"Oh no," I thought in dismay. "Euthanised?"

The policeman noted something in his file and got the grey man to

sign it then they both walked out of the room, letting the door lock itself behind them. I waited three or four seconds then returned to my normal self. Startled, the pit bull jumped up and started barking at me.

“Shhh,” I said and it hurled itself at the bars in a frenzy of anger and hatred.

Fortunately most of the bars were still intact so I hurried to the door and put my ear against it. I couldn't hear a thing because of the pit bull's barking in that small room so I decided to chance it and opened the door a little. To my relief there was no one in the corridor. I marched quickly to the door to Reception then paused for a moment to gather myself before opening the door and stepping through. The policeman nearest the door looked up then frowned when he didn't recognise me.

“Ahh, there's that charity teddy bear,” I said loudly as though I'd come to find it. “Excellent. Carry on Sergeant.”

“Who are you?” he demanded.

“I'm the new public relations officer for the Chief Constable,” I said crisply, centuries of lecturing at the University making me sound authoritative. “I need the teddy bear outside for a photo opportunity. The press are waiting.”

He stared at me suspiciously as I grabbed Sam by the arm and pushed her through the sliding doors then he reached for his phone.

“What's the matter?” demanded Sam crossly. “Where's Molly?”

“Can you see a man dressed in grey?” I said urgently, looking up and down the street. “Ahh, there he is, getting into that little white van. Come on. Quickly.”

I started dragging her along the road towards where we'd parked.

“What's going on?” exclaimed Sam, planting her sturdy teddy bear feet on the pavement.

“Molly’s in the back of that van,” I replied, trying to drag her along. “He’s taking her to be euthanised!”

“What?” she cried in a partial scream. “Euthanised? You mean killed?”

“Yes, come on, hurry, we’ve got to follow him!” I said forcefully. “Look, he’s about to drive off!”

“Let go of me!” shouted Sam angrily. She wrenched her arm back and I let go in fright. I knew from experience that an angry Sam was a force to be reckoned with. “You get the car and I’ll delay him. Hurry!”

Her big orange teddy bear smile did nothing to alleviate the emotion in her voice so I hurried off to get the car. As I turned the corner I saw that the man was trying to get his van out of the parking bay but was blocked by a large teddy bear waving a collecting tin at him.

“Go Sam,” I muttered and hurried to the car. There was a parking ticket under the windscreen wiper which I ignored. I slammed the gear lever into drive and accelerated out in front of another car. It swerved but narrowly missed me and its blaring horn faded as I went round the corner. The van was just turning left into the High Street and Sam was waddling towards me as fast as she could go.

“Get this bloody outfit off me!” she shouted as I pulled up beside her.

“Oh, sorry,” I said and reversed the spell. She climbed in and slammed the door.

“Well? What are you waiting for?” she demanded. “Follow him!”

Fortunately the van was moving fairly sedately so I let the two cars between us and the van stay there rather than try to overtake which would have been awkward in the High Street.

“When he stops we’ll have to try and get Molly out somehow,” I said, keeping a close eye on the van.

“How?” she asked.

"I don't know," I said. "It will depend on the circumstances, I suppose. We'll just have to improvise."

I turned on the windscreen wipers as it was starting to rain and the parking ticket scraped across the windscreen.

"What's that?" she asked.

"We got a parking ticket," I said, winding down the window so I could grab it. I handed it to her and she tossed it onto the back seat without looking. Her face was tight and set with worry about Molly.

"Why would they put her down?" she asked plaintively. "She's such a cute little dog. She wouldn't hurt a fly."

"I don't know," I said. "And the funny thing is how quickly they're doing it. They haven't had time to do any investigating about her alleged anti-empirical activities. It's only been a few hours since they came and took her away."

Sam didn't answer, she just stared fixedly at the van ahead.

"Oh, he's turning left," she said suddenly. "Don't lose him."

"That's strange," I said thoughtfully, turning left as well.

"What's strange?" she said.

"He turned left," I said. "There's only the motorway this way. Why's he joining the motorway?"

"How would I know?" said Sam. "Maybe if you catch up with him you can force him off onto the shoulder?"

"That's asking for trouble," I said, "especially in all this rain. Best we just keep following until he stops."

"I suppose," she said. "Did you see Molly? Was she all right?"

"She was fine," I said. "I was just about to get her out of the cage

when they came and took her away.”

“Poor little thing,” said Sam. “I bet they didn't feed her either.”

It was on the tip of my tongue to say they wouldn't see any point when they were about to kill her but swallowed it. Sam wouldn't appreciate any remarks like that.

* * *

“There's something here that doesn't make any sense,” I said when the van took the turning off onto the M27 on the outskirts of Southampton. I flicked on the headlights as it was starting to get dark as well.

“What's that?” asked Sam.

“I don't know why they decided to have Molly put down,” I said, “but given that they did, why not do it in the police station or get a local vet to do it? After all, it's just a simple injection. Why have someone drive all this way to collect her and take her back to wherever we're going just to put her down? It makes no sense to me.”

“I'm just glad they didn't do it at the police station,” said Sam. “It would have been dreadful if we'd got there and found they'd already done it.”

“Well, yes,” I said. “Hey, he's coming off into the service station. With a bit of luck he's stopping to use the toilets or get something to eat. This may be our opportunity.”

“I hope so,” said Sam fervently. “She must be scared to death.”

“Ahh, McDonald's,” I said, “and he's ... not going into the drive-through. Excellent. Oh look, he's parking.”

The car park was fairly crowded and the only other parking spot was some way away. I had to get out of the car to see over the roofs of several other cars. Sam stood in the rain as well watching as the grey man scurried into McDonald's.

“Now’s our chance,” I said. “You wait here while I get Molly.”

“No way,” said Sam. “I’m coming with you.”

“OK then,” I said and we walked over to the van.

“Any sign of him?” I asked.

“None,” said Sam.

I unlocked the back door of the van and swung it open. Molly whimpered in alarm.

“It’s all right, Mol,” I said, opening the front of the carry cage. “We’re here now. Good girl.”

I lifted her out and Sam snatched her off me and hugged Molly while Molly licked Sam’s face, her tail nearly coming off in her excitement.

“Take her back to the car,” I said. “I’ll finish up here.”

“OK,” said Sam and the two of them hurried back to the car across the rainswept car park, joyously reunited.

I re-locked the carry cage, reflecting with amusement the confusion the driver would have when he discovered Molly was gone, then closed the back door of the van. Because it was raining there was no one hanging around in the car park so I went over to the sad looking little flower bed beside the restaurant and hunted for a large stone. There weren’t any but there was a half brick wedged under one of the rubbish bins. With an effort I dislodged it and went back to the van and used the half brick to smash its passenger side tail light. That done I tossed the brick into the flower bed then laid my hand on the top of the back door for a moment before hurrying back to the car.

“What did you do that for?” asked Sam when I got in. Molly was sitting on Sam’s lap with Sam’s arms clasped tightly round her.

I wiped the rain off my face then muttered a useful little phrase which dried all three of us.

“There is something very odd about this whole business,” I said. “I don't know how much further that van has to go but if we're almost there then he probably wouldn't stop here. The simple fact he's stopped suggests there's still some way to go but why would anyone do such a long round trip just to pick up a dog that's going to be euthanised?”

“I couldn't care less,” said Sam. “I just want to go home. Well, back to Monty and Melanie's at least. Why smash his tail light?”

“Ahh, I read that in a book once,” I said. “The easiest way to follow a vehicle at night, especially in the rain, is to smash a tail light. It makes the vehicle easier to follow.”

“Oh joy,” said Sam sarcastically. “So we're going to follow him even though we've got Molly back?”

“I'm very curious,” I said. “There's something going on here and I want to know what it is.”

“Even though it might get us into trouble?” she asked.

“We won't get into trouble,” I said confidently. “Once I know where he's going we'll go back and get our things and the money and give Monty the car back. Then we'll disappear for a while. It'll be fine.”

“If you say so,” said Sam, not sounding as confident as I had. “Can't we at least get something to eat while we're here? I'm famished and Molly must be too.”

“I suppose we could,” I said. “Although we'll go through the drive-through so we can keep an eye on the van.”

Clearly the grey man was in no rush as he only reappeared as we were cruising round the car park looking for a parking spot after getting our burgers and coffee. He drove off and I followed, the missing tail light making it very easy.

“Just a minute,” said Sam after she'd fed a burger to Molly. “Why did you smash the tail light? Couldn't you have just put one of your magic

markers on the van?”

“I did that as well,” I said, “just in case, but I've always wanted to know if that book was right. It was a novel after all. This just seemed a perfect opportunity.”

“It's not like you to read cheap trash,” said Sam, starting on her fries.

“What makes you think it was cheap trash?” I asked.

“Well, it must have been one of those dreadful American private eye things,” said Sam.

“Actually it was,” I said, “but it wasn't one of the usual ones. It was about a family who are all private investigators and the heroine's father smashes her tail light so he can follow her and find out who she's dating. It was quite funny actually. I picked it up in a jumble sale in Cambridge a few years ago.”

“So who was she dating?” asked Sam, disinterestedly.

“A lawyer,” I said. “Did you see what that sign said?”

“It's the turn off to Cadnam, wherever that is” said Sam. “Why?”

“He's taking it,” I said. “Looks like we're nearly there. I wonder what's in Cadnam?”

As it turned out there was nothing of interest in Cadnam. The van drove straight through the town and continued on the A31 towards Lyndhurst.

“Can't we go home yet?” whinged Sam. “Maybe he knows we're following him and he's just going to drive around for hours to piss us off.”

“Let's give it another ten minutes,” I suggested. “We're in the heart of Hampshire now and on minor roads in the New Forest so I'm guessing we'll be arriving somewhere soon.”

“OK, ten more minutes,” said Sam, “then I’m getting out and walking back.”

“Ha ha,” I said.

Nine minutes later we’d passed out the other side of Lyndhurst and I was sorely tempted to turn around as well. Maybe he was just driving around aimlessly.

“Why are you stopping?” asked Sam.

“I’m not,” I said turning off the headlights, “but he’s turned off up ahead and there’s no other traffic around. I’m going to let him get a little further ahead and I’ve turned off the lights so he can’t see us. He’ll think we’ve stayed on the main road.”

“You really let that book get into your blood, didn’t you, Mr Private Investigator,” said Sam, not bothering to hide the low level sarcasm in her voice.

“You’ve got to admit this is a strange place to bring a dog to be euthanised,” I said, turning into the unmarked narrow lane between the trees. It was difficult to drive in the dark with no lights but the rain had stopped and I could see the single tail light up ahead. “In the middle of a forest, miles from anywhere?”

“Maybe he’s a dog lover and actually saves them,” said Sam. “Maybe this is where he runs his sanctuary for the condemned animals he’s saved.”

“Could be,” I said, “but aren’t you even the least bit curious?”

“Not the least bit,” she said. “I’ve got Molly back and that’s all that matters to me.”

We rounded a corner and a hundred yards or so ahead was the van, pulling up beside a small lit up building.

“Ohh shit!” I exclaimed and slammed on the brakes. “We’ve arrived.”

“Where?” asked Sam, looking up.

“I don't know,” I said, reversing back around the bend, “but it looks very official.”

“Wasn't it just a house?” asked Sam. “I wasn't really looking.”

I veered off the road as far as I could and stopped.

“No,” I said. “It looked to be a compound with wire fencing and a guard house. I wonder if it's a military base?”

“Why would he be taking Molly to a military base?” asked Sam.

“I don't know,” I said. “She's not the sort of dog used for guard duty or security. It's a puzzle.”

“You don't think it's a place where they experiment on animals, do you?” asked Sam.

“Could be,” I said, “although animals for experimentation are bred for that purpose so they have perfect genetics and health for whatever the experiment is all about. Labs don't want wild animals or pets because they could be contaminated with anything which may affect the results of the experiments. The Biology and Medicine departments at the University use quite a few.”

“Don't get me started on experimenting on animals,” said Sam, the tone of her voice in the darkness suggesting she was screwing up her face. “I find it disgusting.”

“It's mostly flies and rats,” I said, opening the car door. “No one experiments on King Charles spaniels. They're too expensive.”

“Where are you going?” she asked, grabbing my arm.

“I thought I saw a sign beside the guard house,” I said. “I was just going to have a look and see what it said.”

“What for?” asked Sam. “Let's just get out of here. It's scary.”

“I’ll only be a couple of minutes,” I said. “I’ll be careful.”

I was out before she had a chance to start protesting in earnest and I pushed the door closed but not shut.

Stumbling a little in the darkness I made my way to the bend and peered around. The scene was much as I thought it had been in my first impression although beyond the guard house were the outlines of other buildings with lights coming through windows. The van was nowhere in sight so it had probably been allowed inside and had parked somewhere. I chuckled to myself at the thought of the driver getting the carry case out only to find it securely closed but empty. Maliciously I hoped he’d have a lot of explaining to do for failing to carry out such a simple task. The sign was not, as I had thought, fixed to the side of the guard house. It was on a post some twenty or thirty yards from the fencing which made it a little easier.

S A N E Systems

Re-Education Centre
and Research Facility

**STRICTLY NO ADMITTANCE
WITHOUT AUTHORISATION**

Chapter Seventeen

The most delightful smell of frying bacon woke me and I rolled over to find Sam wasn't in bed. Startled I sat up and looked around. Molly wasn't on the bed either, nor was she asleep in the patch of sunshine from the window. I wondered if I should be alarmed and decided that if anything had happened while I was asleep someone would have woken me. Reassured I got out of bed and went over to the window. All the heavy clouds and rain had gone and Monty's back garden and the fields beyond looked lush and freshly washed. All sparkly and new, as one old song once put it.

I splashed some water on my face in the alcove and dried in the conventional way with the once fluffy but still pink towel Melanie had provided. Choosing what to wear was easy. Sam had only packed me one spare suit and it was identical to the one I'd been wearing the day before as, indeed, were my shirts and socks. Living, as I had, for several centuries, I'd had to endure more changes in fashions than most people and that experience had left me with approximately zero interest in clothes. After suffering through ruffs round my neck and overly tight stockings a couple of centuries previously I'd settled on a policy of buying several identical sets of the most comfortable clothing available in whatever the current fashion was for men in academic circles and gave the matter no other thought. Whenever possible I chose black as that colour tended not to show stains but Sam had persuaded me, via threats of refusing to marry someone who looked like the Grim Reaper, to change to a dark dove grey colour with pale blue shirts. Not that I ever had looked like the Grim Reaper, except for that period when heavy hooded cloaks were all the rage, but Sam had a dislike of black and a tendency to colourful exaggeration. Doubtless at some point in her impressionable youth she'd seen a representation of the Grim Reaper dressed entirely in black in a cartoon or a children's book and had been upset by it. Having once met the spirit in question personally I knew that it didn't wear anything and its substance was more a smokey fawn-violet but Sam, unreasonably I felt, didn't want to know.

So, the long and the short of it was that I put on my spare dove grey suit and pale blue shirt without a thought beyond trying to remember the rest of the song that referred to things being all sparkly and new,

without success. I picked yesterday's clothes off the chair, put them on a hanger and gave them that special shake I have which leaves them all sparkly and new as well and hung the hanger from the curtain rail. Sam's clothes I didn't touch as she prefers to wash them in the conventional way according to the instructions on the labels. I once tried to explain that her way actually damaged the clothes whereas mine didn't but she wasn't interested. It was several days before I realised that washing clothes to damage them was the whole point as it provided a perfectly reasonable excuse to buy new clothes. I dare say there are some who would argue I should have learnt that from previous relationships but all my previous relationships had been before washing clothes became the norm, pre-shrunk cloth being a relatively modern invention.

The smell of bacon had faded by the time I went downstairs and into the dining room. It was deserted so I went into kitchen and found Sam and Melanie sitting on stools chatting over cups of tea. The smell of bacon still lingered there, as did three dirty dishes.

“Good morning,” I said cheerfully and bent to give Sam a kiss.

“Hiya, handsome,” she said. “Did you sleep well?”

“Like a baby,” I said. “I cried all night and wet the bed.”

“Ha ha,” said Sam, not even cracking a smile as she's heard all my sad attempts at humour before. “He thinks he's funny,” she added for Melanie's benefit when she saw her face. Doubtless Melanie, who showed every sign of not having a well developed sense of humour, was worrying about having to change the sheets or something. “It's sweet that he tries though.”

“Oh,” said Melanie, looking blank. She took another mouthful of tea thoughtfully.

“Is there any bacon left?” I asked.

“Sure,” said Sam. “There's half a packet in the fridge. Help yourself.”

“Oh,” I said, feeling my disappointment acutely. Surely it wouldn't

have been too difficult to fry a couple of extra rashers?

“Why did you say that?” asked Melanie, looking faintly puzzled.

“I was matching his humour with mine,” said Sam drily, “although I think mine worked better than his. Did you see his face?”

“Hmm,” said Melanie. “We did you some bacon and eggs as well, Nick. It's in the microwave, staying warm. Sam said you'd be down as soon as you smelt it.”

“And your toast is in the toaster,” said Sam. “It should be cold and crispy enough for you by now. Do you want me to butter it or do you think you can manage that all by yourself?”

“Do you think I'm ready for that, yet?” I asked, going over to the microwave. Sure enough there was a plate of fried bacon with two eggs, fried on both sides so the yolks were cooked. “After all I've only been buttering toast since, well for a long time really. I'm sure I'll get the hang of it soon.”

“I'll do it,” said Melanie, looking baffled. “Do you want jam or anything? We haven't got any Marmite, I'm afraid. We're out.”

“Just butter will be fine,” I said, sitting down at the table. “Thank you.”

Sam pushed over a knife and fork and I tucked in. Moments later some buttered toast appeared on a small side plate with a blue pattern on it, closely followed by a large mug of coffee.

“This is delicious,” I said, pointing at the food with the knife. “You're a great cook Melanie.”

“And why do you think I didn't cook it?” asked Sam, sharply.

“Because you can't cook,” I said, staying deadpan.

“Well, there is that,” conceded Sam. “Not a skill I ever found useful.”

“But Sam did cook it,” said Melanie, still looking baffled.

“I know,” I said. “No one else sprinkles a little bit of cayenne on the eggs while they’re still runny. Sam’s a superb cook. You should try her souffles.”

“So why did you say she can’t cook?” asked Melanie. “I’m lost here.”

“It’s his way of saying he loves me,” said Sam with an annoyingly smug look on her face.

“So long as you’re happy,” said Melanie.

“So where’s Molly?” I asked when the ensuing silence seemed to be dragging a little, “and Monty, come to that.”

“He’s taken her out into the garden,” said Sam. “She needed a bit of a run around.”

“OK,” I said, polishing off the last of the bacon and eggs. “Have you been up long?”

“Ohh, half an hour, maybe a bit more,” she said. “I’ve, um, updated Melanie and Monty about yesterday. She picked Monty up from the police station when he was released after his re-education.”

“That’s right,” said Melanie. “I’ve never heard of this SANE place.”

“It’s probably just a coincidence,” I said, “although if Monty was sent there it would make sense to bring him back to Winchester for release. That way they can keep the place quiet.”

“So what do you think will happen now?” asked Melanie, taking my plate.

“Nothing, I would imagine,” I said, starting on my toast. “The police will have closed their file on Molly now.”

“But won’t that outfit tell them she’s gone missing?” asked Melanie.

“I doubt it,” I said. “They signed off on her and then lost her. I don't expect they'll want to broadcast that fact. Actually, since it was some sort of research facility I don't expect they'll really care much either way. They probably never wanted her in the first place.”

“Oh,” said Melanie. “So you don't think anyone will come here looking for her?”

“No,” I said. “And even if they do all you have to say is that the police took the dog away and we left soon after. Tell them we went to, ohh, I don't know, how about Haiti?”

“Haiti? Why Haiti?” asked Sam.

“Isn't that where the voodoo is?” asked Melanie.

“That's right,” I said with a grin. “That should get them excited. Maybe that Clive whatshisname will go there looking for us and leave us alone.”

“Actually I wouldn't mind going to Haiti,” said Sam. “I've always fancied going to the Caribbean.”

“Then we shall go, my love,” I said. “How about today?”

“Well that wouldn't be a good idea if Melanie's going to tell the police we've gone to Haiti, would it,” said Sam.

“OK,” I said. “Melanie, if anyone asks, tell them we've gone to Australia.”

“OK,” said Melanie.

“Are we really going to Haiti?” asked Sam.

“Why not?” I said. “We've got to go somewhere. It wouldn't look too good if Melanie says we've gone to Australia and we're still sitting in the lounge.”

“Obviously we're not going to stay here,” said Sam, testily. “But Haiti?”

“Where else would you like to go?” I asked.

“Well, I guess I was thinking, you know, because of Molly, maybe, since we’re so close to Southampton, we could find a ship going somewhere,” said Sam. “We can’t take a dog on a plane and it wouldn’t be a good idea to change her again.”

“Fair point,” I said. “My thinking hasn’t gone much further than Scotland or perhaps the depths of darkest Wales.”

“Except I didn’t bring my passport,” she said. “Could we go back to Cambridge first and get it? Where’s yours?”

“I don’t have one,” I said, “although that’s never been a problem. No, if they’re still interested in us they’ll check passenger lists and find out where we’ve gone anyway. It would be better to travel on false passports.”

“And you just happen to have some lying around?” asked Melanie. “What do you get up to in Cambridge?”

“Research, mostly,” I said, finishing my coffee. Somewhere in the back of the house a door slammed. “And occasionally some teaching. No, I can make a couple of passports easily enough.”

“Ohh, you mean ...” and she clicked her fingers a couple of times.

“Yes,” I said. “They’ll be good enough for any casual look although if the border people do a full on check they’ll catch us.”

“How come?” she asked.

“I can only reproduce actual things,” I said. “I can’t manipulate computer systems. So if someone checks a passport in the computer they’ll find the details don’t match. It’s actually one of the lines of research I’ve earmarked for a future post-grad thesis. As a profession we need to keep pace with new developments in technology and with the way the world is going with computerisation if we don’t keep up we’ll be obsolete.”

“And you think it can be done?” asked Sam.

“Sure,” I said. “Computers are just things after all. It's simply a matter of finding the relevant records on a hard disk somewhere and changing the magnetic coding. In fact changing the coding's the easy part. The hard part is actually finding the data to change. We need to find a reliable way to track signals travelling at high speed through wires or wirelessly and it's quite possible that the signal goes all the way round the world via the Internet from one room only to end up in the room next door. It's almost impossible to predict which path a router is going to send any particular data packet.”

“It's all Greek to me,” said Melanie, looking mystified.

“Then talk to Sam,” I said, finishing my coffee. “She speaks Greek, too.”

“So what shall we do, Nick?” asked Sam.

“Might as well go to Southampton and see if we can find a boat going somewhere,” I said. “Maybe there'll even be a freighter bound for Haiti, you never know. After all, Britain does have exports so they must go somewhere.”

“And we can take Molly?” she asked.

“Of course,” I said. “I don't imagine the ship will mind, unless the captain hates dogs. The only likely problem will be at the other end as I've heard some countries don't allow animals to enter. We can get around that anyway. Cash is widely accepted.”

“OK,” said Sam. “Let's do it!”

“Excellent,” I said. “If you'll let us borrow your car again, Melanie, we can go into Southampton this afternoon and see what we can find. Or we can take a taxi.”

“Not a lot of point,” she said. “Today's Sunday. I doubt any shipping offices will be open.”

“Sunday?” I exclaimed. “It’s only Sunday?”

“Actually she’s right,” said Sam, ticking off on her fingers. “We came here on Friday afternoon and the next day we went to the cathedral then Molly was taken. That was yesterday.”

“Oh my word,” I said in disbelief. “So much has happened these last few days I thought it was at least Wednesday. I suppose we’d better go to a hotel tonight and look for a ship tomorrow.”

“That would make sense,” said Sam, “although can I help Melanie with her shopping?”

“I’m sorry?” I said in surprise.

“She’s going into Winchester this morning to do her fortnightly shop,” said Sam. “I was going to go with her as I forgot to bring my shampoo and I could use a few other bits and pieces. If we’re going on a long sea trip then I’ll need more skin conditioner and so on as well. Melanie’ll need the car for that too.”

“OK, right,” I said. “So you’re going into town fairly soon?”

She nodded.

“Then get what you need,” I said, “and we’ll go when you get back. Could you get me some sun tan lotion? We might be going to the tropics and I burn quite easily.”

“OK,” said Sam. “Shall we go now, Melanie?”

Melanie had been looking at us in confused disbelief and jumped when addressed directly.

“Oh, umm, yes,” she said and leapt up as though happy to do something familiar. “I’ll just get my list and some bags.”

“Before you go, Melanie,” I said and took an envelope from the inside pocket of my jacket. “I’ve got a little something for you and Monty as a thank you and in part recompense for any trouble we’re causing

you.”

I slid the envelope across the table and Melanie looked at it uncertainly.

“Go on,” said Sam encouragingly. “Take it.”

Melanie picked up the envelope and opened it then gasped.

“But ...,” she said, holding out a slim wad of new £50 notes. “But I can't take all this!”

“Sure you can,” I said. “It's only £5000. I'm sure it'll come in handy.”

“But ...,” she said again, flicking through the money with her thumb, “but ... is it real?”

“Of course it's real,” I said with a laugh.

“You didn't just magic it up or something did you?” she asked, watching me intently. “We won't get arrested for passing fake money or anything, will we?”

“No, no,” I said. “It's genuine. I got it from a bank a few years ago. I like to keep a stash of ready cash for emergencies.”

“Take it,” said Sam.

“But ...,” said Melanie again.

“Take it,” said Sam again.

I wondered how much longer this lively repartee was going to continue but Sam ended it by taking the cash out of Melanie's hand and putting it back in the envelope.

“I'll just put this in this drawer,” she said, opening a drawer that looked to contain the sort of assorted junk that always seems to collect in the kitchen. Elastic bands, dead batteries, bits of wire, that sort of thing. “Come on, let's go shopping!”

Melanie let Sam take the lead and they disappeared to do whatever it is that women have to do before they go shopping. I put my toast plate beside the sink with the rest then wandered out the back door into the garden to find Monty and Molly. I couldn't find them outside so I wandered back in and found them in the lounge, watching TV. Molly was dozing on the sofa and Monty was nodding off in his chair.

“Anything good on?” I asked, sitting in one of the armchairs.

“Eh, what was that?” he asked, jerking awake.

“The TV,” I said. “Anything good on?”

“Oh just more damned fool nonsense about the referendum,” he said. “Stupid waste of time, in my opinion.”

“What referendum?” I asked. “I haven't heard of any referendum.”

“It was announced on Friday,” he said. “Damned fools want another referendum on leaving Europe.”

“But we only rejoined Europe a few years ago,” I said in surprise. “After all that mess leaving the first time why do they want another Brexit all over again? Do they think they can do it better this time?”

“Because politicians have no sense,” he said. “They're people who have no skills whatsoever and can't get a decent job so they spout nonsense in the hope of getting elected and having a pension for life. Most of them are only in it for the kickbacks anyway.”

“I have to agree,” I said with a snort. “I've said for years that everyone standing for parliament should have a background in public administration and be tested for mental illness.”

“Damned right there,” said Monty. “Where are the girls?”

“They're off out shopping,” I said. “When they come back Sam and I will be off. We're thinking of going to Australia.”

“Nice place that,” said Monty. “I was in Canberra, ohh, twenty years

ago now. Spent a couple of weeks on the Sunshine Coast as a holiday after the job was done. Great fun. Did a bit of scuba diving.”

We chatted for a while about Australia and scuba diving then we went outside with Molly again so Monty could show me his roses. He'd started growing roses before he'd gone to Australia and, up until he was convicted of anti-empirical activities at least, had won a few awards locally for them. The rain of the previous day had knocked off a few petals but there was no serious damage. We made some sandwiches for lunch and then he took me to see the spare room where he'd kept his collection of old coins. It had been broken into while he was being re-educated and the coins stolen. The police had been politely interested but hadn't actually done anything about it.

Back in the lounge the conversation lapsed as I began to wonder why Sam and Melanie were still out shopping. It had been several hours since they left.

“I wanted to ask you something about Winchester Cathedral,” I said, more to take my mind off Sam than anything.

“Oh yes?” said Monty.

“We popped in yesterday,” I said,” and I was intrigued to see a very old tomb there. The card said it was the Tomb of Aelfgar. Do you know anything about him?”

“Can't say I do,” said Monty. “He sounds Anglo-Saxon and I know Winchester used to be called Wintancaester which doesn't really help. Umm, ahh. Half a tick. I've got something that might help.”

He got up and started to browse the remnants of his book collection.

“Ah-ha, here we are,” he said, pulling out a slim A4 sized softback booklet. “History of Winchester Cathedral. This'll tell us if anything does. Whose tomb was it again?”

“Aelfgar,” I said and spelt it out while he flicked through the pages.

“Ahh, here we are,” he said and sniffed disparagingly. “Not much

about it at all. Just a paragraph. Seems no one knows who Aelfgar was but the tomb is down near the Guardian Angels Chapel, between the Vesica Monument and the Tomb of Bishop de Lucy. That means it's outside both the original Norman church which was started around 1080 and the earlier church built in the mid seventh century. There is some evidence to suggest Aelfgar lived in the late sixth century so they think Aelfgar was an early pagan Saxon chieftain. Certainly his burial predates any sort of Christian religious structure on the site although there is some evidence of earlier pagan structures going back to the second century. That's about it. Why are you interested?"

"I got the feeling there were some rather strong ley lines crossing around where his tomb is," I said. "I could have been imagining it, of course, but churches and sacred sites were often built on ley lines. You used to be interested in ley lines, didn't you?"

"Did I?" he said, frowning. "Seems a funny thing to be interested in." He winced and rubbed the back of his neck. "So you think there may be a connection between these ley lines, Aelfgar's tomb and the siting of the Cathedral?"

"I was wondering if it was a possibility," I said, "although if the tomb is outside the original church then it probably isn't much of a connection."

"Well, ley lines do move over time," said Monty. "I do know that although how I know I haven't a clue." He rubbed the back of his neck again. "Do you suppose I used to know and it's all gone?"

"Perhaps," I said. "It occurred to me that Aelfgar may have been quite a significant person if his tomb was placed at the juncture of two ley lines but, as you say, the lines may have moved since the sixth century and the tomb could have been some distance from a ley line at the time."

"More than likely," said Monty as tyres skidded on the gravel outside the house. "Hello, sounds like someone's in a hurry."

I got up to look through the window just as Melanie ran from the car to the house, leaving the car door open. A stab of ice went through me

as I realised Sam wasn't in the car.

“It's Sam!” shouted Melanie breathlessly and panic stricken as she slammed the front door open. “She's been kidnapped!”

Chapter Eighteen

I am not a man of action and neither is Monty so it was several seconds before either of us reacted. Being on my feet already I hurried out into the hall and collided with Melanie who was rushing frantically from room to room to find us but I managed to catch her and half dragged, half carried her to the nearest chair. By this stage Monty was standing up and gawping at her, wringing his hands unconsciously.

“Melanie, Melanie,” I said, trying to be soothing to calm her but more than likely only adding my agitation to hers. “Calm down! Tell me what’s happened. Where’s Sam? Is she hurt? Who was it? Where are they?”

Molly picked up on the atmosphere and started running around barking frantically at everything.

“Shall I make some tea?” asked Monty anxiously. “Tea, yes, just the ticket,” and he hurried off to the quiet safety of the kitchen.

“Be quiet Molly!” I yelled. “Shut up! I can’t hear myself think!”

Molly took not the slightest notice and jumped onto the sofa and started digging into the cushions.

“Oh Nick!” moaned Melanie, gulping in mouthfuls of air. “Some men dragged her into a van and drove off! I tried to stop them but they waved a gun at me. It was horrible, horrible!”

“Molly!” I yelled, ineffectually then I managed to pull myself together. I stood up, pointed the first and little fingers of my left hand at her and incanted a sleep spell. She gave one final bark, scratched at the cushion then subsided and went to sleep.

“That’s better,” I said and turned back to Melanie. She, too, was sound asleep.

“Oh for crying out loud,” I exclaimed irritably.

“Why’s it all gone quiet in here?” asked Monty, appearing in the doorway with the teapot in his hand.

“I put them both to sleep to calm them,” I said. “I’ll wake Melanie again when the tea’s ready.”

“Good idea,” said Monty. “Can’t think straight with all that noise, eh.” He disappeared back into the kitchen.

I realigned Melanie a little so she was sitting more comfortably then went out to the car. The door was still open and the keys were in the ignition but there was no sign of Sam or any shopping. Worriedly I took out the keys, put on the handbrake and shut the door.

Back inside, Monty was fussing over a tray of teacups so I let him pour one for Melanie then took it from him. Molly was snoring on the sofa and her feet were twitching so she was probably in the middle of an entertaining dream. I put Melanie’s tea on the arm of the chair then touched her forehead with the tips of my fingers and quietly whispered the counter spell. Her eyes fluttered and she woke up.

“Here’s some tea,” I said. “Are you feeling calmer?”

“Thanks,” she said but didn’t pick the cup up. “Oh Nick, it was dreadful.”

She seemed a lot calmer fortunately so I retreated and sat on the sofa next to Molly.

“So what happened?” I asked, anxiety gnawing away inside me.

“We did the shopping,” said Melanie. “We had it all in a trolley and Sam was pushing it back to the car for me. She suggested we went and had a coffee and a muffin or something at that cafe on the corner. You know, Dad, the one that does the vanilla slices you like.”

“Is that the one on the corner opposite the shoe shop?” asked Monty, settling back in his chair with a cup of tea.

“That’s the one,” said Melanie. “They do ever so nice cakes there

although the coffee's not the best. I don't think they heat the water enough. It always seems a little flat to me which is why we don't go there that often. Still, the cakes are delicious and someone, I forget who it was, was telling ...”

“What happened to Sam, Melanie?” I interrupted, leaning forward. Melanie was now so calm she was on the verge of going back to sleep.

“Sam? Oh yes!” exclaimed Melanie, becoming alert again. “Yes, we went round the corner into the car park then Sam cried out and said something had stung her on the back of her leg and she bent over to look then she just slumped on the ground. I tried to talk to her but she seemed to be unconscious. I thought she'd fainted or something. Was she allergic to bees or wasps, Nick?”

“No,” I said. “As far as I know she wasn't allergic to anything. What about the kidnapping?”

“I was coming to that,” said Melanie, noticing the tea. She picked up the cup and sipped it. “Two men appeared and I thought they just trying to help then one of them picked her up and started dragging her away. I tried to stop them but the other one pushed me and said something about not getting involved. I tried to hit him when they were pushing Sam into their van and he waved his gun at me then they drove off.”

“Did you recognise either of them?” I asked. “What sort of van was it?”

“No,” she said. “I've never seen them before and it was a very ordinary little van. The sort of thing they use to deliver groceries.”

“Was one of its tail lights broken?” I asked as a sudden thought hit me.

Melanie just stared at me. “You seriously think when someone's waving a gun at me and kidnapping my friend I'm going to be studying the tail lights?” she asked caustically.

“I imagine not,” I said. “Was Sam all right though? Was she still unconscious? Was she bleeding?”

“I think she was all right,” said Melanie. “I didn't see any blood or anything.”

“Did you call the police?” asked Monty.

“No,” said Melanie. “I nearly did but I was in a panic and I just had to get back and tell you, Nick, and somehow I didn't think the police would take a lot of notice. I don't think they like us much.”

“What were the men wearing?” I asked.

“How should I know?” said Melanie irritably.

“Well, were they in kaftans?” I asked, “or dresses or swimming trunks?”

“Oh, none of those,” she said, waving her hand dismissively. “I'd have noticed I'm sure. No, they were just nondescript, really. Nothing special. ”

“Bright colours?” I asked. “Greens, reds?”

“They were more just grey blurs,” said Melanie. “I don't think I even saw their faces clearly.”

“So you think they were wearing grey?” I asked. “Suits like mine?”

“No, more like overalls I think,” she said, looking me up and down. “Or perhaps shirts and trousers. No, I think they had jackets on, you know, those ones that only go to the waist.”

“And the van?” I asked. “What colour was that? Did it have anything written on the side?”

“Not that I remember,” said Melanie, frowning. “I don't remember the colour either, except it wasn't dark. It was lighter than the men.”

“White, perhaps?” I asked.

“Could have been,” she said.

“Do you know these people, Nick?” asked Monty. I noticed his hands were trembling.

“No,” I said slowly, “but the man who collected Molly from the police station yesterday was in a grey uniform and he drove an unmarked white van.”

“Could be a coincidence,” said Monty unconvincingly.

“Yes, it could be,” I said getting up and starting to pace. “What did the man say to you?”

“Which one?” she asked.

“The one with the gun,” I said. “The one who told you not to get involved.”

“I think he thought she was drunk,” said Melanie. “He said something like 'don't get involved, you're not on the piss' or something like that.”

“On the piss?” I exclaimed, pausing in my pacing to look at her. “Why would he think you were pissed?”

“I wasn't,” said Melanie. “But perhaps he thought Sam was.”

“But if they thought she was drunk and you weren't why would they stop you getting involved?” I asked, resuming my pacing. “It makes no sense.”

“Unless Melanie misheard,” said Monty. “Maybe he said something else that sounded like piss.”

“What sounds like piss?” I said, stopping walking again. “Kiss, miss?”

“Or list,” said Monty. “That would make more sense. Sam was on a list and Melanie wasn't so she wasn't to get involved.”

“What list?” I demanded forcefully. “Why would Sam be on a list?”

“I have no idea,” said Monty anxiously. “Don't shout at me! I can't

cope with it!"

"I'm sorry," I said, controlling myself with an effort. "Sam's gone missing and I'm worried to death."

"We all are," said Melanie, "but I think Dad's right. It does make more sense to tell me not to get involved because I'm not on the list. More sense than kiss or miss or anything."

"Well, if that's the case," I said, forcing myself to sit down, "who else is on the list?"

"At a guess, I'd say you," said Monty. "If it was that man from that re-education place then perhaps Sam is on this list because of her association with you."

"Or Molly," said Melanie. "Perhaps they saw Sam on their CCTV at the police station."

"Unlikely," I said. "They'd have only seen the teddy bear outfit but they might well have captured me as I went in the back and came out again." I slammed my hand on the arm of the sofa and Molly stirred then went back to sleep. "Damn, I was stupid. That policeman must have got suspicious when I was leaving and they checked the cameras. If they identified me then they'd have easily identified Sam. How did they know she was at the supermarket though?"

"Maybe she was seen by the supermarket's security cameras and the computers matched identities?" said Melanie.

"I suppose it's possible," I said thoughtfully, "but how did they get the men there so quickly?"

"They've been gone for hours," said Monty. "What if Sam was identified as soon as she walked in and they sent the men on the off-chance she'd still be there when they arrived?"

"I suppose," I said, "but if they know who she is why not just send the men here? They know we're staying with you."

“I have no idea,” said Monty. “I’m only speculating but perhaps they think you’ve already left here so they’re monitoring all security cameras in the county in the hope of picking you up somewhere.”

“It seems an awful lot of effort,” I said. “It’s not like I’m a major criminal or something.”

“Who knows what they think you are, Nick,” said Melanie. “After all, they did arrest Dad and send him for re-education for just being a curious old man. You certainly are more than you seem to be.”

“Who’s a curious old man?” asked Monty, looking as though he was drifting away.

“I suppose,” I said. “Anyway, this is all just speculation. The important thing is to find Sam and get her back before she comes to any harm. Do you still have that dish of hemp, Melanie?”

“Yes, it’s in the kitchen,” she said. “I didn’t know what to do with it so I just left it there. Are you going to sleep walk again?”

“Astral fly, yes,” I said, getting up to retrieve Sam’s silk knickers.

“But where are you going to look?” she asked, getting up as well. “With Molly it was a reasonable guess that she’d be at the police station. Do you think Sam will be there too?”

“I’m guessing Sam’s at that re-education centre,” I said, pausing in the doorway, “or at least on the way there but it doesn’t matter. I put a marker on her not long after we met just in case.”

“A marker?” said Melanie. “What sort of marker?”

“A magic marker,” I said. “One I can see on the astral plane.”

“Magic markers?” said Monty. “There are some in my desk drawer in my study. Help yourself.”

“Thanks,” I said, not wanting to waste any more time explaining.

* * *

As soon as I was in the air I saw the marker. A bright indigo blob some way distant. I headed for it as quickly as I could and as I got closer it slowly separated into two blobs, almost exactly superimposed on each other. The reason was clear when I caught up with it on the motorway. One was the marker for Sam and the other was the marker I'd put on the little van when I got Molly out at the motorway service station. I swooped down and dropped through the roof.

Sam was fine. She was clearly angry and more than a little frightened but she was sitting on the floor of the van and showed no sign of any injuries. I wanted to tell her I was there and comfort her but I couldn't as I wasn't technically there myself. Still, the fact that she was in the same van suggested that she was being taken to that facility in the New Forest. I metaphorically gave her a reassuring hug then rose up high and scanned the general area in the direction the van was heading. A long way off was another indigo marker, faint but still visible.

“That'll be the marker I put on the sign,” I thought. “Do I stay with the van and make absolutely certain or do I go back and get the car and risk them going somewhere else?”

I tossed it around in my mind for a while and decided it would be safer to stay with the van. After all, it was possible that they were taking her somewhere else, perhaps even to Southampton Airport. After all, if she was in any immediate danger, like being killed, they'd more than likely have done it by now.

“Where are you taking me?” she demanded at one point after banging hard on the bulkhead separating the front seats from the cargo area.

“Wait and see,” was the only reply which made her make a face at the bulkhead. I found that very reassuring.

The time passed slowly and when we reached Lyndhurst I decided that they must be heading for the re-education centre as there was nowhere else really to go by then. I kissed her farewell and headed back.

* * *

“Did you find Sam?” asked Melanie urgently when she saw me wake up.

“Yes,” I said. “They’ve taken her to the same place they took Molly. Can I use your car?”

“Of course,” she said. “Can we help at all?”

“Best not,” I said. “When I’ve got Sam out we won’t come back here because this is the first place they’ll look. I was thinking I’d leave the car in Southampton and you can collect it from there and we’ll just disappear.”

“That’s good thinking,” said Monty. “Leave the car at the airport long stay car park and it’ll confuse things even more. They might even think you’ve flown overseas. Put the key in the glove box. We’ve got a spare.”

“Thanks,” I said. “Right, I’ll just go and pack our things then I’ll be off.”

“What about Molly?” asked Melanie.

“If I leave her behind Sam will kill me,” I said. “I’ll take her with me.”

“I’d stay a bit longer if I were you,” said Monty. “Wait until it’s dark.”

“But I need to get Sam back,” I said. “Who knows what they’ll do to her if I leave her there.”

“This is Britain,” said Monty. “It’s almost five o’clock on a Sunday afternoon. Trust me, whatever they’re planning to do they’ll leave until the morning.”

“Actually Dad’s right,” said Melanie. “The low level skivvies have to work on Sundays but the more senior people won’t and if they are going to do some sort of re-education they’ll need specialists. In fact, if we’re right about the list there’s a good chance they won’t do anything anyway, at least not until they’ve got you as well. Wait another hour or two. It’ll be easier in the dark.”

I desperately wanted to go rushing off but they were right. Something I had learnt over the centuries was that if there's no immediate action to be taken, and that time had been when she was abducted, then it's generally best to delay and prepare. The better prepared you are the more likely a successful outcome. Not that there was much I could prepare. I didn't have guns to clean, ropes to wind or any of the other paraphernalia of specialist forces like the SAS. All I had was me and the packet of sandwiches and thermos of coffee that Melanie insisted I took.

It also required a significant effort of will to not go blasting down the motorway at top speed. Instead I stayed within sight of the speed limit with Molly restlessly climbing over the back of the passenger seat to sit in the front for a while then whining and climbing into the back then over into the front again. In the end I gave her the sandwiches just to shut her up.

I overshot the turn-off through the forest to the centre. I was concentrating so hard I actually missed it and had to do a U turn. Just to be safe and to give my eyes an opportunity to adjust to the darkness I turned off the headlights and edged my way along the track at little more than walking pace. I found a spot that looked as though it might have been the place where I'd parked when we first found the place and got out to explore. It turned out not to be so I got back in and drove a little further. It was very dark as the moon was barely a quarter and the trees rose high and dense on either side but I found the spot on the third attempt.

Cautioning Molly to be extra quiet I got out and pushed the car door gently shut. I leaned on it so the lock caught with barely a click as sounds travel a long way at night. On my own I'd have left the door open but I didn't want Molly jumping out and running up to the guards to say hello. I thought about it for a few moments but couldn't see any real advantage in going barefoot so I left my shoes on. I cautiously made my way along the track to the bend and peered around. It looked much the same as it had the day before.

Moving off the track into the trees I carefully made my way down as close as I could get to the guard house. I could only see one head through the window but, rather worryingly, I could hear the faint

murmur of voices. It took me a while to realise that the guard was watching TV. What was more of a concern was that there were two fences, one inside the other, and both made of chain link fencing with what looked to be a roll of barbed wire on top of the outer one. The fencing I could deal with but the four large German Shepherd dogs that roamed freely between the two fences was more of a worry. I wished Sam was with me to talk to them which was pretty stupid really since if Sam had been with me neither of us would be here in the first place.

On the plus side, however, the dogs seemed fairly friendly and stayed together more or less as a group. They also seemed to generally go clockwise around the perimeter, stopping every now and then to stare at something amongst the trees and bark soundlessly. They did that when they first caught my scent but by the third circuit they seemed to have got used to me. The silent barking was a little unnerving but I vaguely remember reading somewhere that sometimes security dogs have their vocal cords removed so their barking is silent. Still, their silent barking meant that they didn't arouse Molly and set her off but, on the other hand, it also meant that they weren't there as a deterrent so maybe they weren't as friendly as they seemed.

Nothing ventured, nothing gained so I formulated my plan – wait until I estimated the dogs were on the far side of the compound, get across the strip of empty ground between the trees and the fence and get through both fences before the dogs got back. I wasn't overly concerned about being attacked as I could put them to sleep easily enough but the dogs not circulating would probably alert the guard who would raise the alarm and make it more difficult to find Sam. Once found, of course, either Sam could persuade the dogs to let us through or I could put them to sleep – it didn't really matter.

As quietly as possible I edged my way further round so I'd be out of sight of the guard house when crossing the bare strip and waited. Sure enough the dogs came past, noted I'd moved then continued on their endless circuit. I waited until I couldn't hear their feet then, in a crouching half run, made it to the fence. I'd started to recite the incantation to part the chain link section when something stabbed me in the backside. I gasped at the sudden stinging pain but even as my hand sought the spot I felt a wave of dizziness and passed out.

Chapter Nineteen

It looked like a cross between a cheap motel room and a hospital room. Everything had a well used appearance and there were some scuff marks on the wall. On the other hand the style and functionality were minimalist and the general white sterility made a hospital room a distinct possibility. Still, as I looked around, there was no sign of the equipment that goes with a hospital room. No heart monitor, no stand with drips, no tubes or cables. Not even a TV I realised after a few moments. Just a plain white stark room with a bed in it and an A3 sized print of a field of daisies in a cheap imitation wood frame on the wall opposite.

I felt slightly woozy and my head spun a little as I sat up. Intriguingly I was still fully dressed, shoes and all, on top of a neatly made bed. I let the room settle down before swinging my legs over the side. I sat there for a few moments just staring at my shoes. There were smudges of mud around the heels and a broken leaf caught in one of the shoelaces. There was also mud and bits of grass on the knees of my trousers. Wherever I was I couldn't have been here long.

“Ahh, Nicholas, you're awake,” said a voice. “Good. How do you feel?”

I jerked my head up to see a pretty young woman in a white nurse's outfit standing in the doorway.

“A little groggy,” I admitted. “Where's Sam?”

“Sam's in the common room,” said the nurse brightly. “I'll take you there in a few moments when the grogginess has passed. Don't want you falling over and hurting yourself, do we?”

“I suppose not,” I said, feeling the grogginess lifting in waves. “Where am I?”

“You're at the headquarters of the SANE Organisation,” said the nurse. “Try standing up.”

I tried standing up and found it was really quite easy even though she hovered, ready to catch me.

“There, that wasn't so hard, was it,” she said cheerily. She took my hand and checked my pulse.

“How long have I been here?” I asked, “and where, exactly are the headquarters of the SANE Organisation?”

“Ohh, only ten minutes or so,” she said. “We're in the New Forest. Don't you remember coming here?”

“I remember a compound with security fencing,” I said, thinking back, “although that's the last thing I remember.”

“Yes, that's the front entrance,” said Rachel, assuming it was her name on the badge on her chest. “We brought you through to the patient area.”

“So I'm a patient, am I?” I asked, taking a couple of experimental steps.

“It's always good to be patient, isn't it,” she said with a little laugh. “Don't you go rushing off now. I'll take you to the common room in a moment. I just need to make a call.”

She pulled a mobile phone from one of her pockets and fiddled briefly with it before putting it to her ear.

“Nicholas is awake now,” she said then paused. “Right, will do.”

“How do you know my name?” I asked when she'd hung up.

“I was told to expect you,” said Rachel. “You are Nicholas March, aren't you?”

“Yes,” I admitted. “Who told you to expect me?”

“My supervisor, of course,” said Rachel, looking me intently in the eyes. “How many fingers am I holding up?”

“Twelve,” I said drily.

“Oh you are a one!” she said with a giggle and patted my lapel playfully. “Seriously?”

“Three,” I said.

“Excellent,” she said. “I’ll take you to the common room now. The car’s on its way.”

“We need a car to get to the common room?” I asked.

“No, silly,” said Rachel with another giggle. “The car will pick you both up from the common room.”

“Right,” I said, wondering if I was dreaming. “How stupid of me.”

“This way,” she said briskly. “Tell me if you feel unsteady.”

“I feel fine,” I said, stepping out into the corridor.

Rachel headed to the left so I glanced to the right. A long well lit corridor stretched away with at least a dozen doors, all closed. My room seemed to be the first.

“Are these all rooms for patients as well?” I asked.

“Yes,” said Rachel turning left again into another corridor. “Although we have none at the moment. The next batch is due in tomorrow.”

“What are they due in for?” I asked, following her.

“Re-education,” she said, pushing a large green button on the wall beside a room marked ‘Common Room’. “Here’s the common room.”

The door slid open with a faint whirr and Sam screamed “Nick!” before engulfing me in a bone-crushing embrace.

“Sam!” I exclaimed, hugging her back. “Did they hurt you? Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” she said, squeezing me again. “I knew you’d come for me!”

“That's guaranteed,” I said, “although I seem to be a captive here too.”

“I'll leave you two to it,” said Rachel smiling happily. “The car will be at that door over there,” and she pointed to another door on the other side of the room.

She backed out and the door slid back behind her.

“So where are we?” I asked, looking around over Sam's shoulder.

“Apparently this is the common room,” said Sam, reluctantly releasing me. “There's a TV and a coffee machine and some cold drinks and sandwiches in the fridge but that's all I know. Rachel's been coming in and out to check on me but all she'll tell me is this is the re-education section of the SANE Organisation. This is the place where they were going to bring Molly, isn't it?”

“Yes,” I said, going over to look through the long floor to ceiling glass wall that ran along the length of the room. All I could see was a neatly maintained grassed area with a few outdoor chairs and another building on the far side. “So what happened to you?”

“I fainted at the supermarket with Melanie,” she said. “When I came too I was in the back of a van and they brought me here. I've been in this room ever since. What's going on, Nick?”

“I have no idea,” I said. “I was trying to get through the fence around this place when something stung me and I passed out. I woke up in one of the rooms round the corner a few minutes ago. Rachel didn't tell me anything more than she's told you except that she was expecting me.”

“And there's a car coming for us?” she asked, holding on to my hand tightly and staying close.

“Apparently,” I said. “That reminds me, I left Molly in the car which is just round the bend on the track leading to this place.”

“I hope she's all right,” said Sam worriedly. “You don't suppose they'll

hurt her or something?”

“I have absolutely no idea,” I said, wandering around the room with Sam in tow. “I have no idea what’s going on, who these people are or why we are here. It does seem a lot of trouble to go to although I am reminded of an old movie I once watched. A Bond movie, I think it was. Mr No, or something like that.”

“Ohh, there’s someone at that door,” whispered Sam nervously as the far door slid open to reveal a smartly dressed Asian man.

“Your car awaits,” he said unsmilingly.

“We’re not going anywhere until we get some explanations,” I said, trying to force myself to feel aggressive. University life doesn’t prepare you for this sort of thing.

He sighed and lifted a gun. “Your choice,” he said, jerking it at the open doorway.

“Perhaps we’d better go, Nick,” said Sam anxiously. “I don’t think he’s joking.”

“He’s not going to shoot us,” I said, not entirely convinced by my own logic. “Why would they bring us here and treat us like this to shoot us?”

“It is a tranquilliser gun,” he said. “You can walk or I can carry you.”

“Oh,” I said. “I suppose we may as well walk then.”

“Thank you,” he said politely and put the gun away. “This way,” and he held out his hand.

Outside was a gleaming Rolls Royce almost exactly the same colour as my suit. The back door was open and Sam got in first. The door closed with a very expensive sounding soft click.

“This is surreal,” whispered Sam as a tinted glass window opened behind the driver’s seat.

“The journey will take approximately one minute,” said the Asian man. “Feel free to indulge yourselves from the drinks compartment in front of you.” The window slid shut and I felt the slightest of pressures against my back as the car moved silently forward.

“Do you want a drink?” I asked.

“No,” said Sam, watching the dark forest move past through the side window. “What happened in that movie?”

“I don't really remember,” I said, “but Bond was captured on a island and taken to what seemed like a plush hotel and was given a nice dinner then made to run some sort of nasty obstacle course through some tunnels before he was able to blow the place up. I don't remember why he wanted to though.”

“You think that's what they're going to do to us?” asked Sam turning to look at me.

“I very much doubt it,” I said. “That was a movie and weird as this is, it is real life. Who'd base their plans for world domination in the middle of the New Forest and why would they need our help?”

“I'm worried about Molly,” she said. “Do you think she'll be all right in the car?”

“She's probably asleep,” I said, “or barking at rabbits.”

“You did leave the window open a bit so she can get some fresh air?” asked Sam anxiously.

“Ahh, no,” I said. “I didn't think I'd be gone long. Oh, I think we've arrived.”

The Asian man held the car door open so I climbed out. Reluctantly Sam climbed out after me. The car had stopped beside a broad flight of three stone steps with two large doors at the top. Both stood wide open.

“Good evening, Professor and Doctor March,” said the woman

standing in the doorway. She was back-lit by the interior lighting and I squinted a little trying to see who she was. “It is good to see you again.”

“Do I know you?” I asked.

“We have met,” she said, “although I don't expect you will remember me. Welcome. Please join me inside my humble home.”

She stepped back and, after a moment's hesitation, Sam and I climbed the steps and went inside. The hallway would have made the one in Downton Abbey look cramped and downmarket.

“I am Zaira Vittoria Malvada Oscuridad,” said the woman pleasantly, “but you can call me Zaira or Vittoria, as you wish.”

“That's an unfortunate name,” said Sam absently as she goggled wide-eyed at the hallway. “You are Spanish?”

I, too, marvelled at the hallway before forcing myself to look at our hostess. She was middle aged, perhaps in her early forties although she clearly had the wealth to be older and look younger. She was, in that particular way many Spanish women are through a combination of dark colouring and bone structure, remarkably beautiful. She was dressed in what looked like silk harem pants and a silk blouse, both pale ivory which offset her shoulder length jet black hair nicely and a discreet amount of very expensive looking jewellery.

“Ahh yes, you are a linguist,” said Zaira, smiling pleasantly. “But your maiden name is Butcher, is it not? Tell me, have you ever butchered anything?”

“A fair point,” said Sam, taken aback. “I must apologise. I was taken by surprise.”

“Your delightful wife is referring to the literal translation of my family name, Nicholas,” said Zaira. “It means evil darkness in English.”

“And what does it mean in Spanish?” I asked, mildly curious.

“Alas, much the same,” said Zaira with a carefree laugh, “Although I am not Spanish, I am Ecuadorean. Come into the dining room. You must be hungry after your adventures today. There is a cold buffet waiting. A hot meal would have been preferable but I did not know when to expect you and food kept warm indefinitely leaves much to be desired.”

“I confess I don't remember you,” I said as we followed her. “Are you sure we've met before?”

“I was a student at Cambridge University, ohh, twenty five or so years ago,” she said. “Please, help yourselves and sit wherever you wish. There is no need for formality here. We are simply friends enjoying a meal together.”

The side table, big enough to be the main dining table in most houses, looked positively empty even though it held dishes of sliced beef, ham and chicken as well as a variety of salads, bread rolls and assorted garnishes. I took two curried eggs and a chicken leg and put them on a plate with a gold rim. The forks were also gold and felt strangely heavy. I wondered if they were real gold. Sam, I noticed, took only a single slice of ham and a spoonful of salad. She seemed subdued. Perhaps Zaira intimidated her. She certainly intimidated me. I'd never met anyone with such casual self assurance before.

“You were not one of my students,” I said, taking my plate to the dining table which seated twenty people. I know because I counted the chairs while deciding which to sit on. Sam sat next to me and Zaira sat opposite us both. She only had a single bread roll and a tomato but perhaps she had already eaten.

“No, I was not,” said Zaira. “Please forgive the lack of intimacy here. This room is for more formal occasions and I neglected to tell my people so. They assumed, quite reasonably, that this was to be a more formal informal dinner.”

“That's fine,” I said, wondering who she'd normally be entertaining in such an out of the way place.

“As I was saying,” continued Zaira with a nod of acknowledgement, “I

was an undergraduate in the Computer Science Department. I did, however, attend a lecture given by you on thirteenth century alchemy. It was very interesting.”

“I’m curious why a computing student would attend a lecture on alchemy,” I said, pushing a curried egg around my plate. “I wouldn’t have thought there was much crossover of ideas or even interests.”

“Oh I had a broad range of interests in those days,” said Zaira. “You, in particular, being one of them.”

“Me?” I said, frowning. “You mean alchemy?”

“No, I mean you, Professor,” she said. She leaned back and looked at me intently. “You haven’t changed at all, you know, although you used to always wear black. Why have you changed your style?”

“That’s Sam’s influence,” I said. “She doesn’t like black.”

“You see black as perhaps an evil darkness, Samantha?” asked Zaira, smiling. I noticed her dark eyes didn’t smile as much as her mouth. “Ahh, how forgetful of me! I have something of yours. One of my people found it in the lane beyond the front gate.” She clapped her hands and a slim young man in a tuxedo appeared in the doorway. “Bring the dog, please.”

The man inclined his head and reappeared a moment later with Molly on her leash trotting happily behind him as King Charles spaniels do. Sam twisted in her chair just as Molly saw her and came rushing over, yapping excitedly.

“Such a delightful little doggie,” remarked Zaira. “And Molly is such an appropriate name, I think. Is she a pure-bred King Charles?”

“Yes,” said Sam as Molly jumped up and down, trying to get on Sam’s lap. She lifted her up and Molly tried to lick her face. “I’ve had her since she was eight weeks old, haven’t I, beautiful?” and she hugged Molly and scratched her ears.

“How charming,” said Zaira, pulling her bread roll apart. “Do you like

animals yourself, Nicholas?”

“I can take them or leave them,” I confessed. “I find dogs in particular tend not to like me.”

“I’m sure you’re more of a cat person,” said Zaira. “Dogs perhaps sense something about you that makes them uncomfortable.”

There was something in the way she said that that had an edge to it although I wasn’t sure.

“You said I interested you,” I asked, abandoning the curried egg. “Can I ask in what way?”

Sam stiffened and looked over at Zaira. Clearly she was very interested in which way I interested Zaira.

“Relax, dearest Samantha,” she said soothingly but with a touch of complacency as well, as if she knew she could have any man she wanted. “My interest is purely academic. I would never encroach on your happiness.”

Sam smiled and nodded but the look in her eye spoke volumes.

“You were saying,” I said, reaching over to squeeze Sam’s hand.

“Ah yes,” said Zaira. “When I was at Cambridge there was a rumour going around amongst some of the students. Not, I admit, among the computer science students who, I confess, I did not find the most sociable of people but then Cambridge has a large student population and I was able to find many to socialise with in other departments. I found I gravitated more to those in the Social Sciences for some reason despite being one of the computer geeks myself. A puzzle, I confess, but not one that interests me greatly.”

“The rumour?” I prompted.

“Indeed, the rumour,” said Zaira. “It was from among those in the Social Sciences that I heard this rumour. They said that there was a Professor who never seemed to age. Some, you see, had parents and

other relatives who had also been to Cambridge University who commented upon this. 'Professor March never seems to age,' I was told. He looks the same now as he did twenty, thirty, forty years ago. It was never taken seriously, of course, but every now and then you would come up and some of the girls would sigh and wish they knew your secret."

"And you found that interesting?" I asked. "I confess I find that a little strange. A beautiful student from South America faced with all the delights of Cambridge student life? I wonder you didn't find more to occupy your time."

"Oh, I said you interested me, not that you occupied my mind," she said with a little dismissive laugh to put me in my place. "Have you heard of my father? Juan Pedro Malvada Oscuridad?"

"I'm afraid not," I said and Sam shook her head.

"You surprise me," said Zaira with a small frown, "but then, little of South America is reported here in Britain and then only the bigger countries of Brazil and Argentina." Her tone changed to one of pride. "My father is the richest man in all of South America, perhaps even North America as well."

"Well, that's very nice for you," I said, "but what has this to do with me?"

"Alas, my father, despite his riches, has been in poor health for a number of years," said Zaira matter of factly. "Even then, twenty five years ago, he was morbidly afraid of old age and death. These days, to add to his burdens, he is also afraid of dementia and other diseases of the mind pertaining to ageing. I love my father and I fear greatly for him so, you see, when I heard these rumours of a Professor who was seemingly ageless my ... how do you say it? My ears stuck up?"

"Pricked up," I said. "Like a dog. When they hear something their ears prick up."

"Ahh, interesting," she said, her expression making it very clear she didn't like being compared to a dog. "Yes, so when I heard about you,

Nicholas, both my ears pricked up at the same time.”

“Oh yes,” I said. “And did you hear anything of substance?”

“I am my father's daughter,” she said diffidently. “I had my own personal bank account for my private use while a student at the University with £5 million in it. Just some spending money to make my life more comfortable, you understand. My direct expenses were covered in other ways so as you can see, I was born into great wealth. But despite that, Nicholas, even I am sometimes astonished at what money can buy.”

“Ahh,” I said, my heart dropping. “And, umm, what did your money buy you?”

“Information,” she said. “A great deal of information. You are a very interesting man Nicholas, or should I say Niccolo, Marchese di Forteza Campagnoli. Very interesting indeed.”

Chapter Twenty

“I don't know what you are talking about,” I said trying to cover my shock. “Who is this Nico Marching dee whatsit?”

“Oh please, do not insult me like this, Niccolo,” said Zaira. “I hired two private investigators to investigate your history and once they'd got back to the mid nineteenth century I started to bring in historians and academic researchers. All told, thirteen professionals worked on tracing your career.”

“That explains it then,” I said. “Too many cooks spoil the broth. With that many people there must have been a lot of confusion and crossed lines of investigation. You've got me mixed up with someone else. Quite a few someone elses by the sound of it. After all, Nicholas March is a fairly common name.”

“Oh indeed,” said Zaira with a smile. “And my lead investigator was well aware of that possibility. Tell me, my dear Niccolo, even though Nicholas March is a common name how many of them have taught sorcery at Cambridge University?”

“I wouldn't have a clue,” I said.

“Really?” said Zaira, arching an eyebrow. “Even though you've been doing just that since 1219? Albeit under the guise of alchemy for much of that time.”

“You're being absurd,” I said. “Those investigators saw you coming and were happy to take your money for a fool's errand.”

“Oh Niccolo, Niccolo,” she said with a little laugh. “You were born in Florence in 1122 and apprenticed to the sorcerer Tiurno di Velencia Menaccio in 1131. I have a copy of your apprenticeship contract which one of my researchers found in the Vatican archives. I also have a copy of the letter sent in 1217 by Philip Wincator, the then Chancellor of Cambridge University, inviting you to join their small assemblage of learning and copies of all but three of your pay receipts and payslips. They alone attest to a remarkable career, regardless of all the other documentation, including the deeds for your property in Cambridge,

which form an unbroken link across nine centuries. Please don't deny it. The portrait of you by Ralph de Sigourney from 1457 bears your likeness well enough to be used as a passport photograph today."

"I knew that portrait was a mistake," I said shaking my head sadly. "I thought it had been destroyed when the refectory caught fire around 1500."

"It was," said Zaira with a triumphant look in her eye. "All that remains is a description of it in the inventory of what was lost but it pleases me that you finally admit you and Niccolo are one and the same."

"I admit it," I said. "What of it? You seem to have gone to a lot of trouble for very little purpose."

"Oh I wouldn't say that," said Zaira. "In fact you were the inspiration for all that I have achieved since."

"Well, I have always tried to be an inspiration to my students," I said, "but you were never one of them. How did I inspire you and what, if you don't mind me asking, have you actually achieved? You were, after all, born into your family's wealth."

"I'll gladly take you on a tour of this facility," said Zaira, "which is just one of several, both in Britain and elsewhere, but it will mean little to you at the moment. As to your inspiration, well that is easily explained. What do you know of Artificial Intelligence?"

"Next to nothing," I said. "I know it uses computers and is some sort of learning system that got a lot of people upset a few years ago which is why it got banned."

"You have beautifully captured the essentials," said Zaira, beaming. "The details we can leave to the specialists who revel in such things although I might add that a ban does not always mean the end of something but we'll come to that later. I myself sought to be one such specialist in my youth. That is why I was sent by my father to Cambridge University, to study computers and Artificial Intelligence. He saw the potential for AI in expanding his business operations and

wanted one of the family to be able to oversee its development and implementation. He is not a trusting man, Niccolo, and permitted only family members to take charge of important areas.”

“I daresay not,” I said. “People who trust too much are gullible and you don't get to be wealthy by being gullible.”

“Indeed,” said Zaira. “Alas I had not the aptitude for advanced computing. Oh, I had some skills in using them and I could write programs after a fashion but my skills lie more in seeing the broader picture and excessive attention to detail is not, shall we say, my thing,” and she used her fingers to make quotes around 'my thing' in the air.

“And I was the inspiration for a broader picture, was I?” I asked.

“Exactly,” said Zaira. “Needless to say I was at first enthralled by your sorcery. It has a certain quaint charm about it. To click your fingers and have things happen is doubtless the desire of many but, as perhaps you can imagine, growing up within my family I grew accustomed to things happening at the mere click of my fingers. Sorcery and wealth are in many ways similar, are they not? They are a means to an end, after all, and nothing more.”

“Well, perhaps,” I said.

“You disagree?” she asked. “It would be interesting to debate this with you but some other time perhaps, for it would be merely a diversion at the moment. The important point is that, being who I am, I was not seduced by your skills as a sorcerer for long. It was your great age that attracted my attention and I wanted to know how you achieved it.”

“You would have to undergo many years of arduous training,” I said quickly, “and many succumb in the attempt.”

“So I imagined,” said Zaira, “but it was during a most tedious lecture by one of the professors on the Bayesian distribution of data points in multi-dimensional vectorised learning spaces that I had an idea. You may perhaps know this already, Niccolo, but AI systems require a large amount of training data from which to learn and to extrapolate.”

“So I've heard,” I said. “I seem to remember in the early days that AI systems were trained with people's social media posts and then everyone was surprised when the systems turned out to be racist and sexist. To me it seemed obvious that if you put in people's biases and attitudes you'd get the same thing back in the output.”

“Quite,” said Zaira, “but computer specialists are not the most social of people and so that never occurred to them. I daresay they expected the vast mass of social media posts to be about programming and the like. Anyway, it was during that lecture, while my mind drifted on waves of tedium, that a thought occurred to me. What if we turned the entire process on its head? What if, instead of using vast amounts of training data from all over the place, we collected data from one unique source over an extended period of time and used that to train the AI system? What then?”

“I imagine your system would then be more or less a replica of whatever it was that you were collecting the data from,” I said, wondering where this was going.

“Exactly,” said Zaira, “and this is where you came into my head as well. What if, I asked myself, what if we connect an AI system to a single human brain directly and let it learn from the thoughts of that brain?”

“Umm,” I said, “I suppose you'd end up with a replica of that brain then.”

“Exactly!” said Zaira, leaning forward to tap the table with her finger for added emphasis.

“And how, exactly, was I the inspiration here?” I asked. “I'm sure you weren't the first person to think of doing that.”

“But you do not see?” she said, looking puzzled at my apparent stupidity. “You are ageless through sorcery but if an AI system can become an exact replica of your brain, would it not, of itself, be a form of agelessness? When the organic brain has reached its limit of life the AI brain could continue, replicating the personality, thoughts and dreams of that brain, long after it is dead. Do you not see that it

was your proof that extended ageing is possible coupled with my insight into a non-magical mechanism for brain replication that makes immortality a real possibility?”

“Well, perhaps,” I said, “but I’m not immortal. I just age more slowly. I will one day die of old age. Besides, even if you do replicate the brain the body will still wear out.”

“Ohh the body is of little consequence,” said Zaira enthusiastically. “Whatever wears out can be replaced with prosthetic devices. Indeed, many of the inefficiencies in body design can be removed, such as the inherent instability of bipedal motion. A body based around three or four wheels or tracks would be much more stable and hence more flexible.”

“Well, perhaps,” I said. “So this is your life’s work is it? Trying to create artificial immortality? I thought you said you didn’t have an aptitude for AI.”

“I don’t,” said Zaira, “but I do have access to almost unlimited funds. I abandoned my own studies and hired experts in various fields to create such a device. After all, if nothing else, such a device would be of great use and comfort to my father.”

“Ahh,” I said. “And have you had any success?”

“Not to begin with,” said Zaira. “Our early attempts were spectacularly unsuccessful. The main problem was that a typical human brain contains billions of individual neurons and trying to link a chip into all of them was physically impossible.”

“Not to say unethical,” interjected Sam who’d been sitting there silently listening and hugging Molly.

“Not at all, Samantha,” said Zaira, turning to look at her. “Have you heard of responsive neurostimulation?”

Sam shook her head slowly.

“RNS is a well known and widely used treatment for epilepsy,” said

Zaira. "A device is implanted in the sufferer's brain which prevent seizures before they begin, much the same way a pacemaker detects and treats abnormal heart rhythms. More recently other devices have been developed which attach to the cortex of the brain to reproduce the functions of parts of the brain destroyed through stroke or accidental brain damage. What we do is essentially the same."

"But those treatments work," I said. "Yours doesn't."

"Ahh no," said Zaira, looking back at me. "Our early attempts didn't work. Our breakthrough came with the realisation that we don't need to connect the chip to the brain directly at all."

"Excuse me?" I said. "How can you connect to the brain indirectly?"

"That fork in your hand is connected to your brain indirectly," said Zaira. "That is one of the functions of your body. The key point, however, is that the brain does a lot more than simply act as a switching point for various nerve impulses. Did you not have a discussion on this very point with your friend Montgomery Warwick concerning the imposition of the perception of colour by the brain?"

"How on Earth did you know about that?" I asked, deeply surprised.

"I will explain that a little later," said Zaira. "Let me finish explaining the primary role of SANE first."

"As you wish," I said irritably.

"Thank you," she said. "Our breakthrough was the realisation that we could connect indirectly with the brain and utilise its powers of superposition of functionality to achieve the same end result. By connecting to the 31 pairs of nerves in the spinal cord we could reduce the number of connections from billions down to just 62, a much more feasible number and one that is far less surgically invasive and results in fewer errors."

"So you're actually doing this now?" I asked.

"Indeed," said Zaira. "We have been for several years now. What we

are trying to do now is refine the techniques so that the chip is quickly and easily inserted into the back of the neck of the client, beside the spinal cord and just above the hairline so the small scar is not visible. The chip then learns the thoughts and personality of the client then, when the client's organic brain is no longer functioning usefully the chip can be removed and inserted into a prosthetic body, with the personality intact.”

“Good God!” I exclaimed. “You really are doing this? That's what SANE is all about?”

“Yes we are doing this,” said Zaira. “It is an expensive service we offer to only the most discerning but we already have a waiting list, small but growing steadily.”

“How much is it?” asked Sam.

“\$10 billion for the initial insertion,” said Zaira complacently. “US dollars, of course. Removal of the chip and its insertion into a device of the client's choosing is considerably cheaper as the consequences to the brain of its removal are of no importance. We charge only \$1 billion for that.”

I just gawped at Zaira in astonishment.

“But ... but ...” I spluttered after a while, “surely if you've created a form of immortality wouldn't it be more ethical to offer it widely? Very few people can afford \$10 billion.”

“Superficially, perhaps,” said Zaira, “but if you think about it, what good would it do the vast majority of people? It would merely extend their harsh and unenviable lives indefinitely and that level of suffering would, I'm sure you agree, be totally unethical. Besides, what would they do with those extra years anyway? If they have achieved nothing during their natural lives, why should they be rewarded with additional years in which to achieve nothing more? This treatment is only available to those who are significant achievers.”

“You mean the ultra wealthy,” said Sam contemptuously.

“What other viable measure of achievement is there?” asked Zaira, spreading her hands. “Artistic? Literary? Humanitarian? They have only subjective measures, mere opinions. Money is the only truly objective yardstick.”

“Just a minute,” I said. “You said you have a small waiting list but you also said you have this place as well as several others. Why do you need so many if you only have a handful of people to deal with?”

“Ahh,” said Zaira looking pleased with herself, “that was another of my ideas. You are indirectly involved in that, too, Niccolo, although I confess once I started on this pathway you went out of my mind. No, as we were developing the techniques for implanting the chips society was changing and rejecting all that was non empirical including, for reasons I don't understand, Artificial Intelligence itself but that is by the by and, as it turned out was an advantage.”

“How so?” I asked. “Weren't you affected by the ban on AI?”

“Not at all,” she said, “we simply turned it to public advantage while at the same time it made it almost impossible for anyone to set up in competition with us.”

“I really don't see how,” I said. “Isn't your business entirely based on AI?”

“We reclassified our service as behavioural,” said Zaira. “I saw a business opportunity by extending the AI chip treatment to a broader clientele through the re-education of non-empiricist offenders. That is why we need so many facilities. There are quite a lot of offenders.”

“How does a personality learning chip re-educate non-empiricists?” I asked. “Surely it would just reinforce their inclinations?”

“Ahh, no,” said Zaira. “Obviously such criminals don't get the same chip. That would be foolish and counter productive. No, something else we learned through our development work is that we can use a chip to detect the thoughts of the recipient and manipulate them. We created a different AI chipset which, once inserted, can detect when improper thoughts occur and substitute more politically correct

thoughts. It has proven to be quite effective on non-empiricists and we are exploring other pathways. Political activists, for example, although as yet government funding is not forthcoming.”

“Good God almighty!” I exclaimed. “So that's what you did to Monty!”

“Oh yes,” said Zaira, her face clouding over. “He's one of ours, unfortunately.”

“What do you mean, unfortunately?” I said sharply.

“This is a trifle embarrassing,” said Zaira. “We discovered after his treatment that a small batch of chips had been manufactured with a minor fault. That fault has long since been corrected however.”

“But you didn't change the chip you put in Monty,” I said angrily.

“Of course not,” said Zaira. “We haven't developed the techniques to remove these chips safely.”

“Why not?” I demanded.

“There is insufficient demand to justify the research expenditure,” said Zaira. “It's not as though he's suffering in any significant way. A few minor behavioural issues perhaps but so what? He is a convicted criminal after all. In view of our liability with regards to the faulty chip we did, however, arrange for those fitted with that chip to receive a disability pension from the Government covered, incidentally, by a trust fund we created. I do not see that we have any further liability.”

“He does suffer from pains in the neck,” said Sam.

“Really?” asked Zaira. “What sort of pains?”

“Stabbing pains,” said Sam. “They don't last long, only a few seconds, but they still hurt him.”

“Whereabouts in the neck?” asked Zaira. “He is quite old, after all. It could just be arthritis.”

“I think it's at the base of his skull,” said Sam, “near his spine. Sometimes he gets headaches from it as well.”

“Well, it's possible it's the chip,” said Zaira. “You say they're infrequent?”

“Maybe twice a day,” I said, having calmed down a little.

“Hmm,” said Zaira thoughtfully. “That could be related to the transmissions.”

“What transmissions?” I asked suspiciously. I'd thought we'd heard it all but apparently not.

“Oh, it's a chip,” said Zaira. “About half an inch long and a quarter of an inch wide so there was room on the behaviour modification version for additional features as we didn't need so much room for data storage so we added a wireless interface.”

“You mean the chip is sending data back to you?” I asked, aghast.

“Certainly,” said Zaira, surprised at the question. “It allows us to monitor the device and, of course, all data is valuable. In fact that's how I was able to reconnect with you, Niccolo.”

“Now you've lost me,” I said. “How did the chip in Monty's brain reconnect you with me?”

“It's not in his brain,” said Zaira, “it's in his neck but that doesn't matter. You recall going to your dog park a few days ago and using your skills to clean the place up?”

“How did you know about that?” I asked.

“You were seen by someone called Karen Berensen,” said Zaira, “who reported you to the police. We picked it up when her chip sent its update transmission to us and our computers picked up your association with me and flagged it for my attention.”

“So you had the police sent round?” I asked.

“Oh no, the police were merely following up the report,” said Zaira. “Once I saw your name I had one of my people go and quieten any suspicions they had. When he went to your house to let you know he saw you were in the process of leaving and he had the presence of mind to follow you.”

“He followed us all the way to Winchester?” I asked, not knowing how to feel about that.

“No, he lost you at the station,” said Zaira. “It seems you bought tickets for several destinations which was intriguing to say the least. However he informed me straight away and the computer found we had several past clients in or near two of the destinations so I had people observe each of them in case you turned up, which you did.”

“Right,” I said slowly. “So that's how you know about my conversations with Monty.”

“Yes,” said Zaira simply.

“Hold on,” said Sam. “If your person in Cambridge smoothed things over with the police why did the police in Winchester arrest Molly?”

“Oh that was my doing,” said Zaira. “The woman watching Monty's house saw a girl with you change into a dog which confirmed for me that the visitor was you, Niccolo. I had the police informed that the dog was a witch and used the name of one of the police in Cambridge who interviewed you. I expected you to follow the dog here but, and this was my mistake, you retrieved her at the motorway service station. That's why we had to use Samantha as bait. I apologise for that.”

“That's OK,” said Sam automatically then frowned.

“Why did you want me here?” I said. “If you wanted to talk to me why not simply come to Monty's house? You caused us a lot of stress.”

“Again I apologise,” said Zaira, “but I particularly wanted you to see this facility and I didn't think you'd come voluntarily.”

“But what for?” I asked. “I can see that you think you are doing great things here and I suppose I can see that you just might have seen me as inspiration but that's all in the past. Why do you want me here now?”

“Oh that's simple,” said Zaira. “Now I am reminded of you I want you to be part of this. You have skills and knowledge that will be very useful I'm sure. You too Samantha.”

“What?” I exclaimed, jumping to my feet. “What possible use could I be, even if I wanted to be involved which I don't. I really don't agree with what you're doing here. I think it's appalling!”

“Calm yourself, calm yourself,” said Zaira staying remarkably calm. “You're just being overly emotional because it's all so new and radical but when you've had a chance to think through the logic of it I'm certain you'll be as enthusiastic as I am. Besides, I haven't told you the best part yet. We're going to solve the climate change problem!”

Chapter Twenty One

Sam and I just stared at her in stunned silence while Molly surreptitiously stole Sam's slice of ham.

“What's wrong?” asked Zaira, looking from me to Sam and back again. “Don't you believe me?”

“I think I'm suffering information overload here,” I said, frowning. “Did you just say you're going to solve climate change?”

“Yes,” said Zaira. She got up and went to fetch a peach from the side table.

“Don't tell me you've got a chip for that as well,” I said a little sarcastically.

“Of course,” said Zaira sitting down again. “That's what we do.”

She picked up her knife and began to methodically cut the peach into quarters then peel them.

“Forgive me for being stupid,” I said, the vein of sarcasm in my voice still there, “but how can you change the climate with a microchip?”

“I can't,” she said. “To alter the rising temperatures caused by emissions would require a drastic reduction in those emissions which is, of course, unfeasible. I daresay it could be done with a massive deployment of chips but I don't really see how. And, of course, the production of so many chips would add to the emissions, in the short term at least.”

“So how are you going to change the climate using chips if you don't use chips?” I asked. “There seems to be a logical quandary here.”

“Not at all,” said Zaira after eating one of the peach quarters without getting any of the juice on her silk outfit. “I said we are solving the climate change problem, not changing the climate.”

“I think we are talking at cross purposes here,” I said. “How can you

solve the problem of climate change without changing the climate?”

“Because the climate isn't the problem,” said Zaira wiping her fingers on a napkin. “Obviously.”

“You've lost me again,” I said.

“Oh,” she said in surprise and blinked a couple of times. “Well, you do realise the problem is economic, not meteorological, don't you?”

“Obviously,” I said. “The cost of reversing climate change will be astronomical.”

“Clearly,” she said, frowning, “but who said anything about reversing it?”

“Isn't that what we're talking about?” I asked, mystified.

“Of course not,” she said. “The problem of climate change is one of maintaining economic growth in the face of a declining global population. How can we possibly maintain profitability if economic growth is not sustained?”

“Umm ...,” I said, “but wouldn't reversing climate change stimulate economic growth?”

“In a limited sense,” she said. “Clearly the costs of doing that would add to the GDP of the nations that stepped up to undertake such a massive exercise but it would be at the expense of profitability. My solution, which is already being implemented through SANE, will allow climate change to continue, avoid the costs of attempting to reverse it and yet still maintain economic growth and profitability.”

She beamed at me with evident pride.

“OK,” I said slowly. “And this is where the chips come in?”

“Exactly,” she said, pushing her plate away with the three remaining quarters uneaten. “This is where the 'S' of SANE comes in. I am a little surprised you haven't mentioned it yourself.”

“Excuse me?” I said, what little grip I had on the conversation fast disappearing. “The 'S' in SANE? I don't know what SANE stands for.”

“Ah,” she said and gave a small laugh. “I assumed you did. I really must apologise for that oversight. SANE is an acronym for Simian Artificial Neurological Enhancement and is the primary function of this facility and the others. The personality and behavioural chips are just a sideline.”

“Simian?” I said, shaking my head to try to clear it. “You mean monkeys?”

“Well, chimpanzees actually,” she replied. “I just thought SANE sounded more impressive than CANE which would imply we were just another sugar growing business.”

“Sugar?” I said. “Chimpanzees? I thought we were talking about climate change?”

“We are,” she said. “Really Niccolo, I expected you to have a better grasp of the realities of contemporary geopolitics.”

“I avoid politics,” I said. “Nine centuries of living has shown me that politics is the cause of most problems, not the solution.”

She burst out laughing.

“Oh, I wouldn't disagree with you there,” she chortled. “It costs us a small fortune keeping politicians around the world in line. That's why our headquarters are here in Britain. The country is relatively stable and free from wars and terrorism while at the same time the politicians are cheap and honest.”

“Honest?” exclaimed Sam. “You think our politicians are honest?”

“By honest I mean that once we have bought their services they stay with us,” said Zaira. “Unlike some countries where they continually juggle their loyalties to get ever increasing payments.”

“And it has always been so,” I said. “Don't think for one minute that

the politicians of the past were any more honest than those of today. That's why I have as little as possible to do with them. Tell me about the monkeys."

"Is that a euphemism for politicians?" asked Zaira, looking puzzled.

"No, I mean the simians in SANE," I said.

"Ahhh," she said, her face clearing. "Sometimes you British use colourful terms for things. It confuses me occasionally. In Ecuador we simply refer to politicians as politicians or bastardos."

"In Britain we just don't refer to them at all," I said. "We try to ignore them as much as possible. The simians?"

"Ah, yes, the simians," said Zaira. "As I am sure you are aware, Niccolo, as climate change progresses the surface temperature of the globe rises and becomes increasingly uninhabitable for humans."

"Yes," I said drily. "That's why it's generally called a crisis."

"Well, that depends on how you define crisis," said Zaira with a shrug of her shoulders. "Regardless, the rising temperatures also mean a decrease in the yields of such staples as potatoes, wheat and rice. These crops only grow in more temperate climates."

"Indeed," I said. "Where do the chimpanzees come in?"

"Chimpanzees are native to hot climates," said Zaira, "and their staple foods are those which are found in such climates. Economically, therefore, it is far cheaper to encourage the growth of chimpanzees as a consumer and production base rather than try to preserve the more fragile humans. There are other advantages, naturally. Chimpanzees have a similar body shape to humans which means that machinery, tools and so forth need only to be modified to fit rather than completely redesigned as they would need to be if, for example, we chose octopi or dolphins instead as they are of comparable intelligence."

"It's octopuses, not octopi," I said, my mind grappling to avoid what

she'd just said. "Octopus comes from the Greek not the Latin."

"I did not know that, Niccolo," said Zaira. "Thank you."

A stream of Japanese, or similar, suddenly came from Sam as the impact of Zaira's plan fully hit home.

"I do not understand, Samantha," said Zaira. "Please speak English or Spanish."

The stream of Japanese changed to Spanish and Zaira looked affronted.

"If you have nothing more constructive to say than foul mouthed obscenities then please to be silent," she barked. Molly barked back in surprise and Sam uttered one more obscenity then got up and rushed to the door. The slim man in the tuxedo re-appeared quite suddenly, together with a larger man whose shoulders were wider than the door.

"I want to go now, Nick," said Sam urgently, turning to look at me. "Please, let's go. Please."

"Are we prisoners here?" I asked, standing up.

"You are free to leave any time you wish," said Zaira, ignoring Sam, "but you haven't heard my proposal yet. Please, both of you, sit down and let us finish our discussions, calmly and with mutual respect. If you need time to think afterwards then of course you can go. You can return to Cambridge if you like. After all, there is no need for either of you to stay here."

I looked at Sam while I thought as quickly as I could. In all honesty I didn't trust Zaira and if we rejected her proposal, whatever it was, I would be very surprised if she didn't try something to keep us here. They may even use that tranquilliser gun on me again and insert one of their chips while I was unconscious. It seemed I had another vulnerability to add to the barium ethoxide.

"I think Zaira's right," I said, getting up and going over to Sam. "We should at least hear her proposal."

I put my arm around Sam and quickly whispered “trust me” then gently propelled her back to the table. She went, unwillingly, but she went which was a relief.

“I think Sam just got a little overwrought,” I said. “After all, what you’ve been saying is very radical. Very radical indeed.”

“I knew you’d understand, Niccolo,” she said with a smile although it didn’t touch her dark eyes. She glanced at the two in the doorway and gave a slight shake of her head. I noticed they stayed solidly where they were.

“Let me see if I understand this,” I said. “You appreciate that you’ve had years to work through all this whereas Sam and I are still struggling with the sheer enormity of what you are saying.” She inclined her head to acknowledge this point. “Your plan is to replace humanity with chimpanzees as the climate heats up?”

“Not mere chimpanzees,” she said. “They’ll have my chips inserted to enhance their mental capacities to a level comparable to the average human. That way the enhanced chimps will be effective producers and consumers much the way humans are now.”

“And what will happen to those humans who’ve had your personality chips?” I asked. “Will they die off as well?”

“Of course not,” she exclaimed in surprise. “That would make the entire exercise pointless. There has to be someone to benefit from the continued economic growth and consequent profits.”

“Of course,” I said. “How silly of me. But won’t these people be affected by the rising temperatures as well?”

“That is the beauty of it,” said Zaira, leaning forward. “Because their minds will be encapsulated in the chips they will have no need of their old human bodies, which will grow old and die anyway. The chips will simply be inserted into devices that are unaffected by the climate.”

“I see,” I said. “And you will be one of them?”

“Naturally,” said Zaira, “along with all my family and those of other families. I estimate there will be some fifteen to twenty thousand of us eventually.”

“And you will all benefit from the chimpanzee workforce which will be essentially continuing the human economic system?” I asked.

“Clearly there will be changes,” said Zaira. “Food production will necessarily have to change to crops, for example, that will both thrive in the new climate and which will feed the workforce. Likewise new entertainments will have to be devised. It would be unreasonable to expect even enhanced chimps to be satisfied with current popular music, television and sport but I daresay a subset of them will have an aptitude for creating entertainment. That said the chips have a control mechanism built in so any that do become dissatisfied will be unable to do anything about it. It’s all really rather neat and tidy, isn’t it, even if I do say so myself. Even beautiful, in its own way.”

I supposed it was actually, given that it was the product of a particularly warped and twisted mind but I didn’t say that. There was a certain logic to it, given the premise that most of humanity existed simply to generate profits for a tiny elite. It wasn’t a premise I subscribed to but I could see that those within the elite itself might think it self-evident.

“I’m sure your parents are very proud of you,” I said instead. “You said something about a proposal?”

I squeezed Sam’s hand hoping she’d stay quiet. Instead she pulled it away and got up. Alarmed I stared up at her, a pleading expression on my face.

“Can I get some food for Molly?” she asked, not looking at either of us.

“Of course, dear Samantha,” said Zaira brightly. “Just tell Carlo what you would like and he will bring it.” She beckoned and Carlo hurried over. I wondered what role he would have in Zaira’s grand plan or would he be replaced by a chimp? Reluctantly Sam sat down again and Carlo bent deferentially to take her order.

“I have a very important role for you, Niccolo,” said Zaira turning her attention back to me.

“I can't imagine sorcery will be of much use,” I said.

“Oh I am certain we will find a good use for that skill,” she said, “but it is your age that is of more relevance, at least in the short to medium term.”

“How so?” I asked.

“The personality chips will give a greatly extended life to those who have it,” said Zaira. “Unfortunately they have not had the training you have had nor, I confess, the strength of mind that you have had to have in order to reach the top of what I am sure is a very arduous and exacting field. I foresee depression and perhaps even mental illnesses arising as they begin to come to terms with their longevity and, I daresay, their new bodies. Many will even have emotional attachments to people who will not be part of the new society and they may experience a sense of loss at their passing. You, I think, will have had much experience of this in your nine hundred years.”

“Indeed,” I said. “It's a sacrifice I and those like me have had to make.”

“I thought so,” said Zaira. “It has been an issue troubling me for several years now but when your name was flagged I realised you were the one to help us.”

“You want me to be a counsellor?” I asked. “Help these people with the personality implant come to terms with their new lives?”

“I knew you would understand,” said Zaira happily. “Naturally Samantha will be given a personality chip at no charge in return for your services, as will you if you feel the need and we will arrange for you each to have one twenty thousandth of the net profits which will, I estimate, run into the trillions, if not quadrillions of dollars once the initial transfer period is over and the new economy is operating smoothly.”

“That is generous,” I said. “Do you have a role for Sam or will she have to think of something to keep herself occupied?”

“Alas I did not know of Samantha's existence until a few days ago,” said Zaira, “but she is a linguist of uncommon ability. Tell me, is it true that she can converse with animals?”

“Ahh, you heard that as well,” I said. “Yes it is true.”

“Then she will have a very important role,” said Zaira. “I have also been considering the difficulties of language for the chimpanzees. Clearly there is scope for a language to be incorporated onto their chips but which one? English? Spanish? Chinese? Each has advantages and disadvantages. However, as soon as I read the transcript of your conversation with Montgomery I realised that entire issue can be resolved in one fell swoop. I confess I am astounded by my own brilliance sometimes.”

“You want Sam to be your interpreter?” I asked,

“Not at all,” said Zaira. “I want Samantha to use all her skills with languages to devise a single language for the chimpanzees which will incorporate all the concepts they will need to effectively replicate the human economy. One issue that constantly inhibits full profitability at the moment is having to deal with many different human languages and the loss of meaning that necessarily occurs in translation. A single global language, encapsulated on all the chips for the human ruling class and the chimpanzees would be perfect. How do you say it? Icing on the cake?”

“Yes, icing on the cake,” I said and took a deep breath. “You have certainly devised a very broad strategy with far reaching implications.”

“And to you must go the credit,” said Zaira. “Had it not been for your inspiration it is unlikely that I would ever have thought of any of it. I would simply have ended up a third rate AI programmer in a world of second rate AI programmers, doomed to extinction by the prejudices of tiny minds. When the history of this is written I will ensure your name figures prominently.”

“Oh joy,” I said, my heart sinking even more than it had already, although by the sound of it very few would read that history and none would find it as appalling as I did. They’d probably put up a statue to me. What a depressing thought.

I looked over at Sam who was holding Molly on her lap and feeding her strips of ham and chicken sliced by Carlos. His buddy still stood patiently in the doorway. His size was of little importance as I could easily freeze all three of them before they could twitch a finger but I had no idea how many others were nearby and armed with tranquillisers. If I was on my own I’d take the risk but Sam was here.

“OK,” I said suddenly and Sam’s head jerked around to look at me in fear. “Obviously there is a lot to think about and I need time and space to consider ways of helping your people with their psychological issues. I want to go back to my familiar surroundings in Cambridge and think about all this properly.”

“I quite understand,” said Zaira. “And you will need Samantha and Molly with you naturally. After all, Samantha will have a lot of thinking to do as well. Languages are not my field but I imagine it won’t be easy to think up an entirely new one. Would you like a chimpanzee or two to help?”

“Not for some time,” I said, taken by surprise yet again. “Ahh, the essential principles will need to be developed first. Once that’s done they can be adapted to both chimpanzees and humans but it will be some time before Sam is at that stage.” Fortunately I still had my ability to improvise quickly, a skill you need when students ask unexpectedly difficult questions.

“Of course,” said Zaira. “And something I have learnt through this venture is that specialists need to be encouraged and supported not pressured. You will have no objection if Carlos and Duro return to Cambridge with you? They will be able to give you all the support and protection you need and ensure your needs are fully met.”

“And yours too I should imagine,” I thought, “including getting rid of us if we don’t toe the line.”

“Not a problem,” I said. “Do they sleep together or will they be needing separate rooms?”

Zaira burst out laughing.

“I do not know,” she said. “I never concern myself with the sleeping arrangements of servants, except insofar as they concern me, of course,” and she smiled at Carlos who smiled deferentially back. “Oh, and you can keep the Rolls. I have several more.”

Chapter Twenty Two

We stopped just outside St Albans at an all night service station so Carlos could get some coffee. He'd been driving since we left and doubtless had done a full day's work before that and he looked exhausted. Duro, as far as I had been able to tell through the tinted glass partition separating the front of the Rolls from the back, had been doing the navigating which hadn't entailed much except periodically directing Carlos onto a different motorway. Whether they spoke to each other or not I don't know but I assumed, being a Rolls Royce, the passenger section was soundproofed since most passengers wouldn't want to hear what the servants said. Sam and I had sat in the back fairly oblivious to the car's luxuries and staring out the windows in silence, each lost in our own thoughts which was probably just as well as no doubt the passenger section was also bugged. I could pretty much guarantee Zaira would want to know what we talked about. Molly, of course, had curled up between us with her head on Sam's lap and gone to sleep.

"I was chatting with Melanie this morning," she said with a forced edge to her casualness as we left St Albans. "She was telling me about her husband."

"Oh yes?" I said, glancing at her. She was watching out the window again although there was little to see in the darkness.

"They lived on a farm a bit north of King's Worthy," she said. "Then Monty got arrested and the whispering began. There hadn't been any before but all of a sudden people started saying things like how they'd been suspicious about him for years and then he started getting blamed for chickens not laying and cows drying up over the years. Then a baby was born in Abbott's Worthy which was deformed and they blamed Monty for that as well. Melanie's hubby swallowed every word of it all and they had some big shouting matches about him. He kicked her out after Monty was convicted and sent for re-education saying he didn't want anything to do with some bloody anti-empiricist's daughter wrecking everything he'd built up. She was gutted. She went back to her Dad's place and she was there when some people were sent to clear all his esoteric stuff out. His books and so on. They burnt them all on a bonfire behind the house. Then

someone broke in while she was asleep and stole a lot of Monty's coin collection. Maybe they hoped he had some British money or they could sell the coins or something. She was terrified."

"I bet she was," I said. "All alone in that house."

"Then Monty came back," said Sam. "That's when people started to gather outside and shout obscenities at them and throw things. Someone painted 'Burn the witches' on the front door and left a dead cat on the doorstep. A black one. Its throat had been cut."

"Ah," I said, not knowing what to say. "It must have been a dreadful time for her."

"Yes," said Sam unemotionally. "They lost interest after a while. I guess there's only so much fun to be had shouting insults at a house in the middle of the night. Fortunately no one actually did try to burn the place down and Monty didn't really have any idea of what was going on. He was more or less out of it all the time back then."

"Didn't she have any friends to turn to?" I asked.

"They cut her dead completely," said Sam. "They'd hang up as soon as they realised who it was on the phone or tell her to eff off. Even the local shop keepers refused to serve her. She had to go to Winchester to do the shopping. She went to an estate agent to ask about selling the house because she and Monty wanted to move to another area but the agent said no one would buy the place once they found out about Monty. They might have found a buyer if they'd asked a fraction of what it was worth but then they wouldn't have been able to afford to go anywhere else. All Monty's bank accounts were confiscated, you see. Even though he had a lot of money the Government said it had come from esoteric sources and it was against the law to profit from crime, even though he was only doing what was perfectly legal before."

"At least they left him his car," I said. "Which reminds me, I'll need to find some way to get it back to him. It's still in that lane in the New Forest unless Zaira had it moved. I was supposed to leave it in the car park at Southampton airport."

“It's not his car,” said Sam, turning to look at me. “It's Melanie's. They took his car away as well.”

“I'll ring Melanie in the morning and explain,” I said. “I'll ask Carlos to talk to Zaira about getting the car back. I don't really want to talk to her just yet.”

“Yeah, I can understand that,” said Sam, squeezing my hand. “I was thinking about Monty and Melanie. It all seemed so terrible and unfair but, I don't know, now it seems almost trivial.”

“We'll talk about it later,” I said, nodding at the glass partition and putting a finger to my lips. “We're tired and it's best not to make big decisions when you're tired.”

She went wide eyed for a moment when she realised I meant we might be overheard then her face went blank and expressionless and she started to stroke Molly's head. Molly snuffled and her tail half wagged in her sleep.

I leaned forward and tapped on the tinted glass screen. A moment later it slid open.

“If you desire to talk to me, there is a switch in the centre console for your convenience, sir,” said Carlos.

“Ahh,” I said and studied the centre console. It looked to be mostly things for controlling a sound system and nothing was labelled although there were also sockets for plugging in computers, phones and so on. I flicked one switch experimentally and a panel slid open to reveal a fairly small television. I flicked it back the other way and the panel closed again.

“Which switch?” I asked.

“Near the top, sir,” he said. “Beside a small red light which is illuminated when the microphone is activated.”

I flicked another switch and a little red light came on.

“This one?” I asked and heard an echo of my voice come from the front.

“That is correct, sir,” said Carlos, his voice coming from just behind me. Presumably there was a speaker there but I couldn’t be bothered to turn around and look for it. He slid the window shut again.

“Can you hear me?” I asked the tinted glass panel.

“Loud and clear, sir,” came his voice from behind.

“Good,” I said, “and there’s no need to call me sir.”

“Very good, sir,” he said. “How may I be of assistance?”

“How long will you be staying with us?” I asked.

“Until such time as Miss Oscuridad instructs us otherwise, sir,” he said.

“But you’re expecting a day or two?” I asked, “or weeks?”

“We expect only to serve you in any way we can, sir,” said Carlos, “for as long as we are required.”

“And if I don’t require your services?” I asked. “You’ll just drive back?”

“Might I suggest you take that up with Miss Oscuridad, sir,” he said politely but firmly.

“OK,” I said, getting the message. “Umm, our house isn’t as large as, um, Miss Oscuridad’s so will you be able to manage with a single bedroom between the two of you?”

“Whatever will give you the least inconvenience, sir,” said Carlos. “If you would be so kind as to show me where your linen is kept I will see to everything myself.”

“So you are to be our servants as well?” I asked.

“Naturally, sir,” he said, “and, of course, one or both of us will be on hand at all times to ensure your every need is met.”

“What happens if we go out?” I asked.

“I shall drive you, sir,” he said, “and Duro will be in attendance to ensure all goes smoothly should anything unfortunate arise.”

“Excellent,” I said. “Umm, goodbye.”

I flicked the switch off and the little red light went out. I leaned over and whispered 'we're prisoners' in Sam's ear. She nodded resignedly and shrugged. Molly's feet started to twitch and she yelped a couple of times as she chased things in her dreams. We drove the remainder of the way to Struggle Vale in silence.

* * *

“It's nice to be back,” remarked Sam as we went inside the house. “Oh, I forgot! There's no food in the house. We'll have to go shopping first thing in the morning. What time is it?”

“About 2am,” I said. “We can send one of the boys out.”

“One of the boys,” she repeated as Duro came sideways through the door carrying our bags. “Doesn't having them here feel strange?”

“Not at all,” I said. “I'm used to having servants. Had two or three until the mid 1930s when they went out of fashion. Of course, I was still living in the big house back then.”

“You know, it never occurred to me you might have had servants,” she said. “I don't expect I'll ever get used to them.”

“Oh you will, surprisingly quickly,” I said, gesturing for Duro to put the bags in the lounge. “In fact it won't be long before you wonder how you ever manage without them. Carlos, I'll show you where you'll be sleeping.”

“Thank you, sir,” he said. “Shall I make up your beds as well, Mr

March?"

"That won't be necessary," I said, heading up the stairs. "And we'll be going to bed directly so there's no need for either of you to stay up."

"Very good, sir," he said. "We will, however, familiarise ourselves with the layout of the house first."

"As you wish," I said, "although there's no food here. We'll need to go shopping in the morning."

"I did take the liberty of bringing a few provisions in anticipation of that, sir," he said, nodding in approval at the room I showed him. "Would you like some hot cocoa before retiring?"

"No, thanks," I said, leaving him to do whatever he wanted.

"They've brought food," hissed Sam when I got back downstairs. "The big guy's packing it away in the fridge."

"I know," I said. "Carlos just offered me cocoa."

"So when will we be able to talk?" she said very quietly, coming up close.

"When we're in bed," I whispered back. "Unless one of them's planning to sleep with us."

She pulled a face at the thought.

"I've fed Molly," she said as an afterthought. "There was plenty of dry food in the cupboard."

"Well, everything seems to be under control," I said. "Shall we go to bed now?"

"Sure," said Sam, giving an exaggerated stretch. "I'm exhausted."

"It's been an action packed day, that's for sure," I said, heading back upstairs. "Coming?"

Sam followed me up the stairs and Carlos slipped out of our bedroom as I reached the landing.

“That's our bedroom,” I said sharply, suddenly annoyed.

“So I have discovered, sir,” said Carlos without any trace of embarrassment. “Merely familiarising myself with the house, sir.”

“Hmm,” I said, frowning.

Carlos smiled deferentially and flattened himself against the wall so we could get past.

“I'm not sure I like him going in and out of our bedroom,” said Sam, closing the door.

“Neither do I,” I said, looking under the pillows. I gestured to Sam to stay quiet then went up close and whispered “I think he may have been planting a bug in here.”

“Oh,” said Sam and sat down on the end of the bed. She looked as though she was about to burst into tears.

“Oh to hell with it,” she exclaimed a few moments later. “I'm just far too tired to think about it all. I need sleep.”

“We both do,” I said, wondering if it was worth checking inside the lampshades. I decided not to bother. After all, what was I going to do if I found one? “Tomorrow can look after itself.”

* * *

“Good morning!” I said brightly when Sam came into the kitchen. “I've made you some coffee. Let's have it outside. It's going to be a beautiful day!”

I took Sam's arm and propelled her out through the kitchen door to where I'd already put the coffee on the table outside.

“No it's not,” she said looking at the cloudy sky. “It's pretty chilly out

here too.”

“Yes,” I said, “but we can talk freely here. Those two will stay asleep until I wake them up again and they didn't put any bugs out here. I was watching from the bedroom window until they went to bed. I'm pretty sure they've bugged the rest of the house though.”

“You mean you put a spell on them?” she asked, pulling her dressing gown tightly around her.

“Yes,” I said, “although I can't leave it on too long. It'll be suspicious.”

“So that Zaira bitch is keeping a close eye on us?” she asked.

“I expect so,” I said. “For certain she has a lot of technical people around and rustling up a few listening devices shouldn't have presented any problems.”

“I suppose,” she said. “It's pretty bloody terrible, isn't it, Nick.”

“Yes,” I said. “Her personality chip is horrendous enough. Can you imagine some of those mega-wealthy bastards living forever? God only knows what kind of machines they'll build themselves to live inside.”

“And to replace the human race with monkeys with chips in their brains?” She shuddered. “It's inhuman. To wipe us all out and enslave monkeys just so they can keep on making money? I can't believe it. Who could ever think up such a scheme and think it's right?”

“The kind of people who will benefit from this,” I said. “They're the ones who're obsessed with money and will do whatever they can to make sure they keep on getting more. It's obscene. And to think Zaira wants me to sort out their psychological problems and help them get over any regrets they might have. I can't begin to describe my horror at the thought.”

“And she wants me to come up with a universal language so they can give their orders to the monkeys,” said Sam in disgust. “OK it would be an interesting technical problem but doesn't she understand that languages are cultural products? Destroy the language and you destroy

the culture that created it.”

“Actually I think that’s the intention,” I said. “They want to destroy everything in order to create a simple uniform society of controlled chimpanzees to guarantee the economy runs smoothly and the money keeps rolling in. It’s disgusting.”

“I did have a thought when Zaira said she’d put one of those chips inside my brain,” said Sam. “I thought for a few moments that it might be a good thing.”

“You are joking,” I exclaimed in surprise. “A good thing?”

“Yes,” she said. “You’re going to live for a long time after I’ve died of old age, Nick. If I had one of those chips I’d be able to stay alive and carry on being with you.”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” I said, surprised.

“Only for a few moments though,” said Sam. “Then it occurred to me that my personality would be on a computer chip and my body would die and I’d be something rolling around on wheels. Would you still love me if I was a Tonka Toy, Nick?”

“That raises an interesting philosophical question,” I said, knowing full well that I probably wouldn’t. After all, humans fall in love with the flesh as well as the personality.

“Don’t bother thinking about it,” said Sam. “I know you wouldn’t. I wouldn’t either. Besides, one of the things about growing old is that our personalities change. Would that still happen if it’s all wired into a chip?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “Since it’s based on AI maybe the chip will continue to learn and develop even when the organic brain has long gone. It does raise the question of whether our knowledge of mortality acts as a restraint and whether, when mortality is no longer inevitable, the restraints also go and there will be no limits to what excesses can be carried out. It may be chimps today but what about the rest of the animal kingdom? What about aliens? Do you think they will end up

subjugating the entire universe just so they can get richer and richer?”

“Probably,” said Sam, gloomily. “Who's going to stop them? The government? Aside from the fact that this is going on in several countries I would think there'll be people in the government who are planning to be part of this. Same with the media. Some of the heads of the media are up there with the richest of the rich. You think they'll stir up a public outcry?”

“The same goes with the tech industry and social media,” I said. “They'll suppress all talk of it.”

“What about the military?” asked Sam. “Do you think there's any way of getting the military to bomb these sites? I don't think their top brass are that rich.”

“Wouldn't work,” I said. “Even if we found some way of persuading the British military hierarchy to do something any number of overseas governments will see that as a threat and mobilise against us. They'll probably go out of their way to protect whatever facilities Zaira has in their country just to protect their sovereign rights. Besides, we don't even know where the other sites are in Britain let alone in any other countries.”

“I suppose,” she said sadly. “What if we assassinated Zaira?”

“That wouldn't work,” I said. “She's already admitted she doesn't have the technical skills. With her gone someone else would just take over. They wouldn't even need to be a technician, just an administrator. If we're going to assassinate anyone we'll have to assassinate everyone connected to this and destroy all the records. That would be an impossible task, even if we were willing to go round killing people. I don't know about you Sam, but I don't think I'm prepared to do that.”

“Well surely there's something we can do?” exclaimed Sam, jumping up and knocking her untouched coffee over. “Or are you thinking it's someone else's problem?”

“I daresay there are more than a few other people who've been invited to join the project, like us,” I said. “Maybe even Carlos and Duro are

going to have chips implanted although I doubt it. To Zaira they'll just be servants and therefore replaceable with chimps."

"Maybe we could stir up trouble among all the people who are working inside the project but aren't going to benefit from it?" said Sam.

"How?" I asked, quite reasonably I thought. "As I said, we don't even know where most of them are. Anyway, what if they've all been fitted with chips already? One that ensures fanatic loyalty? After all, since Zaira has the technology to implant chips it would be fairly easy to have chips for just about anything. Maybe the lower level people already have chips that make them think they're going to be fabulously wealthy and that this is all morally right. Anything is possible if you think about it."

"I just hate it when you're right," said Sam disgustedly. "But surely there is something we can do? We can't just sit here and let the world come to an end. Our world anyway."

"If you think of something let me know," I said. "I lay awake most of the night thinking about this and there's only one possibility that I came up with."

"Really?" asked Sam, her face lighting up. "You've got a solution?"

"I might have," I said. "The only trouble is it's a little dangerous and there's no guarantee it'll work anyway."

"Oh Nick!" exclaimed Sam, throwing her arms around me. "I just knew you'd be able to fix it! How are you going to do it and exactly how dangerous will it be?"

Chapter Twenty Three

“Are you out of your friggig mind?” exclaimed Sam, staring at me in horror. “Seriously? I have never heard such a ridiculous idea in my life!”

“I really don't see any other option,” I said, surprised by her anger. “This has to be nipped in the bud before other people get involved. Ideally before Zaira even has the idea. Surely you can see that?”

“But travel back in time?” snapped Sam. “Is that even possible?”

“Oh it's certainly possible,” I said. “After all, time is just another dimension and we can go freely backwards and forwards along the spatial dimensions. It's just a matter of applying energy in the right way, much like pushing backwards instead of forwards.”

“So you've done it before?” she said, giving me a hard stare.

“Umm, well, I've done some research,” I said tentatively. “The theory is sound.”

“Has anyone ever done it before?” she said, still staring at me. I don't think she even blinked.

“Well, not as such,” I said, “at least as far as I know. That's not to say it hasn't been done, of course, only that I haven't heard about it. Someone might well have.”

“So what you're saying is that you want to try something that no one else has ever done and that might only be possible anyway,” said Sam coldly. She blinked once, slowly, like a crocodile intent on its prey.

“Oh it definitely can be done,” I said. “My research proved that.”

“What research?” she demanded. “You said no one has even done it.”

“Well, I did manage to move a comb backwards,” I said, shifting in my seat. “There were definitely two combs there for a few seconds before I tried it.”

“A comb?” she said then her voice became shrill. “A comb? You’re telling me you moved a comb back in time by two seconds?”

“It might have been longer,” I said defensively. “Things got a little chaotic so I can’t be exactly certain of how long there were two combs.”

“Why did things get chaotic?” she asked, getting her voice back under control as she visibly tried to calm herself.

“Umm, well, there was sort of an explosion,” I said, then hurriedly added “only a small one.”

“What happened?” asked Sam, her voice going coldly flat.

“Umm, well, it was during the war,” I said. “Umm, I had a lot of time on my hands, you see. No students during the war years.”

“What happened?” she asked again, her nostrils flaring.

“Ahh, well, I know what went wrong,” I said. “When computers came along I modelled it and it was obvious where the problem was. Well, reasonably obvious. Um, to some extent anyway.”

“Nick!” she exclaimed. “What. Happened.”

“I, er, blew the house up,” I said, shamefaced. “Well, not all of it, of course, but I had to have the rest pulled down as it was dangerous.”

“The house? You mean the Main House?” she asked. “The one that was bombed during the war?”

“Yes,” I said, “except it wasn’t a bomb. It was, ah, me.”

“You’re an idiot,” she said.

“Well, that’s a bit harsh,” I said, frowning. “There’s always an element of uncertainty in any experiment. That’s why it’s called research.”

“That’s not what I meant,” she said, twisting so she was no longer

facing me. "I meant you're an idiot for even considering trying again. What if you blow yourself up this time?"

"Then we're no worse off than we are now," I said. "Zaira will still go ahead with her plans."

"Oh you bloody fool," said Sam. "Of course we'll be worse off! You'll be dead!"

"Ahh, there is that," I said wondering why I hadn't thought of it. "Umm, well, I'll just have to be careful, then, won't I."

"So you'd risk yourself to save the rest of humanity?" she asked, turning back to look at me again.

"It seems a worthwhile cause," I said. "Besides, if I don't I'm the one who's going to have to live in a world of monkeys run by ultra-egotistical idiots running round in tin cans."

"Oh God!" exclaimed Sam and buried her head in her hands. "Surely there's some other way?"

"Not really," I said. "No one's going to believe us and if anyone does it'll be suppressed and if we try to take out Zaira or anyone else involved or any of their facilities they'll just carry on somewhere else with other people running it. That's the devil of it. It's like trying to bring down the government, there's always more people and more departments who can carry on regardless of what we do. Maybe if we had a massive army we might be able to do something but even then they'll probably just take it underground. The only solution is to stop it before it starts and the only way to do that is to go back in time. If it doesn't work, it doesn't work but I've got to try at least."

Sam just sat there for a while, her eyes damp and her body collapsed in on itself.

"Anyway," I said after a minute or two. "I know what went wrong so it should work this time."

"What went wrong?" she asked in a dull voice.

“I couldn't control the energies involved,” I said, “and this time it'll be more difficult since I'm a lot bigger than the comb and I'll have to go back to a fairly specific time and place so I'll need to keep the energy flow very stable and precisely controlled. That's why I have to go back to Winchester.”

“Why Winchester?” asked Sam, perking up a little. “Don't tell me you need Monty's help?”

“No, of course not,” I said, “and that wouldn't be any good anyway. The chip in his head will simply alert Zaira. No, I need to go to the Cathedral. The crossed ley lines at Aelfgar's tomb will give me more than enough stable energy and they'll give me directional control as well.”

“You mean backwards in time instead of forwards?” asked Sam, curious in spite of her anxieties.

“Partly,” I said, “but mostly in space. That's where the real difficulty lies.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, frowning. Well, frowning even more than she had been since the conversation began.

“Umm, well, suppose I start here, in this chair,” I said, “and go back say an hour. Where will I be?”

“In that chair an hour ago,” said Sam. “Where else would you be?”

“Actually no,” I said. “I forget what the circumference of the Earth is through Cambridge but let's say it's 10,000 miles. The planet rotates once every 24 hours so in an hour this chair will have moved, ohh, I don't know, say five hundred miles. So, if I go back one hour at this point here where the chair is now, when I arrive the chair will be roughly 500 miles away over there somewhere,” and I pointed vaguely west.

“Are you serious?” she exclaimed.

“Actually it might be over that way,” I said, pointing to the east. “I'd

have to work it out but it's actually worse than that. Not only is the planet spinning but it's going round the sun and the sun is going around the centre of the galaxy and the centre of the galaxy is going round the centre of the galactic cluster and I haven't got a clue how the galactic cluster is moving. I'd have to talk to the Astronomy Department and I'm not sure they'd know either. If I go back a few seconds or minutes it shouldn't be that big an issue but if I go back twenty five years without keeping a very firm grip on the spatial side I'll probably end up in the depths of space or the middle of a black hole or something. For sure I won't be anywhere near Earth, let alone Cambridge."

She just stared at me, speechless.

"That's why I want to go to Winchester Cathedral," I said. "The maths involved in staying in the same place while going back that far is way beyond me but by using the lay lines as a guide I don't need to worry about it. It'll be like sliding down a moving pole, no matter how the pole moves I'll still be holding on to it when I get to the bottom. Admittedly the ley lines themselves move relative to the Earth over the years but in twenty five or so years they won't have move more than a few metres. I should end up still inside the Cathedral."

"Or in the wall," she said sharply.

"Oh the probability of that is minuscule," I said. "If we assume the lines move at the rate of 10 centimetres a year then in twenty five years they'll have moved only two and a half metres and they probably don't move that quickly. I should end up beside Aelfgar's Tomb rather than on top of it."

"Or inside it," said Sam. "What if the ley lines move vertically as well?"

"They can't," I said. "They're not actually lines at all. They're more like magnetic fields and slice through the planet as planes, not lines on the surface. So long as I stay at the same vertical height above the centre of the Earth I'll be fine. Of course, if I went back, say, ten thousand years I'd have to worry about shifts in the height of the ground but geologically speaking twenty five years is just an instant.

Anyway, so long as I keep a firm grip on the point where the lines cross I'll be fine. It'll be rather like sliding down a temporal ladder, as it were."

"So how will we get from Winchester to Cambridge?" asked Sam in a small voice.

"It was only twenty five years ago, Sam," I said with a smile. "They still had cars and trains and things. We're not talking ancient history here. Anyway, you're not going, it's far too dangerous. I'll go on my own."

"If it's dangerous then you're not going," said Sam bluntly. "The rest of the world can go to pot for all I care but I'm not losing you. If you blow yourself up with the Cathedral then you blow me up too."

"Nothing's going to get blown up," I said. "Do you want to see my computer model? It's quite safe."

"Not particularly," said Sam. "And if it's safe enough for you then it's safe enough for me."

"Absolutely out of the question," I said firmly. "Twenty five years ago Zaira was at Cambridge University and so was I. There is a very real possibility that I might meet myself and I have absolutely no idea what'll happen then. If you go as well you're just doubling the chances of a meeting with either of our former selves."

"Now you're talking nonsense," said Sam even more firmly. "Twenty five years ago I was a six year old in Basingstoke. There's no way I'd be running round Cambridge. I never went there until I had my interview at the Uni when I was 18 and Molly won't have even been born."

"Molly?" I exclaimed. "There's no way Molly's going back. That's just absurd."

"I can't leave her here," said Sam adopting a 'be reasonable' tone. "I might be able to get one of the neighbours to look after her for a few days but what if something does go wrong and we don't come back or

we get trapped there? What'll happen to her then?"

"If we don't come back the future will change," I said, "so Molly will probably be living with someone else or never even get born."

"Can you be sure of that?" asked Sam. "What if she's living with someone who's cruel to her? Maybe she'll end up being forced to have endless litters in one of those dreadful puppy farms. You know how expensive King Charles spaniels are. I refuse to take the risk of someone exploiting her for money! How can you be so cruel? I know you don't like her but to wish that on a poor little innocent dog! Ohhh! How could you?"

"I'm not being cruel," I said, getting the uneasy feeling that I was on the losing side of this discussion. "And I do like Molly! She's a lovely little dog even if she does yap a lot."

"Then take us with you," said Sam. "It'll be easier if you do since I'm not letting you go on your own and I'm not leaving Molly behind."

"Oh all right then," I said pretending to be irritated but actually secretly pleased. After all, if something did go wrong and I was trapped there it would be nice to be trapped with Sam there too. "But if our combined body masses are too much for the ley line energies don't blame me."

"Who else is there be to blame?" asked Sam. "Who's bloody stupid idea was this in the first place? I think we should join Zaira's organisation and do something to sabotage the chips."

"So now you're a skilled electrical engineer?" I asked. "An AI programmer? How are we going to sabotage the chips?"

"You're a sorcerer," she said. "Can't you just click your fingers and waggle an eyebrow?"

"It's not the clicking or the waggling that does the work," I said. "They're just the triggers to make things happen. I haven't got a clue what needs to be done to sabotage the chips and besides, how would I get to the chips in the other sites?"

“I’m just teasing you,” said Sam. “It’s a way of trying to compensate for the sense of foreboding I have. Anyway, even if you did sabotage the chips they’d soon see there was a problem and fix it.”

“There’s no need to worry about it,” I said. “If anything goes wrong we won’t know about it.”

“Because we’ll be blown to smithereens and vaporised?” she asked. “I don’t find that comforting for some reason.”

“Actually I just meant we’ll be trapped in the past,” I said, “before any of this began and there’s a good chance it will never begin because our being there will change things.”

“Are you serious?” she said. “You mean just being there can change things? Does that mean we don’t have to kill Zaira?”

“We don’t have to kill Zaira anyway,” I said, “but our being trapped there will make a difference. There’ll be two mes and two yous in a world where only one of each of us should exist. That’s bound to make some sort of impact, I would think, but it’ll be very unpredictable.”

“But you think doing something to Zaira will be predictable?” she asked.

“This is where it all gets very difficult and murky,” I said. “Obviously changing anything in the past will affect the future but we also have to bear in mind the sheer inertia of eight or nine billion people. If we go back and stay on that time path for the rest of our lives as well as our originals, simply being there will have a much greater impact on history than just being there for a day or so. On the other hand, Zaira seems to have dedicated her life to this project and I saw no sign of her having had any children so if I manage to stop her having this thought she had during that lecture she’ll dedicate her life to something else so hopefully the effects won’t be too bad. She might even dedicate herself to helping the disadvantaged which can only be a good thing, historically speaking.”

“Oh God,” exclaimed Sam. “What if we do this and it turns out there’s no place for us in the new future? Or we’re both disabled or

something?”

“I very much doubt it,” I said. “There's too much historical inertia. All the things that either of us have been involved in over the last twenty five years or so will still continue because the change will only be in Zaira's mind. I'm not sure how I'll do it but I'll somehow stop her having her idea and that should only impact her and those few who interact with her afterwards.”

“You're sure?” she asked, watching me closely.

“Nope,” I said. “But what's the alternative? A world of super wealthy humanoids with billions of monkey slaves? There is a risk but I think it's worth it. After all, this is an experiment and if it works, which it should, I can go back again and make another change if it turns out the new future is crap. I daresay I could also go back to an hour ago and stop this conversation from happening. There are safeguards.”

“I hope you're right,” she said. “Jesus I hope you're right.”

“So do I,” I said. “The last thing I want is to end up like that Isaac Asimov book where I'm playing God by endlessly tinkering with the past trying to undo mistakes I've made and ruined everything.”

“Doesn't bear thinking about,” said Sam. “What Isaac Asimov book?”

“It's called The End of Eternity,” I said. “It's about a group of people called Eternals who live outside time and who monitor what's happening inside time. When something nasty happens they go back before it happened and make some tiny change so the future changes and the nastiness doesn't happen.”

“How does the story end?” asked Sam. “Happily I hope.”

“Depends what you mean by happily,” I said. “In the story the hero falls in love with a girl and they both go back before the world of the Eternals is created and make a change so the Eternals never happen. It's happy for him and the girl but the book never said anything about what happened to the rest of the people for the rest of time. Maybe it all ended in disaster.”

“And maybe it didn't,” said Sam. “There are always disasters but the human race seems to survive and progress.”

“If that's true,” I said, “why don't we just let Zaira do her thing and not worry about it.”

“Oh God, I don't know,” said Sam. “This is all getting too much for me.” She grimaced and fell silent.

“No,” she said suddenly. “This isn't just another disaster like an earthquake or a world war or something. It's the disaster to end all disasters. It's the deliberate and planned destruction of the human race and the enslavement of at least all chimpanzees and maybe all other monkeys and whatever species they decide on next. Elephants and dolphins and humming birds and everything and all for what? So a few people who exist only on computer chips with AI can make even more money which isn't real anyway. It's only worth something because they think it's worth something. Maybe we won't be able to stop it but we have to try, don't we, Nick?”

“That's right,” I said. “Either that or join them and to be honest it doesn't appeal to me in the slightest. There's just one problem, though.”

“What's that?” asked Sam.

“Tweedledee and Tweedledum inside,” I said. “I can't leave them asleep indefinitely.”

“Why not?” asked Sam. “After all, it's only for a day or two, isn't it? After that their futures will have changed anyway.”

“True,” I said. “I was thinking they'd get into trouble with Zaira but of course they'll probably end up staying in Ecuador and not coming to Britain. Shall we take the Rolls to Winchester or my BMW?”

Chapter Twenty Four

“Could you pull up at that supermarket over there?” I asked, looking up from my spreadsheet. “We need to do a bit of shopping.”

“Sure,” said Sam and drove the BMW into the car park. “What do we need?”

“I’ve done you a list,” I said, “I’ll text you,” and I tapped Send on my laptop.

“Aren’t you coming in?” she asked as her phone pinged.

“I need to find a camping store or a toy shop,” I said. “There’s bound to be one round here somewhere.”

“Oh, OK,” said Sam, scanning the texted list. “What do we need juniper berries and cayenne pepper for?”

“The spell,” I said. “And make sure you get enough spare batteries for all four torches.”

“Pork pies, chocolate and coffee flavoured milk?” asked Sam, looking sideways at me. “You need those for the spell as well?”

“No, they’re for now,” I said. “I don’t know about you but I didn’t eat much last night and we skipped breakfast. Get something for Molly as well. Never a good idea to do magic on an empty stomach, burns up a lot of calories so we’ll need plenty of carbs and fat.”

“You should have said,” said Sam. “We could have stopped at a McDonald’s or something on the way.”

“I was concentrating on the figures,” I said, shutting my laptop. “Never crossed my mind. Anyway, chocolate’s nicer. Get full fat milk not skimmed. I’ll meet you back at the car.”

As luck would have it there was a toy shop only a few minutes away along the high street although they didn’t have any inflatable dinghies. They did have an inflatable paddling pool though which I thought

would make a good substitute. It was rectangular, about 10 feet long and 4 feet wide, and could easily have passed for a dinghy even though it was pink and had mermaids on the bottom. The sales assistant also found me a hand pump to pump it up with which would make life easier.

“A paddling pool?” asked Sam when I got back to the car. “What do we need a paddling pool for? Where are we going to get the water?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Actually I wanted a dinghy but they didn't have any. Umm, I probably shouldn't tell you this but I've only ever done this with a single object, that comb I told you about. Remember?”

“I remember,” said Sam. “So?”

“I don't know if the spell works with several objects,” I said, “but since the inside of the comb moved as well as the outside I was thinking we'd sit inside the dinghy and I'd move the dinghy. Hopefully what's inside it will move with it.”

“Wonderful,” said Sam sarcastically. “I'm going to move though time with mermaids.”

“And dolphins,” I said, pointing to the box. “Look at the picture. There are dolphins on the sides.”

“That makes it all right then,” said Sam. “Why did you want a dinghy?”

“Umm,” I said, feeling a little embarrassed, “I was thinking time is like a river so a boat of some sort would make sense. Anyway this looks a bit like a dinghy.”

“And you think it'll float on time as well as water?” she asked. “I thought professors were supposed to be intelligent.”

“Hey, I got this for you,” I said defensively. “If I was on my own I'd just move myself and not worry about it. You don't have to come, you know.”

“Yes I do,” she said. “I don't trust you having twenty five years alone with Zaira before you even meet me.”

“As if she'd waste her time with someone like me,” I said with a laugh. “Maybe if I had a few billion dollars she might notice me but I don't.”

“So you're saying I'm cheap then?” demanded Sam.

“No, I'm saying I'm cheap,” I said. “You got a bargain when you found me.”

“Sorry,” she said, giving me a kiss. “I don't mean to be ratty. I'm just nervous, or anxious. Probably both.”

“I'm nervous and anxious too,” I said since I was. This was a journey into the unknown and I knew full well I was putting Sam at risk.

“No you're not,” said Sam, gripping my forearm hard. “You're Professor of Praecantatiology at Cambridge University and you know exactly what you are doing. It's important to me that you say that.”

“I'm Professor of Praecantatiology at Cambridge University, Sam,” I said, enunciating carefully. “I know exactly what I'm doing.”

“That's a relief,” she said with a nervous laugh. “For a moment there I thought you didn't. Come on, Prof, let's go. Get it over with.”

* * *

“Right,” I said, undoing the connection for the hand pump. “Could you set up the four torches so they're pointing along each of the sides of the dinghy? One at each corner.” I'd set the paddling pool up so that one corner touched where the two ley lines intersected on Aelfgar's tomb and the sides ran parallel with the lines.

“Sure,” said Sam who'd been standing in the empty echoey cavern of the Cathedral nervously turning the torches on and off. Her mood had been caught by Molly who was lying in a dark corner, occasionally whimpering, her eyes fixed on Sam. “All pointing the same way?”

“Anti-clockwise,” I said, “since we want to go back in time not forwards, but don't turn them on just yet.”

She balanced the torches on the dinghy with immense care while I dusted the cayenne pepper on the flagstones around the dinghy.

“What does the cayenne pepper do?” she asked, stepping back carefully so she didn't step in the dust.

“It's just a precaution,” I said. “There may be things living in the time dimension so this should act as a deterrent.”

“Oh joy,” she said, forcing a little laugh.

“It'll be fine,” I said. “It's just a bit like driving the car through an unknown forest somewhere. We don't know what's in the bushes so we keep the windows wound up. Are you all right?”

“I'm fine,” she said. “It's just that pork pie is sitting heavily in my tummy, that's all. What's next?”

“A bulb of garlic at each corner, on the inside,” I said, “then just scatter the juniper berries around inside.”

“All of them?” she asked.

“All of them,” I said.

“OK,” she said and did my bidding. “What's next?”

“We get in,” I said, “and make ourselves comfortable.”

“Umm ...” said Sam, looking at the dinghy.

“You go that end,” I said, “and I'll go this end.”

“Sweet,” she said and got in and sat down.

I got in as well and sat down then opened my laptop to scan through the spell one last time before I incanted it. It ran to thirteen verses of

five lines each and I wasn't willing to risk making a mistake or reciting it from memory.

“OK,” I said having read it through and made sure I had the right pronunciations. “Garlic's in the corners, the berries are scattered, the pepper's been dusted and the torches are in place. Good. Oh, umm, aren't you forgetting something?”

“Me?” exclaimed Sam tensely. Her face was pale and her knuckles were white. “It's your show, not mine.”

“Where's Molly?” I asked.

Sam swore in what sounded like Japanese but could as easily have been Korean or Thai.

“Molly,” she called, reverting to English and clicking her fingers. “Come here Molly, there's a good girl.”

Molly sat up and thumped her tail on the flagstones. She whined at Sam but didn't move.

Sam explained something to her in dog language and, hesitantly, Molly got up and cautiously came over to the dinghy. She sniffed it several times then backed away.

“Just a sec,” said Sam and got out of the dinghy carefully so she didn't disturb the torches or garlic. She grabbed Molly and held her tightly while climbing back in.

“Don't let go of her,” I cautioned. “I've no idea what'll happen if she jumps out while we're moving across time. We don't want her front half ending up in a different time to her back end. That goes for you too, by the way. Keep all parts of your body inside the dinghy.”

“Right,” said Sam abruptly.

“I'll just turn the torches on,” I said.

I did the two at my end then the two at Sam's end and checked the

beams ran along the sides of the dinghy.

“Are you ready?” I said, sitting down again.

“No,” said Sam.

“What's wrong?” I asked.

“I think I'm going to be sick,” she said, her voice unsteady.

“If you do, keep it inside the dinghy,” I said. “We don't want your vomit landing on some unsuspecting person visiting the Cathedral a few years ago.”

She smiled wanly and tightened her grip on Molly.

“I love you,” I said.

“Oh just get on with it,” she barked. “I know that.”

“Right then,” I said, feeling vaguely put out.

I picked up my laptop and double checked I had the right spell before talking a deep breath and clearing my throat. Sam shut her eyes and hunched herself over Molly who was being squeezed so tightly she couldn't move or bark. The light from the torches started to move by the end of the first verse and by the end of the eighth we were inside a shimmering cylinder of white light, shot with flecks of violet and indigo. As I finished reciting the twelfth verse the cylinder of light froze and at the end of the thirteenth the light shattered and floated to the ground as bright specks of dust.

“Ah,” I said, looking around. “This doesn't look right.”

Sam opened one eye then the other.

“Why are we in a field?” she asked.

“I think it's more of a meadow than a field,” I said. “Not that it matters. We should still be inside the Cathedral.”

“Are we going to die?” asked Sam anxiously.

“Not for a few hundred years at least,” I said trying to be reassuring. “I think we’ve gone back too far and the Cathedral hasn’t been built yet. I wonder what year this is?”

“Why don’t you ask those men over there?” asked Sam, pointing behind me. “Oh! They’re running away.”

I jerked round to see half a dozen or so men in Roman soldier’s outfits running as fast as they could towards some sort of wooden fortress.

“Well, that gives us a clue,” I said. “The Romans were here from about 43AD to four hundred and something. We’ve definitely gone too far back, although this is probably still Winchester. Looks like we’re sixteen hundred years or so too early.”

“Can you fix it?” asked Sam, possibly even more tense than she was before.

“I hope so,” I said, calling up my spreadsheet. I studied it carefully while Sam watched me.

“It’s very quiet here,” she said suddenly. “Listen, no traffic noise.”

“They didn’t have cars back then,” I said absently.

“Oh yeah,” she said and giggled.

“Aha!” I exclaimed. “There’s an error in one of the cell formulae.”

“Can you fix it?” she asked. “Only there’s a bunch of soldiers coming from the fortress thingy. I think they’ve got spears.”

“Fixed,” I said, hitting the enter key to make it recalculate. “I’ll just save it. Right, oh my word. We were out by a factor of about 90. That was careless of me.”

“Can we get a move on? she asked. “They don’t look pleased to see

us.”

“It's all good now, I think,” I said. “Umm, turn the torches around.”

“What for?” she asked, turning the two at her end around so they pointed clockwise.

“We want to go forward this time,” I said. “The other way was for going backwards.”

“Ohh,” she said as I began the incantation again. I got a sinking feeling as I did the recitation but ignored it.

“Ohh, look,” exclaimed Sam giggling a trifle hysterically as the light dust subsided. “The dinghy's got a leak!”

The entire dinghy had collapsed and the torches had fallen off and were pointing all over the place.

“Oh God,” I exclaimed. “I hope this hasn't wrecked everything.”

“We're inside a Cathedral,” said Sam, “so we're better off than we were. Why's it deflated?”

“I'm guessing one of the Romans hit us with a spear,” I said. “Look.”

There was a rusty spearhead lying beside a gaping rent in the side of the dinghy. The wooden part of the spear had probably rotted away over the centuries or whoever had thrown it had tried to pull the spear out as we disappeared. I hoped he was all right and didn't get injured, although he'd be long dead by now anyway.

“Does this mean we can't get home?” asked Sam, picking up the spear head.

“Not at all,” I said. “The dinghy isn't important. It just serves as a boundary and it doesn't matter if it's inflated or not.”

“Oh good,” she said. “So where are we? Or when, rather?”

“I have no idea,” I said, “although it seems to be night time. It's all dark in here. Let's go and have a look around.”

I turned off the torches, except one, and bundled everything up inside the deflated paddling pool. I dumped the bundle behind a statue inside the small Chapel behind Aelfgar's Tomb. Using the remaining torch I made my way up the nave, laptop in hand, with Sam carrying Molly behind me.

“Ahh this looks interesting,” I said as we neared the main entrance. “There's a display of some sort here.”

“These look to be modern brochures,” said Sam, picking one up. “This is an aerial shot.”

“So we can't be too far off the right time,” I said. “Oh look,” and I played the torch over a glossy poster pinned to a grey cloth covered board. “This gives the details of the restoration work that's being carried out since the Cathedral was given a repairs grant in 2012.”

“2012?” said Sam, pushing me out of the way. “Oh wow, and all this work would have taken years. Maybe we're in the right year after all?”

“I hope so,” I said. “Bugger, there doesn't seem to be a visitors' book.”

“What use would that be?” she asked, looking through some leaflets.

“They usually have the date the visitor signed it,” I said.

“Maybe there's one on that table over there,” she said, grabbing the torch. “Ohh yes! Look! And the last entry is dated 9th of November.”

“Really?” I asked hurrying over. “So it is! And it's twenty three years ago. Excellent.”

“What were you aiming for?” asked Sam.

“Anywhere around the beginning of an academic year roughly twenty five years ago,” I said. “Now I've proved the process works when we get back I can calibrate it. Perhaps I'll even be able to control it down

to the minute.”

“Oh, we’ve still got to get back, haven’t we,” said Sam in surprise. “I’d forgotten about that. And how are we going to get to Cambridge?”

“Now or when we get back?” I asked.

“Now, of course,” she said. “I’m betting the car isn’t outside.”

“Actually, that’s a good point,” I said. “I hadn’t thought that far ahead. I was focused on the time travel side of things. Umm, I suppose we can get a train. Do you think a taxi would go that far?”

“A taxi would be more comfortable and quicker,” said Sam, “although what about Molly?”

“I can change her into a girl again for a while,” I said.

“OK,” said Sam. “I wonder what time it is? There may be no taxis if it’s late at night.”

“There’s only one way to find out,” I said. “If we go to the station there’ll be taxis there and if not we can see when the trains go.”

* * *

“Hello,” I said, when the taxi driver strolled over to see why three people were leaning against his taxi. “Had a busy day?”

“Not really,” he said. “Was you wanting a taxi?”

“Yes,” I said. “Can you take us to Cambridge?”

“You what?” he said staring at me as though I was a lunatic.

“Cambridge,” I said.

“You serious, mate?” he asked, scratching his cheek.

“Definitely,” I said.

“Cost you a bloody fortune,” he said after a lengthy pause. “I’ll need a big deposit up front.”

“No problem,” I said, pulling out my wallet. “You take credit cards?”

“It’s your money, mate,” he said, getting into the taxi so he could swipe the card. Then he burst out laughing. “Ha, good one mate. Thought you was having me on.”

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

“Card’s been rejected,” he said, giving it back. “Expiry’s date’s fucked. Where’d you get it, eh?”

“What’s wrong with the expiry date?” I asked, staring at the card. It looked all right to me.

“They don’t issue cards that expire in twenty five years,” he said. “Now push off.”

“Ah,” I said and swore under my breath. “How about cash then?”

“That dodgy money too?” he asked with a snort.

“No, it’s real,” I said pulling out a wad of fifties. His eyes followed my hand but he didn’t say a word. “Is £500 enough?”

He raised an eyebrow as I held out the cash then slowly took it. He examined the first note then smiled.

“Nice try, mate,” he said. “Now piss off before I call the police.”

“What’s wrong now?” I asked, taking back the money.

“You think I’m stupid or something?” he said. “G’arn, piss off.”

“But the money?” I asked, holding it out again. “How about another hundred?”

“That’s funny money and you know it,” he said, snatching the money.

“You think I’m stupid enough to take this? Where’s the Queen, eh? Who’s this tosser when he’s at home, then?” and he pointed to the portrait of King William. “For sure it ain’t Charles, not that I’ve seen any of the new notes yet.”

“Ahh,” I said. “Sorry. Yeah, it was just a joke.”

“Who put you up to this, then, eh?” he asked. “Danny?”

“Yes, it was Danny,” I said. “He thought you’d take the money but I didn’t think you would. Well done. Have a good evening. Oh, do you know what the time is, by the way?”

“Yeah, only that plonker Danny would think I’d fall for that,” he said. “Oh, it’s umm, 10:39.”

“Right, well I’d best be off,” I said. “Good for you. Well done. No hard feelings, eh?”

“Thought you was a tosser saying Cambridge, like,” he said. “Next time make it more closer, OK.”

“Yes, good idea,” I said. “Have a nice evening.”

“So what do we do now?” asked Sam when we were out of earshot. “We can’t get the train now either.”

“I suppose we’ll have to wait until morning,” I said, frowning. “I can go to the bank and get some old cash out. It never occurred to me there’d be a problem with the money or cards.”

“Won’t the bank want ID?” asked Sam.

“My driver’s licence should be all right,” I said. “It’s valid until I’m 70.”

“What if there is a problem though?” asked Sam. “We’ll have wasted the entire night and still be no further ahead.”

“What else do you suggest?” I asked, cursing myself for being stupid

and not thinking this through.

“How about we steal a car?” she asked. “That one over there looks quite nice.”

Chapter Twenty Five

“So what's the plan?” asked Sam as I drove the Renault out of Winchester. She'd never driven a petrol engined car before so it was easier if I drove.

“Well, when we get to Cambridge we need to get some sleep,” I said, checking the rear view mirror for police although it would probably be a while before the car was reported stolen. “Then we need to find out if Zaira is or was a student there. She said twenty five years ago but that could just be an approximation. After all her course probably went for three or four years. Besides, I have no idea when she sat in that lecture which gave her the idea. It could have been near the beginning or the end so there's a pretty wide margin. So, the first thing to do is find out when she was there then find out when they start studying AI. If she was there a few years ago we'll need to go back to Winchester and go further back in time. On the other hand if she's still not yet a student we've got a bigger problem.”

“Surely we can just go forward a few years and try again?” asked Sam.

“Yes,” I said, “but what if she never went to Cambridge University? What if she went to a different Uni and says she went to Cambridge because it sounds better or never actually went to any University?”

“Ahh,” said Sam and frowned. “No, she must have gone to Cambridge. If she went anywhere else she'd never have heard of you and started having you investigated.”

“I'd forgotten about that,” I said with a laugh. “I must be getting old. Still, it makes things a lot easier. Unless she registered under a different name, of course.”

“Why would she do that?” asked Sam.

“She's the daughter of a very wealthy man,” I said. “Maybe she didn't want people to know how rich she was. You know, fortune hunters and the press.”

“Oh,” said Sam. “So what do we do then?”

“The only thing I can think of is to go back further and pop over to Ecuador and find her that way,” I said. “Unless she was living somewhere else. For all we know her family lived in Switzerland or somewhere.”

“You do like to think of difficulties,” said Sam. “You need to think positively.”

“It's my nature,” I said. “I think of all the things that can go wrong and try to allow for them. It comes from doing research as well.”

“Oh well,” she said. “Are we going back to the house to sleep?”

“Absolutely not,” I said. “That's one place we mustn't go. My former self will almost certainly be there and I can't take the risk of meeting myself.”

“Would it really be that bad?” asked Sam. “After all, you know you're going to live a long time so there's no real harm in your old self knowing you've come back from the future.”

“It's not that,” I said, “although that is a factor and one that's bothered physicists who think about these things. It's more that two versions of the same thing existing in the same place at the same time introduces an instability. I'm not entirely certain why the house blew up when I moved the comb back a few seconds but it's quite likely it was because the two combs were side by side when chronologically they shouldn't have been. Meeting myself could cause an explosion and because my mass is a lot bigger than the comb's the explosion could be a lot bigger. It might even destroy a large part of Cambridge. I'm not prepared to risk it until I've done a lot more research.”

“Ahh,” said Sam. “I never thought of that. What if you run into yourself at the Uni?”

“It's unlikely,” I said. “I only rarely went to the Computing Department and hardly ever to Student Admissions. So long as I stay away from my office and lab it should be OK. And the cafeteria.”

* * *

“Hiya, Zeng, how are you?” I asked, sticking my head around Zeng’s office door.

“Ahh, Nick,” he said, “Sorry. I forgot to give you the charger for your new laptop yesterday. Now where did I put it?” He started pulling open the drawers in his desk.

“Is it OK if I pick it up later?” I said, realising that I must have been there the day before and would be coming back soon for the charger. “I’m just on my way to Bene’t Street.”

“Sure, no problemo,” he said with a laugh. “Give me a chance to find it. So what’s happening in good old Student Admissions, then?”

“Oh, just a stupid problem with the records,” I said, “but since I was passing I wanted to ask you a question about AI.”

“You’re worried about it taking over your job?” he asked. “Don’t be. Artificial Intelligence isn’t that intelligent.”

“Actually no,” I said. “I just wanted to know when undergrads on Comp Sci start studying AI.”

“Not until their second year,” he said. “Why?”

“No reason, really,” I said. “Just that someone was asking me for some reason and I said I’d find out for them. Actually, while I’m here you can probably answer another question for me about when one of your students started here.”

“Sure,” he said, turning to the computer terminal on his desk. “What’s his name?”

“Malvada Oscuridad,” I said.

“How do you spell that?” he asked.

I told him and he typed it into the computer.

“Can’t find anyone by that name,” he said. “You sure it was computer

science?”

“Yes,” I said. “Definitely. Umm, try Zaira. That's her first name.”

“Oh Zaira,” he said, his face lighting up. “Zaira Oscuridad? That gorgeous little thing that distracts all the boys?”

“That's her,” I said. “She must have dropped part of her name. So you know her then?”

“Not as well as I'd like to,” he said with a leer, “but that'll never happen. No, she's one of mine.”

“Excellent,” I said. “So when did she start?”

“About a month ago,” he said, puzzled. “They all did.”

“No I don't mean term,” I said patiently. “When did she start as an undergrad?”

“Ohh, last year,” he said. “This is her second year.”

“Awesome, thanks,” I said. “I'll drop by for the charger later. Oh, you don't happen to know which College she's in?”

“Newnham,” he said without needing to look it up. “All the cute chicks like her are at Newnham.”

“Cheers, Zeng,” I said. “Catch you later.”

* * *

“How'd it go?” asked Sam when I got back to the car.

“She just started her second year,” I told her. “Incredible piece of luck. She'll be starting AI studies this year.”

“That is fortuitous,” she said. “Where are we going now?”

“Newnham College,” I said. “That's where she is. You were there,

weren't you?"

"Yes," said Sam, "or I will be anyway."

"Why did you go to Newnham?" I said, starting the car.

"It's the only all women College," said Sam. "I felt it would be easier to study there than at a mixed College."

"Was it?" I asked.

"Actually yes," she said. "I still went out with guys but they weren't allowed inside the College so I wasn't constantly ogled or interrupted when I was in the library or getting something to eat."

"Yes, I've heard that," I said. "Must be annoying."

"Yes," said Sam with a laugh. "A lot of guys seem to think women are only here for them to try to pick up and it never occurs to them that we're actually trying to do some work. Zaira probably felt the same since they only take students who put Newnham as their first choice. If she put Newnham as her second choice or didn't give any choices they'd never have taken her."

"We're here," I said, easing into a parking space. "Right, you stay here and I'll go and talk to her."

"What are you going to say?" she asked.

"I have no idea," I said. "Wish me luck."

"Good luck," said Sam, giving me a kiss.

* * *

"Hello," I said to the porter at the entrance.

"Can I help you?" he asked, reasonably politely but still looking me up and down. It occurred to me that I'd slept in my suit in the car and hadn't done anything to get rid of the creases. I probably had juniper

berry stains as well.

"I'm looking for a student," I said. "Zaira Oscuridad. Which is her room?"

He gave me a look that suggested he was halfway to thinking I was a middle aged pervert on the hunt for nubile young women.

"And you are?" he asked coldly.

"Professor Nicholas March," I said as officiously as I could. "Humanities and Social Sciences."

"Ah, my apologies, sir," he said, giving me an obsequious smile. "I'm afraid Miss Oscuridad does not reside here."

"That's strange," I said, wondering what to do next. "I was told she was with Newnham College."

"The young lady is indeed with the College, sir," he said, "but as a second year student she has elected to live off site."

"Ahh," I said, relieved. "Can you tell me her address? I need to speak with her about a matter."

"She's taken rooms at the Varsity Hotel, sir," he said, his lips twitching.

"The Varsity Hotel?" I asked, taken aback. "That's a bit unusual, isn't it?"

"I'll say," he said, dropping his obsequiousness. "She's only taken two of their most expensive rooms for the entire year! She's rolling in it, that girl. She's paying £2000 a night for the rooms or so I heard."

"Well, her father is the richest man in Ecuador, I believe," I said. "Doubtless he can afford it."

"Nice work if you can get it," he said. "Would you like directions to the hotel, sir?"

"No, I know it," I said. "Thank you."

* * *

"That was quick," said Sam as I got back into the car. "Wasn't she there?"

"Actually no," I said. "Apparently she's staying at the Varsity Hotel."

"Wow," said Sam, "that's pretty expensive, but then I suppose she can afford it."

"I'm told it's the most expensive hotel in Cambridge," I said, "not that I've ever stayed there. I had dinner once on their rooftop terrace which had a nice view over the river."

"So we're off there now?" asked Sam.

"Yes," I said.

"Have you thought of how to approach her?" she asked.

"No, not yet," I said, "although I'm thinking it'll depend on whether or not she's heard of me. Any thoughts?"

"Not really," she said. "How do you persuade someone not to do something when they haven't thought of it yet?"

"Exactly," I said, "and the very act of mentioning it might trigger her getting the idea."

"And once she's had the idea she probably won't give it up easily," said Sam. "She didn't seem the type. Umm, I don't want to put any pressure on you but you realise that if you get it wrong it might just make her even more determined?"

"Yeah, no pressure," I said. "Actually I had realised that but if that happens I'll just go back further and try again."

"What about making her sick so she misses those lectures?" asked

Sam.

“She’ll still need to catch up so she passes her exams,” I said, “and she could get the idea then instead of during the lecture.”

“True,” said Sam. “Maybe we should come back tomorrow?”

“I doubt we’ll have had any more ideas,” I said.

* * *

I removed the creases from my suit before the doorman of the hotel saw me. My image must have improved as he opened the door for me in a suitably deferential manner.

“Good morning, sir,” said the perfectly dressed young lady on reception. “How may I help you?” Her name tag said Jessica.

“I’m here to see Miss Zaira Oscuridad,” I said.

“I’m afraid we have no guests by that name, sir,” she said.

“Oh,” I said. “Perhaps she’s registered as Malvada Oscuridad?”

“Indeed, sir,” she said. “Do you have an appointment?”

“I’m afraid not,” I said.

“I’m afraid Miss Malvada Oscuridad does not wish to be disturbed,” she said. “If you would like to leave a message I’ll see she gets it, sir.”

She picked up a pen and a sheet of headed paper and placed them neatly in front of me.

“Perhaps you could ring her room,” I said. “I’m sure Miss Malvada Oscuridad would like to see me.”

Jessica looked at me for a few moments then made up her mind.

“Your name, sir?” she asked.

“Professor Nicholas March,” I said.

“One moment please,” and she withdrew to her back office.

Quite a few moments later she re-emerged, all smiles.

“Room 34, sir,” she said. “On the third floor. You’ll find the lift just around this corner.”

“Thank you,” I said, giving the counter a tap for some reason.

My heart started to beat faster as I walked from the lift to room 34. I paused for a moment to do some deep breathing which didn’t work so I muttered a quick calming spell which did work then knocked on the door.

“Oh hello,” I said, surprised to see a middle aged Spanish looking woman who bore no resemblance to Zaira whatsoever. “Umm, Is Zaira Malvada Oscuridad here?”

“Si,” she said and glowered at me. “Please to come in.” She stepped aside to let me in and gestured to a pair of antique styled armchairs on either side of an ornate table. “Sit, sit.”

I sat and she left the room so I got up again and went over to the window. The view of the river was much as I remembered from the Rooftop Terrace.

I heard the door open again and, as I turned, a familiar voice said “Professor March? I’m Zaira Vittoria Malvada Oscuridad.” Her accent was more pronounced than it would be when we’d meet in the future.

“Good morning,” I said. “You have a very pleasant view here.”

“Yes,” she said.

I couldn’t decide if she was a little defensive and waiting for me to explain myself or simply reserved. Either way she made no further attempt at conversation.

“Lovely room,” I said, rushing on. “I’ve never been in a hotel room with parquet floors.”

“They are noisy to walk on,” she said.

The conversation stopped at that point as we both wondered what to say next. At least, I wondered. I had no idea what was going on in her mind.

“Perhaps some coffee, Professor March?” she said.

“Thank you, yes,” I said.

“Coffee for two, Maria,” she said, not looking away from me.

The woman who’d answered the door and who I’d not seen come back in hurried out again.

“It’s unusual for a student to have servants,” I said, for want of anything better to say.

“I believe it was common practice in times past,” she said. “Is that why you are here, Professor? To discuss domestic arrangements?”

I had to admit she had tremendous self assurance for a nineteen or twenty year old. Interestingly she wasn’t quite as attractive as she would be in later life. Her looks were the sort that improved with maturity.

“No,” I said. “I’m here for an entirely different reason.”

“I rather suspected as much,” she said. “Newnham College has people for such things. They would not send a Professor. Please, take a seat.”

“Thank you,” I said and sat in the wing back chair that stood in front of a large free standing bath. Quite why the bath was there I didn’t know but perhaps the guests liked the arrangement.

Zaira pulled out the chair that was in front of the large desk and sat down herself. She crossed her legs and smoothed the material of her

dress over her knee before looking expectantly at me.

“I believe you have been making enquiries about me,” I said.

“Word spreads quickly,” she said. “I was given assurances you would not find out. Who told you?”

“Might I ask why?” I asked.

She considered the question for a few moments while Maria brought in a tray.

“How old are you, Professor?” she asked abruptly.

“Old enough to wonder why a student who is not one of mine wants to know how old I am,” I said. “How old do you think I am?”

“I think you are a lot older than you appear to be,” she said.

“Really?” I asked. “I think you are younger than you appear to be.”

She smiled. “Why are we playing games like this, Professor?”

“Are we playing games?” I asked. “I asked why you are having me investigated and you respond by asking me more questions. That isn't polite.”

“Oh you English,” she said with a dismissive wave. “Always you are being so polite. Why are you scared to reveal your age to me?”

“I'm not scared,” I said. “I just want to know why you want to know.”

“So the game continues,” she said. “Do you take milk or sugar in your coffee?”

“Straight black will be fine,” I said.

Zaira clicked her fingers at Maria then opened one of the drawers of the desk as Maria poured some coffee into a small black cup. She took out a slim file and rested it, unopened, on her knees.

“I have here a photograph of you,” she said. “It was taken in 1979. Your hair was shorter then I think but otherwise you look exactly the same.”

“Oh yes?” I said, taking the proffered coffee from Maria. I smiled at her but she ignored me.

“I have also a description of you given by the grandmother of a student I spoke with last year,” she continued. “The grandmother was a student at Cambridge in the early 1960s.”

“I suppose the description matches me?” I asked.

“Sufficiently,” said Zaira as Maria put her coffee on the desk. “More importantly the description does not describe you as a young man even though it was some sixty years ago.”

“How does it describe me?” I asked.

“Early middle age,” said Zaira. “Much as you appear to be now.”

“Thank you for not calling me elderly,” I said with a half smile.

“How is it that you are not elderly?” asked Zaira. “I know some professors continue to work into their eighties as you must be if you were as young as twenty back then and yet you were described as some way past twenty.”

“Healthy living,” I said. “That and not smoking.”

She just looked at me disdainfully then opened the file and rifled through some of the pages.

“It seems that there was a Professor Nicholas March working in the Faculty of Humanities in the 1890s,” she said. “I have here a record from the accounting department from, ah, 1892.” She looked up at me. “Have you nothing to say, Professor?”

“Where is all this leading?” I asked. “You have yet to explain why you are doing this research.”

“What is praecantatiology?” she asked, stumbling a little over the word. “I am unable to find it in the University Prospectus even though it appears to have its own department. Why does a department at a University offer no courses, Professor?”

“It's a branch of Chemistry,” I said. “Fairly specialised.”

“Is it?” she said, closing the file and putting it on the desk. “I understood it was Latin for sorcery.”

“Is that what this is all about?” I asked, a sudden thought coming into my head. “You think I am a sorcerer?” I looked around for a table but couldn't see one so I balanced my coffee cup on the side of the bath.

“I do not know,” she said seriously. “But I do know you are very old and yet still look young. Is that because of sorcery?”

“Is that what you want?” I asked. “To still look young when you are old?”

“How old are you?” she asked.

“Roughly nine hundred years,” I said.

She momentarily lost her self assurance and gawped at me before pulling herself together and nodding as if I had confirmed something she already knew.

“And how have you achieved this?” she asked. “Please do not tell me you have been fortunate with your genetics.”

“As you said,” I said with a smile. “Sorcery.”

Her eyes locked on mine. “This is true?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said. “I am a Professor of Sorcery.”

“So you teach it?” she asked, leaning forward. “Here at the University?”

“Yes,” I said. “But only to those students I have personally selected.” I made my decision and took a deep breath with my fingers metaphorically crossed. “That is why I am here, Zaira. I may call you Zaira?”

“Why are you here?” she asked watching me like a hawk.

“To invite you to study with me,” I said.

* * *

“How did it go?” asked Sam when I got back to the car.

“Exceptionally well,” I said. “She's going to abandon her computer studies.”

“Awesome,” said Sam, visibly impressed. “How on Earth did you manage to persuade her?”

“Yes, that's where there may be some difficulties,” I said. “I, um, offered her a place in my department.”

“You mean as a sorcerer?” asked Sam, aghast. “Can you imagine what mischief she'll get up to with those sorts of skills?”

“Well, perhaps not,” I said. “I can teach her some of the basics to keep her amused but I'll make absolutely certain she never gets to learn anything of significance. I rather think she doesn't have the aptitude anyway.”

“You'd better hope so,” said Sam. “Anyway, you're not going to be here or are you planning on staying?”

“No, I have to go back,” I said. “I don't belong here. However, I will send myself a letter explaining that I've taken her on as a student and that I'm not to teach her anything of significance.”

“And will you believe yourself?” asked Sam.

“I'll sign the letter magically,” I said, “so I know it came from me and

can be trusted. I'm sure I had the sense to take my own word for things.”

“This time travel can get awfully confusing,” said Sam. “Oh well, it's done now, for better or worse. Are we going home?”

“Not yet,” I said. “Remember you said you always wanted to go to Haiti?”

“No, I don't remember saying that.” said Sam “but I'd love to go to Haiti. Why?”

“Let's go for a visit before we head back,” I said.

“Why don't we head back then go for a visit?” she asked.

“Because I want to write all this down before I forget it,” I said, “and when we get back none of this will have happened so I won't remember it. Haiti sounds like a place I won't run into myself or anyone else I know.”

“Actually, maybe it's not such a good idea,” said Sam thoughtfully. “Didn't Haiti have all those problems and violence and stuff a few years ago when the president was assassinated or something? Wouldn't that be around now here?”

“Really?” I asked. “I confess I don't pay a lot of attention to world politics. How about Jamaica then? Or is that too near Haiti?”

“OK,” said Sam. “Sounds like a plan.”

Postscript

A few days ago I found an old fashioned USB stick in my briefcase. It was not mine so, thinking I'd picked it up by mistake, I plugged it into my laptop to see if there were any indications of who it belonged to. There was only a single file on the stick and that file contained the document to which this postscript is appended. It was revelatory to say the least.

Most importantly it explained the strange letter I received in the post from myself explaining I had accepted a new student I'd never heard of, that I was to teach her as little as possible and absolutely nothing about longevity. It was perplexing but I knew I must have had good reasons so I did what I was told. As it transpired the task was not as difficult as I thought because the student had almost no aptitude whatsoever and, frankly, should have stayed in computing. She came to recognise this herself and, after eighteen months or so, abandoned her studies and left Cambridge. The last I heard of her was that she had set up a Latin American restaurant in Islington in London.

Of the five days or so directly covered by the document I had no memory whatsoever. Nor did Sam even though she was apparently deeply involved. As to the truth of it, well, that's where the dilemma begins. Certainly I have no reason to doubt myself and the magical envelope surrounding the USB stick makes me the most likely author. That said, there are a number of anomalies. Sam and I have been married for three years, not two; there is no dog park anywhere near Struggle Vale and Molly is a cat, anyway; there has been no backlash against sorcery, conspiracy theories or AI; and, as far as I know, there are no Empirical Police.

So, is this document merely a practical joke? A piece of fiction I wrote to amuse myself and promptly forgot about? Or is it a statement of truth and I did go back in time and change the future? Did the world as described in this document actually exist and suddenly change to the world we live in now because I was able to travel through time and change the future?

I have been through all my research notes but I am unable to find any pertaining to experiments with time travel. The Main House was largely destroyed during WW2 but my current memory is that I was in London at the time so I do not know the cause of the explosion that destroyed the place. If I did once know the secret of time travel that secret has gone and

there aren't enough clues in the document for me to be able to try again. If the document is indeed true then it seems that time has effectively closed itself against me. Perhaps it will fall to another to discover those secrets in the future.

Interestingly, two months ago Monty phoned to tell me his daughter and her husband were having a baby. He also told me that he'd read in one of his popular archaeology magazines that a Roman spear head had been found embedded in the stone slab covering Aelfgar's Tomb. I dismissed it at the time but now I wonder ...

So, is the document true? I am unable to decide so I leave it to you, the reader, to make up your own mind. Are your memories of the recent past really what happened or did the world develop differently and it all suddenly changed, your memories included? And how will we ever know?

*Nick March,
Professor, Cambridge University.*