

Nicola L. C. Talbot

THE PRIVATE ENEMY

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To my husband, Gavin,
and our son, Cameron,
with love.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

The absences of the final 's' (or 'es') in the third person singular present tense of verbs in some of the dialogue are not typographical errors but are a peculiarity of the Broad Norfolk dialect. (For example, 'he like it' or 'she go there'.) See page 523 for further information about the Norfolk dialect.

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FLIGHT

THE last Earl of Wynherne lay dead on the study floor. His daughter sat at the desk reading a document, her fists against her temples. Her jaws were clenched. Tears could come later. There was no time for them now. The dull pain behind her eyes heightened the impenetrability of the legal phrasing on the paper in front of her. She reached for a jug and poured water into a tumbler. The spout chattered against the glass rim. Droplets splashed on to the oak desktop. The safety lid on a brown medicine bottle nearly defeated her trembling hands, but at last it clicked over the catch and spun free. She swallowed a couple of pills, checked her watch and glanced at the window while trying to refasten the lid.

There was a filing cabinet in the corner of the room, next to the window. One of the drawers was ajar, and they were all too stiff to slide open by accident. The medicine bottle slipped from her fingers, the lid tumbled off and pills spilled across the desk. She ran over, tugged open the drawer and clicked the folders across the rails, searching for anything missing or out of place amongst her well-ordered files. At last she found it: a crumpled letter poking up near the back as

though it had been stuffed there in haste. She eased it out of the drawer and studied it, at first puzzled, but then she gave a cry of alarm.

A cattle grid rattled in the distance. For a moment she stared transfixed at the letter, then she snatched the legal document from the desk, darted into the hall, slammed the bolt across the front door, shot upstairs and tipped the contents of a cash box and jewellery case into a bag. A car came up the gravel drive, stones pinging on metal. She pressed herself against the wall next to the open window of her bedroom. Footsteps crunched over to the house. The latch jiggled downstairs, and someone hammered on the knocker. She glanced at a pair of scissors on the dresser.

Dr Carmichael stood in front of the mansion, clutching his medical bag, while Mr Allerton pounded the knocker.

‘It’s me, George Allerton. I’ve brought the doctor. Open the door.’

Allerton hurled himself against the oak door, but it held firm. Dr Carmichael gazed across the flat lawn and the heathland beyond that stretched off to the boundary wall. There was a small wood to one side of the mansion, but there wasn’t a soul in sight. A train whistled in the distance. Did anyone work here on a Sunday? Even the cottage by the entrance gates had appeared empty. The faint sounds of farmyard animals — hens clucking, horses neighing — coming from the far side of the building were the only signs of life. He turned and looked up at the grey stone wall of the mansion. For a moment, he thought he detected a movement in an upstairs window but decided that it was just the breeze disturbing a curtain.

‘Mr Allerton, that window up there is open,’ he said. ‘Maybe we could climb up?’

‘Let’s try downstairs before we risk our necks,’ Allerton said. ‘The kitchen door’s that way. You try there. I’ll give the French windows a go. You’d better prepare a sedative. She had a violent fit after the death of her uncle. Heaven knows how she’ll react to seeing her father.’

With that, Allerton ran off to the right, so Dr Carmichael headed in the other direction, racing along the path that skirted the mansion. A climbing rose dislodged his hat as he rounded the corner, but he didn’t stop to retrieve it. The kitchen door was locked, but a casement window was on its latch, so he poked his fingers through the gap, unhooked it, passed his bag in, scrambled over the sill, but slipped on the marble worktop and fell to the floor, his head smacking on the flagstones.

He lay there for a moment splayed out, his glasses tumbled down his nose, then he rolled on to his side, groaned, pushed his glasses back up his nose and propped himself up. A hundred tiny blacksmiths were hammering away at the back of his skull. His case was nearby. He blinked a couple of times, reached out, missed it, grabbed the handle on the second attempt and staggered to his feet. There were two internal doors. He tried one but found a narrow staircase behind it. The other led into a wood-panelled corridor that looked more promising. He stumbled along it, peering into every room he passed until he saw a man lying on the floor of what must be a study. He went over and felt for a pulse, but it was too late. That meant the hysterical daughter was now his priority. What had Allerton said? The shock had made her violent. He opened his case, fumbled in it and took out a hypodermic. Five millilitres of diazepam should

do. He drew it, turned the syringe and tapped it to expel any air bubbles.

He heard the sound of a bolt being thrown back and feet crunching across the gravel drive. A yell ripped through the air. Dr Carmichael raced out of the room, still holding the syringe. The front door was wide open, and Allerton was sprawled out on the drive with a pair of scissors embedded in his thigh. A red stain was spreading out across his beige trousers. Carmichael glanced round and glimpsed a flash of yellow and white amongst the trees. He looked back at the fallen man, but Allerton waved him away.

‘Go after her!’

The doctor ran over to the wood. The landscape seemed to be pitching about like a ship in a storm. A small voice at the back of his mind was trying to list the symptoms of concussion, like a medical student in a class, but there was no time for that now. Branches lashed against his face. The ground dipped beneath his feet. He slipped on the mud, stumbled and pitched down the bank into a stream. He fell on his face, the hypodermic needle jabbing into his left hand.

Detective Inspector Charles Hadley stepped out of the car on to the gravel drive and adjusted his homburg. He rested a foot on the running board and leant an elbow on the roof, his chin cupped in his hand. He had first stood here, in front of the Gothic mansion, thirty-two years ago — not as a detective inspector, just little Charlie Hadley from the nearby village. He, his parents and all the other villagers were weighed down with their baggage, trudging up the driveway to seek refuge from the raiders behind the thick, grey stone of Wynherne Hall. He could still see his dad smiling at him.

‘Fare ye well, tergether. Dunt be afraid, Charlie. I’ll be back soon. Jist you look arter yar mum.’

And then he had headed off with the other men to the armoury beyond the birch and alder coppice.

‘Sar? Are you orl right?’

Hadley glanced up and saw Detective Sergeant Fenning on the other side of the car, tucking a dark curl under her slate-blue felt hat.

‘I’m fine.’

He took out the voice recorder from his coat pocket and realised that he’d forgotten to charge the capacitor before setting out. He began to wind it up and looked around him as he did so. The mansion hadn’t changed much since his childhood, but the intervening years had altered the landscape. The electricity pylons that had once straddled the countryside were no more than stubs of metal; in their place, generators hummed in outhouses. There was no trace of the old mobile phone mast, but the landlines had been restored — although the telegraph pole Hadley had passed near the entrance gate now had a branch tangled up in its cables. The wooden watch towers still ringed the estate just inside the high perimeter wall. Relics of the violent anarchy, they were now abandoned and, to the young, little more than landmarks.

The morning sun was just peering out above the chimney stacks. The front of the house was still in shadow. Rainwater left over from last night’s storm dripped from the gargoyles gurning high up in the guttering. Mr Allerton was sitting on a stone step leading up to the heavy oak door, nursing a bandaged leg. Hadley leant towards D.S. Fenning and said in a low voice:

‘Mr Allerton is apparently an eligible bachelor.’

Fenning, in her turn, leant towards him, resting her right arm on the car roof.

‘You mean he hev munny and he look like a fillum star, but praps he hev a few mawthers listed in a little black book.’

‘Fenning, that’s most unprofessional.’

She smiled, and he turned away. Two men were approaching from the coppice. Hadley recognised the bent nose and scarred face of the older man. That was Amos, the Wynherne steward. The young sandy-haired man being supported by Amos was presumably the doctor. The orange light on the voice recorder went out, indicating that the capacitor was fully charged. Hadley tucked the crank away and moved over to Fenning’s side.

‘See if you can slip away at some point and do a quick look-over the house.’

‘With no warrant? Do they see me snoutin’ abowt, shall I say I’m looking for the bathroom?’

‘I want to know what made Her Ladyship act like that,’ Hadley said. ‘Mr Allerton’s solicitors won’t be happy if we suggest he might’ve done something to provoke her, and the locals will go savage if we arrest the last of the Coulgranes. I don’t want to start a war.’

‘Is there still an armoury here?’

‘That’s technically a museum now, but I wouldn’t be surprised if the exhibits are kept in good working order.’

Hadley and Fenning walked over to Allerton and waited for Amos and Carmichael. The doctor’s worsted suit was covered in mud, his glasses splattered, and he seemed to have a twig behind his right ear. He looked as though he was about to throw up, but perhaps that wasn’t so surprising, Hadley thought, given the smell of the bio-mass generators

coming from the steward's overalls: pungent, almost as sickly as silage.

'You don't mind the voice recorder, do you?' Hadley said when they were all assembled by the front door.

Allerton hesitated for a moment but then shrugged.

'Of course not. Why should I? I'm not an Anti-Tech, but the others might object.'

'Not me,' Amos said. 'I hent got noffin to hide.'

The doctor stared vacantly, but on a repeated application he shook his head. Hadley turned to Amos.

'D'you know how much of the drug went into him?'

'Thass ony shock. He say he drew five millilitres, and thass orl in the syringe.'

'We've put out a search for Her Ladyship,' Hadley said, 'but the report we received was confused.'

'Tell them not to hurt her,' Allerton said.

'I'm told she stabbed you.'

'Yes, but it's not her fault. She's not well.'

Allerton rubbed his leg and winced.

'So you're not going to press charges?' Hadley said.

'Of course not. I just want her found before she hurts herself — or anyone else.' Allerton fumbled in a pocket and produced a business card. 'These are the details of an excellent clinic in Central City. They'll know how to deal with this situation far better than the police.'

Hadley took the card from him and glanced at it.

'Where's the earl's body?'

'In the study.'

'Then that's where we're going.'

Allerton made an attempt to stand and groaned.

'I don't think I can make it.'

‘Fenning,’ Hadley said, ‘radio in and ask them to contact the clinic.’ He handed her the card. She gave a slight nod and walked over to the car. ‘Amos, would you mind helping Mr Allerton?’

‘No, it’s all right,’ Allerton said. ‘I’ll manage.’ But Amos hauled him to his feet and practically dragged him up the steps. ‘I tell you, I’m all right. Let me go.’

Hadley assisted Dr Carmichael into the study, helped him on to an armchair with a tatty cover that smelt of dogs and went over to the earl’s body, which was crumpled on the floor beside the desk. Hadley knelt down, snapped on a pair of gloves and examined the corpse.

In life, the earl had been a middle-aged recluse with grey hair and leathery skin. His hands bore the scars of electrical burns — hardly surprising for a man who had spent a lifetime working with generators. The earl was wearing a tweed waistcoat but no jacket. Hadley leant closer and edged the shirt collar lower. There was a raised mark on the back of the earl’s neck. Maybe an insect bite or sting.

Hadley bent over the corpse and sniffed, but the air was saturated with the tinny stench of blood from Allerton’s bandaged leg and the almond pomade in his slicked-back hair. Fenning had been right about the film-star look. Allerton was draped over a faded brocade chaise longue, the picture of heroic anguish. It was the same sofa that Hadley had once seen his own father lying on, fatally injured by raiders during the anarchy.

Amos stomped over to the other side of the room, trailing mud and moss on the floorboards, folded his arms and glared at Allerton.

‘What happened?’ Hadley asked.

‘I think he was stung,’ Allerton said. ‘He suddenly cried

out, clapped his neck and collapsed. Then he started wheezing and clutching his stomach.'

'It sounds like anaphylactic shock,' Dr Carmichael said. 'Mr Allerton came to fetch me, but it was too late.'

'So he was alive when you went for help, Mr Allerton?' Hadley said.

'Yes.' Allerton was still reclined on the sofa, one hand on his temple. 'I didn't want to leave him, but the lines were down, and there was no one else around.'

Allerton flopped his hand on to his chest and played with a ring on his finger. Hadley eyed the large, green opal on it. Was that kind of thing fashionable in the city? The mixed smells of blood and pomade was like almond syrup gone bad. Despite his country-gent clothes, he was still a newcomer. It couldn't be more than eight years, by Hadley's reckoning, since Allerton had moved to the neighbouring estate.

'What were you doing here, Mr Allerton?' Hadley said.

'The earl phoned me last night and asked me to come round this morning. He was worried about his daughter.'

Hadley turned to the doctor.

'Dr Carmichael, we need to send some blood samples to Central City before you write the death certificate.'

The doctor nodded, winced and rubbed his head. Hadley studied the oak desk and picked up an open chequebook. The stubs showed that it hadn't been used for months, but the remaining slips indicated that the account holder was John Wynherne. The position of the body seemed to suggest that the earl had been seated at the desk and had slipped to the floor when he collapsed. Wouldn't a chat between neighbours be conducted in the sitting room rather than in such a business-like setting?

'What were you talking about?' Hadley said.

'I was suggesting that I contact a clinic to help Lady Coulgrane,' Allerton said.

'Lady Coulgrane?' For a moment Hadley was thrown by the reference to a woman who had died so many years ago but then realised that Allerton must be referring to the earl's daughter. He shrugged off the error and put the chequebook back on the desk. 'Were you asking for money?'

'Of course not. He was concerned about the cost, but I reassured him that I'd pay for everything.'

'That's very generous of you,' Hadley said. 'D'you assist all your neighbours?'

Allerton struggled to an upright position, propped up by the back and arm of the sofa.

'Obviously you wouldn't know, as we haven't announced it yet,' he said. 'Lady Coulgrane is my fiancée.'

Amos grunted. His fists tightened. Scars stood out white against his weather-beaten face.

'Mr Allerton,' Hadley said, 'is it true she aimed a shotgun at you last year?'

'Wherever did you hear that?'

'Local gossip.'

'Not the most reliable source of information. I merely surprised her while she was holding the gun, but some people –' he glared at Amos '– misinterpreted what happened.'

'So she hasn't made any threats against you?'

'None whatsoever.'

Hadley picked up a medicine bottle from the desk and studied the label: co-codamol 500mg, Dr P. Barnes. The lid was undone. Pills were scattered on the surface of the desk, but there were also a few left inside the bottle.

'What's wrong with her?'

'She's got a brain tumour,' Allerton said.

The deep resonant chimes of a grandfather clock echoed around the house. Fenning slipped in through the doorway, but her expression gave nothing away. Hadley turned his attention back to Allerton.

‘Is she getting treatment?’

‘I arranged for her to go to a private hospital, but she’s gone into denial and won’t accept the diagnosis. That’s why I want her to go to the clinic.’

A door creaked in another area of the house. Allerton jerked and nearly fell off the sofa. Hadley looked over at Fenning. She peered into the hallway and shrugged at him.

‘Who else is here?’ Hadley asked Amos.

‘Thass the boy Joe.’

‘He’s not to wander in and out without permission,’ Allerton said.

‘We both work here. You’re the one who come snoutin’ round wi’out permission.’

‘If she chose not to tell you we’re engaged, that’s her business. You’re the steward, not her uncle.’

Amos made towards him, his arm sweeping backwards, but Hadley stepped between them.

‘That’s enough. Amos, how long’s Joe been in the house this morning?’

‘I sent him directly to Great Bartling to git help. I think he’ll have ony now a-come back.’

‘Where were you both before then?’

‘At church, like she was, ony we went to the generator shed arter we got back to tricolate the Type 1 bein’ as the tempest last night had made the rain run in. We heard a hallerin’ and went to see woss dewun. We found the doctor by the beck, but he fared badly and was in a puckaterry, so I came

up here and found him—’ pointing at Allerton ‘—dattysin’ up the troshel.’

‘You mean bleeding,’ Allerton said.

‘I bandaged his leg.’

‘You need to go on a first aid course. You tied it so tight I could’ve lost my leg.’

‘Then I tried the phone.’

‘I’d already told you it wasn’t working.’

‘That dunt signify. He was as duzzy as a shanny mawkin,’ Amos said to Hadley. ‘Then I sent the boy Joe to fetch help.’

‘Any idea where she might’ve gone?’ Hadley asked.

Amos shrugged.

‘Maybe she hatta have a mardle wi’ a friend.’

‘A mardle? She was hardly in a sociable frame of mind,’ Allerton said. ‘You don’t seem to understand the gravity of this situation.’

‘Nonetheless,’ Hadley said, ‘it would help to have a list of her friends, just in case.’

Hadley removed his gloves and looked around the room. The walls were covered with images of Coulgranes throughout the ages — some in uniform, others in evening wear, with hairstyles ranging from powdered wigs to bobs, beehives and curls. There was a mix of miniatures, silhouettes, oil on canvas and photos. One of the photographs was of the late earl’s daughter. The golden ringlets and the porcelain-like sheen to her face made her seem like a china doll, but it would do.

‘Fenning, have a copy made of that picture.’

‘What wuz she wearin’?’ Fenning asked Allerton.

‘A white floral print dress, a yellow jacket, black ankle boots and a bergère hat. She always wears the Coulgrane signet ring on her right little finger. It’s easily identifiable.’

Fenning and Hadley returned to the car and, after she radioed in for the police photographer, Hadley asked her what she'd found.

'Blond hair clippings,' she replied, handing a bag over to him. 'I coont find evidence of dye in any onem sinks or hutches, and there wunt no discarded packets in the bins. There ent no sign of the clothes Mr Allerton described, so praps she hent changed. A haircut ent much of a disguise, but praps she dint have time to do any more. There's noffin outta th'ordinary in the medicine cabinet, but she mighta took drugs with her. I dint see no sign o' the ring Mr Allerton mentioned, but I found an empty jewellery case.'

'Ask the housekeeper if she can provide a description of any items that might've been in it and get the list circulated to all jewellers.' Hadley looked over to the coppice where the earl's daughter had last been seen. 'It might also be an idea if we check with Amos to see if anything's missing from the armoury.'

A NEW MIGRANT

FOUR lorries were parked in a lay-by. The drivers were gathered around a fast-food stall eating bacon butties. Three of them were large and hairy, their jackets undone and their ties loose. The fourth was taller than the others but he was lean, with a thin, chestnut-coloured moustache. His brown fedora was tilted forwards, casting a shadow across his blue eyes, and he wore a gabardine trench coat over his single-breasted suit.

‘That storm last night certainly cleared the air,’ he said.

‘Yeah, you’re right, Jack,’ Hector said as he scratched his cauliflower ear.

‘Hell of a storm — just like I said it would be.’

Spike removed his sandwich from his mouth.

‘Yeah, you sure did,’ he said and adjusted the partial denture that took the place of a missing front tooth.

‘It’s ironic that it took lightning to get rid of those damn Anti-Techs,’ Jack said.

He took a bite out of his sandwich. It was greasy, as usual, but at least it would tide him over until dinner. The other three started laughing.

‘Yeah, that’s real funny,’ Alf said.

‘Yeah—’ Hector’s grin was somewhat lopsided due to an old knife wound ‘—that’s a good one.’

‘It sure sent them packing,’ Jack said, ‘but their protest has eaten into my profits.’

The others stopped laughing. Alf scowled.

‘Yeah, the bastards.’

Jack looked at him and nodded. Alf’s skin was a light brown, apart from the puckered scar on his cheek where Jack had once shot him, but that was in the past when Alf had worked for Slim Hamilton — he was one of Jack’s lads now. Spike, once more tucking into his sandwich, was standing next to Alf.

‘You’ve got ketchup on your nose, Spike,’ Jack said.

‘Sorry, Jack.’

Spike took out a handkerchief and rubbed it over his misshapen nose. Jack finished his sandwich, produced a cheroot from his coat and struck a match against one of the wooden posts of the fast-food stall. While he was lighting the thin cigar, he caught sight of a figure walking along the grass verge with a thumb outstretched. The hitch-hiker was wearing a waxed jacket fastened up to the neck and a pair of hobnailed boots caked in mud. A flat cap overshadowed the youth’s eyes.

Jack nudged Hector.

‘What d’you reckon?’

‘Bet he won’t last a month.’

‘A fortnight, more like,’ Spike said.

Alf shook his head.

‘A week. What d’you reckon, Jack?’

‘It’s hardly fair for me to make a wager, but I’ll say at least six weeks to give you lads a chance.’

The kid was a few yards off now, just in front of Jack's truck. His cap looked like it had been stolen from a scarecrow. It was stained and way too big. What little Jack could see of the youth's face was mottled and blistered—had farm labourers never heard of sun cream?

'Where're you heading, boy?'

'Woss the best place to find work?'

The kid didn't have any baggage, not even a little bundle of odds and ends. Jack blew out a stream of smoke.

'If you're looking for a job, you're in luck. I've a friend who needs help in his shop. His last assistant turned out to be no good, but maybe you'll do.'

'I work hard, I do. Dunt you worry about that. What type o' shop is it?'

A truck drove past in the nearside lane and flashed its lights. Jack waved and turned back to the kid.

'It's a sort of junk shop: oddities, a bit of ironmongery and such like. I'm sure I could persuade him to take you on.'

'Thass hully kind o' you, sar.'

'I'm Jack Preston, but you can call me "Jack".' Was it his imagination or had the kid given a start at his name? Maybe his reputation had spread to the country. Sweet. That would be one in the eye for Stan. 'These are my friends: Spike, Hector and Alf. What's your name, lad?'

The boy didn't seem to like eye contact, but maybe he just didn't want to get a crick in his neck.

'Harry.' The kid glanced back over the fields and then said: 'Harry Ferguson.'

'Pleased to meet you, Harry. This is my truck. In you get. Mind the step.'

Jack held the passenger door open. After a moment's hesitation, Harry clambered in, and Jack slammed the door,

grinned at the other truckers, strode over to the driver's side and jumped up.

'You're lucky we met,' he said as he closed the door and fastened his belt. 'I don't usually drive on a Sunday, but the Anti-Techs set up road blocks in Central City last week.' He turned the key in the ignition. 'We were stuck for two days, kicking our heels, so I'm going to take this week off. It's bad for business, but hopefully things will've calmed down by next week.'

Jack pulled out on to the dual carriageway heading east towards Norwich, rested his cheroot in the ashtray and began fiddling with the radio.

'D'you know any cheap places I could stay?' Harry said.

'I've a spare bed at mine, and you're welcome to rent it. I've two other lodgers, but I'm sure you'll get along just fine.'

A voice crackled over the radio.

'What's your status, Jack?'

'On schedule. I have an extra package — the usual.'

He hooked the handset back on its cradle. A twin-cowl Phaeton shot past — must've been doing at least sixty — but its narrow wheels hit a puddle and the car began to skid. It moved over to the nearside lane and slowed down a little. There was a billboard on the verge advertising a brand of toothpaste. The paper was peeling at one corner and one of the wooden posts was snapped. There were fragments of glass and chrome lying on the mud beneath it. Jack eased up on the accelerator. The fields on either side were waterlogged, but it was nothing compared to the flooding further back where the road passed south of The Wash. If it hadn't been for the embankments, dykes and wind pumps, it would've been impassable.

'So how old are you, lad?'

‘Twenty.’

‘Come off it. You’re never twenty.’

Jack picked up his cheroot and tapped off the ash.

‘We develop late in our family. My dad dint start shavin’ until he wuz twenty-five, and I can’t git served nowhere except my local. Well, the landlord know me, so he believe me, but the rest mob me.’

‘Yeah? No kidding,’ Jack said. ‘So how d’you account for the late development?’

‘The doctor say thass a faulty gene or some such squit. At school they call me names, and that make me raw. Do they start anything, I lam ’em.’

‘Got a bit of a temper, have you?’

‘Blast no, bor, I dunt mean that.’

‘Did you get much schooling?’

‘I larnt to read and write, but woss the use o’ school when you hatta work on a farm? My dad — may he rest in peace — was going outta business.’

‘That’s too bad.’

‘Our neighbour hev a big farm, and he skrowge out the smaller ones. We hatta work orl hours, and we still coont break even.’

‘Yeah, that sounds familiar.’

‘And now my family’s orl passed on, and I’ve no farm. So woss the use in staying? There’s no point a-sittin’ on my arse. Might jist as well try my luck in the city. Bound to be suffin for a tidy worker.’

Harry continued to chatter: people and places, markets and fêtes, all the inconsequential country affairs strung into one breathless narrative. Jack gave up on the conversation and let his mind wander.



It took almost two hours to reach Norwich. The sign welcoming visitors to the fine city had a note proclaiming that it had been proudly rebuilt since the anarchy. Harry stared out of the window at the unfamiliar sights. Pedestrians bustled along the pavements, some stepping out into the road to avoid women's parasols. The men wore homburgs or fedoras, but a few also carried umbrellas, as though they were afraid last night's storm would return, despite the clear sky. The houses were tall with yellow, pink or pastel blue fronts and intricate wrought ironwork on the balconies and across the windows.

'I've never seen such great buildings,' Harry said, 'except praps the town hall, but where are the gardens?'

'Gardens? There aren't many who can afford the extra land, but who needs a bit of grass when you've got everything you need just round the corner?'

'There's a cinema in Great Bartling.'

'That where you lived?'

'No, thass about six mile from my farm.'

'Six miles? That's your idea of just down the road?'

Harry turned round and gazed past Jack out of his window. There was a screen fastened to a wall on the other side of the street. On it was a moving image of a woman washing her hair whilst wearing a flimsy, wet dress. So that's what an electronic billboard looked like. The woman on the screen began to shake her hair in the wind. Good grief, she didn't seem to be wearing anything under her dress. No wonder there was so much immorality in the city. Didn't it distract the drivers? Harry glanced at Jack, but he was frowning at the traffic.

The pedestrians on the nearside pavement had become even more bunched up. Harry wound the window down and peered out. The vehicles stank of biofuel. Further along the

street, Harry could see banners being held up above the heads of the crowd bearing slogans such as ‘No computers!’ and ‘Don’t bring back anarchy!’

‘Damn Anti-Techs,’ Jack said. ‘They’d better not try blocking the roads here.’

‘Why are they demonstrating?’ Harry said. ‘Nowun’s thinking o’ bringing back puters, are they?’

‘Sure they are. What’s wrong with that? The authorities use them, why shouldn’t the rest of us?’

They turned into a road full of grey warehouses and depots, pulled into a bay and parked alongside another lorry that had arrived just before them. Harry leant out of the window to watch the driver squeezing out of the cab. Particles of food hung on his black beard like insects dangling in a spider’s web. His sleeves were rolled up above his elbows, and his forearms were covered in tattoos that danced as he flexed his muscles. His shirt was crumpled around his braces, but he straightened his clothes and put on his jacket and hat. He glanced at Harry and grinned. Jack collected a case from behind his seat, opened the door and jumped down. Harry closed the window and joined them.

‘Lo, Eric,’ Jack said. ‘This is Harry. He’s going to be our new flatmate.’

‘He’s a bit of a skinny runt,’ Eric said as he slung a duffel bag over his shoulder.

‘He just needs a bit of feeding up. Wait here for us, lad. We’ve got to put our keys away and sign off.’

Jack and Eric went into the depot office, and Harry stood by the trucks until they returned a few minutes later.

‘Come along, lad,’ Jack said and strode ahead with Eric.

Harry hurried after them through the gateway where Jack stopped to buy a newspaper from a kiosk before he and Eric

merged into the crowd of pedestrians. Harry ducked round the side of the pavement to avoid being jostled but stopped as a disembodied voice spoke from a flickering billboard across the road.

*'Unightly blemishes? Can't afford surgery? Try Dr Master-
terson's liquid skin.'*

Harry looked up and watched a drab woman at a dressing table smear a substance over a face full of liver spots. A moment later she was transformed into an elegant socialite at a party surrounded by attentive men, her skin as smooth as a china doll. The scene changed to a bathroom where the woman peeled off the sheer film without wincing and threw the gummy remains in a bin.

'Only sustainable, natural ingredients used,' the voice said. *'Easy on and easy off. No pain and no fuss.'*

No pain? Ha! Wearing that stuff for any length of time was about as painless as shoving your face in a patch of nettles. Harry was about to turn away when the image changed to a crowd of people who laughed and hugged one another. A smiling mother lifted a baby, and they twirled round in bright sunlight amidst a shower of petals. Again a voice spoke from the billboard.

'The new era. The whole world united in peace and prosperity.'

'Don't worry, lad.' Jack clapped Harry on the shoulder. 'We'll take good care of you.'

Harry's muscles tightened for a moment.

'You all right?' Jack said.

'I fare a mite frazzled and no mistake. I rackon there's a sight more people in this street than there wuz animals on our farm.'

‘I’m sure you’ll get used to it. Walk between the two of us, and we’ll make sure you’re not trampled on.’

The three of them left the industrial estate and entered a residential area. The roads grew narrower and quieter and changed from tarmac to cobbles. The terrace houses diminished in size and gaiety until they gave way to grime-covered blocks of flats. Laundry hung in rows above their heads, obscuring the sky.

‘Welcome to my neighbourhood,’ Jack said. ‘I hope you’ll soon think of it as home.’

A man lounged against a wall with his jacket undone and his face unshaven. A group of women stood nearby, wearing knee-length close-fitting dresses, boleros and little hats perched on chignons. Some twirled their parasols and others had theirs furled but, as soon as they saw Jack, they straightened themselves, like slovenly privates catching sight of their sergeant-major.

‘How’s things, girls?’

‘Swell, Jack.’

Harry studied Jack’s hard-boiled face and then eyed the women. They were smiling at Jack, but not with a touting-for-customers kind of smile. Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea. Jack and Eric continued to stride down the lane. Harry followed, but slower. Jack glanced round.

‘Tired?’ he said.

‘I hatta do a lot o’ jammin’ about afore we met.’

‘Don’t worry, we’re almost there.’

Jack turned into one of the buildings. The door had small round marks of painted filler scattered across it as though it had once been infested by giant half-inch thick woodworm. Harry paused to let Eric pass.

‘No, after you, kid,’ Eric said. ‘A skinny runt like you could get lost in a big place like this.’

Harry stepped through the doorway into a lobby with mildew-speckled, faded wallpaper. There was a lift next to the stairwell opposite the entrance and, through the broken grill doors, Harry could see a smear on the back wall leading to a dark stain on the floor. Jack led the way up the stairs, and Eric took the rear. They reached the first floor, and Jack opened a door, letting out a smell of stale beer and rotting food.

‘Come on, then,’ he said.

For a moment Harry held back but then followed him in. There was a cramped space that aspired to being a hall with three internal doors. Jack opened the right hand one.

‘Bathroom,’ he said and flicked a switch in the hall.

A light came on through the open doorway and Harry peered in. It was small and windowless with scum lining the sink and bath. An extractor fan juddered into life. Jack switched off the light and pointed ahead.

‘Kitchen.’

The counters and sink were full of unwashed crockery harbouring colonies of mould. The net curtain in front of the window was a yellowy grey, with a dead fly entangled in its frayed hem. Jack strode through the third doorway.

‘The main room. Come on, don’t be shy.’

Eric gave Harry a prod in the back, and Harry stumbled into the room. At one end, there were two sets of bunk-beds opposite each other with a wardrobe along the side wall between them. At the other end, near the window, there was a round table with six chairs in front of a tall, thin cupboard. The far corner was dominated by a home brew kit and boxes of engine parts. There was a bookcase by the door — its con-

tents were mostly from an era of private detectives drinking bourbon in dingy offices or gangsters wielding tommy guns. The spines were creased and peeling. The floor was strewn with crumpled beer cans, dirty laundry and empty packaging. Jack pointed to the furthest top bunk.

‘That’s the bed to let. You’re lucky I met you before someone else snapped it up. Eric’s got the bunk below.’

Harry glanced at the other top bunk where a young man lounged, reading a magazine — *Generator Monthly* by the look of it. His worsted jacket was slung over the end rail, and his fedora was hanging on the nearest bed post. He was in his mid-twenties, as far as Harry could tell, but there were flecks of white in his otherwise black hair. He held a beer can in one hand, but his gaze remained fixed on the page in front of him.

‘Adam, my lad,’ Jack said, ‘this is Harry.’

‘He can bugger off,’ Adam said without looking up.

Jack smiled at him and winked at Harry.

‘Make sure you don’t provoke Adam. I suggest you stay away from him unless you want to talk about engines.’

Harry studied the young man or, rather, the magazine in front of his face.

‘That look like a Bostock Type 1 generator,’ Harry said. Adam flipped over the magazine and glanced at the picture. ‘Our farm hev a Type 1 and both the Type 2s: the Mark A and the Mark B.’

‘There ain’t any Type 1s around no more,’ Adam said.

‘Maybe they’re not hully common, but our farm hev one. That need tricolatin’ orl the time, but I useter git it going mostly, though once I was a lummo, and the shock hulled me to the wall. My hair stood anend for rest o’ the day.’

Adam tossed his can on to the floor, grabbed the side rail of the bunk with both hands, swung himself over and jumped down, his head missing the ceiling by a few inches. He landed knees bent on an empty cardboard box, which crumpled beneath him. Then he straightened up, strode over to Jack and eyed Harry.

‘You worked on a Type 1?’ he said.

‘I certainly hev, and thass a job to meet someone else who’s interested in generators.’

‘“Interested” doesn’t cover it,’ Jack said as he ruffled Adam’s hair.

‘What type o’ generator do this building run on, bor?’ Harry asked.

‘None,’ Adam said. ‘There ain’t much need for generators in the city now we’ve got the alcohol sub-stations.’

‘I rackon thass better to use readily available fuel, like plants and manure.’

‘Not so readily available in the city,’ Jack said.

‘There’s also one that run on animal remains — or human remains if you’re not careful.’

‘An interesting way to dispose of bodies.’ Jack took out a cheroot from his cigar case. ‘I’m surprised certain parties haven’t made a note of that.’

‘So what’re the main differences between the Mark A and the Mark B?’ Adam said to Harry, but Jack rested a hand on his shoulder.

‘Save it for later, my lad. Let the boy get settled first.’

‘How much do the rent cost?’ Harry said.

Jack twirled the cheroot around his fingers.

‘I’ll take you to see Bob tomorrow, and once we’ve found out how much he’s prepared to pay you then maybe we can come to an arrangement that will be within your means.’

‘But what about ternight? That would craze me to stay the night not knowing how much thass a-gorta cost.’

Jack struck a match with his thumbnail and eyed Harry as he lit his cheroot. Harry adopted an amiable expression.

‘I tell you what –’ Jack blew out the match ‘– you can stay the first night free of charge.’

‘Thass masterous kind on you,’ Harry said. ‘What about dinner and breakfast?’

Perhaps that was pushing it a bit. Harry watched, muscles tensed, as Jack flicked the spent match into an ashtray, but he gave a wave with his cheroot.

‘This isn’t something I’d usually offer, but I like you, so I’ll let you have the first dinner, night and breakfast on me. I’m afraid after that I’ll have to start charging. I’m sure you understand that times are hard, and I need the extra rent. And there are so many migrants in want of lodgings.’

‘Oh, I understand, and I do appreciate it. Thass a tidy thing we met, but dunt you put yarself out on my account. Do you find it an imposition, do you tell me directly. I’d hate for you to change yar mind and mob me later.’

‘I don’t change my mind. You can use the bottom drawer under the wardrobe for your things — only you don’t seem to have any baggage. Leave in a hurry, did you?’

‘Those creditors, they take everything. Thass a blessing they left me with the clothes I’m wearing.’

Jack leant against one of the bedposts.

‘That sure was low-down of them to not even leave you with a spare pair of underwear but, if you like, I’ll arrange a loan to tide you over so you can get kitted out.’

‘Blast no,’ Harry said, ‘that oont be necessary. I’ll buy some second-hand ones when I’ve saved up enough.’

‘You’re going to get a bit ripe.’

‘Nix,’ Adam said to Harry. ‘You don’t want to go around getting second-hand clothes. You don’t know what the previous owner might’ve had. Think of all the infections you could catch.’

Eric nudged Harry.

‘Don’t mind Adam, kid.’ The trucker stank of biofuel and greasy food. ‘He’s got a thing about infectious diseases. He won’t even shake hands with people.’

Harry moved away, crouched down and began to inspect the bottom drawer, all the while listening to the men’s conversation and trying to determine the best course of action in this unknown place.

‘You bet I won’t,’ Adam said. ‘Sixty percent of people don’t wash their hands after going to the can. I ain’t catching their germs.’

‘How d’you know it’s sixty percent?’ Eric said. ‘I reckon you just made it up.’

‘I never made it up. Spud told me and, anyhow, I’ve seen some bloke go for a piss and then wipe his hands on his trousers.’

Harry stood up and studied the young man. Jack patted Adam on the back.

‘There are some lousy people about, my lad, but you know, if germs bother you that much, you might want to help keep this place a bit cleaner.’

‘Sorry, Jack.’

‘That’s all right, my boy. Let’s get something to eat. Maybe Harry can tell you about his generators on the way.’

Adam put on his jacket and fedora, tilting his hat forwards so that it was at the same angle as Jack’s, and they all left the flat.

ADAM

ADAM strolled alongside Harry, with Jack and Eric a few yards ahead. The kid sure knew about the history of generators: dates and everything. Migrants were usually such a dumb bunch. They never lasted long, but maybe Jack might let this one stay a while.

A couple of kids raced around a corner, pulled up when they saw Jack and darted across the road. Jack pointed with his cheroot down the narrow cul-de-sac where the boys had come from.

‘Harry, Bob’s shop’s down that way. Nice and convenient. No need to worry about bus fares, or anything like that.’

Adam watched Harry peer down the lane, but the kid’s face remained expressionless. Night always reached Bob’s cul-de-sac before the other streets. There were no pavements, on account of it being too narrow, and the buildings stood tall and dirty. There were lights coming from some of the windows, but it was the kind of frail light that seemed to make everything that much dingier.

‘Is that true I need papers to git a job in the city, bor?’ Harry said.

Where had he heard that from? He must be the first migrant they'd ever come across who'd known that.

'Sure you do,' Jack said. 'D'you have any?'

'No, we dunt hatta have none of that ID dewun back home. Birth certificates are one thing, but to carry about a bit o' paper saying everything about you orl the time, thass jist a load o' squit.'

'Maybe so, but you're going to need ID papers to work here. Fortunately Adam's a sort of part-time clerk, and he'll be able to get you some. Won't you, my lad?'

'Sure, I can do that.'

'Thass hully kind o' you,' Harry said to Adam. 'I expect there's probably a fee.'

Adam glanced at Jack and then shrugged.

'Yeah, that's right.'

They continued walking until they reached a junction. There was a copper on the other side of the intersection. His gut sagged over his trousers and a blackjack hung on his hip. He glanced in their direction, looked around and headed over to them. He inspected the nails on his left hand as he strolled across the road and slid his right hand into a pocket.

'No prizes for guessing what he's after,' Jack murmured to Adam.

The copper stepped on to the pavement, a few yards away, and had another quick look around.

'How's things, Bryson?' Jack said.

The copper sidled over to him and fingered his collar.

'Lost ten grand last night.'

'How'd you manage that?'

Bryson scuffed his shoe on the pavement.

'Poker over at The Blue Diamond. I had it made. I was sure I had it made. High quads with an ace kicker. Then

Long-Odds Verkroost cleaned me out. I can't let the missus get wind of it. You know what she's like.'

'Want a loan to tide you over?'

'That'd be great, Jack. Just until pay day.'

'Call round tomorrow, and we'll sort something out.'

'Cheers, Jack.'

Adam watched the copper walk away, and then he turned to Jack.

'The Blue Diamond's a bit out of his league, ain't it?'

'Sure it is. One of these days I'm going to leave him to his missus. You all right, Harry?'

They had come to a row of shops with neon signs, and the kid was gazing at them like they were at some kind of amusement show.

'This place is a job,' Harry said, 'but I gather that ent as big as Central City.'

Jack blew out a stream of smoke and tapped the ash off his cheroot on to the pavement.

'Central City's bigger, but this place has its charms.'

'I've heard there are some masterous buildings in Central City, like that Sector House. I once saw a picture of it in a newspaper, and that looked a rare place.'

Adam moved away from Harry. If the kid liked Central City so much, he should've gone there instead. Lousy pretentious dump full of lousy government cretins in their dumb new buildings.

'Sector House ain't all it's cracked up to be,' he said. 'They should've given more thought when they built the wall round it. Sure, they made it high, but the mortar ain't flush against the bricks. They must've hired a bunch of cowboys.'

'You mean it's possible to climb?' Harry said.

'I reckon it'd be a cinch.'

Adam broke off as he caught sight of Jack tapping the side of his nose. Jack then slid his finger down, took the cheroot out of his mouth and inspected it for a moment.

‘Adam likes climbing the wall down the gym,’ he said and drew on the cheroot.

‘Yeah, that’s right,’ Adam said, ‘down the gym.’

They continued on their way. A van with a dodgy exhaust drove by leaving a grey cloud trailing behind it. Harry stared after it and turned to Jack.

‘D’you reckon I could become a trucker? I’ve driven heavy agricultural vehicles. I’m sure I could handle a lorry.’

‘You’re too young to drive a truck,’ Eric said.

‘Blast, no, bor. I’m twenty.’

‘Like hell you are.’

Eric shoved Harry and the kid flew backwards towards a clothes shop. Adam lunged behind Harry, flung both arms around the kid, grabbed him and stumbled back into the wall, just missing the window.

‘What d’you want to chuck the kid around for, Eric?’ Adam said.

‘That was just a prod. He’s a featherweight, but what’s he think he’s doing giving us a load of crap like that?’

Eric poked Harry’s left shoulder with a thick, hairy finger. Adam still had his arms around Harry with the kid’s back pressed against his chest. Harry’s jacket sure seemed to have a lot of padding at the front or maybe there were a couple of deep, full pockets inside it. There was also something straight, hard and about a foot long inside the back of the jacket that dug into Adam’s hip. Too rigid for a blackjack. Too uniform for a firearm. Too cylindrical for a knife sheath. A bit of piping, maybe? Harry had grabbed Adam’s wrists and tensed up. The kid’s hands, tinged with blue from the

shop's neon sign, were small with slender fingers. There was a pale band of skin on the right little finger, like people get from wearing a ring most of the time. It occurred to Adam that maybe it wasn't a pocket he'd got a hold on. He loosened his grip.

High heels tapped along an alley at the end of the row of shops. A woman stepped out on to their street.

'Can it,' Jack said quietly. 'Rita's coming. Adam, let the kid go.'

Jack strolled towards the approaching woman with Eric by his side.

'I was just trying to stop you from hitting the wall, that's all,' Adam whispered in Harry's ear. 'I didn't mean to grab your — you there. Okay?' Harry nodded but pushed his hand away from her chest. 'Be careful of Rita. You won't want any job she offers you.'

Adam let go, but as he did so he felt Harry shuddering.

Rita was wearing her usual outfit: a red dress that hugged her figure with a suggestion of underlying structural reinforcements and a wide-brimmed hat covered in rosebuds. Overshadowing that, a tasselled pink parasol swayed, the stalk and hat brim colliding with every step she took. Her left hand always seemed to be on her hip, as though it had been welded in place, and a reticule dangled from her wrist.

'Jack, I see you've finally made it back,' she said as she presented her cheek to him. 'About time too.'

'That's sure nice of you to miss me, Rita love.' Jack's kiss barely reached her cheek. 'Come and meet Harry. Lost his farm, poor kid, but I've let him the spare bunk.'

He beckoned to Adam and Harry, and they came over to join the other three.

‘You poor thing.’ Rita leant towards Harry, displaying so much of her cleavage in the process that Adam caught a glimpse of the pocket pistol she kept in it. ‘It must be hard on you coming to a strange place not knowing anyone, but I know some girls who’d be more than happy to get to know you and help you settle in.’

‘I don’t reckon Harry would get along with them,’ Adam said. ‘I know I don’t.’

Rita pursed her lips.

‘Jack, tell him to butt out and stop insulting my girls.’

Jack glanced over at Adam and looked back at Rita.

‘Rita love, I didn’t hear any insults. Adam was just trying to explain that he and Harry are developing a bit of a rapport, what with the kid knowing almost as much about generators as Adam. Isn’t that right, my lad?’

Adam strolled over to Jack’s side and put his hands in his trouser pockets.

‘Sure, that’s right.’

He grinned at Rita, and she turned her back on him.

‘So you’re another generator nut, are you, boy?’ she said to Harry.

‘Our Type 1 is the talk of the neighbourhood.’

‘Oh, give me a break.’

‘Rita love, you coming to the café with us?’ Jack said.

‘Yeah, sure. Let’s go.’

Rita strutted ahead between Jack and Eric. Adam followed on behind with Harry, and the two of them occupied the rest of the journey talking about generators. They discussed the differences in fuel, efficiency, design, popularity, modern ones versus the older types, and sundry other matters that appeared to be of great interest to Harry and were of definite interest to Adam. He was in the process of quizzing

her on the layout of the turbine in the Mark B when they reached the café. Rita turned on them.

‘Oh, for crying out loud.’

Adam glared at her and clenched his fists. Jack nudged her. She rolled her eyes upwards but closed the parasol and smiled at Harry.

‘So, Harry, Jack tells me you had to leave the country because your dad went bankrupt.’

‘Thass true. When my poor old dad died, the creditors took everything.’

Jack dropped his cheroot stub in the gutter and trod on it.

‘They didn’t even leave the lad with a spare set of clothes.’

‘That’s too bad,’ Rita said.

‘Dad wunt even cold in his bed,’ Harry said.

‘Don’t worry, lad.’ Jack opened the café door. ‘We’ll look after you. Let’s get you fixed up with a decent meal.’

Adam followed Harry into the café but noticed that Rita was sidling towards her with an expression Adam recognised. If Rita was in the mood for a bit of teasing — when wasn’t she? — she’d have to find some other mug. He shoved Harry over to the end of a vacant table, out of Rita’s way.

‘You sit there, kid,’ he said and pulled up the chair next to her.

Rita pouted and went round to the other side of the table. She sat opposite Harry and leant forwards.

‘It must’ve been real tough on you, Harry. I reckon you need a bit of comforting.’

‘I dunt need no comforting. Thass jist the way o’ things. I know we ony hed a small farm, and the poachers were always a-stealing our hins, but the police are so spread out there’s noffin they can do about it.’

‘That’s a real bummer.’

‘Well, what can they do when there’s a sight o’ land and so few people? And our equipment was old and allus in need o’ tricolatin’. My late granfar — may he rest in peace — used to be masterly good with generators. My dad was his prentice, and they both larnt me, but Grandpa Eddie went a bit peculiar in the end.’

‘Peculiar?’ Jack said as he pulled up the chair next to Rita. ‘In what way?’

‘Every now and then he rackoned he was a tree. He useter stand out in the field stark naked and sway abowt in the breeze.’

‘Were your whole family mental?’ Rita said.

‘I’m not mad.’ Harry clenched her fists. Adam poised himself to intervene, but she remained seated. ‘I dunt like it when people say that. I dunt rackon thass polite.’

‘I reckon Harry’s normal,’ Adam said as Eric sat down next to him.

‘Everyone’s normal compared to you,’ Rita said.

Adam leapt to his feet, but Eric jumped up and grabbed his shoulder. Jack motioned him to sit down. Adam thumped back on his seat, but he glared at Rita. She smirked. Jack laid a hand on her arm.

‘Let Adam be, Rita.’ A waitress came to the table and took their orders. ‘How’s your brother, Lise?’

‘Everything’s okay now, Jack,’ the waitress said. ‘Thank you so much. We’re very grateful for your help.’

‘That’s real nice of you to say, Lise. Let me know if you have any more problems.’

The waitress soon returned with the food and, throughout the meal, Jack only had to glance in her direction to bring her hurrying back to top up his glass or replace Adam’s fork. (There was a small bit of who-knows-what on one of the

prongs — there was no way he was going to put that in his mouth.) Jack talked for a while about the past week, dwelling in particular on the demonstrations and the resulting traffic jams leaving Central City. Adam was content to listen. Eric supported Jack from time to time with a ‘Yeah, that’s right.’

‘You wouldn’t catch me spending my life in a lousy truck,’ Rita said.

‘It’s lucky you don’t have to do it then,’ Jack said.

‘You don’t have to either.’

‘I like driving. Harry was saying he wants to be a trucker.’

‘You’re kidding. He’s way too small.’

‘I’m strong enough. You hatta be, do you want to work on a farm. There’s hay bales to shift and tractors to drive, not to mention some o’ the animals. We had a pig what was twenty-one stone. He uster eat our hins do they escape into his field, but I slit his throat and chopped him up.’

‘That’s gross,’ Rita said.

‘What d’you think happened to the hin you’re eatin’?’

‘It must be good to know exactly where your food comes from,’ Adam said. ‘At least you know no one’s gobbled in it or swapped it for rat. I mean, look at this —’ he prodded a lump of meat with a bone attached ‘— how can I be sure it’s chicken?’

‘Thass definitely a hin bone not rat,’ Harry said. ‘I’ve killed a sight o’ rats — mostly with a shotgun although there was one I decapitated.’

‘You can handle a shotgun?’ Jack picked up his glass and smiled. ‘I like the sound of that.’

He winked at Adam over the glass as he took a sip, but Rita was pursing her lips like she’d swallowed something she’d much rather spit out. Eric dipped a chip in a pool of ketchup and swirled it around on his plate.

‘Did you, like, have a field with a bull in it and a sign on the gate with “beware of the bull” written on it?’

‘I never saw the point in that,’ Harry said. ‘Do a duddy tewl wander off the footpaths into a field with a bull in it, he’s ony got hisself to blame.’

Jack put the glass down and ran a finger around its rim.

‘You sure have an interesting vocabulary.’

‘I dunt talk different from them back home.’

‘Yeah? Do they all use long words like “decapitated”?’

Jack said.

Adam was sure he detected a slight hesitation, but she grinned again.

‘Ah well, that would be my Uncle Barney. He larnt me a good deal, except about generators.’ She turned to Adam. ‘Wuz that your dad who larned you about generators?’

Jack gave a muffled oath, Rita smirked and Eric gestured at Harry. Adam clenched his fists.

‘I don’t know who he is, but knowing my mother he’ll be a dumb-arsed politician or bank director. Lousy bitch.’

‘I’m sorry,’ Harry said. ‘I didn’t mean to upset you.’

He stared at her for a moment and shrugged.

‘I ain’t bothered. Besides, I could now thump her far harder than she ever hit me if I wanted to and, when she’s old and infirm, I’ll be the one to lock her up in the cellar, only I won’t leave her with the generator: she won’t appreciate it like I did.’ He smiled. ‘It never used to throw things at me or swear at me and tell me I was no good or lock me up because it didn’t want to be interrupted while it had company. I wish I could’ve taken it with me when I left.’

Adam stared at his food and stabbed a chip with his fork. Rita sniggered.

‘Button it, Rita,’ Jack said.

Blood rushed to Adam's cheeks.

'Thass a rat bone,' Harry said as she pointed at Rita's plate with a knife. 'No, my mistake, thass a hin.'

'What? Jack!'

'Harry, what the hell d'you think you're playing at?'

'I'm sorry, Jack. These hins look like they've been shut up in a barn orl their life, and that deform the bones, which make 'em harder to identify.'

Adam smirked at Rita. She swore at him, scrunched up her paper napkin, threw it on to the table and stormed off. Jack strode after her. They stopped at the café door, but Adam could just make out what they were saying.

'Get rid of him,' Rita said.

'Don't tell me how to run my business.'

'He insulted me.'

'You shouldn't've laughed at Adam. I've told you often enough to let him be.'

'Oh and I suppose you're going to tell me to let Harry be as well.'

'I'll deal with him in my own time.'

'It's bad enough that you let Adam get away with as much as you do. I ain't going to stand for any migrant getting out of line.'

'I don't let anyone get out of line.'

'He'd better not insult me again, because I won't stand for it.'

With that, Rita strutted out of the café. Jack glanced at Adam for a moment. Adam smiled at him, but Jack turned away and went off to settle the bill.



‘I’m sorry if I’ve caused any jip,’ Harry said to Jack, after they had left the café. ‘That’ll larn me, if Rita dunt want no more truck with me.’

Jack leant against a lamp post next to Eric, took out a cheroot and ran it along his moustache, breathing in like he was savouring the last one left in the world.

‘For the record, Harry,’ he said, ‘I know exactly what a rat bone looks like and what rat tastes like. Rita may try to convince everyone she lived a life of luxury during the anarchy, but I sure as hell remember what really happened in those days, and it’ll take a damn sight more than thirty years to forget it.’

‘I’m sorry, Jack. I didn’t know.’

Adam moved over to her side.

‘Don’t be mad at Harry for stopping Rita from laughing at me. You know I don’t like people making fun of me.’

‘I certainly never meant to upset you,’ she said to him.

‘Oh believe me,’ Jack said, ‘if I thought you’d done that deliberately, you wouldn’t still be upright. And Adam, my dear boy,’ he added as he stepped away from the lamp post and put an arm across Adam’s shoulders, ‘it may not be haute cuisine, but they know better than to serve my lad anything unwholesome.’

Adam nodded but then heard distant gunfire.

‘That ain’t Stan, is it?’

‘Sounds like Hershey’s guns, but they’re close to Stan’s neighbourhood — he’s not going to like that.’ Jack twirled the unlit cheroot around his fingers. ‘Harry, you be more careful in future because there are a lot worse things that can happen to you than being kicked out with nowhere to go.’ He patted Adam’s back and moved away. ‘Now, Harry, given that it’s your first night here, how about I treat you to a pint

of beer at our local? After all, you did say you're twenty and used to get served at your pub back home.'

'But like I said, I can't git served nowhere else.'

'I know the landlord. I'm sure he'd accept your word if you gave him your date of birth.'

'Thass hully kind o' you,' Harry said, 'but I rackon I'm dead on my feet from jammin' abowt so far terday.'

'In that case, I'll get you a beer from the off-licence over the road, and maybe we'll take you along to the pub some other time.'

With that, he strode over to the off-licence. Harry looked, for a moment, as though she was going to call after Jack, but she remained silent. Jack soon returned with four cans of beer tucked in the crook of his left arm and the cheroot, still unlit, in his mouth. He distributed the cans, struck a match and strolled ahead with Eric.

'You're lucky Jack's good-natured,' Adam said to Harry, as they sauntered some yards behind the other two. Street lamps began to flicker on — only every other light, the remainder would come on later. 'So how many generators did you have on your farm?'

'Let me see now...'

She began to count them off on her fingers. Adam smiled as they strolled along together. His can was soon empty, but he caught sight of Harry slipping hers into one of the many pockets of her jacket.

'Watch out,' he said in a low voice. 'Jack'll get offended if you don't drink it.'

'Would he be offended if I gave it to you?'

Adam glanced at Jack's back and then at a newsagent, nestled between a barber's shop and a letting agency.

'There's no sense in it going to waste. Hang on a minute.'

He waited until Jack and Eric had turned into the next street, then ducked into the newsagent, picked up a carton of apple juice from the shelf and took it over to the counter. The shopkeeper, a small balding man from sector one hundred and eighty, hustled over.

‘Ah, Mr Trent,’ he said. ‘I am so pleased to see you. And Mr Preston is back?’

‘Yeah, sure he is,’ Adam said.

‘Perhaps you can talk to him on my son’s behalf.’

‘I’m in a hurry.’

‘But it will not take long.’

‘I’ll stop by tomorrow.’

‘But since you are here —’

‘Just the apple juice, or d’you want to piss me off?’

Adam paid and returned outside. He stepped into an alley on the other side of the letting agency and gestured to Harry, who seemed to be inspecting the brickwork.

‘Here, hold on to this,’ Adam said, handing over the juice carton. ‘What’re you looking at?’

‘I’d always heard the city was full of graffiti, but I can’t see none.’

‘Maybe in Central City, but not here. We sprayed the last person who tried it.’

‘Sprayed?’

‘Not in his face. Jack’s firm but he ain’t vicious.’ Adam poured her beer into his empty can. ‘The bloke was just a little punk who’d drifted in from somewhere. He was lucky he only got paint sprayed on him. Well, that and a bit of a shaking. And maybe a knock or two. Jack don’t stand for people disrespecting his territory. Here, hold my can.’ He took the juice carton from her and emptied it into her can.

‘The dumb git would’ve had his hand broken or head blown off if he’d tried it in other parts of the city.’

He discarded the empty juice carton and took back his beer can.

‘You can’t be too careful,’ he said as they left the alley. ‘I ain’t got nothing contagious, so we could’ve just swapped cans, but it’s best to get into good habits. There’re some disgusting people about. Filthy buggers with all their gob and sweat. It ain’t no wonder the plague’s come back.’

They turned the corner and found Jack lounging against a small brick bus shelter, smoking his cheroot. Eric stood next to him.

‘You’re being a bit slow,’ Jack said. ‘We nearly turned back to look for you.’

‘Hev the plague really come back?’ Harry asked Adam, as they walked over to Jack.

‘Sure it has. There was an outbreak of it in sector eighty.’

‘Hey,’ Eric said, ‘that sounds just like that film we saw the night we had the dodgy kebab.’

He crushed his can in one hand and dumped it into a bin fastened below the bus stop sign.

‘The film weren’t in sector eighty,’ Adam said. ‘Spud told me he’d heard about it when he was travelling through sector fifty-nine.’

‘Adam, my lad,’ Jack said, ‘Spud’s a laugh, but the kind of long distance hauls he does is enough to make a man see pixies dancing with bug-eyed aliens.’

He exhaled a puff of smoke. Adam took another swig from his can. The beer raced to his head like a kid late for a party, and the alcohol fumes danced with the cheroot smoke until they blended in a fog. It brought back memories of late nights. Jack was a good listener, and he wasn’t a low-down

sneak who'd rat on him. This was a hell of a beer, almost as strong as Jack's home brew. Not that Jack was being mean when he'd bought it for Harry; it was just one of his little life lessons — nothing personal. Harry had chosen not to drink it, so no harm done. She'd just have to learn not to boast about doing things she didn't actually want to do.

'You all right, my lad?' Jack said to Adam.

'Yeah sure, Jack.'

'Come on, Harry, drink up. Haven't you finished yet?'

Harry downed the rest of her drink and tossed the empty can into the bin.

'I didn't mean all in one go.'

She hiccuped and they resumed their walk back to the flat. Adam took another swig.

'I bet it's rife amongst Rita's people,' he said as they approached the entrance to Bob's cul-de-sac. 'I bet they're all covered in sores and boils just waiting to explode pus and blood over everyone.'

'That's enough, my lad,' Jack said.

'Sorry, Jack.'

'How much have you had tonight?'

'Only three cans.'

'Three? You can't have got home much before us.'

'No, I mean two. I lost count.'

'You lost count after two?'

Harry stumbled on a kerb and bumped into Eric.

'Oh, I'm sorry, bor,' she said. 'You've got hully great pavements here.'

'Yeah, well they would be high to a titch like you.'

Harry bumbled along and narrowly missed a lamp post. Eric laughed. She babbled about a trip to market, but her

accent thickened so much that half her words were unintelligible. She veered towards the road, and he shoved her back on course. Jack nudged Adam and leant close to him.

‘What d’you reckon, my lad: is he for real or is he yanking our legs?’

Adam shrugged and inspected his beer can. Jack took it out of his hand, shook it slightly and then returned it.

‘You pacing yourself, my lad? Don’t you drink yours all in one go, will you?’

They reached their apartment block, and Adam followed behind Harry up the stairs. She stumbled on a step, but when she grabbed the rail, he saw her hand shaking. She hesitated for a moment and then continued. The sound of her hobnailed boots echoed along the stairwell. Eric went on ahead and opened up the flat. She staggered into the main room, clasped her temples and moaned.

‘What’s up with you?’ Jack said.

‘There’s nothing wrong with me.’ She clenched her fists, her body quivering. Jack slipped a hand into his coat pocket, but a moment later she smiled. ‘I’m sorry. I dint mean to sound so rude. If you dunt mind, I rackon I might turn in.’

She ducked into the bathroom before the others could say a word and closed the door behind her.

‘That was interesting,’ Jack said as he removed his hand from his pocket. ‘Very interesting.’

‘Here,’ Eric said, ‘you don’t reckon the kid really is nuts, do you?’

‘Nuts, dumb or sick.’

‘I reckon Harry’ll be all right,’ Adam said.

‘Maybe, but he needs to know who’s boss round here.’ Jack stroked his moustache with the tip of his index finger. ‘Watch him while Eric and I go to the pub.’

Jack patted Adam's shoulder and left with Eric. Harry returned from the bathroom. Despite the blemishes, her face was pale, and her hands were trembling. She climbed the ladder to her bunk and collapsed on to the mattress, still fully clothed. Adam strolled over.

'You okay, Harry?'

There was no reply. He put his foot on the bottom rung of her ladder. She lurched away and fumbled inside her jacket, but Adam leapt back.

'It's all right,' he said, retreating further towards his own bunk. 'I ain't going to mess with you. I just wanted to know if you needed any help. That can't be from a few drops of beer at the bottom of the can.'

Her head sank on to the pillow. She still had her right hand inside her jacket, but she had slumped on to it. He could just make out her face in the gap under the top rail. Her mouth was slightly open, her breathing rapid and shallow. Maybe he ought to find a bucket.

'It's just a headache, that's all,' she said. 'Everybody gets headaches, don't they?'

'Sure they do. I get them — usually after I've been in a fight or after I've had a few.' He moved forward, until he was halfway along the wardrobe that stood against the wall between the two sets of bunk beds. 'D'you want any paracetamol? Or something stronger? I've got some co-codamol if it's real bad.'

'What will it cost?'

'Nothing. Looks like it's your lucky night for getting things free.'

He went to fetch the pack from the bathroom but, as he opened the medicine cabinet, he heard clattering and thumping sounds from the other room. He turned and saw her

stumbling towards him. She clasped the wooden moulding of the door frame with a pale hand.

‘You didn’t need to get out of bed,’ Adam said, ‘or are you worried I’m going to give you something else instead?’

‘Maybe.’

‘I ain’t going to do that, but if you don’t believe me, it’s got the name written on the pill. Well, abbreviated anyway. Look, you sit down by the table while I get some water.’

Adam pulled out a chair for her, cleared some space on the table, put the medicine bottle down and went off into the kitchen. He washed up a glass, filled it with fresh water and returned to find her slumped across the table. He ran over to her, but as soon as he touched her shoulder she flinched and struggled to sit up.

‘You may as well trust me,’ he said as he put the glass in front of her. ‘Sooner or later you’ll need to sleep — sooner by the looks of it. What you gonna do? Stay awake for the rest of your life? Run away and doss in a doorway? I’ve been there and, believe me, I ain’t never going back. You’ll be a lot safer here, that’s for sure.’

She reached for the water and pressed the glass against her right temple. Her cap had fallen off and, when she lowered the tumbler, he had his first clear view of her face. Her eyes were bloodshot, her brow was furrowed and her ragged blond hair stood out in all directions, but her nose was long and thin — a bit like Jack’s — and her jaw line reminded him of the smooth curve down the wheel arch to the running board on his Phaeton.

She picked up the medicine bottle but struggled with the safety cap.

‘Here, let me do it,’ he said.

He took the bottle from her, undid it and shook out a couple of pills on to her hand. She swallowed them, muttered a thank you and, grasping hold of the table and chair back, she pushed herself on to her feet. Adam put an arm around her to steady her, but she tried to pull away.

‘I ain’t going to make off with you. If you pass out on the floor, I’ll have to hoist you up the ladder, and that ain’t exactly my idea of fun, so stop being so damn jumpy and let me help you.’

She leant on him, and he led her over to the bunk. She stumbled on a pile of dirty laundry, but he steadied her and helped her up the ladder. Once she had made it up, he returned to the kitchen, washed the beer down with a pint of water and, after a quick trip to the bathroom, he made himself a coffee. He took the mug back to the other room. Harry was lying on her side and seemed asleep. Adam picked up her cap from the table but, as he moved close to her bunk, she opened her eyes.

‘I thought you might want your cap back,’ he said, holding it up.

She took it from him and dropped it on her head. It flopped across her face.

‘That ain’t going to stay on all night,’ he said, but she didn’t reply.

He leant against the wardrobe and sipped his coffee. Outside a dog barked and a car horn sounded. The murmur of a radio programme drifted in from the next flat.

‘Who are you running from?’ he said.

‘What makes you think I’m running from someone?’

‘You’re as jumpy as a flea on a hot soldering iron, you ain’t got no baggage and you’ve got a piece in your jacket.’

‘A piece?’

‘You know what I mean: a weapon. Probably a bit of lead piping.’

‘It isn’t lead piping.’

‘Yeah? Then what is it?’

She raised her head and tilted her cap back so that it was no longer across her face.

‘Does it matter?’

‘Look, I’m sorry about where I grabbed you earlier, but people are going to figure out you’re a woman pretty soon and if you’re found packing a weapon, you’ll be in trouble.’

Harry propped herself up, laid her arms on the bed rail and rested her chin on top. She looked down at him and her mouth twitched at the corners.

‘Not as much trouble as I’d be in without it.’

‘I wouldn’t put it past Rita to get the cops on you just for being in possession.’

‘It doesn’t look much like a weapon. People have seen it before and not realised what it was.’ She closed her eyes and sank back into the pillow. A moment later, her eyes were open again, peering at him from under the rail. ‘It is, however, very effective.’

She turned her back on him and rearranged her blankets. He drank some more coffee.

‘You ain’t an assassin, are you?’ he said. She didn’t reply. ‘What happened to your accent?’

‘What accent? I dunt know what you’re a-talking about.’

‘Yeah right.’

He finished his coffee, left the mug on the bedside table and climbed the ladder to his bunk where he found his mechanics magazine. He turned the page and began reading: the Type 1 generator was designed by Dr Sir Edward Bostock, a scientist at Colingham University, just before the fuel crisis

that triggered global anarchy. The holding tank contained enzymes that converted vegetation into liquid, which was then collected in the secondary fermenting chamber. Yeah, Harry had mentioned about that. She also seemed to know a lot about Bostock. Lucky kid growing up with all those generators and having a dad and granddad to teach her. He flicked over the page and turned his back on her. An hour passed and neither of them said a word. He was almost convinced she was asleep when he heard her voice.

‘How much rent does Jack usually charge?’

He turned round. Her blue eyes weren’t so bloodshot now, and her face was less furrowed. He didn’t answer at first, but then he shrugged.

‘It varies. Some don’t think to negotiate.’

‘If I did negotiate, how low do you think he’d be likely to go?’

‘How should I know?’

She didn’t reply. He returned to his magazine. He read a paragraph, but when he had finished it, he found he couldn’t recall any of it. He read it again.

‘I reckon eighty a week is the lowest he’s ever taken from a migrant.’

They said nothing further for the rest of the evening. Adam changed into his pyjamas, dimmed the lights and fastened his watch around the post near his head. He was still awake when Jack and Eric returned. Adam threw aside his bed clothes, grabbed the side rail of his bunk and jumped down. His bare feet caught on an empty beer can and he swore.

‘I don’t want to sound like a nag,’ Jack said as he hung his coat and hat on a peg, ‘but if the two of you were a bit tidier that wouldn’t happen.’

‘Sorry, Jack.’ Adam leant against the bed frame and rubbed his foot. ‘I’ll clear up tomorrow.’

Eric belched, yawned and sat on his bunk below Harry and removed his shoes.

‘Yeah, we can do it tomorrow.’

‘Any problems with the kid, my lad?’ Jack said to Adam.

‘Nix.’

Jack strolled over to Harry’s bunk and studied his new lodger in the dim light.

‘He hasn’t even taken off his hat, coat and boots.’

‘Yeah, he looked deadbeat.’

‘What d’you make of his accent?’

‘We’ve had migrants with a broad accent before,’ Adam said. Jack drummed his fingers on the bedpost. ‘He knows a lot about generators.’

Jack turned to Adam and patted his cheek.

‘My dear boy, you know very well you can’t judge a person by their knowledge of generators. Now I don’t like to mention his name, but I reckon you can guess who I’m thinking about.’

‘He don’t know half as much as he says — not like Harry.’

Jack ruffled Adam’s hair.

‘Just be careful. Talk all you like about generators and engines, but don’t trust him.’

‘Can Harry be a trucker?’

‘You serious?’

‘Sure I am, Jack. I mean, I ain’t saying right now, but maybe you could consider it?’

Jack eyed Adam for a moment, but then he smiled.

‘All right. I’m not making any promises, but give him some lessons — only in the old quarry. Don’t let him loose on the roads.’

‘I reckon he’s got potential.’

‘We’ll see. If he’s got one hell of a hangover in the morning, then maybe his outburst was just the effect of a strong beer on an untrained gut.’

‘Not everyone gets a hangover.’

‘Not everyone acts like a headcase.’

NEW EMPLOYMENT

WHEN Harry awoke the next morning, the flat was filled with cigar smoke and the smell of coffee. She was clammy under her jacket, and she had a crick in her neck. Her feet throbbed inside her boots, and her thigh ached from where she had lain on the penknife in her pocket, but at least she hadn't woken up with a headache — for the first time in weeks. Sounds drifted across the room: crockery clattering, a knife scraping against toast, crunching and conversation.

'I'll wake Harry.'

'Sit down, Adam. I'll give him a shake when it's time to go if he's not up by then.'

'I just thought Bob might not like his new assistant being late.'

'Since when have you cared about Bob? And I'm sitting right next to you. There's no need to shout.'

'Sorry, Jack.'

'If Harry shows any sign of a hangover, Eric can give him the cold water treatment. Isn't that right, Eric?'

'Yeah, sure thing, Jack.'

Harry lay in bed for a few minutes longer, then sighed, stretched and rolled on to her back. The weapon strapped to the inside of her jacket jabbed into her spine, so she turned round on to her front, curled her legs, pushed herself upright and clambered down the ladder. The three men were eating breakfast at the table on the other side of the room.

‘Looks like you can hold back on the cold water, Eric,’ Jack said as she made her way to the door. Harry glanced back. There was amusement but no friendliness in the smile he gave her. ‘You can use one of the towels in the bathroom cupboard, but you’re responsible for laundering it.’

Harry nodded, went into the bathroom and switched on the shower. The plumbing juddered and squealed while she washed. It was just starting to knock like a giant death-watch beetle when she turned off the water. She dressed and decided that clean underwear, a toothbrush and toothpaste needed to go high up on her list of expenditures. She then tied her laces, tugged on her cap, checked the contents of her pockets and joined the others.

Jack folded up his newspaper and gestured with it at an empty seat next to Adam.

‘Sit down, Harry, and help yourself. The bread’s got a few spots of mould on it, but you can pick them off.’

‘Most folk dunt realise mould hev invisible roots,’ she said as she inspected the bread. ‘They pick off the top but eat the rest.’

Adam paused, a slice of toast midway to his mouth.

‘What?’ he said.

Jack rolled up his newspaper into a tight tube.

‘Don’t wind Adam up.’

‘I wunt trying to,’ Harry said. ‘Honest, Jack, I was only saying what my Aunt Hilda told me. She was an expert on

fungi howsomever even she made the occasional mistake. One time she put magic mushrooms in a casserole, and we orl hed quite a trip. Then she went and ate a toxic one and died.'

Jack held the newspaper as though it was a club for a moment but then tossed it on to the table.

'Not so much of an expert,' he said.

'I rackon that was her poor eyesight what did it. D'you mind if I toast this?'

'Go right ahead.'

Breakfast was soon finished, and Harry set off with Jack towards Bob's shop. He strode ahead, but she caught up and trotted along beside him, although her hobnails jarred against the hard surface. People bustled along the pavement, but they all gave way to Jack.

'You seem to be getting along well with Adam — for the moment,' Jack said.

'Thass a masterley great thing to find someone else woss hully interested in generators. My Grandpa Eddie was the expert in my family, and his death wuz a big loss to the generator community.'

'That the grandfather who thought he was a tree?'

'Only in his latter days.'

'So what did he die of?'

'Hypothermia.'

'No kidding.'

Harry jumped back as a bus bumped up on to the pavement in front of them to make way for a postal van coming in the opposite direction. She ducked behind Jack until the bus thumped back down off the kerb, missing a lamp post by a few inches.

‘How long hev you known Adam?’ she said as she resumed her place by Jack’s side.

‘Eight years.’ They turned into Bob’s cul-de-sac. ‘His mother kicked him out when he was sixteen. He got into trouble, but I fixed things for him, and I’ve looked after him ever since.’

‘That do sound like he wuz hully lucky to hev met you,’ Harry said.

‘You don’t know how much trouble he would’ve been in if I hadn’t helped him out.’

He led her down a flight of steps to a basement shop. Thin fingers of sunlight filtered into it through small, grubby windows, and a musty smell permeated the air. A solitary electric bulb hung from the ceiling. The room was filled with stacks of shelves packed with boxes. A stepladder with a handrail running up each side stood in one of the aisles. There was a counter near Harry with an inner doorway beyond. A tapping sound approached from the other side of it, and what looked like a desiccated corpse holding a heavy walking stick emerged. He shuffled around the counter and leered at Harry.

‘So you want a job, d’you, boy?’ He poked her with his stick. ‘Not got much in the way of muscle, have you?’

Harry pushed the stick away.

‘I’ve got more muscle than you. I could easily snap your neck, hang you up and jug you like a hare.’

‘None of that, lad.’ Jack nudged her jaw with his knuckles. ‘Learn some manners, before someone tries teaching you.’

‘I ain’t taking on someone who gives me that kind of lip,’ Bob said. ‘I expect a bit of respect from my employees.’

‘You’re going to give him a chance, Bob. Adam reckons he’s got potential.’

Bob bit his lower lip and shrugged. The two of them haggled over her proposed wages until Bob gave in to Jack's higher offer. Jack winked at her.

'You hent told me the rent yit,' Harry said.

'Well, let's say a hundred a week.'

'A hundred? For jist a bed?'

'It's not just a bed,' Jack said. 'It's breakfast as well, not to mention tea and coffee.'

'I was thinkin' more on sixty.'

Jack leant back against the counter and took out a cheroot.

'Sixty? Are you kidding me?'

'Not at orl, Jack, but I need to think about other things, like wittles and clothes.'

'You don't know how lucky you are getting such reasonable accommodation, but I like you, so let's say ninety.'

Harry picked at a bit of dirt under a fingernail and looked back at him.

'That dunt leave me much from my wages. What if unforeseen expenses should crop up? What if I fare sadly? Can't you say seventy?'

Jack stroked his thin moustache with the unlit cheroot.

'Would you bankrupt me? And there's me giving you one night bed and breakfast free.'

'I appreciate your generosity, but I did say at the time I dint want to put you out.'

'Aren't you putting me out right now? I'm hurt, Harry. However, as I said, I like you. You've got a bit to learn, but I reckon you'll do, so let's say eighty, but that's my final offer.'

'Eighty? Well, okay.'

Jack put the cheroot to his lips and struck a match with his thumbnail.

‘I usually ask for rent in advance, but I suppose you’re not going to be able to manage it until you get your pay check at the end of the week.’

‘Dunt you worry about that.’ Harry rummaged inside her jacket. ‘Spect you probably want a deposit as well.’

The deposit turned out to be the same as a week’s rent, but Harry counted out the money and requested a receipt.

‘A receipt?’ Jack said as he flicked through the bundle of banknotes.

‘Thass usual practice, hintut?’

Jack studied Harry, blew out a stream of smoke, tapped ash off his cheroot on to the floor and smiled.

‘Sure.’

He took out a pad and pen from the inside of his trench coat and scribbled a receipt. Then he went through the inner doorway with Bob, leaving her behind. Harry wandered about, but the shop wasn’t designed for browsing. There were no products on view and the boxes on the shelves just had alphanumeric codes written on them. The two men soon returned. Jack tucked a brown envelope inside his coat and left. Bob shuffled over to her.

‘So, Mr Snotty I’ve-got-more-muscle-than-you, see if you can move that box up on to the top shelf. Or is it too heavy for you?’

He pointed to a box resting on the floor. Harry studied it, looked up at the shelf and fetched the stepladder. She bent her knees, shifted the box on to her shoulder, climbed the ladder and slid the box into place. Then she held the top of the ladder handrails, swung herself round and jumped down. Her hobnails slipped against the stone floor, and she slid over to the opposite shelf. She grabbed it and swung round as though it had been a planned manoeuvre.

Bob raised his stick.

‘What’re you trying to do, boy? Smash through my floor?’

The bell on the shop door rang, and Bob shuffled over to the counter. A man with a battered fedora low over his face and coat collar turned up approached him. Bob gestured to Harry with his stick.

‘Hey, boy. Fetch the small box at the end of the third shelf, and no acrobatics.’

Harry brought it over. The man began to open the box but stopped and stared at her.

‘Don’t be so damn nose-y,’ Bob said to Harry. ‘Clear off.’

She returned down the aisle and glanced back. The man peered into the box, handed Bob some money and took it away. There were more boxes to stack on the shelves, but she didn’t attempt to find out what was in them.

Lunchtime came round, and Harry was allowed out. She bought a sandwich and drink from the newsagent, returned to the shop and settled down on the floor behind some packing cases where she ate her meal. Afterwards, she took out a document from the inside of her jacket, squinted at it, angled it to catch a few limp rays from the electric bulb but eventually gave up and folded it away. She was about to go back to work when she heard the front door opening. Footsteps approached. Bob’s stick tapped in the other direction. Harry remained seated behind the cases and listened.

‘Is that you, boy?’

‘It’s Adam. Where’s Harry?’

‘Out to lunch. Jack want him knocked about?’

‘No. In fact, you’re going to keep your stick away from Harry, or you’ll get my fist in your face.’

‘All right. Let me go. I won’t touch the kid.’

‘You’d better not.’

The footsteps retreated and the door slammed. There was a sigh and low mumbling. The stick tapped away and all was silent again.

Adam lounged on his bunk that afternoon, reading a history of the modern generator. Coming up next issue: a biography of Edward Bostock, inventor of the Type 1, plus pictures of his prototype, still in use today on his granddaughter's farm.

The front door clicked. It was too quiet to be Jack or Eric. Besides, they weren't due back from the gym yet. He raised the magazine in front of his face and peered around the edge of the page. Harry came into the room but didn't look in his direction. Instead, she sat down at the table, picked up the newspaper and began to flick through it. Adam was debating whether to join her or to adopt a nonchalant attitude and ignore her when she gave a start.

'What's up?' he said.

Harry flicked over the rest of the newspaper.

'All out for a hundred and seventy. I was hoping we would at least hold out for two hundred.'

'What?'

'Cricket.'

'Oh.'

'I'm going to make a coffee,' she said. 'D'you want one?'

'Yeah, all right. Milk, no sugar.'

Harry walked out of the room, and Adam jumped down from his bunk. A can crumpled beneath his shoe — the same one he had trodden on last night. He kicked the empty cans, packaging and dirty laundry under Eric's bunk and strolled over to the table. The newspaper was face down showing the sports results on the back page, but Harry had been looking

somewhere in the middle of it. Probably wasn't anything important. She hadn't shut the paper properly. He slid his fingers in the gap and opened it. So what if she didn't want to tell him the truth? It wasn't like they were friends or anything. He sat down and began to skim through the page in front of him.

**The Anti-Technology League:
Luddites or Protectors of the Future?**

Following the demonstrations in Central City against the proposal to allow computer use outside the public sector, our correspondent Ainsley McKee interviewed Fulton Robbins, president of the Anti-Technology League, and Ken de Saulles, chief spokesman for Sector House.

Not those damn Anti-Techs again. Adam skipped on to the next article.

**Top Brain Surgeon Killed in
Drink-Driving Crash**

David Trescothic, leading brain surgeon at Colingham Private Hospital, was killed last night when his car hit a tree. He was taken to his own hospital but pronounced dead on arrival. 'It was most unlike him to drink before driving,' his P.A. Miss Alice Penderbury said, 'but he's been under tremendous strain lately.'

There was a picture of a grey-haired man with sideburns, and next to it was a photo of a car that had a one-way ticket to the scrapyard. Shame about the car — it looked like a Bentley.

Burnt Satellite Fragment Hits Derelict Airport

A burning chunk of metal — all that was left of an old satellite — smashed into a disused hangar at the abandoned Norwich airport last night. ‘It was an enormous fireball,’ said Mrs Carpenter, a resident in the nearby housing estate, ‘and there was an explosion that shook our flat so violently that the picture of my old mum fell off the shelf and broke. I was sure it was judgement day.’

Perhaps not the apocalypse, but was it a message to the people of our generation? Fulton Robbins, president of the Anti-Technology League, said: ‘It’s prophetic that one of these artificial abominations hit a symbol of past technology, but how many more of these monstrosities are still up there waiting to fall on us?’

That was a question we put to Professor Wainright at Colingham University. ‘The medium orbit satellites may well take at least a hundred years to reach the atmosphere after burning up their fuel,’ he said, ‘but it was entirely coincidental that it happened to hit an old airport. I’m sure a divine message would have struck the airport in Central City [the only working airport in this sector] not some disused provincial airport. There’s nothing supernatural about the incident.’

Others are not so convinced. ‘There’s something spooky about that place,’ Mrs Carpenter stated. ‘My neighbour Mrs Bacon swore she saw a ghost plane coming in to land last month, and the very next week she was dead.’

Adam heard Harry returning, so he flicked the newspaper closed and opened up his magazine. She put the mugs on the table and sat opposite him. She was still wearing her jacket and cap, as though she wasn't planning on staying.

'You serious about wanting to be a trucker?' he said.

'Better than being stuck in a basement shop.'

'I can give you lessons, but the chances are you won't get a job.'

Harry shrugged.

'Maybe if I can show I'm up to it, people might change their minds.'

'It's Jack's mind you need to change.'

'How much for lessons?'

'Jack worked out the costs. Hang on while I find it. I'm supposed to let you negotiate, but I can't be arsed, so let's pretend we've wasted ten minutes haggling.'

They finished their coffee and set off through the lanes, out of Jack's neighbourhood and along the streets lined with terrace houses. Adam dodged round a crowd that was spilling out of a bus shelter and, for a moment, he lost sight of Harry, but then he noticed her heading towards an alley. He called her back.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I thought I came out of there with Jack and Eric yesterday.'

'Yeah, they go that way, but we're going this way.'

'Is it a short cut?'

'No. You in a hurry or something?'

He walked faster. Harry's hobnails clicked on the pavement behind him, but he didn't look back at her until they reached the depot. He led her through the gates, past the parking bays and into the grey two-storey building.

‘We have to sign the keys in and out here.’ Adam leant against a hatch frame in the corridor. ‘Hiya, Ned. Jack spoken to you about me taking Harry for a ride?’

The man on the other side of the hatch grinned, displaying a gold tooth.

‘Sure.’ Ned slid Adam’s truck key across the counter while Adam scrawled his name in the book. ‘You might want to get the kid a pair of stilts so he can reach the pedals.’

Adam picked up the key and looked back at Harry, but she had turned away and was inspecting a wall map.

‘I take it this is your route,’ she said as she traced the highlighted line with a forefinger.

‘Yeah, that’s right,’ Adam said.

‘What’s this blob here?’

‘That’s Betsy’s Café.’ Adam lounged against the wall next to the map and twirled the truck key around his thumb. ‘We stop there on Monday and Thursday nights.’ Harry was still staring at the map, her finger resting on Betsy’s street just below the junction where Sector House stood. ‘Come on, let’s go.’ He led her outside and over to his lorry. ‘Jack’s trucks are all based on the Bedford OS model with a van body. Four wheels, as you can see, ten feet long, three ton with spiral bevel rear axle and hydraulic brakes. But it has five gears instead of four, and obviously the engine had to be redesigned for biofuel.’

He unlocked the lorry and, once they were in, he pulled out of the depot and continued talking.

‘Jack was thinking about replacing the trucks with the long-wheelbase model a few years ago, but the Anti-Techs keep pressing for further restrictions on vehicle sizes, and he didn’t want to risk having to scrap a new fleet of trucks.’

‘I’m surprised that a change in the law would make much of a difference to him.’

‘You ain’t about to get up on your high horse about Jack, are you?’

‘No, I just meant that he didn’t seem the type to be easily intimidated by such things.’

‘Damn right, he ain’t, but an over-sized vehicle ain’t exactly easy to hide. It’s not like we’re lawless, Harry. I mean, this ain’t the anarchy. I ain’t even packing a weapon — well, apart from my knife and sometimes I carry a blackjack and occasionally we need the guns — but what I meant was we don’t usually go around waving our tommy guns about in public places just for the hell of it.’

Adam slowed down as he approached a junction.

‘My Uncle Barney once told me that lorries used to be huge before the fuel crisis,’ Harry said.

‘Yeah, sure, that’s right. Jack told me when he was a kid he saw one so big it took up two lanes and had to have a police escort.’

Adam drove out of the city and headed south until he reached the gravel quarry. He pulled up in the shadows between two mounds of sand, put the brake on and turned to Harry.

‘Out you get then. We’ll swap over and you can have a go.’

Harry undid her belt but paused with her hand on the door latch.

‘What’s up?’ Adam said.

‘You’re not going to let me out and drive off without me?’

‘Bloody hell, Harry. You ain’t half paranoid.’

‘I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘Empty quarries conjure up all kinds of images.’

‘You’re nuts, you are.’

‘No, I’m not. And I’m not paranoid, either. I just happen to be careful.’

‘Are you going to get out or are we going to climb over each other?’

‘All right, I’ll get out.’

She jumped down and walked around the front, eyeing him. He slid over to the passenger seat and waved the truck key at her so that she could see it wasn’t in the ignition. She clambered into the driver’s seat, and he gave her the key.

‘Step one: turn on the ignition,’ he said.

‘I’ve driven lorries laden with hay bales. Long-wheelbase and much heavier than this truck. And it wouldn’t have made a difference to us if the Anti-Techs had managed to get the law changed.’

‘You know I’ve half a mind to ask Jack to tell you to pack your bags — if you had any.’

‘I just meant that agricultural vehicles are exempt as long as they spend most of the time off-road. I’ve had plenty of practice driving heavy vehicles, so you don’t need to start at the very basics.’

‘Well, go on then. Let’s see your brilliant driving skills.’

Harry started the engine and drove around the quarry. Adam watched her hands, feet and face. All right, so maybe she could drive as well as she said, and maybe it had sounded a bit condescending when he’d told her to turn on the ignition, but it had just been a joke. She needn’t have got so uptight about it. How the hell was he supposed to talk to her? One minute it was like talking to a bloke, next minute she was being all defensive.

‘All right, Harry. That’s enough or Jack’ll be charging for the extra fuel. Swap over and we’ll head back.’

WANTED

ADAM drove back to the city, with Harry once more in the passenger seat, pulled into the depot and returned his truck key. He then led her to Jack's regular café where they had eaten the previous evening. The glass front door opened into an area that the proprietor liked to designate as the lobby, but it was just a corner of the café that had a latticed fence to separate it from the main room. The lobby contained a collection of potted plants, a large gilt-framed mirror mounted on the side wall, and next to that was a general noticeboard. It was around this board that they found Jack and Eric watching P.C. Donnaghan pinning up a missing-person notice. It looked like the lousy copper was trying to grow a moustache — and failing. Just a few stupid bristles sticking out in all directions like a balding hedgehog.

'Hey, Adam,' Jack said. 'Take a look over here. How's this for a sweet little face?'

Adam glanced at the poster but then stopped and stared. The pale, porcelain-like skin and long, golden tresses were unfamiliar, and the clear blue eyes had a seemingly gentle, innocent expression, but he recognised the long, thin nose

and the jaw line.

‘She sure is something, isn’t she?’ Jack said. ‘Have we finally found a pretty face that’s caught your eye, my lad?’

‘I ain’t saying she’s caught my eye.’

‘Sure you’re not.’ Jack put a hand on Adam’s shoulder. ‘You’re just taking a good look so you can recognise her if you see her hitching a lift.’

‘Yeah, keep your eyes peeled,’ Eric said. ‘Donnaghan says there’s a sector-wide search for her.’

Adam risked a glance at Harry. She was standing by a potted aspidistra near the front door. The plant was on a high stand and overshadowed her. A red glow from the neon sign outside filtered through the leaves creating a stippled effect that seemed to highlight her weather-beaten face.

Donnaghan hitched up his trousers. The lousy cop was always doing that. Why didn’t he get himself a uniform that fitted for a change or did he reckon it made him look important?

‘That’s right,’ Donnaghan said to Eric. ‘Her fiancé is offering a generous reward for her safe return.’

‘Fiancé?’ Adam said. ‘He ain’t much good at being a fiancé if he’s lost her.’

‘That’s just what I’d expect from you,’ Donnaghan said. ‘You wouldn’t know how to look after a woman.’

‘And you look after them so well,’ Adam said but stopped when he felt Jack tapping his shoulder.

The lousy cop was always making insinuations — which was a damn nerve given what he was like — but Adam had Jack with him, so the bastard had better not try anything.

‘Donnaghan told us she’s nuts,’ Eric said.

‘Don’t be putting words in my mouth, Eric. According to the report, she has a brain tumour that’s affected her reasoning.

It triggered a delusional state, and she ran away before the doctor was able to sedate her.'

'Yeah, she's nuts.'

'Well, I ain't looking for her,' Adam said. 'It might be contagious.'

'Don't be stupid,' Eric said. 'You can't catch a brain tumour.'

'Don't call me stupid.'

'Pack it in, both of you,' Jack said. 'Anyway, didn't you hear Donnaghan say there's a reward for her return?'

'For her safe return,' Donnaghan said.

'You going to personally see to that?' Adam took a step towards the cop, but Jack tightened his hold and pulled Adam back. 'So what's the reward, anyhow?'

'A generous one.'

'Generous is a relative term,' Jack said. 'How about a number?'

'I don't know. It isn't on the poster.'

Adam laughed.

'Yeah, it's a real big reward, ain't it? So big they can't fit it on the piece of paper. Chances are it's just a handshake, and I ain't touching anyone's hand.'

'Who wrote up this poster?' Jack said. 'It hardly says anything. Where was she last seen?'

'She lives in West Norfolk,' Donnaghan said.

'You're a genius, aren't you, Donnaghan? That's the one bit of information that's actually written on the damn thing. Could you perhaps be a little bit more specific?'

Harry walked over to them and put her hands in her jacket pockets.

'The Wynherne Estate is about half way atwin here and Central City,' she said. 'Every one know about the Coul-

graner back home. The estate go on for miles south o' the road we come in on.'

'Bet you didn't know that, did you, Donnaghan?' Adam said. 'You ain't as savvy as you think.'

'It's not my fault if they didn't send all the information. Country folk don't seem to realise anything exists beyond their borders.'

'Thass not true,' Harry said. 'We orl know abowt the city back home. Folk often mardle abowt the city. There's a statue o' her great-granfar outside the town hall in Great Bartling. He's on a rearin' hoss with a lance through a raider and another raider crushed beneath the hoss's hooves, and every time we see it, we say, "D'you rackon they'll come back?" And the old blokes have a laugh and say, "Not bloody likely."'

Alf, Hector and Spike entered the café and shouldered Donnaghan out of the way. Eric filled them in, with some embellishment.

'Orl this song and a dance for one mawther,' Harry said, 'but nowun care about a poor farmer woss lorst everythin.'

'Sure, our hearts bleed for you,' Jack said. 'Isn't that right, lads?'

'I spect she'll be found when someone fy-out the ditches. Only t'other week the old doctor wuz found in one.'

'You sure are an optimist, Harry. You don't think maybe she's running around a field somewhere or hitching a lift? Would you have recognised her if you'd seen her?'

'Ah yis, we orl woulda, but I dint see no fine ladies. Jist a cuppla Massey Fergusons and a Fordson. We hed a Massey Ferguson that belonged to my granfar from afore the anarchy. That lasted us a masterly long time.'

The café door opened again, letting in a blast of cold air, and Rita entered the lobby.

‘What’s going on? Why the big crowd? Move out the way, Spike, and let me through.’

‘Come on, kid,’ Adam said to Harry. ‘There’s too many germs in a crowd.’

He shoved Harry into the main part of the café, nodded at some of the patrons he recognised, sauntered over to a table and slumped into a chair. Harry sat next to him, and they were soon joined by Jack, Eric and Rita. Eric pulled up a seat on the other side of Adam, and Rita took the place opposite Adam. She opened up a compact and smoothed out her eyebrows.

‘You want to move down a seat?’ Jack said to her.

‘I’m not sitting opposite that kid again, thank you very much.’

‘Then shift over in front of Eric.’

‘I’m not playing musical chairs.’

‘All right, but make sure you don’t wind Adam up.’

Jack selected the chair opposite Harry, and Lise the waitress came over to take their order. Adam shared his menu card with Harry — not that there was a great deal of variety since all the items seemed to involve chicken or beans or chips or a combination thereof. They ended up selecting the same meal they’d had the previous evening. Lise headed off to the kitchen, and a nineteen-year-old lad slid into the spare seat next to Rita.

‘How’s things, gorgeous?’ he said, leaning towards her.

Rita smiled and nudged him.

‘What’re you after, Masher?’

‘Just came over to meet the new boy. Reckoned he might want help settling in.’

‘Beat it, Ralph,’ Jack said.

‘Aw, Jack, you know I don’t like being called that. I’m Masher, I am.’

‘I’ll mash you if you give me any lip.’

‘Give him a break, Jack,’ Rita said. ‘He’s just being sociable.’

‘I’ll tell you who I’d like to be sociable with,’ Masher said. ‘That cute little number in the poster.’

‘Jack told you to beat it, Ralph,’ Adam said.

Masher yawned and went over to join one of the other tables. Adam could see him nudging his neighbour and gesturing at Harry. For a moment, Adam toyed with the idea of going over and smacking him in the face, but he decided that probably wouldn’t be such a good idea.

‘Why don’t you ever give that kid any encouragement?’ Rita said to Jack. ‘You’re always putting him down.’

‘I don’t like him.’

‘And you sure aren’t one for hiding your likes and dislikes, are you?’

‘Why should I?’

Lise came over with plates balanced on her wrists but, as she passed Masher’s table, he patted her backside.

‘Hoy, Ralph,’ Jack said. ‘Keep your hands to yourself. This isn’t a damn petting zoo.’

Everyone turned to look at the boy and some of them sniggered.

‘For crying out loud, Jack,’ Rita said. ‘He was just having a bit of fun. She’s only a waitress.’

‘What’s the point in people having my protection if they can’t rely on it? Besides, I don’t want my dinner on the floor.’

Lise brought the food over, thanked Jack and moved to a different table, notepad at the ready.

‘How much d’you reckon the fiancé is prepared to pay?’ Rita said. ‘I suppose if he’s keen on her he might be open to negotiation.’

‘Sure, but I reckon you ought to find her before you start haggling over her.’

‘She’s going to be hard to miss,’ Rita said. ‘Have someone check out the refuge, and tell your truckers to keep an eye out for her. If your people don’t find her, I’m sure one of mine will.’

Adam gripped his table knife so tightly that his knuckles turned white.

‘Make sure they treat her nice or he might not want her back,’ Jack said.

‘Thass true. She do stand out a bit,’ Harry said. ‘She’d hev stood out on my farm, thass for sure.’

Eric shovelled a forkful of chips into his mouth. He leaned forwards and stared around Adam at Harry, his jaws chomping up and down, but eventually he swallowed.

‘Did you ever used to go about with a shotgun saying, “Get orf my land”?’

‘Only once that I recall. That wunt long arter my Uncle Barney died, and I wunt feelin’ sociable.’

‘Did you shoot?’ Jack said.

Adam reached for the jug of water and glanced at Harry.

‘No, he cleared off hully quick.’ She held her glass out to Adam, and he filled it for her. ‘We useter be a fare full house when I was young. There was me and my brother, our parents, Uncle Barney, Aunt Hilda, Grandpa Eddie and Grandma Izzy, Grandpa George and Grandma Josey, and there wuz also Great-Grandpa Reggie.’

‘That’s a full house,’ Jack said. ‘You must’ve all been stacked on top of each other.’

‘Oh, and there wuz also Uncle Freddy, but he hed an accident with the Mark B generator. Mind you, he kept us well supplied with electricity for a time arter his death.’

‘What the hell’s that supposed to mean?’ Rita said.

Jack signalled to Adam for a top-up.

‘Apparently there’s a generator that runs on animal and human remains,’ Jack said.

‘Well, he wuz dead, and we coont find no way to get the body out. Not that we use that generator no more. No one wanted to go near it arter that, so we jist left it in the shud.’ She frowned. ‘I should’ve scrapped it.’

‘Has anyone in your family ever died of old age?’

Harry tapped her fingers on the table for a moment.

‘My great-granfar died when he wuz a hundred and two.’

‘That’s a good long run,’ Jack said.

‘Mind you, he dint die of old age. He fell orf the top o’ a haystack.’

‘You don’t half talk some bull,’ Rita said.

‘Now, Rita love, don’t be like that.’

‘Oh come off it, Jack. He’s making it up, especially the bit about the generator. That’s a load of bull.’

‘No it ain’t,’ Adam said.

‘Oh, and you know Harry’s life story, do you?’

‘No, but I know a damn sight more about generators than you do.’

‘You clearly want to know a damn sight more about Harry than anyone else does.’

Adam leapt to his feet.

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘Sit down, Adam,’ Jack said. ‘And, Rita, just don’t go there. I was stuck in Central City for two days thanks to those damn Anti-Techs, and now I’m back I’d appreciate being able to eat my dinner in peace.’



The rest of the meal passed without further bickering. There were sour looks between Rita and Adam, but Jack was used to that, and so far there hadn't been any accusations of either of them kicking the other. At least Harry had remained quiet. The bill was settled, and Jack strode over to the lobby where he found Rita standing in front of the mirror applying cream to her face.

'Rita love, the sun's almost set,' he said. 'You can't need that much cream.'

'There's still some sun out there, and we all know how harmful it is.'

'It isn't that bad.'

Jack leant against the doorpost and waited for the other three. Eric had gone to the gents, and Adam, with Harry tagging along, had stopped to talk to Alf. Rita dipped her fingers into the pot and scooped out another dollop of cream.

'Have you seen Harry's face?' she said. 'That's the sun what's done that. Is that how you want me to end up?'

She remained facing the mirror as she spoke, and the tarnishes where the silver backing had been damaged made it seem as though she had grey blotches over her cheeks.

'Harry's worked outdoors all his life,' Jack said. 'You don't get like that walking in the dusk with a parasol and hat.'

'That kid's mental. You mark my words: he'll end up in a straitjacket and a pair of electric handcuffs, and it'll be the sun what's done it. I ain't taking no chances.'

'Well hurry up.'

Eric came out of the gents and joined Adam and Harry. Jack gestured to them, strode out of the café and took out a cheroot. They followed him outside while Rita remained in front of the mirror.

‘Here, Jack,’ Adam said, ‘d’you mind if I don’t come to the pub? Harry’d like to see my car.’

‘Sure. Anything for a bit of peace and quiet.’

‘Cheers, Jack.’

He and Harry walked away, Harry chatting about cars, but Adam seemed unusually quiet. At least, it was unusual for him to be quiet when the topic was about something mechanical. Jack twirled the cheroot around his fingers.

‘It ain’t like Adam to let anyone near his car,’ Eric said.

‘Hopefully it’ll keep them both out of trouble for the evening. Maybe it’ll do Adam good to have a friend to hang out with.’

Jack struck a match, lit his cheroot and glanced through the window. Rita was now applying cream to her throat.

‘I ought to buy shares in that stuff,’ he said.

He leant against a lamp post and blew out a smoke ring. Eric put his hands in his pockets and rocked on his feet. The door opened. Rita stepped outside and put up her parasol.

‘You got rid of the brat?’ she said to Jack.

‘I told Adam to take him back. I’m not having a kid cramp my style in the pub. Are we ready?’

‘Don’t look at me: I ain’t holding anyone up,’ Rita said and flounced off down the street with her left hand on her hip.

The Crown and Mitre was on the corner between Jack and Big Stan’s neighbourhoods and had a mixture of people from both territories. Big Stan O’Brien was already sitting at a table near an inglenook with Seán, Ciaran and Niall on either side of him. He was using his hat as a fan, and his balding head glowed red from the light of the fire. All it needed was for someone to shove an apple in his mouth for him to play the part of a roasting hog. His nose looked as

though it had once collided with a brick wall. His ear had a chunk missing.

‘How’s it going, Jack?’ Stan’s chair creaked as he leant back and raised his glass to Jack. ‘I hear you got stuck in Central City.’

Jack and Eric sat down on an upholstered bench by the window opposite the others, and Rita pulled up a chair at the end of the table.

‘Tell me about it, Stan,’ Jack said. ‘Where’d you get to last night?’

‘Hershey knocked off the jewellers down West Street.’

Jack leant back against the wall and blew out a stream of smoke. The thud of darts sounded in the alcove on the other side of the fireplace.

‘I heard his guns going. Isn’t that place owned by one of your relatives?’

‘Sure it is. So as you can imagine, I’m not too happy about it.’

‘Hershey’s getting to be a cocky little bastard.’

‘That’s what I was thinking, and I was also thinking that maybe you’d like to help me teach him a lesson.’

The bar behind Stan was beginning to get crowded. Bob shuffled over to it and perched on a stool between a lanky youth and one of Jack’s truckers.

‘Well, I don’t know, Stan,’ Jack said. ‘It would require a bit of planning to do the job properly, and he hasn’t inconvenienced me.’

Stan leant forward, reeking of stout.

‘So far, but that might change given the way he’s going. We could split his territory half-way. He’s got that nice little place down by the river you could have.’

‘All right, but it’d have to be done properly.’

‘And there’s no one better at planning a thing like that than you.’

Jack looked over to the bar, about to catch the landlord’s eye, when Masher slid into the seat next to Rita.

‘I’ve got you a drink, Rita.’

‘That’s real sweet of you, Masher.’

‘Yeah, real sweet of you, Ralph,’ Jack said.

‘I didn’t see you offering me a drink.’

‘I’ve only just sat down.’

Jack signalled to the landlord, and a barmaid was dispatched to take his order. The youth next to Bob moved his hand towards the old man’s jacket.

‘Stan,’ Jack said, ‘Benny’s in danger of losing his fingers.’

‘Neutral ground, Jack.’

‘Which is why he should be keeping his fingers to himself instead of poking them into people’s pockets.’

Stan twisted round in his seat.

‘Benny, go play with your brother.’ The youth sloped off, and Stan turned back to Jack. ‘He can’t help it. Half the time his head doesn’t know what his hands are doing.’

Pool balls clicked against each other on the far side of the pub. Most of the patrons were grouped according to their territories, except for those around the bar. Occasionally there’d be some jostling, but the landlord only needed to glance in Jack and Stan’s direction for things to subside.

One of the logs on the fire crackled and spat out sparks on to the hearth. A shadow fell over the table, and Jack looked up to see Chief Constable Ethan Hall with a face as sore as a kid who’d been grounded for a month. He had an old scar that bisected one of his blond eyebrows, and he was flanked, as usual, by D.I.s van Loame and Cornell. Van Loame also had a scar, but his was across the left side of his jaw, and his

nose was bent — a memento from the time he had attempted to arrest Hammer Harmer. The Chief Constable grabbed the back of a chair with both hands as though planning to rip it in half.

‘What’s up, Ethan?’ Jack said. The barmaid brought over a tray of drinks. ‘Bring us another three pints, Kitty.’

‘Do I look fat?’ Ethan said.

‘Not a bit. Who’s been putting that idea in your head?’

‘It’ll be the mother-in-law,’ Stan said. ‘It’s always the mother-in-law behind that kind of comment. Tell her it’s insulation.’

‘Tell her to take a hike,’ Jack said.

‘Don’t mind Jack, Ethan. He’s ignorant about in-laws.’

‘And I’m happy to keep it that way, Stan.’

‘I’m all for the married state,’ Ethan said, ‘but it would be better if the in-laws didn’t live in the same house — or in the same county for that matter.’ He sat down, and his D.I.s pulled up the chairs on either side of him. ‘She’s just trying to stir things up because I didn’t like her new hat.’

‘Talking about in-laws,’ Jack said. ‘Stan, your brother-in-law’s third cousin’s whatsit was over at the café.’

Ciaran thumped his beer mug down on the table. His face bore his usual thuggish scowl.

‘Don’t say Donnaghan and Adam have had another disagreement,’ Stan said. ‘They’ve got to learn to put the past behind them.’

‘I was curious about the poster he’s pinning up all over the place.’

‘Which one?’ Ethan said. ‘We get so many I lose track.’

‘Lady Coulgrane from the Wynherne Estate.’

The pub was full of the usual sounds, but a gasp and a movement by the bar caught Jack's attention. Bob swivelled round on his stool, his front splashed with beer.

'Oh, the china doll,' Ethan said. 'Poor girl. She's the type who's usually found dead.'

'That may cause a problem given her family history.'

Bob was straining forwards in his seat. If the old man's lids opened any wider, his eyeballs would be rolling about on the floor like a pair of marbles.

'Seems like you know more than me,' Ethan said. 'The name rang a bell, but we hardly got any information.'

'Yeah, I noticed the poster was a bit sparse. Her family were big during the anarchy. Apparently there's a statue of her great-grandfather taking out a couple of raiders in one of their market towns.'

Bob slid off his seat and glanced around the pub. The fire shot up a spout of blue-green flame as it reached a nail in one of the logs. Bob jumped, stumbled back and knocked into his stool.

'They're all savages in the country,' Stan said. 'Half of them don't seem to know the anarchy's over.'

'It's coming back to me now,' Jack said. 'Ethan, d'you remember when we were kids we were told of some big old place in West Norfolk?'

'Sure, that's right. A spooky mansion with a high wall, and people who went there never came back.'

Bob ran the back of his hand across his mouth.

'They had everything you could dream of –' Jack waved his cheroot in the air '– but they had their own private army protecting the place.'

'Each soldier was seven foot tall in full armour with two-handed swords and battle-axes.'

‘It weren’t no laughing matter,’ Bob said.

He took a step towards their table and then backed away, twisting his stick with both hands.

‘What’s got you so jumpy, Bob?’ Jack said.

‘Nothing.’

Bob turned to go, but Eric planted himself by his side, dwarfing the old man.

‘Jack asked you a question.’

‘They ain’t coming here, are they?’

Jack leant back in his seat, drew on his cheroot and breathed out smoke. The old man was squeezing his bad leg with one hand.

‘You were a raider,’ Jack said.

‘It was every man for himself back then. What were we supposed to eat. Bricks?’

‘How many of you came back from your raid on the Wynherne Estate?’

Bob chewed on his lower lip, shuffling from one foot to the other.

‘Just me.’

‘What’s eating you? Reckon the old earl’s going to come here to take out the one they missed? Well you can relax, the old fellow’s dead.’

‘It weren’t just the old one. It was the other ones — especially *him*.’

‘Who?’

‘I don’t know his name. Maybe he’s her father, for all I know. I ain’t having nothing to do with any of them.’

He turned round and shuffled away.

‘What d’you think?’ Adam said. ‘The exterior’s based on the 1930 Ford Model A Phaeton convertible with ten fin

per inch radiator. Inside it's got a six cylinder engine with a reciprocating rotary injection pump and electric fan. It's got extra safety features that the original didn't have, such as a collapsible steering wheel, and later I'll fix in the seat belts: two in the front, three in the back.'

He flicked off a bit of dust from the mudguard. The basement car park below their lodgings was mostly dim, but Jack'd had an extra light installed above Adam's place and a fan to improve the ventilation where he worked. The bay to the left had his bike and locker, and the one on the right was always kept vacant, which gave him a fair bit of room to work around the car.

'Have you been working on it long?' Harry asked.

'Couple of years, but I ain't around much.'

Adam picked up a cloth and polished one of the chrome headlamps. He could see her reflection in it, distorted by the curve of the metal. Harry tilted her cap back.

'It must be nice to have your own space away from everyone else.'

'Damn right. D'you want to work on it with me?'

'I'd like that.'

They went upstairs to the flat and brought down Adam's toolbox and a box containing clamps, brackets, hoses and bits of cable. He took out a pair of overalls from his locker, hung up his jacket and perched his fedora over one of the bike helmets on the top shelf. He turned his back on her and stepped into his overalls.

Why had he asked her to work on his car? She'd better not make a mess of it. He never let anyone near his Phaeton — except Jack, of course, only he wasn't interested in engines. And Eric had given a hand with some heavy lifting, but that was it. She might've said she had some lousy fiancé lurking

around in the background. Some bloke with a lot of money and influence, no doubt. Sure, Adam could picture him: a fellow who'd had all the breaks. The kind of git who was just the type to get engaged to a title. Probably had no chin and an affected voice. Maybe they'd had a spat, but he'd find her and they'd make up, and it'd be see-ya, nice knowing-ya.

Adam yanked up his zip. Harry was squinting and shielding her eyes from the light. There couldn't be any truth about the tumour, could there? It'd be just like Donnaghan to get the report wrong. Probably made the whole thing up so he could spin a story to get attention. Adam lifted the cowling.

'How's your head?' he said without looking at her.

'Why d'you ask?'

'There ain't much ventilation down here, so say if you need a bit of air.'

'There's a fan on.'

'What of it? Anyway, I've already made a start on the wiring loom. Can you get under the engine bay? You should see it coming through.'

Harry wriggled under the car.

'Yes, I see it.'

'Here, you'll need the handbrake cable.'

He fetched it from the box and placed it on her upturned palm. Her skin was rough with little scars, like you get when you work with machines a lot. Maybe he'd got it wrong. The similarity between Harry and the missing lady could just be a coincidence, but then he remembered how her accent had slipped from Broad Norfolk to refined tones. He peered through the engine bay and watched her connect the cable.

'So, you've got a fiancé, have you?'

'Since when has "I'd rather be dead in a ditch" been a coy way of saying "Oh yes, I'd love to marry you"?''

‘So there ain’t much truth in that poster?’

‘About as much truth as the report that a herd of pigs have been engaged in aerobatics over The Wash.’ She wriggled out from under the car and dusted herself down. ‘That’s the handbrake connected to the loom. What next?’

‘The radiator needs connecting to the pump,’ he said. She fetched a hose and clamps from the box while Adam checked the mounting tabs. ‘Did the co-codamol help last night?’

‘Yes, thanks.’

‘D’you need any more?’

‘Maybe.’

She held the hose over the lower flange while he clamped it into place.

‘How often d’you take them?’

‘If you really must know, I’ve woken up with a headache every morning for the past two months, except today. I think working in Bob’s shop triggered one: it’s pretty airless in there.’

Yeah, that was true enough. Jack had often joked about Bob’s place being like one of those tombs that archaeologists discover, but that didn’t explain the last two months. Maybe the would-be fiancé had spiked her water or food, like that story Spud had once told about some bloke who’d poisoned a girl because she’d given him the rub.

Harry pressed the other end of the hose on to the water pump inlet, and Adam leant over to fasten the clamp in place. Her hair brushed against his cheek. There was a lingering smell of biofuel.

‘So is he the fellow you’re running from?’ Adam said, but Harry walked away and fetched another hose and more clamps from the box. ‘It ain’t surprising you’re so jumpy if some

sleazy bastard's telling everyone he's your fiancé.' She returned to the car but stopped to rub her forehead. 'You okay?'

'I'm fine.'

'Don't bite my head off,' he said. 'I ain't trying to marry you.' She leant over the engine bay and pressed the hose over the upper flange, and Adam clamped it in place. 'So what happened yesterday that made you leg it without even a change of clothes?'

She straightened up and put a hand on her hip.

'I was forced to embed a pair of scissors into his leg.'

'Scissors?'

'I happened to have a pair in my hand. It was his own stupid fault.'

Adam leant back against the car radiator and folded his arms across his chest.

'What about your assassin's weapon you've got hidden in your jacket?'

'It's not an assassin's weapon.'

'What is it then?'

Harry tucked her hand inside the back of her jacket and pulled out a stick about a foot in length and an inch in diameter with a walnut veneer.

'This is it,' she said.

'Are those bite marks?'

'My dogs got hold of it, but it's useful because if anyone sees it, I can say it's their fetching stick.'

'So it's just a stick?'

Harry held it in front of her. Both ends shot out until they were six feet apart. Adam instinctively reached for the knife strapped to his ankle but then pretended that he was merely scratching his leg.

‘That’s quite a kick,’ he said. ‘You could punch a hole in a man’s skull with that.’

‘Yes. It also goes to half length.’

The stick retracted until it was three feet in length. It then collapsed to its original size. There was a slight swishing sound that suggested some kind of hydraulic system. He couldn’t see a control panel, but the tendons on the back of her hand flexed every time she activated it, so there must be hidden buttons beneath her finger tips.

‘Sweet,’ Adam said. ‘Where’d you get it?’

‘From someone my Uncle Barney knew.’

‘You should get him to deal with that fiancé.’

‘Don’t call him that. He’s not my fiancé.’

‘So what shall I call him?’

‘I usually go with “the git” or sometimes “the obnoxious bastard”.’

Harry tidied the stick away. Adam watched her fiddling with something behind her back and decided that there must be some straps on the lining of her jacket that kept it in place.

‘Have your family come down in the world?’ he said.

Harry turned back to the engine bay and picked up the unattached end of the second hose.

‘Are we going to fix this to the pump?’

‘I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be tactless.’

‘Allerton lent Dad some money after Uncle Barney died. Unfortunately I was out at the time.’

That went a long way to explaining why she seemed so cagey about money. The bastard had probably failed to mention about interest and other fees to her Dad. Hardly surprising she’d stabbed him.

‘The poster didn’t say nothing about the cops being after you for assaulting anyone.’

‘He has an image to preserve,’ Harry said. ‘I may not have the influence my family once had, but my godmother’s pretty important in our neighbourhood. She believes Allerton is the perfect gentleman who has only my best interests at heart. He’s not going to risk losing that impression.’

‘Won’t she think differently when she hears you had to stab him?’

Harry wagged the free end of the hose back and forth.

‘He’ll say it’s proof that I’m not well. I expect he’s being very gentlemanly about it.’

‘So get a scan to show you ain’t got a tumour. I could have a word with Jack, and he’d fix it up for you.’

‘No thank you.’ She shoved the hose into his hands. ‘Anyway, I’ve already had a scan and it was negative.’

He handed the hose back to her.

‘So what’s the problem? You must have some paperwork you can show your godmother.’

‘Unfortunately I don’t any more. At least, not the right paperwork.’

‘What d’you mean?’

Harry laid the loose end of the hose on top of the water pump and stared for a moment at the engine before looking up at Adam.

‘The letter I received from the specialist has been replaced by a fake saying that the scan was positive.’

Adam scratched his chin and then fetched a clamp from the box. He tossed it up in the air and caught it.

‘So you’re saying that it’s been swapped by this bloke — what’s his name — Allerton?’

‘I came back home yesterday to find Allerton running out of the house, saying that my father was having a fit and that he was going to fetch help. I found my father dead and

the filing cabinet drawer was ajar. I know my father wouldn't have opened it.'

'Why not?'

'He never touched paperwork.'

'How come?'

'He had some kind of breakdown after my mother died and became a recluse, but even before then he just worked on the generators. Uncle Barney and I dealt with running the farm.'

'I take it you checked the filing cabinet and found the letter had been switched?'

'Yes.' Harry rummaged inside her jacket and produced a letter. 'This is what I found. It's not even addressed correctly.'

Adam took a look. The top right corner had a logo depicting what was probably meant to be a happy healthy family, only they looked like they were being held in a giant's body-lock. The letter was signed by David Trescothic. Why did that name sound familiar?

'Have you tried asking this Trescothic bloke if he's got a copy of the original?'

'I was going to, but I made the mistake of not going to him immediately. I thought it would be too obvious to go straight to Colingham.'

The image of a smashed Bentley came back to Adam.

'Here, is he the fellow who wrapped his car round a tree last night?'

'Yes.'

'Did you show anyone the letter when you got it?'

Harry tucked it inside her jacket, turned back to the engine and picked up the hose.

'I didn't want to tell anyone in case Dad got to hear about it. I didn't want to worry him.'

She pressed the hose against the water pump outlet. It was a shame Harry didn't seem to want to trust Jack. He'd be able to sort everything out for her. Then again Rita would probably find out and try muscling in. Adam leant over and clamped the hose in place, only this time he decided that it would be more convenient to reach round her with one arm. A blond ringlet trailed down the back of her neck.

'You ain't done a very good job of cutting your hair.'

'I was in a hurry.'

'You missed a bit.' He touched the curl, and she straightened up. 'Jack'll get suspicious if he sees it. D'you want me to cut it for you?'

'Okay.'

He opened the scissor attachment on his penknife and, standing behind her, he snipped off the ringlet and tucked it into his pocket. He closed the cawling and went over to the locker.

'I'm surprised Jack ain't figured out you're a woman yet. Or Rita for that matter.' He opened up a tub of Swarfega and scooped out a glob. 'I'd stay out of her way if I was you. Don't let her into the flat when you're on your own. She's got a key, so you'll have to keep the door bolted.' He worked the dark green, gelatinous substance between his fingers and then took Harry's hands and rubbed it over her skin. 'I've got some old jeans and shirts you can have. I ain't worn them since Jack gave me a suit when I turned eighteen, but they might fit you if you roll the legs up and wear braces.'

He picked up a cloth and began to wipe the Swarfega off his hands.

‘Thanks,’ she said. ‘Jack may have had a point about needing a change of clothes.’

‘Yeah, well, you don’t want to get second-hand clothes from someone you don’t know.’ He handed her the cloth. ‘I mean, I ain’t got nothing contagious, but you just can’t tell with other people, can you?’

MEDICAL REPORTS

THE children were supposed to stay inside Wynherne Hall during an attack, but little Charlie Hadley climbed out of a first floor window and down a thick trunk of ivy that clung to the old building. The moon was full but a cloud had drifted across it. Watch fires blazed in the distance. The sound of vehicles came from the South West. The boy tiptoed round the mansion and headed into the coppice. Thin shoots from the alders and birches lashed against his face. He tripped on a fallen branch, but he picked it up and used it to help guide him along the path. He reached a wooden bridge over the stream and grabbed the handrail. The boards creaked beneath his feet and he could hear the water rushing and gurgling below. On the far side, he climbed the bank. Although the moon was still obscured, there were plenty of stars out and in their dim light he could see the low brick building ahead.

He crept up the path and peeped in through a window. No one was about. A lit lantern hung from the ceiling. Charlie eased up the door latch and went inside. Most of the racks were empty as many of the weapons were with the soldiers who were out in the grounds, but there were still some left

here: swords, lances and a selection of bows — recurve, compound, long- and crossbows. There was also a stack of shields ranging from small and thin to the thickest, extra reinforced type that only the strongest men could wield.

Charlie tried one of the smallest shields, but it was too heavy for him. He searched amongst the bows and found a lightweight recurve, slotted the limbs into the riser and tightened the bolts. Then he fitted one end of the string on to the lower limb, put the bow between his legs and bent it, pulling the other end of the string upwards. Inch by inch it neared the upper tip. His body began to shake. He gave an extra heave and pushed the looped string into its notch. Spasms shook his arms. He took a few deep breaths and flexed his muscles, then found a quiver full of arrows. The strap was too wide for his waist, so he slung it over his shoulder and headed out into the night.

The invaders were targeting the section where the boundary wall hadn't been completed. The air was full of the stench of the foul fuel used by the raiders. Charlie Hadley clutched his bow and ran across the meadow. The ground trembled with the thunder of horses' hooves as soldiers of the South West regiment headed over to the breach in the wall. Charlie stumbled on a tussock.

The cloud drifted away from the moon, and the land around him was lit in a white glow, mingled with the orange flames of the watchfires. Vehicles with metal plates fastened to their front and sides bumped over the ground, spewing black smoke from their exhausts. Shots rang out from them. Some missed their mark, some thudded against the extra-reinforced shields of the Wynherne soldiers, but sometimes a horse or rider fell. Crossbow bolts streaked back, their faint thwup sounds barely audible above the clamour. One of the

vehicles turned in Charlie's direction. He jumped up, ran over to an old oak tree and scrambled up it. He nocked an arrow to his string, peered out from the branches and fired. It fell short.

An Andalusian horse, its armour glinting in the firelight, galloped towards the vehicle. Its rider had a lion painted on his breastplate, standing proudly on its four paws, its tail in the air. The rider's right hand grasped a lance. Bullets slammed into his shield, but neither horse nor rider flinched. The vehicle swerved round a watchfire. One of the raiders stood in the back, operating a mounted gun. The explosive shots from it stopped and were replaced by loud clicks. The man shouted. The vehicle's wheels began to spin in the mud. Charlie fired another arrow. It struck the leg of the man in the back, and he tumbled out. The vehicle pulled clear of the mud, swung round on to a lane away from the approaching rider, but the vehicle's front tyres tumbled into one of the covered spiked pits. The driver's face smashed against the mangled dashboard. The man next to him was flung out. He rolled around and pulled out a gun, but the rider bore down on him and plunged his lance into the man's chest.

The other raider, still with Charlie's arrow stuck in his leg, tried to crawl away. As the light from the watchfire fell on his face, Charlie realised that he was only a teenager. The rider wheeled round and headed towards him. The youth pulled out a small knife, but he might just as well have brandished a wooden spoon. The rider approached, but he reined in his horse, thrust his lance into the ground, dismounted and removed his helmet. It was Captain the Honourable Barnabas Coulgrane. He drew his sword, strode over to the youth and kicked the knife from his hand. He then put the sword tip to the lad's throat.

‘If I ever see you on our land again, I will kill you. Go and tell everyone you meet what will happen to them if they try to invade the Wynherne Estate.’

The youth dragged himself backwards until he reached the trunk of the oak tree in which Charlie was hiding. His hands scrambled against the bark, and he pulled himself up and hobbled away. Charlie leant forwards. The branch beneath him creaked. The Captain looked up, his sword at the ready. Then he smiled.

‘Shouldn’t you be in bed?’

Charlie clambered down. The captain of the South West regiment picked up the knife with his gauntleted hand and gave it to the boy.

‘A souvenir. Now go back to bed.’

Detective Inspector Hadley sat at his desk and picked up an envelope from the pile of post that had just been delivered. He eased the point of his knife under the flap and slit it open, but he didn’t remove the letter inside. Instead he studied the knife. It wasn’t much to look at: just a black plastic handle and a two-inch blade. He’d made a leather sheath for it after the Captain had given it to him. When anyone asked him why he kept an old blunt knife in his pocket, he would shrug and say that it was his letter-opener. He turned it over in his hands. An open folder lay on his desk. He looked down at the reduced copy of the portrait of Lady Harriet. She had the same nose and chin as her uncle, and even the same blue eyes and blond hair — although in a completely different style — but the Captain had never had that wide-eyed wistful look.

Hadley and Fenning’s office was arranged so that their desks faced each other with the window alongside the space

in between. This meant that if Hadley glanced to his left, he could see out across the grassy square in the middle of Great Bartling. The statue of the Old General was at its centre, and the local volunteers were giving it its weekly clean. Even the most tearaway scamp in the district would think twice about scribbling on that landmark. On the other side of the square, the brewery lorry had pulled up outside the Prince of Wales pub, and Molly the barmaid was chatting with the driver.

Hadley heard voices in the corridor outside, the first of which he recognised as the deep brogue of D.I. Williams.

‘Have you heard that blooda Quinn’s refused our pay rise? The stingy bugger.’

Then came Fenning’s merry voice:

‘Dint you know he’s spent orl the munny on moving the boundaries? Every time he change the constabularies, he hatta pay to make new charts and replace the old logos.’

‘Blast it, we’re in Norfolk, so we ought to be in the blooda Norfolk Constabulary not blooda Central Constabulary.’

The door opened and Fenning came into the office, but she poked her head back into the corridor.

‘I’ll be sure to tell Quinn next time I’m in Central City.’

She shut the door, hung her hat and coat on the stand, and slid her briefcase on to her desk. She flipped the catches.

‘I’ve now a-come from visitin’ the neighbourhood’s most eligible bachelor, or so I’ve heard him described. Himpin’ away on a fancy stick, he wuz, as pensy as a midnight woman the first time she gorn a-nijjertin’.’ Fenning came over to Hadley and handed him a sheet of paper covered with names and addresses written in a flowery script. ‘Mr Allerton gi’ me that list o’ Lady Harriet’s friends. He say they know no more than a crow do bowt Sunday, but I assume you’ll want to visit them.’

Hadley looked back at the photo and tapped his forefinger on the desk.

‘Why’d she run off like that?’

Fenning perched on the edge of his desk and smoothed out a wrinkle in her trousers.

‘I spuz that coulda bin shock,’ she said. ‘Mr Allerton’s convinced she’s gornta Colingham, but he dunt know what he’s talking about. She’s likelier to go to Central City do she want to hide.’

‘The Colingham lot haven’t turned up anything,’ Hadley said, ‘and it sounds like they’ve put every man on the job.’

He stood up and turned to the wall map. The Norfolk Constabulary was coloured yellow, but the western part of the county formed part of the pink bubble that defined the Central Constabulary, encompassing Leicester in its westernmost end to almost as far east as Swaffham. Hadley traced the west-east road from Central City to Norwich.

‘She could’ve headed east,’ he said.

He turned back to look at Fenning. She brushed a curl away from her eye.

‘Yes, she coulda, or she coulda turned north towards Fakenham or south towards Thetford. She could also be hidin’ in a barn or abandoned cottage or even in a tree house.’

‘Is that where you’d hide?’

‘No, I’d hide in yar attic,’ she said. ‘Do anyone hear the spars creakin’, you could say thass high sprites.’

‘This is serious.’

‘I know, but we dunt hev the resources to go snoutin’ round every abandoned cottage. Praps she think Mr Allerton’ll press charges for assault, but he oont agree to make a public appeal to let her know she ent in trouble.’

‘Why not?’

‘He say he witnessed a murder in Central City and came here to escape reprisals from the notorious “Tommy Gun” Preston.’ Fenning picked up Hadley’s paperweight — an amethyst geode — tossed it up in the air and caught it. ‘That dunt quite fit with my idea of an eligible bachelor. Tall, dark, handsome with a sight a munny, but on the run from the mob.’

Hadley moved closer to her. The stray curl fell across her right eye again. He brushed it back.

‘No, that doesn’t quite fit his image,’ he said, ‘but I don’t understand is why she stabbed him in the first place.’

Fenning turned the paperweight round and about in her hands. The sunlight glinted off the purple crystals.

‘Maybe he wunt behavin’ in a gentlemanly manner. Dunt you trust them eligible bachelors.’

‘The doctor was also on the premises.’ Hadley picked up the photo and slid it back into the folder. ‘Did you manage to get a description of any of the jewellery she took with her?’

‘Only the signet ring: gold with a carved lion. That was orl the information I could git from the housekeeper. Not even Mr Allerton could supply any information on that front, which is a bit of a rum’um.’

Hadley sat back down and picked up the envelope he had opened. It had the windmill logo of the Fen Bank stamped on it.

‘You can’t expect men to pay as much attention to jewellery as women.’

Fenning put down the paperweight and leant over the desk towards him.

‘Praps not, but he’s a bit of a cheapskate if he never buy his fiancée any jewellery — not even an engagement ring.’

‘I hope you didn’t say anything tactless to such a well-respected member of the community, Fenning.’

‘I’m sure I wuz polite about it,’ she said. ‘Did you contact the pathologist?’

‘Yes, but don’t hold your breath: that could take weeks. They’ve got a backlog, and the recent protests have apparently made things worse.’

‘What’re protesters got to do with the pathologist?’

‘He didn’t say.’ Hadley removed the letter from the envelope. ‘I don’t see why we can’t have our own local expert.’

‘Praps you should ask Commissioner Quinn for one.’

‘Yes, of course, and I should also ask for a promotion and maybe he might even give me a new car for Christmas.’

He screwed up the empty envelope and threw it at her. She ducked and it missed her.

‘Dr Carmichael dint seem to suspect foul play.’ Fenning picked up the envelope and tossed it in the bin. ‘Then agin, he seemed to fare sadly with that ding to his head and prickin’ hisself with a needle.’

‘Perhaps we ought to drop in at the surgery: he should’ve recovered by now.’

Dr Carmichael’s surgery was in a small thatched cottage on the edge of the Wynherne Estate. It consisted of a reception area, a nurse’s treatment room and the doctor’s consulting room, which looked out on to the back garden. One wall was lined with shelves. The top three were packed with books, but the lower ones were empty. There were cardboard boxes piled on the floor, next to a stepladder.

The desk in the centre of the room was cluttered: prescription pads, stethoscope, calender, pen tray and ink bottle, and a framed photo of a middle-aged couple. The doctor was pale and slim with fair hair and round glasses. He was bent over the bottom drawer of the filing cabinet, clicking

the folders across the runners. Hadley checked the capacitor indicator on his voice recorder, and Fenning sat by his side with her notepad at the ready.

‘It’ll be so much better when the health service gets computers again,’ the doctor said. ‘Although I suppose the rural practices will be the last to benefit.’

‘I noticed the label on Lady Harriet’s medicine bottle has Dr Barnes named as her G.P.,’ Hadley said. ‘Where is he? Has he moved?’

‘No, he died.’

Carmichael clicked another folder forwards.

‘How?’

‘He drowned in a drainage ditch on his way back from a party.’

‘Had he been drinking?’

The doctor closed the bottom drawer and pulled open the top one.

‘He’d only had two glasses of wine, but the toxicology report found aspirin as well as alcohol. It wasn’t a fatal overdose, but the combination would probably have caused disorientation.’

Fenning scribbled in her notepad. Even Hadley didn’t completely rely on his voice recorder, and she was good at shorthand.

‘Wuz that definitely an overdose?’ she said.

‘I suspect he lost count of how many he’d taken. You’d think a doctor would’ve known better.’

‘You look very young,’ Hadley said. ‘How long have you been in practice?’

Carmichael turned to look at him and pushed his glasses up his nose.

‘I qualified a year ago. Up until two weeks ago, I was at Colingham with Dr Gathercole. I’m sure he’ll be happy to tell you anything you want to know about me.’

‘I certainly didn’t mean any offence, doctor, but if you’ve only been here a couple of weeks, you can’t have seen much of Lady Harriet.’

‘I haven’t seen anything at all of her, except for a fleeting glimpse of her back yesterday.’

Hadley glanced at Fenning, and she raised her eyebrows. Carmichael resumed his search through the folders in the cabinet drawer.

‘Ah, here’s her file.’ He pulled out a slim, green folder. ‘I was looking for “Wynherne” instead of “Coulgrane”. Oh, I sent off the earl’s blood samples to Central City for analysis, but I’ve kept one back in cold storage in case the protesters block the delivery.’

‘They’ve gone home by all accounts,’ Hadley said, ‘but that’s a sensible precaution.’

Carmichael handed over the folder, and Hadley rested his voice recorder on the table, so that he had both hands free to browse through the file.

‘But, doctor,’ Fenning said, ‘do you never meet Lady Harriet, when did you first larn about her state o’ mind?’

‘Mr Allerton described her symptoms while he drove me over there. He was very concerned about leaving her alone with her father in that condition.’

‘I thought her dad collapsed time she wuz in church.’

‘Mr Allerton told me she returned just as he was setting off to fetch help.’

Hadley lifted a letter out of the file. The top right corner had an image of a man, woman and child being hugged by a pair of large, disembodied arms.

‘What d’you think caused the tumour?’ he said.

‘A genetic disposition.’ Carmichael sat down and swivelled his chair round to face them. ‘Her mother and brother both died of the same thing.’

Hadley read through the letter. It was signed by David Trescothic, neurologist at Colingham Private Hospital and was addressed to ‘Lady Coulgrane’ — the same error that Allerton had made, but perhaps most people simply didn’t know or care about such things these days. The letter stated that the scan conducted on the twelfth of the previous month had shown the presence of a glioblastoma intracranial tumour.

Carmichael picked up the voice recorder and peered at it.

‘I hope you still don’t mind the voice recorder,’ Hadley said. ‘I asked yesterday.’

‘Not at all. I find it fascinating. D’you think that if we had wind-up computers, the Anti-Technology League might be happier about them?’

‘I don’t think that would work.’

‘Perhaps they could be foot-powered,’ Carmichael said, ‘like sewing machines.’

‘I don’t think that would work either. May I have it back?’

Carmichael turned the voice recorder round and pulled out the crank handle.

‘If computers were foot-powered, it would counteract the problem of a sedentary lifestyle. You must be in your forties. Did you use a computer when you were a child, Inspector?’

‘Yes, I did, but I’m only thirty-eight.’

‘Including the Internet? Did you suffer any ill effects?’

‘What kind of effects?’

‘My supervisor at university did his Ph.D. thesis on the rise of mental health problems associated with Internet use.’

‘You sounded keen on computers a moment ago.’

‘Oh, they’re useful for administrative work, and I’m glad they’re allowed in hospitals to aid diagnosis and treatments, but they need to be properly regulated. There was a very interesting article in the Journal of— what was it? Clinical Psychology? Or Psychological Assessment?’

He stood up and looked over the shelves.

‘May I have my voice recorder back?’

‘It must be in one of the boxes. I haven’t had time to finish unpacking. It was all about how you can’t get away from an argument on the Internet. More and more people contribute to it, and it never goes away, so there’s no psychological closure. Perhaps you didn’t use it long enough to have any lasting effect, or perhaps over time you’ve suppressed the memories of it.’

Fenning stood up, strode over to the doctor, took the voice recorder with her left hand, grabbed his hand with her other hand and pumped his arm up and down.

‘Thank you for sparing us a moment of yar time, Dr Carmichael. We’d better leave you to finish yar unpackin’ in peace and quiet.’

Hadley and Fenning stood by the front desk of Colingham Private Hospital. Next to them was the waiting area where people sat in armchairs reading glossy magazines. A sixteen-year-old girl was watering pot plants.

‘I’m sorry, you can’t see him,’ the receptionist said to Hadley, ‘Mr Trescothic was moved this morning.’

‘Moved where?’ Hadley took out his ID and flipped it open. ‘This is a police matter.’

She looked at Hadley and then at Fenning.

‘Excuse me, I won’t be a moment.’

The receptionist opened a door behind her and spoke in a low voice. A man came out of the room, glanced at Hadley and Fenning, and hurried away to another door. The receptionist returned to the desk.

‘The Administrator will speak to you shortly.’

An elderly man came out of the second room, with the younger man following behind him. He leant his wrinkled face close to Hadley. His breath smelt of menthol.

‘I’m the hospital administrator,’ he said in a low voice. ‘I gather you’ve come about Mr Trescothic.’

‘We just wanted a moment of his time to talk to him.’

‘Talk to him?’ The Administrator glanced at the receptionist and looked back at Hadley. ‘My dear fellow, you can’t possibly talk to him. Haven’t you heard? He died in a car crash last night. The police have been here half the morning.’

‘I’m sorry, I didn’t know. We’re from Great Bartling, not Colingham. Are his patient records available?’

‘You’d better speak to Miss Penderbury, his personal assistant. Mrs Arnold, see to it, will you?’

With that, the Administrator returned to his office, and the younger man retired through the door behind the receptionist. She called to the girl with the watering can.

‘Jessie, show these people to Miss Penderbury.’ The receptionist lowered her voice while the girl came over. ‘If you wouldn’t mind being discreet: Mr Trescothic’s death has made a bit of a dent in the hospital’s reputation. We don’t want to unduly worry the patients.’

‘Naturally,’ Hadley said.

The girl led them down the corridor, her head erect, one hand on her hip and the other swinging the watering can back and forth, but not quite far enough to spill the contents. There was a smell of fresh paint, and they passed alcoves with more

comfy chairs and potted plants. It made quite a difference to the stark national health hospital on the other side of town.

‘Hev you been here long, Jessie?’ Fenning asked.

‘No, I’ve only now a-started my prenticeship.’

Jessie knocked on a door. There came the sound of something clattering and then a voice called them to enter. The girl opened the door and poked her head in.

‘Miss Penderbury, a bloke and a mawther to see you.’

‘Do they have an appointment?’ a voice came from inside.

Hadley and Fenning walked into the room, leaving Jessie to continue the watering. A woman sat by a desk near a sash window. On the wall behind her was a poster of a happy white-haired couple who had enough money to get their hips and knees replaced before they died of old age. Another wall had a poster of a young girl with a bandaged head thanking the wonderful staff for all their support. Miss Penderbury opened an appointment book.

‘Your names?’

‘D.I. Hadley and D.S. Fenning,’ Hadley said, showing his ID. ‘D’you mind the voice recorder, Miss Penderbury?’

She stood up, walked round to the other side of the desk and perched against it, her arms folded across her chest.

‘I most certainly do mind. Such technology is an infringement of civil liberties.’

‘It’s just a form of note-taking.’

‘It’s a matter of principle,’ she said. ‘I have no objections to a notepad.’

Hadley tucked the voice recorder back into his jacket. There were a couple of comfy chairs in the office, in the same style as those in the waiting areas, but Miss Penderbury gave no gesture that could be interpreted as an offer to sit down. She unfolded her arms and leant back, her hands pressed

against the desk behind her. She was wearing a pencil skirt and the top button of her jacket was undone. Colingham was far too close to the city for Hadley's liking. He had a feeling that Fenning would be making comments on Miss Penderbury's dress sense when they drove back to Great Bartling.

'I thought you'd all finally gone. What more do you want to know about Mr Trescothic's death? It's very unsettling for the patients.'

'Actually,' Hadley said, 'we came about Lady Harriet Coulgrane. We gather she came to see Mr Trescothic. Can you give us a bit more information about her condition?'

'Patient details are confidential.'

'Perhaps you're not aware she's gone missing. We need to know how ill she is, and how it's likely to affect her behaviour. The Administrator suggested we talk to you.'

'I'll see if I can locate her file.'

Miss Penderbury bent over a drawer in the filing cabinet. Her skirt really was far too tight. He could feel Fenning's elbow nudging him. He considered frowning at her to remind her to be tactful, but that sometimes had the reverse effect so, instead, he stared out of the window. For a moment he saw a shadow moving in the corner of the glass. It was probably nothing, but it might distract Fenning from Miss Penderbury if he went over to investigate.

'What did you make of Lady Harriet?' Fenning asked as Hadley walked over to the window.

'I've never met her,' Miss Penderbury said.

The bottom window sash was raised, but the sill had scuff marks on it that seemed out of place in such a pristine building. Hadley gazed out on to a lawn with a stone bird bath supported by a nymph, some flower beds and a few

trees dotted about the place with wooden benches under them. There was a faint smell that reminded him of Battenberg cake.

‘Dunt you see patients when they arrive?’ Fenning asked.

‘Yes, but her appointment was before I started work here.’

Hadley turned round. Miss Penderbury was still bent over the drawer. Fenning was tapping her pen against her notepad.

‘Haven’t you been here long?’ Hadley said.

‘No.’ Miss Penderbury took out a folder, straightened up and closed the drawer with her hip. ‘Some job this has turned out to be. I’m only here a week and my boss gets pickled and drives into a tree. How’s that going to look on my résumé?’

Hadley walked back to Fenning’s side.

‘What happened to your predecessor, Miss Penderbury?’ he said.

‘She left for the city.’

‘Whereabouts?’

‘Your guess is as good as mine.’ Miss Penderbury handed him the slim folder. ‘People get the idea that life’s more glamorous in the city, and they lose everything chasing after a dream. I doubt anyone here will see her again.’

Hadley opened the folder. There was a copy of the letter he’d seen in Carmichael’s surgery, and a sheet of paper with an image from a brain scan. There was a shadow near the front of the left hemisphere. The top right corner of the page had the patient’s name: Harriet Catherine Isabella Coulgrane. The last item in the file was Mr Trescothic’s report. Chronic headaches, nausea and a change in personality. Fenning looked over his shoulder.

‘Nasty way to go,’ she said.

Hadley returned the folder. Yes, it was a nasty way to go, but it was a bit of a coincidence that both the G.P. and the specialist were dead and that Allerton was the only one

who had known about the tumour. Maybe if they could trace Trescothic's previous P.A., she might be able to supply more information.

'What was her name?' Hadley asked. 'Your predecessor.'
'Jane Lamm.'

This is the end of the sample. If you enjoyed reading it, please consider buying the book. You should be able to order it from most book sellers (ISBN 978-1-909440-05-0) or you can buy it from the Dickimaw Books Store www.dickimaw-books.com/shop/.

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