

THE
DEAD
AND THE
MISSING

By

A. D. Davies

This is an extended preview, the first 12 chapters. If you like this and would like to read more, please visit <http://addavies.com/dead-and-missing-xl/>

Novels by A. D. Davies

Adam Park Thrillers:

The Dead and the Missing

Alicia Friend Investigations:

His First His Second

In Black In White

Standalone:

Three Years Dead

Return Fire – co-authored with Joe Dinicola

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For all those out there fighting the good fight

UNITED KINGDOM

CHAPTER ONE

As the ocean swelled under a grey sky, and my board rose higher than it had all day, I started to question if I should really be out here at all. The five-foot wave rolled away, curling as it prepared to break. Half a dozen younger surfers scrambled to catch it, and surged towards the beach in a line, greeted by the whoops and cheers of their friends waiting in the shallows. Like the other regulars, I'd been unable to resist the strengthening troughs and peaks that heralded a twelve-to-fourteen hour storm, a "weather-bomb" the tabloids predicted would destroy every town and village in its path, flooding the southwest back to Biblical times.

I might be exaggerating that last bit. But only a little.

It *was* a grey day, though, the wind picking up steadily, and it started spitting about ten minutes ago. In Britain? Yeah, in Britain. At the seaside.

My fellow hardy souls were all younger than me by a good decade and a half, and I shivered in my thermal wetsuit. I was pretty sure the next decent wave would be my final run of the day, so I had to make it count. I wondered how long it would be until that became the final run of my life.

How *do* you make that count? The last wave you'll ever catch?

On the beach, a woman watched the horizon, standing stock-still amid the small, young-looking audience. Strands of blond hair fluttered in the wind as if it had escaped from a ponytail and, even from here, I could see she was dressed in sensible trousers and a padded jacket, while the others all sported bare legs and hooded fleeces.

My curiosity ended, however, when an incoming roller challenged me as only the ocean can. I lay on my front and paddled. This was the wave. *My* wave. I found my focus-point and scooped faster and faster, shoulders heaving and pulling against the water. My speed and the sea's roll fell into sync. I popped up on my board and carved through the wall of water, nature's hand embracing me and guiding me toward the sand. I'm a shade under six foot, but this wave curled over me by another head. It should have been terrifying, but the illusion of control enhanced my delusion that nature could not simply swat me from existence, and as I allowed the ocean to propel me forward while all I had to do was not fall off, it was enough to bring me home.

As I hopped off my board in the foaming shallows, a smattering of applause sounded and a couple of the youthfully-smooth girls trotted over. Late teens, early twenties. Bikinis under Saltrock and O'Neil hoodies. I picked up my board and smiled back. They ran straight past to a kid peeling off a wetsuit with purple-swooshes, his sculpted hairless torso drawing even my eye. Sure, I was in as good shape as any of the younger guys, but at thirty-six I needed to remember I wasn't some "Bodhi"-type figure from the original version of *Point Break*; I was the old dude who turned up on their beach one day, and just about earned his place.

The only person who noticed me was the mommy-type blonde in the padded jacket. Hands in her pockets, shoulders hunched. About my age, perhaps a tad older, but if she said she was thirty I wouldn't argue.

She said, "Adam Park?" Plummy, upper-middle-class. Not quite aristocracy. Poking out of her jacket was the corner of a brown envelope about an inch thick.

I stripped off my hood and upper part of my wetsuit, perhaps hoping to compete with the young stud-muffin and his admirers. They all jogged by without as much as a glance.

Philistines.

"No," I said to the woman. "I'm not who you're looking for."

"Well that's odd," she said. "You look an awful lot like him."

She fussed with her zip and slipped a portrait photo from the envelope. Even though it flapped about in the wind, I could see it featured a nasty bastard in a thousand-quid suit. The picture used to adorn the lobby to an office, beneath which was printed my name and position within the company—*director*. I was clean-shaven in the photo and my hair was a sensible length.

I said, "That's not me," and snatched up my kit-bag and headed for the showers at the top end of the beach.

She scrambled in front and pushed the envelope into my bare chest. Which did surprise me. You see, I didn't really look like the sort of guy who people can push about. As well as my physique, my facial hair grows thicker and more quickly than the average person, so after five days without shaving, I sported a near-full scraggly beard. Still, it matched my hair that hadn't seen a barber in two months, yet this prim-and-proper lady wouldn't let me leave.

She said, "Can I at least buy you a drink? If you're still not interested, then fine. I'll go."

I carried on up the sand, the woman striding to keep up. "How'd you find me?"

"Harry," she said.

"Of course Harry."

"He said you were hiding down here but I should try anyway."

More of the surfers were coming in now, my wave being the first in a succession of six-plus footers, a rarity in this part of the world. The horizon had darkened as black as night, although it was only four o'clock in July.

“I’m not hiding,” I said. “I’ve been on holiday.”

“For two years?”

It took me a moment to calculate but yes, she was correct. I’d now seen two Christmases with only myself for company.

I said, “I needed a break. Figured touring Britain’s coastline was a good idea.”

“Harry said you have form. For this. Going off on your own.”

I increased my stride. “Harry likes to talk. Especially about things he doesn’t understand.” We paused by a row of showers at the foot of the access road. I said, “Daughter?”

“I’m sorry?”

I flicked on a shower and stood beneath it, one eye on the blue-grey clouds, still some distance out. “I assume that’s why Harry got you to tap me up. Someone’s missing and he’s out of ideas. Your daughter? Son?”

“My sister,” she said. “She just turned eighteen.”

I glanced at the envelope through the stream of fresh water. “Why are you talking to Harry and me instead of the police?”

“Because the police say she stole a bag of cash and went on the run. And we don’t think she is still in the country.”

I said, “How much did she steal?”

“*Nothing*. She wouldn’t do that. She’s either been kidnapped or hurt or she’s ... I need to know.”

No one’s loved one is ever to blame for criminal acts. They’ve always been coerced or kidnapped or threatened.

I said, “Fine. So who did she *allegedly* steal from?”

“Her boss. She was working in a strip club, of all places. Harry thinks he’s the one obstructing the investigation.”

“Got a name?”

“He’s called Curtis Benson.”

Curtis Benson. I’d never met the man, but I’d heard of him. Investigators at my company had encountered his businesses in the past, but it was difficult to get a firm read on him. The grapevine gossips whispered that he’d risen too quickly to be an honest man, and opinion was divided as to whether he was just a dodgy entrepreneur who from time to time indulged in a spot of brown envelope action with the powers that be, or a serious *playa* in the crime community.

“Bloody Harry,” I said. “He’s supposed to be retired. Jayne’ll be doing her nut.”

“He’s my uncle.”

I almost laughed. “Came out of retirement to help a niece I’ve never heard of?”

“My father was Harry’s brother. When my mother remarried we didn’t really stay in touch with Harry and Jayne. Except for Christmas cards and birthdays, that sort of thing.”

Harry had a brother who died back in the eighties—the Falklands War—so there was no reason to think this woman was lying. It happened before I started working with him, meaning I had no definite frame of reference. Except—

“But if your sister is only eighteen...”

“My half-sister, then. But still my sister. Please. My mother isn’t with us anymore and Sarah’s dad left a long time ago. Harry was willing to look into it if I paid his expenses, but now we’re seriously short. He thought you would help.”

I switched off the shower and toweled down as best I could. “Why would he think that?”

“He said you have more money than God, and you are soft as shit, and you would probably take pity on me if I cried.”

“You’re not crying.”

As I rubbed the towel over my scruffy hair, she fixed her eyes on mine and, through what looked like sheer willpower alone, a solitary tear rolled down her cheek. She said, “Do you have a hankie?”

Okay, I thought. That was impressive.

I said, “*One drink.*”



I recommended Sanjay’s Bar, a fifteen-minute stroll to a perch far enough back from the cliffs to be safe but sufficiently exposed to observe the approaching storm. I threw on a Fat Willie fleece and, with practiced ease, dressed my nether-regions under my towel. When suitably decent, I gathered my things and set off up the steep, narrow road, trying not to show how difficult it was to walk in a straight line with the wind buffeting my surfboard like a sail. I think I did okay.

“Right,” I said. “Let’s hear it.”

The woman’s coat caught the wind, puffing her up like she’d been inflated. She said, “The last I heard from Sarah was an email.” She slipped a sheet of A4 from the envelope wedged in her coat. It would have taken flight, but she held on tight and offered it to me. I had no free hands, so she gripped it in both hers, up close to my face. “She said she went on holiday. Didn’t say where, but she promised to be home soon. Then she stopped communicating altogether.”

I scanned the printed email. The name of the sender was Sarah Stiles. The recipient Caroline Stiles. I assumed the woman before me was Caroline. Sarah wrote that she was

sorry for causing any worry over the past week and that, yes, as Caroline said, she'd be home soon. Actually—

“It says ‘we will be home soon’,” I said. “Who’s ‘we’?”

“I don’t know. Harry doesn’t either.”

“Boyfriend, then? Someone she met at the club?”

Caroline folded the email and slipped it back in the envelope. “She never mentioned one, but Harry said we should work to that assumption.”

“She sent it 22nd of June. That’s nearly a month ago. The police still weren’t interested?”

“I explained that already,” she said. “They don’t believe she’s a victim. They think she’s a *thief*, on the run with her accomplice.”

“Right,” I said. “The ‘we’.”

She adopted a “duh” voice. “*Miss Stiles, youngsters do this when they’re in trouble. She’ll come home when the money runs out.*” Back to normal. “All they’ve done is put her photo on their missing-persons website and told me to start a Facebook campaign.”

“Bullshit,” I said. “She’s still an eighteen-year-old girl who hasn’t been seen since committing a crime. I can’t believe they refused to do *anything*.”

“Well, it’s true, *mister*.”

“Look, *miss*. Not even the prime minister can phone up a police station and say, ‘Hey, stop investigating this will you?’ At least not without a compelling national security issue. Presumably Harry doesn’t think the boyfriend is a terrorist?”

“Do you believe Harry would let it lie at that? Do you think *I* would? We went to our MP and she parroted the same nonsense. I tried the press, and they ran a story about how Sarah’s lovely boss was now struggling to pay his staff because the money was gone. So I did the Facebook thing, as well as Twitter and Ask.fm and even MySpace. But all the *horrible* people who post comments and false leads, it’s... it’s *horrible*, there’s no other word for it.”

“Trolls,” I said. “They’re called trolls.”

We reached the car park of what looked like an Edwardian London abode, all grey brick and tall white-framed windows. *Sanjay’s Bar*. The smokers’ enclosure was empty, and the only remaining outdoor furniture was the bolted-down tables. We carried on round the side where Sanjay kept a space for my VW Camper, a burgundy 1974 beauty with a white roof and chrome wheels.

I said, “So no leads at all from social media?”

“We got one hit,” Caroline said. “Maybe. A woman who thinks she met Sarah in Paris shortly before she sent that email. But she didn’t leave a contact number or anything, so...”

I opened the VW’s back door. “If she’s with a boyfriend, she’s probably fine.”

“No.” She set her mouth and eyes firmly. “If someone else is involved, some *guy*, it was

he who put her up to it. Forced her to take part.”

I maneuvered my board through the gap between the fold-out bed and kitchenette. I guessed Harry had told her to emphasize what a turd the boyfriend must be if this sweet, innocent girl was wanted for a crime she didn’t commit.

Caroline said, “I’m sorry to be such a pest, but I’ve virtually run out of money. Harry looked as deep as he could and found enough evidence leading out of the country, but—”

I wedged the board in place, and said, “She definitely left the UK?”

“She definitely obtained a fake passport. But Harry couldn’t find the name she was using. We think Paris is a good lead, but that disappeared after the... *trolls* swarmed on her.”

“No phone, I assume?”

“Turned off. No records in the digital cloud, no photos, nothing.”

I shut the door. “Look. Caroline. They say it’s a small world, but really... it isn’t. It’s huge. I mean ridiculously big. Even if she’s still in Paris, that is one colossal city.”

“Are you willing to help us?”

“Let me get this straight. Your sister goes missing a month ago. Possibly with a boyfriend. But no one else, I assume, is reported missing?”

She nodded reluctantly.

I said, “*Maybe* she stole a bunch of cash from a reputed criminal, *maybe* a case of mistaken identity. You can’t afford to keep your detective, so you hop on a train in the hope of convincing an *ex-private* investigator to take over. For free. Do I have that right so far?”

“Almost,” she said. “I couldn’t afford the train. I used a coach.”

“From Leeds?” I said.

She nodded.

Leeds to Cornwall. That’s a long journey.

“Bloody Harry,” I said. “Did he tell you why he wants my help? Apart from being free of charge?”

“The budget is part of it, of course,” she said. “But we need someone with experience of tracking people in the modern world. And even Harry says there’s no one better.”

“He said that?” I actually felt my cheeks flush.

“Yes,” she said. “He says he was better when he was young, of course, but you seem to have a weird affinity when the case takes you out of the country. I don’t get that but...”

“Yeah.” I raised my face to the sky, to the roiling clouds above. “People think differently when they’re in an unfamiliar place. It’s a tribal thing. Even in a friendly country, our subconscious mind tells us it’s enemy territory, and most people act in a way they wouldn’t in a place they know. I tune into that.”

She nodded, like she’d heard it before. “He also says you have some resource, a tool that

can help. Illegal, but... you put so much of yourself into your work, into finding these people, that you and some techy person developed it. You use it to help, even though it could land you in prison.”

“It’s called DDS,” I said. “I don’t have it. But I can get hold of it.” As the drizzle graduated to full-on rain, I hurried toward the pub’s entrance, the wind blowing my hair every which way.

Caroline called, “Where are you going?”

“Inside,” I said. “If Harry sent you, I never really had a choice. I’ll look over the case. But you’re buying me that drink.”



The original Sanjay’s Bar had overlooked Aragon Bay, a white-sand beach in what Sanjay thought of as his wife’s special corner of Sri Lanka. But when the 2004 tsunami smashed that to a billion splinters, Sanjay sold his ruined land to the government, and followed his university-bound kids to England. Pictures from before, during and after the tsunami adorned the walls even now. Sanjay says he likes Bude almost as much as he did Aragon Bay, but he still misses his wife. Now he runs this pub in a small town on the North Cornwall coast. It’s like any other in this part of the world: a fire, booze promotions, quiz nights. Like any other pub, that is, except the main food menu sizzles with garlic and ginger, boasting twists on British staples as well as the traditional fare of pie and mash. Which leaves Sanjay himself—leather-skinned and fifty years old—who still dresses in sarongs and sandals, as he did back home, and insists on the same over-the-top welcome as when I first plodded up from the beach and flopped onto a beanbag on his deck.

“Adam, my good friend!” he called from behind the bar. “Who is your lovely lady?”

Caroline and I eased through the thin crowd, and I asked about his latest guest ale. Sanjay recommended the local brew, Bude-iful Day, and Caroline ordered two pints.

“Big storm,” I said.

Sanjay eased back the pump, squirting bitter into the glass. “She will be fierce, yes.” He moved the glass expertly and pumped the rest of the drink. “Good waves today?”

“Big ones. A little scary.”

The crowd itself was an odd mix of surfer dudes and gals fresh from the ocean and local drinkers who thought surfers were birthed by some demon to destroy society. We snagged a table near the window, and for a good minute or so we watched the clouds sweep in. Others formed the same idea, and this half of the pub was packed. Lightning forked on the horizon, drawing an “Oooh,” from the gathered drinkers.

Caroline removed her coat, revealing a black turtle-neck sweater. Her rosy cheeks could

have belonged to a winter trekker. She slid the envelope into view and took a pull on the bitter. I sipped mine too.

“Smooth and strong,” I said. “And a bit nutty. Exactly how I like it. Coincidentally, it’s how I like my women too.”

Not even the flicker of a smile. *Fine*, I thought. *Business it is.*

I said, “Did Harry tell you why I don’t do this anymore?”

“He said you were good at it. Literally good enough to make a million.”

“A lot more than a million.” I detected that old bragging smugness in my tone and steered myself back to the casual demeanor that I’d spent a couple of years cultivating. “The corporate world pays a mint for the sort of work I do.”

“Why give up your business if it was doing so well?”

“Talk to me about Sarah.”

“Talk to me about why you gave up your business.”

Sanjay delivered two menus, flashed a look Caroline’s way, grinning like a teenager. *Subtle, mate.*

When he was gone, I said, “This is about your sister, not my employment history. *I’m* supposed to be interviewing *you*.” I concentrated on sipping my pint. “I need to be sure, and *you* need to be sure, that me getting involved will be beneficial.”

The wind whipped up, blowing leaves and eddies of sand along the beach, the debris visible even from this high. Rain spattered the window.

“Listen,” I said. “Travelling. Backpacking. Living out there in the world. It’s how I learned about the missing persons business in the first place. And what I have to say about that might mean a lot of doubt for you.”

“Why?”

“Because Sarah is about the same age I was when I took off.”

“You weren’t under the influence of someone else.”

Ah, mention of the mysterious manipulator again. The one nobody had identified. I didn’t really know how to phrase the thing I didn’t want to say, a truth big sis certainly would not want to hear, but I tried. I told her how, aged just eighteen, I journeyed into Europe, where I met new people and drank foreign beer and took recreational drugs, and got mugged and pickpocketed, and learned how easy it was to meet someone in Marseille and bump into them six weeks later in Dubrovnik. I probably shared too much when I said I made love on beaches and up mountains, but it was such a release. I was a citizen of the world, a free man and, as far as I was concerned, the wisest person on the planet. And so it went, until three years later when I’d lived in South Africa a couple of months, and I met a young woman called Sophie, who became my first ever “client.”

Caroline said, “What’s your point?”

“That Sarah could be enjoying every second of it,” I said. “The fun. The freedom.”

“I do not believe that, Mr. Park. And when you read more about her, I don’t think you will either.”

“Okay.” I put my memories back in their box for now, and opened the envelope.



The photo presented Sarah Stiles as a dark-haired girl with wide blue eyes and light freckles; an eighteen-year-old who looked fifteen. With her father departed and mother dead, Caroline put her through high school. She left aged seventeen to work her first job in a department store, where she commenced a relationship with a man two decades her senior, but her condition meant she would not concede the boyfriend could possibly be a bad person.

I asked, “What condition?”

“What they euphemistically call ‘learning difficulties.’ Non-specific, but closely related to Asperger’s.”

“Like an extreme form of OCD?”

“That’s something of a simplification, but not a million miles away. On the surface she is perfectly normal. But she does some things very, very well, while other things confuse and frighten her. And she has a near-eidetic memory too, which is tough.”

“Eidetic? You mean photographic?”

“There’s actually no such thing as a photographic memory, but yes, her ability to recall minute detail is remarkable.”

“What does she do very, very well?”

“She is the best at spatial-relations. She can beat the world at Tetris, or organize a room to be more efficient in seconds, and her art... it’s so complex, so detailed. She can look at a building or a bridge, and sketch it out, exactly proportioned. Here.”

Caroline took over the file and thumbed to a couple of pictures. The first was a black-and-white cityscape of Leeds, the town hall’s dome rendered in intricate detail. The other was a color painting featuring the rock formation on Ilkley Moor known as the Cow and Calf. Again, stunningly accurate. I also noted there were no actual people in either.

Caroline said, “A gallery told us they were too clinical to ever sell well, yet she keeps on trying.” She slipped the pictures back into the envelope. “But when anything goes even slightly wrong, well... she goes into what I call ‘mission mode’, where she becomes incredibly practical and focuses on solving the problem before her. Pure tunnel vision. If I’m running late, she leaves without me, or—”

“Or when a sister disapproves of her boyfriend.”

“A man that age pursuing a seventeen-year-old girl, it was tantamount to pedophilia. She flew into a rage. I’d never seen her like that before.”

“Is she medicated?”

“She was,” Caroline said. “This man, he introduced her to something that helped but wasn’t exactly legal.”

“Heroin?”

“Marijuana.”

I shrugged. Decided against telling her I had an eighth of the stuff in my bag right now. “There are worse solutions than a little medicinal weed.”

Without a reply, I concentrated on Harry’s case file.

After the spat, Sarah showed up on her true love’s doorstep, her way of solving the problem of betrayal. Unfortunately, her true love, being freshly divorced, “needed his space” and sent her away. She refused to come home, so had to make money quickly. “Mission mode” kicked in and she took the job where she could earn the most in the shortest time ...

“A table-dancing bar for Heaven’s sake,” Caroline said. “A *strip-club*.” She hushed her voice at the final words there, as if anyone nearby gave a crap. “I finally got hold of her on the phone one night, and I told her she was right, that she should make her own decisions. We both had a bit of a cry and she told me she loved me, and she’d be home eventually. No. *Soon*. She said ‘soon’.”

Lightning cracked over the ocean and its twin fingers stabbed the water. The sky was a blue-grey blanket, so dull that rows of night-activated bulbs twinkled on outside.

Caroline said, “But then she stopped calling altogether. And I contacted Harry.”

Harry tracked Sarah out to a large terraced house in the district of Birstall, but it was in darkness and all its utilities were cut off. After much cajoling of Sarah’s boss, and a strict promise of confidentiality, he was also allowed to interview Sarah’s fellow dancers and other staff.

On Sunday 17th June Sarah showed up as usual, and somewhere between one and three a.m., while everyone was out front servicing the peak-time customers, Sarah vanished off the face of the Earth. The next morning, the safe was empty, and all who Harry interviewed seemed oddly aware of the fact that Sarah knew the combination.

All those accounts of that night, though, *each one*, were so similar, so word-perfect, that the witnesses had obviously been coached, which led to Harry digging out a snazzy shirt one night, and paying the club’s admission. He found only one girl he didn’t recognize from his interviews, a pixie-like blonde called Lily. A higher-than-usual tip meant the unprepared witness took Harry into a private room with no music. But as soon as Harry assured her about confidentiality, three meat-head security types muscled in and demanded to know what the fuck was going on.

I said, “No clue what she was going to say?”

“No.”

“Any idea how much was taken?”

“The owner claimed to be waiting for the insurance to pay out and *said* they didn’t want to publicize the amount. But the people Harry spoke to estimated anywhere between fifty and two-hundred thousand. It was taken in the early hours of Monday. On Wednesday, a detective inspector came round asking questions. Did I know where Sarah was, had she contacted me? But that’s all.”

A few bum-numbing stakeouts furnished Harry’s file with a grainy photo, taken from a fair distance, of Lily exiting onto the street, but more importantly sent him to a forgery expert who spent a lot of time in the club, an ex-copper who made IDs for some of the underage Eastern-Europeans. In a sales-tease, the forger admitted to Harry that, *sure, he’d made a passport for the little cutie*, but Harry could not afford the bribe that would reveal the identity issued.

I hate to brag, but I would have no such trouble in the bribery department. And Harry knew it.

I said, “I’m not Indiana Jones. I’m not some super ex-government special agent. I’m a guy who’s good at finding people.”

“So *find* her,” she hissed.

She seemed to shock herself at the outburst, but didn’t apologize, just shakily lifted the glass to her lips again.

So, a girl disappears with a boyfriend on the 17th June. Probably out of the country. Four weeks without even a hint of contact, Sarah was either dead or a willing criminal partner.

I said, “You have to understand, if she isn’t in trouble, I can’t force her to come home.”

“You can’t?”

“If someone wants to stay hidden, I will not drag her back to Blighty kicking and screaming.”

“But you’ll tell me she’s okay? If you find her?”

“Yes,” I said. “I can do that.”

Outside, night-lights twinkled up and down Bude Bay. Thunder boomed overhead and another fork of white split the vista in two. I suggested we eat here before getting some shut-eye. Sanjay’s B&B was full so she would have to share my VW. It was going to be a rough night, and we had a heck of a journey back to Leeds the following day.

CHAPTER TWO

We set off before dawn. Rain lashed my camper van all the way up the A30, a road that feels like it loops around and around in a Groundhog Day-style procession of sameness, switching between dual carriageway and single-track road on a whim. The worst of the storm was over, but Caroline still fidgeted, hand gripping the passenger seat with every wind-assisted swerve. In the absence of a radio, voice raised over the chugging engine, her small talk felt forced.

“So what was the big thing Harry mentioned? What sent you away the first time?”

I said, “It was when my dad died. I took off with a rucksack and explored the world a little.”

“A little?”

“Okay, eight years. Almost nine.” The wind changed direction, and the van almost took off. “And I only came home because I got hurt. I guess I wanted to see my mummy.”

She wrinkled her nose in a chuckle, but it died quickly, as if she had no right to be happy at this precise moment. She needed to keep talking. “And the business? You wouldn’t tell me last night why you gave it up.”

“Fine. I didn’t like it anymore,” I said. “In a nutshell, after I came home to the UK, Harry and I started up together. We tracked missing people, and one day we took on a corporate client to locate a financial officer who ran off with a pension pot. We found him, got recommended to other high-end companies, and we soon ran up a good rep. Background checks, a bit of assessing corporate espionage, and we grew from there. Harry said it wasn’t ‘proper’ work, though. He’d been on about retiring for years, so he let me buy him out and I took things to the next level. I brought in actual executives to push the business side, made sub-contractors full-time employees, and hired accountants to invest our income. And you know what?”

“They invested badly.”

“They invested *brilliantly*. Private investigations became ‘corporate security’, and the investment portfolio? It made ten times what the core business did. I was running an investment bank with a private investigation business tacked on the back.” I shook my head and steadied the wheel again. “But we were investing in companies who... let’s say I wasn’t comfortable with their worldview. Heck, we did contract work for them, and I’m not even

sure what that work was.”

“Couldn’t you have stopped? Done something else?”

“I owned fifty-one per cent of the company. But when I tried to sack the senior VP, it turned out he had more friends on the board than I did.” I braced myself as a sixteen-wheeler roared past, drenching the windows in spray. “They made me an offer.”

“Resign?”

“Sell my shares and live a long, wealthy retirement. I negotiated. I let a prick called Roger Gorman take over running the place while I could veto certain clients.”

“Roger...”

“Gorman,” I said. “With a *G*. Not the film-maker. Now all I can do is take the money they make and pour it into good causes—a couple of fresh water projects that I came across when I lived in Africa, and a camp that reintegrates child soldiers back into the world, some Brazilian street kids’ charities, an Indian refuge for beaten women, some others. And I still keep a hefty chunk for myself, of course.”

“Doesn’t explain why you don’t start a new firm. Help people like me.”

“Non-compete clause. I’m not allowed to work as a private investigator unless it’s through the company. Not here, or anywhere in the world. I’d forfeit all my shares and financial position, and I’ve always tried to find a way to get rid of the current board. I still hope to.”

“Hope to?” she said. “While you bum around on a surfboard?”

I often asked myself the same thing. Many evenings I would stand there on a beach, watching the sunset, envisaging scenario after scenario where I gutted the company and put it to work for good. On those evenings, the sun would go down without me seeing it, and I would suddenly find myself bathed in twilight, and only the waves lapping at my ankles ever sparked me back to reality.

I said, “When inspiration strikes I’ll know what to do.”

A long silence ground itself out. I hoped she was finished with the interrogation. She wasn’t.

“Is it true you failed your psychology degree?”

“I didn’t fail,” I said. “I got a third. A new exec suggested a qualification might add prestige. I excelled in the practical stuff, but I couldn’t write for shit. Kept going off-topic. ‘Too fond of introspection,’ was how one professor put it.” I shrugged. “Lost me most of my marks.” That and—what did my professors call it again? Oh yeah—my moral judgments. Only Harry often added the adjective “sanctimonious”.

Each time the vehicle aquaplaned or veered to one side, the chatter seemed to calm her. She asked how a guy like me—a “beach bum and thrill seeker,” she called me—came to specialize in tracking down lost people. I told her about South Africa, about Sophie—my

first real client. Being twenty-one and handsome, I decided to hit on her in a hostel bar, but after a little probing I learned she was on the road with her boyfriend during their university gap year. I kind of looked down my nose at her then because—y’know—I was *sooo* superior having lived Out There for so long. But her boyfriend had planned to rendezvous here once she’d done her thing in Jo’Burg, and now he wasn’t where he was supposed to be. Still hoping, I suppose, to impress the pants off her, I used my ever-so-superior experience to analyze all the ways in and out of the town and traced his movements from there, eventually discovering him on a sand-and-palm-tree island, doped up on acid and weed, shagging a Russian girl whose assets and free-spirit made him temporarily forget Sophie even existed. Literally. I had to remind him. He felt bad. But not bad enough to leave the free-spirited Russian, so it was up to me to convey the news to Sophie.

“And no,” I said, “she still didn’t sleep with me.”

After that, though, I gained something of a knack for tracing people. Methodical investigation, logical deduction. Detectives in Britain and the States would find me via this new-fangled thingamajig called “the internet” and recruited me as their eyes and ears, and even though the vast majority turned out well, I still located a couple of subjects in morgues and, in one case, their hotel room with fourteen stab-wounds. Ultimately, though, the good work—putting parents’ minds at rest—outweighed that tiniest fraction of humanity that is wired so differently to the rest of us that they might as well be a separate species.

In time, I convinced myself I was not only wise, but also tough. A hard-man. Turns out, I was wrong about that.

Caroline said, “Harry told me you got involved with some goons.”

“Goons,” I said. “Yeah, ‘goons’ is fairly accurate. Poked around somewhere I shouldn’t have. Bangkok to be precise. They persuaded me to stop.”

“And that’s what you mentioned? Getting hurt? The reason you came home?”

“Yes,” I said.

Subtly changing the subject, she said, “You must speak a lot of languages.”

“I can ask directions, order dinner, and chat about the weather in eight languages. I am fluent in precisely zero.”

She wasn’t impressed. We hit the M1 and the further north we travelled, the brighter the sun shone, and a full English breakfast and a couple of extra-shot-infused coffee-stops later, I was playing songs in my head, tapping the wheel, my feet dancing when not on the pedals. Caroline hadn’t indulged in as much coffee as me, so she slept the remaining four hours. When I passed the sign confirming I had officially returned to Leeds, I wound down the window and felt the city’s air on my face, the summer sun hot, the breeze cool and clean.

I dropped Caroline at her house out in the sticks, and headed for home, a newish building on the south edge of the city center. My parking space was still reserved in the underground lot and I ascended to the twentieth floor in my board-shorts and fleece, jittery from the

caffeine and ready to go, go, *GO!* I entered my apartment, a split-level affair, the open plan kitchen-diner leading to a carpeted lounge, with a staircase to my bathroom and two bedrooms. On a clear day I could see all the way to the industrial landscape of Bradford. The apartment was cleaned once a month by an agency, so it smelled fresh and left no nasty surprises.

Once I'd unpacked my rucksack, I shaved my face smooth, showered, and changed into a designer suit and a shirt that felt a bit tight. No tie. My hair was clean but scraggly, yet it went well with the suit, like I was trying to emulate a GQ model. I didn't really need this getup for my planned meetings, but I did not want to draw attention by entering those environments in a t-shirt and flip-flops.

I took my three-year-old BlackBerry out of a drawer, plugged it in and booted it up. Still worked. I needed two things before commencing my investigation in earnest: the Deep Detect System, and a chat with Harry. I sent Harry a text to tell him to meet me here at three p.m., then fired off an email to Roger Gorman to say I'd be in his office at two. It was currently shortly after midday.

Sitting on a beach, up a hill, on top of a mountain, I could watch nature shift and sway for hours; I'd happily read a novel cover-to-cover, lying in a sunbeam, purring like a cat; I could listen to music as rain pounded outside all evening; all simple, do-nothing activities. But there was work to do here. Even lacking the data I needed from Harry, even without DDS, there were leads to chase, people to contact, a trail to pick up.

No, sitting on my arse was not an option.

CHAPTER THREE

Blazing Seas was well-known as Curtis Benson's favorite table-dancing bar, or rather "gentlemen's club" as the sign proclaimed. Its nickname, Blazing *Sleaze*, was well-earned: gaudy orange neon, with three stages hosting poles from floor to ceiling, and an array of leather seats arranged ostensibly so blokes could peruse the bar's wares, but perhaps more importantly, the bar's wares could peruse the clientele, choosing those most likely to spend that bit extra. Approaching lunchtime on a Friday and already a full complement of dancers sashayed about the place, gliding from one group of men to another.

I ordered a beer and sat on a barstool and pretended to be a punter. I referred three beautiful young women to the drink I was nursing so very slowly, and once the third girl wandered away, her colleagues seemed to figure I was only there for the stage-show.

About three-quarters through my pint, as I was contemplating a second, a woman of around twenty strode down one of two wrought-iron spiral staircases and through a cloud of dry ice that swept from the stage. She wore a see-through baby-doll nightie over white lacy bra and panties, and had long red hair and a petite body, tight and gym-toned. Her smile alone might have tempted me to fork out for a legitimate dance if I didn't find the whole pantomime so boring.

As she approached, the continuous smile showed she hadn't heard I wasn't paying for dances today. She placed her hands on my thighs and leaned into my ear and in a soft but discernible Yorkshire accent said, "It's ten pounds for a dance, love. Fifty for an hour in the VIP room," then stood back to allow me to perv over her a little longer. She added, "Limited touching in the VIP room. *Limited.*"

"I'm looking for someone called Lily," I said.

"I can be your Lily if you want."

"I'll pay more than a VIP fondle," I said. "Finder's fee for you too. She came highly recommended."

She thought about that a moment. "Lily...?"

"Youngster, quite small. Short blond hair."

"Oh, *that* Lily. Yeah, I heard she moved to Manchester." The girl looked toward the large, shaven-headed barman. "Why don't you take me to the VIP room?"

I played along and handed her fifty pounds, which the barman exchanged for some sort of voucher. The young woman led me up the spiral staircase down which she had come minutes earlier, then to a compact room with its own stereo and a stiff leather couch, all surrounded by mirrors. She selected a Katy Perry track, and went to work.

“How limited is the touching?” I asked.

“Hips and legs. An extra fifty to me gets you my ass too.”

“Hair?”

“Stay off the hair. And my tits.”

As she straddled my lap, I reached out for her hair and gently gripped it, and—as I suspected—it came partly away.

“Hey!” she said.

A wig. Attached to her real hair with metal grips. The grainy photo in Harry’s file revealed her build and the shape of her nose. I’d taken a gamble here.

I said, “Lily, right?”

“Fuck you, prick.” She climbed off and removed the wig entirely to reveal she was blond underneath. The boyish style gave her the pixie quality that Harry had described, although her Yorkshire accent had now developed a booming *ey-ooop* timbre that really didn’t suit her stature. “All I have to do is pull that chord and you’ll be picking your teeth out of the alley.” The alarm was one of several strings made to look like sparkly decor.

I said, “I’ll give you a hundred pounds if you tell me everything you were about to tell Harry before he got booted out.”

“That hairy bastard?” she said. “Get fucked. You know what they’ll do to me?”

“Sarah’s in trouble, you know?”

“I don’t care. I can’t care.”

“You know she’s not normal, don’t you? Vulnerable. If she was put up to the theft, I need to know.” I made my best *I’m desperate* face. “Please.”

She stared at me. “They made me change my stage name, and wear that wig. Didn’t want the guy sending someone else to talk to me. Guess the disguise was pretty shit, eh?”

“No one will ever know. I won’t note your name anywhere, or indicate where I got the intel. Not even that you were a friend.” I saw that hit a nerve. “You *are* her friend, aren’t you?”

“Two hundred,” she said.

“One-sixty. That’s all I have on me.”

I took out my wallet and showed her eight twenty-pound notes. She snatched them, stashed them in her shoe, then took off her nightie and threw it in my face.

“There’s no need for that,” I said.

“Last time someone saw me chatting to a detective, I got proper threatened. If anyone comes in now, it needs to look like business.”

In her underwear, she leaned forward, rolling her shoulders, her cleavage at my eye level. I couldn't pry myself away as I listened.

She said, “Sarah, she was, like, this ‘Rain Man’ type. Rain *Girl*, or something. She did tricks for us on our breaks. Memorizing the order of a deck of cards, or she could look out over the bar for five seconds, and tell us how many people were in there. Crazy.”

“Did you get on?”

“As well as any of them. Listen, love, I know you don't want this, but we've been here a while.” She unhooked her bra, slid it off, and I looked to the side.

When I was almost eighteen, I had a lot of lad-friends at the supermarket in which I worked after school. Although underage, we came to places like Blazing Seas once a month, to drink, to take the piss, to watch the girls. I'd be too drunk and naïve to care who exploited whom. Today, with Lily, I told myself it wasn't exploitation. She had information, and it was *that* for which I was paying. The thing was, I hadn't been with a woman in over a year, so a pretty dancer in nothing but panties meant the reason I crossed my legs was painfully obvious.

She straddled me again, leaned in so close that my breath radiated back off her soft, tanned flesh.

I said, “What wasn't my colleague told?”

She writhed, taking pleasure in my discomfort. “One of them tricks. Sarah would hear the clicks of the safe and memorize them. She showed some of us girls one day as a joke, and the head security guy, this midget prick called Mikey, he made 'em change the combination and banned Sarah from going near it. When Gareth started banging Sarah, he must have convinced her to show him again.”

I held her hips to stop her gyrating. “Wait. Who's Gareth?”

“Get off me. Now.” I let go and she resumed her dance. She said, “Gareth Delingpole. Doorman here at the Sleaze. Started seeing her after she moved into his spare room.”

“He was her landlord too?”

“Yeah, she rented a room in his house up in Birstall. Big terraced place, you know, four bedrooms, a cellar.”

“You think Gareth put Sarah up to it?”

“Of course. Sarah was sweet as pie. Didn't do nothing bad, ever. That's why we thought it was odd, y'know, her ending up with him.”

“Why odd?”

“Well, she's so nice and Gareth... he's got a reputation, okay? Jealous type. Heard he used to slap his wife around. Someone said he went to jail for it.”

“He’s been inside? Why take such a risk as stealing from a busy club?”

She performed a pirouette and paused in a commanding, hands-on-hips pose for a bridge in the music. When the singing resumed, so did she. “Gareth brought a camera to work one morning, some new hobby, and, I dunno, we heard shouting. Gussed Gareth’d been takin’ pictures of the girls or something. When we came out from getting changed, Curtis had Gareth’s camera and took out that card thing that stores the photos.”

“The SD card,” I said.

“Right, that. Curtis threatened to fire him if he did it again. Gareth knew we saw what happened. And you could tell... you could *tell* he wanted to hurt Curtis.”

Embarrassed in front of a roomful of women. Could have been a trigger for revenge. I thought about the SD card Benson confiscated. If there was anything incriminating on there, it would have been destroyed, surely.

I said, “Money was stolen, but no one really knows how much.”

“Reckon they got about two hundred grand, maybe two-fifty.” With her back to me, she hooked her thumbs into her panties. “But we all know Curtis likes his shady deals, so it coulda been a million for all the tax man knows.”

“I assume that Gareth isn’t around anymore?”

“Nah.” Her panties came down, then off entirely, twirling them round her finger before flinging them into a corner. She said, “Gareth disappeared the same night as Sarah.”

The file specifically mentioned that no one else but Sarah was reportedly missing from the city, no one who could be connected to her, anyway. Her landlord, boyfriend, work colleague; Gareth was connected alright. And yet still the police hadn’t made a move. I couldn’t keep it all straight, partly thanks to Lily.

Still dancing, she said, “When they found out, Mikey summoned Curtis on the phone. Curtis came in, we all saw him. Shitting his pants, he was.” The song ended. She stopped moving and sat on my lap. “So that’s it. Some cash went missing, and the insurance is dealing with it. That’s what the girls were told to say if anyone came asking questions. We shouldn’t mention that Sarah and Gareth were in it together, or else.”

A second high-tempo track boomed out and she shifted her weight side-to-side. I moved my thigh to hide my physical reaction.

She said, “You really don’t like this, do you?”

“I really *do* like it,” I said. “That’s the problem.”

“Wife?”

“Morals.”

“Nature trumps morals, Mister... what’s your name?”

The music died and a man’s voice said, “Adam Park.”

The door was open, revealing a short bald man, flanked by two bouncers with black goatees and leather jackets. *Goons*, as Harry would call them. The pair looked almost like twins, but one was in his forties, the other his twenties.

Lily said, "I'm busy, Mikey."

"We know," said the little man—Mikey, I assumed. He was about fifty, his face as craggy as granite and his t-shirt gave away not an ounce of flab. He was so short, I could easily have rested my chin on his smooth, dull pate.

Without a signal, the two men advanced and Lily scurried to one side. My penis shrank to the size of a vole and I rose to my feet as four hands gripped my arms.

"Hi," I said. "Is there a problem?"

"Might be," he said. "Lily, what have you and Mr. Park been discussing?"

"Nothing?" she said.

Mikey took another step toward me. "Care to raise her on that, Mr. Park? Nothing?"

I said, "The booths are bugged, aren't they?"

Mikey smiled. "It'll be easier if you just tell us."

I nodded to myself. "But you can't hear much above the music. Otherwise you'd be in here a lot quicker."

"Bob and Daz are gonna take you to see Mr. Benson."

I glanced at Bob and Daz. Cock-sure grins. Hands clasped, chests puffed. I wondered if I really was on my way to see Curtis Benson or if I was simply being removed to a place where they would brutally incentivize me to stay away. I'd been smart enough to escape those situations in the past rather than confront them, but then there was the psychological side. Even if I were to be deposited at the feet of Curtis Benson, I would be seen as prey upon which all could feed.

Like most people, I watched the Jason Bourne films a while ago, and as much as I'd love to be able to take down my opponents with a quick flurry and leave them with nothing but a headache, the Bob/Daz twins were bigger than me, steroid-enhanced if I wasn't mistaken, and—trust me—punching a guy in the head often hurts the puncher more than a solid punchee.

Still, I launched my foot toward one of their knees—Bob, the older one. The crack was hard but didn't dislocate the joint, just hurting him enough to loosen his grip. I levered him round and shoved him into Mikey.

Lily pressed herself into the corner, screaming at the top of her lungs.

I spun to Daz and grasped his elbow, and shoved it toward his eye. His fingers opened. I threw my palm into his windpipe and crashed an elbow through his jaw. He went down; classic glass jaw, as so many of these pumped-up meat-heads proved.

They'd both be fine. In about five days.

Mikey threw Bob off him and prepared to fight me, but I raised my hands and said, “I give in.”

Lily’s screams had deflated to a whimper. She held her nightie against her body.

I winked at Lily, and to Mikey I said, “Take me to your leader.”

CHAPTER FOUR

It was always a shock, this violence. An evolutionary reaction that, in some people, comes naturally; in others it's a struggle to summon that willpower. Having once been beaten to a pulp in a foreign land, I learned that lesson more thoroughly than most ever will, an experience that would give the most ardent pacifist the impetus to really learn how to fight, to build up the strength required. I was a prime example of that.

The year I returned home from Thailand, I joined an athletics meet for the cardio, a meat-head gym for strength, and a Krav Maga club to learn the bastard-tough martial art used by Mossad. To my mother's dismay, I even sculpted my appearance to that of how I thought a "hard-man" should look: I allowed my over-active beard to grow out and clipped it into a goatee, shaved off my hair, and snapped a stud into one ear, and between the martial arts, athletics, and the meat-head gym, I was finally ready to face anything this evil world could throw at me. At the peak of my training, I prepared to hit the road again, launch myself back out into the world, and track down the Bangkok thugs who had hurt me so badly. My rebirth would have been complete. Then, a few days before I was due to fly out, the owner of the meat-head gym learned his fourteen-year-old daughter had run away to London with a detailed and well-thought-out plan to become a singer and marry a footballer. Because I was unfamiliar with the process in the UK, I called private detective Harry Riley, my late father's old mate, who I still saw from time to time on a nodding "hey-how-are-you" basis around pubs and at the football. We located Darla physically unharmed, and although extracting her was something of a chore, it was a chore that enabled me to beat the living shit out of some would-be pimp's enforcer, a bruiser who would have destroyed me a year earlier. It confirmed that my efforts had borne fruit, but the act of breaking another human being had an unexpected effect on me: I felt truly sick. The blood, the twisted limbs, the pleading with me to stop... The only thing about that episode that left me remotely happy was freeing that girl from the mini-harem into which she'd been inducted.

And so, with all thoughts of revenge shelved, I went to work for Harry. He made me shave my goatee and grow out my hair and remove the stud from my ear, ostensibly to make me less conspicuous when tailing someone, but also—he said—because I looked like a dick head. I changed my driving license and passport photos back to "normal" and having fought in the same war as his brother, having seen genuine combat up-close, he helped me

understand that a stray punch, kick or elbow could kill a man, either through the blow itself or with him falling awkwardly. Or, more likely, it would be *me* falling awkwardly. Take on the wrong person, he said, assess the situation incorrectly, and I'd be on my back in hospital rather than strutting away, victorious.

Still, today, I couldn't help an inward smile having assessed the situation correctly with Daz and Bob. Those two fellas, they had no doubt broken a few bones in their time, so I tried not to feel too guilty about using them as psychological leverage.

My pondering ended at a steel door as Mikey knocked and opened it. He held out his arm as an invitation. I adopted a manner that suggested I didn't give a toss what happened next, like this was routine. I kept the word "glib" in mind. I liked glib. Glib helped establish authority, even though it usually made the glib person unlikable. It could, however, rile up the wrong adversary, so I also kept in mind to not push my fucking luck.

Inside, from the middle of a glorified store-room, a desk and a leather chair greeted me, and a couple of seats slightly less inviting than those in a trucker's cafe. I noted the exits (none, except the one I came through), potential weapons (glasses, cups, boxes of beer bottles, those two chairs), and human threats. Only one: Curtis Benson. In a purple suit, black shirt and close-cropped dyed-blond hair (yep, on a black guy), he could have been an attention-seeking Premier League footballer on a night out.

Mikey stepped outside and closed the door.

With heavy eyelids, an expression that hovered somewhere between anger and boredom, Benson said, "Fucked up two of my men." He had no discernible accent, just a low voice that sounded similar to how rappers talk during interviews.

"Your 'men'?" I said, repeating the *keep it glib* mantra to myself. "What are you, a James Bond baddie?"

He scowled. An attempt at intimidation.

I said, "I mean a Roger Moore James Bond baddie, not Daniel Craig. Who has 'men' these days? Apart from royalty?"

"You think this is some sorta open mic comedy night? You ready to get booed off?"

"And that's your best comeback is it?" I took a chair and sat. This sort of bravado could work a charm, but if Benson saw through the bluff, how things turned out would depend on how much of his "gangsta" act was for show.

"You're overconfident," Benson said. "You got any idea how much shit you in right now?"

"You saw what I did to your, heh, 'men' back there. That's nothing. My own people know where I am, and they do not take kindly to small-time gangsta-wannabes beating up on their boss."

"Your... 'people'?"

“My people.”

“If I’m a James Bond baddie, guess that makes you Moses.”

“Now *that’s* a better comeback,” I said.

“I’m *ek-static* you approve. But you really are misinformed about the dynamic of this situation. You think I’m some gangsta-punk-wannabe, and you say you got some bad-ass people backing you up. If that was true, I’d be impressed and you’d be walkin’ outa here in about thirty seconds. But let’s talk about your... ‘people’. These would be...” He lifted an iPad from his desk, tapped a couple of icons, and continued. “Park Avenue Investigations, right? Those the people you mean?”

Did you see what I did there? Adam... *Park...* plus “*Avenue*.” Known as *PAI* to those in the business, it was basically a play on words, whilst sounding prestigious to clients from all over the world. *Park Avenue*. Cool, huh?

“That’s right,” I said.

“The same people consulting with Herman Yorrick Solicitors on how to *delete* you from the board. How to *dissolve* your majority interest an’ kick you the fuck out on the street? *Those* your ‘people’?”

He handed me the iPad and let me whizz through a couple of screens. Emails, contracts with Roger Gorman’s signature, counter-signed by Sylvia Thorne, Gorman’s right-hand pit-bull. They dated back a couple of months. Clearly, Roger wasn’t satisfied with taking over the running of *my* business. He wanted me gone completely. Herman Yorrick specialized in negotiating people out of contracts that were otherwise cast-iron, and in my case had consulted psychiatrists about my “erratic behavior.” I was the person with legal responsibility over my shareholders’ cash and I’d spent two years surfing, snowboarding and skydiving around the country. If I could be proven mentally incompetent, Roger Gorman could, eventually, force me to sell my shares at current market value. So far, the responses from three psychiatrists had insisted upon a full consult with me in person before they could pass judgment. They were waiting on a fourth psychiatrist’s answer, which an email between Herman Yorrick himself and Roger Gorman suggested would be positive if some form of “bonus” were awarded based on what Yorrick called “a speedy turnaround.” I’m pretty sure I knew what that meant.

I handed the iPad back to Benson.

“So,” he said, “you still think they’re gonna back you up with ninjas or some shit?”

“The chairman wants me out,” I said, “but that doesn’t mean my staff won’t follow my instructions.”

He dabbed the screen and showed me more emails. I didn’t read them, so he narrated.

“You got a meetin’ with the head honcho today, so I’m guessin’ that’s to get help locatin’ my li’l burglar girl.”

“How the hell...?”

“Because I ain’t who you think I am, you *dick*. I got *resources*. I got connections can get me CCTV from places the cops need a warrant for. I got hackers can bust through your state-of-the-art firewalls in a couple a’ hours, and I got people who’ll fuck you up *prison*-style and dump you in the canal for fun—won’t even want payin’. You think those minimum wage fuck-heads were all I gotta offer?”

“I suppose not.”

“Now...” He calmed himself and steepled his fingers under his chin. “I got a proposal. My sources supplied me with pictures of my li’l burglar girl at Leeds-Bradford airport. Holdin’ hands with that fuck of a bouncer, headin’ to Paris. We got a few internal issues goin’ on right now, and since you in a shit-heap a’ trouble, you gonna work for *me*. I want Sarah found, I want Gareth found, I want my money, and—”

“I meant to ask, there’s some speculation about the actual amount—”

He threw the iPad at the wall, smashing it to pieces. “DO NOT INTERRUPT ME AGAIN!”

I shut my mouth and sat completely still.

He continued as if the tantrum never occurred. “I want Sarah and Gareth found, I want my money found, and I want you to bring them all to me within one week of you leaving this office.”

“You can’t expect me to—”

“A week. That’s seven days, and I’m bein’ generous. Folk down in Paris with fingers in a lotta pastries, they can’t find her. And I know these guys are thorough. Lord of the fuckin’ underworld’s helpin’ me out.”

“Lord of the—”

“I got the trains covered, I got the planes covered. Watchin’ CCTV in both places for weeks. *Very* reliable intel. Car rental and police reports too. Can’t cross the border on her fake passport, ’cause silly bitches used the same guy some of my less... official dancers use.” I thought he was going to chuckle like a proper villain but he didn’t. “Now she’s called Thandy Gallway. Gareth became Mark Gallway. So if they ain’t in Paris, they’re walkin’ around France on foot.”

“Or on coaches, or hitchhiking or maybe they slipped past your people.”

“Nobody slips past my people.”

“France is huge. You think I can—”

“It’s what you *do*, detective-man. You track people anywhere they go. Logic plus technology. Sherlock fuckin’ Holmes in board-shorts.”

I needed time to think. Questions are always good. Questions that poke or stoke the ego are best. “You’re well-connected enough to get into airport security ...”

He nodded, satisfied.

I said, “Why do you need some lowly investigator like me?”

After a pause, he said, “Our people’re gettin’ watched. Lotta chatter lately. Law closin’ down a lotta places. Not mine, but friends a’ mine.”

“With the same side line in exploiting desperate women? Twenty-first century slavers?”

He pressed his lips together, holding in another outburst. “Those girls pay off their debt a lot quicker through me, through the wages I *pay* them, than the ugly hags pickin’ fruit out in some farmer’s field.”

“You’re doing a public service.”

“Damn right,” he said. “A service that’s none of your fuckin’ business.”

“Gareth sourced his and Sarah’s passports through *your* broker. They’d get new ones in Paris.”

“No forger does work there without my guy knowin’ who they are, and we got ’em all tapped.”

“Don’t talk crap,” I said. “No one—especially some criminal—*no one* holds complete power over a city, no matter how much they think they do.”

“Not complete,” Benson admitted. “But the top dogs know the top freelancers. Forgers ain’t common these days. It’s a special-ee-tee. Understand? They ain’t tapped up *no one* who can get ’em outta that country. You know I’m tellin’ the truth. That’s why I’m puttin’ you on this case instead of that Gruffalo-lookin’ guy.”

I didn’t know what a “Gruffalo” was, but I guessed it was big and hairy. I said, “They’re guilty of a theft. Why get the police to black-out an investigation?”

“I told you already, we got law movin’ in on some of our smaller operations. Somethin’s leakin’, and I ain’t taking the chance it’ll lead to me.”

“You could get the foreign office involved.”

Benson took an A4 envelope from his desk drawer and slid it to me. “You go near the fuckin’ foreign office, and bad things will happen.”

I removed two photos. One was taken at Harry’s house through a window while he and Jayne dined on a Chinese takeaway. The other was of me leaving my apartment on my way here.

“We been watchin’ Harry, makin’ sure he don’t come back round here. Didn’t want him stumblin’ across Sarah and my money and doin’ somethin’ legit with it. Then you show up in town, so we gotta look into you too. Pretty tight with these old folks, huh?”

A couple of hours, maybe a couple of days if he intercepted Harry’s planning with Caroline, but that’s all it took him to access Park Avenue Investigations and determine my relationship with the company’s hierarchy, as well as digging up chunks of my personal history.

I said, “If your insurance paid out, how come you’re so desperate to get Sarah back?”

“Look at me, Mr. Park. *Look* at me.”

I looked at him. He clearly knew the silence made me want to speak, to fill the gap. An old interrogator’s trick, neat and effective when your quarry isn’t aware of it.

Finally, he said, “You’re an investigator. Tell me. Am I the sort of prick who lets people get away with shit like that?” He didn’t need an answer. “You gonna find Mr. and Mrs. Gallway, and you gonna find my money, and anythin’ else in their possession, and you will bring it all to me by next Friday. Let’s be all dramatic and say... *midnight*.”

“Anything else in their possession,” I said. *The camera. The SD card. Benson and Gareth arguing.* “Let’s talk about that.”

“No,” he said. “Let’s not, you clever fuck. Bring them to me.”

“I already told you—”

“And I already showed you I can get to your old people any time.”

I forced a degree of authority into my voice. “Harry’s records would indicate he had evidence on you. It’s all in cloud storage. Plus, no way would Harry value his life, or even his wife’s, over a girl like Sarah.”

“Yeah? Well, let’s try somethin’ else. *Mikey!*”

The steel door opened. Lily stood there, stiff and pale, her skin patchy, her physique now that of a sparrow. Red marks curled round both arms where she’d been held too firmly. Someone shoved her from behind. She stumbled in and fell to her knees, then crumpled onto her front, as if awaiting a further blow. After a beat, she sobbed. She was in her baby doll nightie, her underwear not yet replaced.

“Oh, come on,” I said. “You’re really doing this?”

Mikey came in and closed the door. He placed his hand on the top of her head and made her look up at me through tear-streaked mascara.

Benson said, “We’ll swap her for the money, and for Sarah and Gareth. You fail, she dies—badly—and your pal Harry will be implicated. And it *will* stick. No matter what he’s got hiding in his cloud.”

At some point, I’d got to my feet. Balled my fists too, some primitive hangover in the genes.

I said, “Let her go.”

“Let who go?” Mikey swung his boot into her back and she yelped like a dog. “Her?”

A jolt of fiery sickness spiked through me. I threw a chair and followed it in, but Mikey was expecting it. He stepped away from my kick at his knee. I feigned a throat-grab so he’d focus on that, allowing me to bring the real hold and rip his shoulder from its socket, but he shimmied aside, grabbed my wrist, and used my momentum to swing me onto my back.

He let me up and I switched disciplines and blazed into him with flurry of knees and elbows, most of which he blocked with ease, or shrugged off like I'd never even hit him.

"Mikey," Benson said. "This ain't a disco."

Mikey thrust a tight fist into the base of my sternum. It blew all the air out of my diaphragm and it felt like my heart had burst. Unable to breathe, I dropped to the floor and readied myself for what would surely be a serious beating. But it didn't come.

Benson knelt next to Lily and helped her up into the chair I threw at Mikey. "Sorry, Lily, but talk to fuckos like him and look what happens."

She sniffed and nodded.

Benson seemed almost tender as he stroked her knee. "Mr. Park here is forcing me to do things I don't wanna. But don't worry. We'll get you some clothes, patch you up. You go home, you wait. We'll come by, see how you are, we'll treat you good. Until next Friday. If Mr. Park don't come back with what I want, I'm sorry, but..." Benson's hand crept higher up Lily's leg, the inside of her thigh.

"Okay," I said, which hurt to say.

"Okay?" Benson said.

I managed, "I'll do it."

"You hear that, Lily? He'll do it. Now what do you say to Mr. Park?"

Her voice cracked, barely audible. "Th- thank you..."

Benson stood beside Mikey, both looking down on me. Benson pointed to the door. "Now get the fuck out, and go do your job."

CHAPTER FIVE

I'm not sure how I got out onto the street. There were corridors. There was the flesh-and-neon-orange blur of Blazing Seas and the curious faces of the dancers as a couple of new disposable security guys “encouraged” me toward the exit. I sat in a bus shelter a few meters up the road and tried to coax my breathing back to its regular rhythm.

When I felt able to move under my own steam, I pushed myself up and walked shakily toward my next appointment. Like a drunk, I leaned on walls or railings every ten meters. When I did finally negotiate the winding streets past office buildings and coffee shops and fashion boutiques, and into the lobby of Park Avenue Investigations, it was like tension physically dissolving around me. We occupied the top floor of a ten-story office block five minutes' walk from my apartment, and as the lift doors clunked shut behind me, I was suddenly... *safe*. I hadn't registered feeling *unsafe* before, but that trembling in my legs ended, and although my hands still shook, it was with less intensity, and all that remained was an ache in my stomach and chest.

When I last checked there were forty-two employees, eight board members—of which I was one—and a healthy bank balance, relatively untouched by the recent worldwide financial crash. Now, the clinically-white lobby had seen an art-deco refurbishment and photo portraits adorned one wall displaying *ten* board members, but that was a little deceptive since I wasn't among them. Roger Gorman's photo was larger than the others by a good six inches and positioned above them, creating a swish-looking organizational chart.

My pass granted me access before the receptionist saw me, so I slinked off into the marble-laden gents and unbuttoned my shirt to examine my torso in the bathroom mirror. A bruise had already bloomed into a dirty purple smudge.

If only I'd gone for his ankle... maybe waited until *he* made the move instead of plowing in with everything I had... if I'd let him come to me, a counter-attack would have worked... him coming at me with his fist... me, stepping aside... ramming my heel into his knee... follow-up jab to his nose to disorientate... grab his head and smash my knee through his jaw... and he's out... I've won...

If I'd let him throw that first punch, I'd have beaten him.

I would have.

The altercations I fought in the past were always against amateurs, people who—like Benson’s security dogs—perhaps handled themselves okay, but were ultimately driven by machismo. My training had been disciplined, and that had made *me* disciplined, and it had made me the favorite in scenarios even when I was out-muscled. Mikey was utterly controlled, though. Never on the back foot. I went at him with Krav Maga, and with a Muay Thai assault furious enough to down a horse, and he waved me off like I was a snappy Yorkshire terrier. I’d pegged him as bodyguard to a small-time crook with big ambitions, and so underestimated both him and his boss.

Clearly, Gareth Delingpole had too.

I tidied myself up and returned to the lobby, but as I was about to announce myself to the receptionist, Roger Gorman blew in through a pair of frosted-glass doors. Although he appeared tanned in the photo, his skin color in real-life was close to mahogany, and when he grinned the falsest grin in the world, I wasn’t sure whether it was a trick of the light or if his white teeth *actually* glowed.

“Adam!” He extended one hand and shook mine vigorously, while his other slapped my shoulder.

“Roger,” I said. “Good to see you.”

We stood in silence until Roger let out a short, nervous guff of laughter and swung his arm to the side. “Right this way.”

The man trying to certify me mentally incompetent led me into the heart of my former empire, teeth front and center all the way. The corridors hadn’t seen the extensive renovation of the outer shell, but they’d received a lick or two of paint, and some of the artwork had been upgraded from poncy to downright ugly.

Passing the accounts section, he said, “It’s all in good hands, Adam. Thirteen percent spike on last year.”

“Thirteen percent spike in what?” I said. “Profit, or the number of people your clients’ products have murdered?”

Another guff of laughter from Roger, then, “Always one with a joke, Adam.”

“Always,” I said.

Once we were past the gopher cubicles, his smile dropped. “And they’re *our* clients. Mine *and* yours. They don’t have to be, though.”

When I didn’t reply, Roger reinstated his lite-brite rigor smile and led me around a corner to where the carpets were deeper, and into a large room that could have been a conference space but, with the Rolls-Royce-sized desk and tall chair, I guessed it was Roger’s new office. A rug featuring some oriental design spanned three-quarters of the floor, featuring dotted indentations to suggest the room was, indeed, occasionally used for meetings. The nearest wall doubled as a cupboard and grooves along the ceiling indicated something could slide out, most likely tables, with the chairs currently hidden alongside.

“Been a while,” he said as he took his seat and gestured to the slightly-lower one opposite. When not entertaining a high-powered get-together, Gorman would enjoy an uninterrupted floor-to-ceiling view of Leeds, and for miles up the River Aire.

As I sat, I withheld a wince, and said, “I need access to the Deep Detect System.”

“DDS? The software you called evil?”

“The software I designed and still own,” I replied.

“Actually, Adam, the company owns it,” he said.

“Still keep it all on site?”

“I’m hardly going to trust possession of such a thing to an outside company, am I?”

When Gorman ousted me, one of the first things he did was dissolve all our cloud backup accounts to bring them in-house. Separate servers, independent power and generator fail-safes, with a state-of-the-art CO2 fire-extinguisher system in place of water. Nothing left to chance in the paranoia of a guilty man.

I said, “If it’s on site, it shouldn’t take too long to sign me in.”

“You know our rates,” he said. “If you have a client, sign them up.”

“She can’t afford your rates.”

“Our rates.”

“I’ll send you the details when I have them. I expect the results within—”

“No.”

“No?”

“No,” he said. “The software is the property of Park Avenue Investigations. Park Avenue Investigations has shareholders. DDS costs a lot of money to run.” He leaned closer. “If it’s so important, how come *you* don’t stump up the cash? Not given it all to some Oopma-Loompa tribe, have you?”

“Really?” I said. “Oopma-Loompas? That’s a new low, Roger, even for you.”

He shuffled uncomfortably. I expected my presence was keeping him from some meeting or phone call or eating another baby.

“Adam,” he said, “do we have to go through this sermon again? It was pretentious hippie nonsense two years ago and it’s pretentious hippie nonsense now. I don’t force the world to be like this. I happen to make money from *living* in that world.” He gestured toward the door. “Now why don’t you go back to Um-Bongo-Land or wherever you’ve been?”

I remained seated. “If I pay to use DDS, the money goes back into the company and it gets used for more death and more corruption and—”

“Damn it, Adam!” He opened a drawer and retrieved a thin sheaf of papers and slapped them on his desk, a prop he no doubt prepped when I announced my visit. “You are not running this company. I have the executive mandate. *I* control DDS.”

“You have executive control,” I said, “but I still know every pissy secret about this company. And you know my pretentious hippie nonsense doesn’t prevent me from burning this place to the ground if I have to.”

Gorman glared, trying to stay calm but at the same time assessing whether I was bluffing and therefore vulnerable. He said, “You couldn’t do the jail-time. Way too pretty.”

“I could be out of the country and in the wind an hour after leaving this building. Don’t forget I’m also privy to the ‘special services’ you provided for the Collinson Armory Corporation. And don’t get me started on conspiracy to bribe some dodgy psychiatrist.”

He stood sharply as if about to assault me, but the pudgy old fart wasn’t stupid.

“Yeah,” I said, suddenly deeply grateful to the criminal forcing me to work for him. “I have evidence of your plans on that front. So don’t even think about trying it.”

He slowly placed what he thought had been his trump card back in the drawer. “When did you get to be so *bloody* sanctimonious?”

Better a sanctimonious know-it-all than a... shit. I argued frequently with friends about my views on various subjects. One minute I was a naïve, pompous lefty, the next an over-simplified blood-and-thunder rightist; I simply saw myself as a guy with morals. We all have them. I just stand by them with more idiotic ferocity than many. Not ferocious enough to lose friends, though. I was not a fan of “agreeing to disagree” on a subject, but I would happily take a hiatus with good friends, people who were essentially decent people, but who might have been bitten by some left/right-biased news story that they believed wholesale. They usually came around in time, even Harry, who really hated being wrong. I’d love to say I was never wrong, and I *have* switched viewpoints from time-to-time when the evidence persuaded me, but the situation with Gorman offered no agree-to-disagree option. I could not back down.

And when I can’t win? Well, I take some time out until I *can* win.

I said, “I built this company as a means to find people who needed finding. DDS might be illegal, but when used correctly it—”

“And blackmail? Can you really not see your own hypocrisy?”

“Blackmail’s actually pretty cool when it’s done for the right reasons.”

His oddly-tuned brain worked behind that mahogany mask he called a face. “Fine, Adam. What’s the deal?”

“I’ll be treated like a freelancer, operating under the legal privilege which—I’m assuming here—but you being a lawyer and all, we still have that confidentiality clause?”

“You assume correctly.”

“I’ll work to PAI rules, which will ensure I’m not in breach of my non-compete clause, but will also furnish me with all the legal clout PAI commands. I’ll feed DDS as soon as I have the details.”

I stood and allowed the chair to slide back messily to the side. A little childish, but what the fuck. Who didn't enjoy messing with pricks like Roger Gorman?



After leaving the office, I wandered down to the Tech-Hive, a pocket of the building housing thousands of terabytes of data and software on banks of bespoke servers. Here, Jessica Denvers sat cross-legged on a tall stool, watching the door as I entered. Surrounded by the organized chaos of tablet computers, audio and video bugs, phones and assorted surveillance hardware that made up her lab, she was already holding out a smart-phone.

She said, "I figured if you blind-copied me in on an email to Roger Gorman that you'd be coming back to work. Here. You'll no-doubt need this." It was about four and a half inches, far bigger than phones had been two years ago. "The latest operating system," she added in something of a monotone. "Syncs with the PAI mainframe. The 'Family Moments' tile is the link to DDS. Four-G network, naturally."

"Naturally," I said. "That's a lot of initials."

"Pay attention, Double-oh-Seven."

A hint of the humor I remembered.

"I always pay attention," I said. "You've changed your hair."

"About eight times since you last saw me."

She was currently rocking a platinum-blond look with a purple streak, held back in a glittery Alice-band. It shouldn't really have worked on her honey-colored skin, a mix of her white-British and Jamaican parentage, but her hair possessed more Caucasian genes than African, so it was easier to style.

She said, "The link takes you to a video website similar to You Tube or Vimeo. Tap on the 'about us' option and hold for three seconds. This links to the DDS live section where you input your target's details. If you have something in front of you like a credit card, just snap a photo. It's a fifty mega-pixel camera."

"You've improved the interface."

"Even more times than my hair."

I played with the tiles, zipping them around, until I noticed Jess hadn't moved. "You okay?"

"Am I okay?" she said. "Am I okay with being dumped in this hole? Am I okay with Gormless Gorman firing three-quarters of my staff, doubling my workload and not giving me a pay rise for two years? Or am I okay with a guy I thought was my friend as well as my boss upping sticks and fucking off to God-knows-where without even a goodbye text?"

Harry often teased that Jess had something of a crush on me, but I didn't believe it. She was dedicated and brilliant and ten years my junior, which wouldn't be so bad, but she was the sort of person who alphabetized her CD collection, while I preferred to store them by color, starting with white at the left, building up through the spectrum to black on the right. Back when we used CDs, of course. Besides, a guy like me simply wouldn't be good for her.

Unwilling to reveal my gentlemanly thoughts, I tried glib again: "Are they my only options?"

"Do you need anything else?"

"Your number and twenty-four-seven access to your brain."

She took off her glasses and pointed with them. "You, sir, are pushing your bloody luck." She turned to her pile of junk and picked up what looked like an iPad but was nothing to do with Apple.

"It's a girl," I said. "Missing four weeks. An outside chance of kidnapping."

I recruited Jess straight out of uni, back when Park Avenue Investigations was still just me and a personal assistant. Her savant-like work with technology—both operating and developing it—was instrumental in expanding my business, and while we were doing "good" work she was happy. But, like me, she had misgivings about corporate espionage and supporting firms who exploited child soldiers. I convinced her to stay on with a promise that I'd get us away from those people.

I said, "The police aren't investigating and someone is covering up Sarah's movements." I stood closer to her. "I need your help, Jess." Then I ladled on some Hollywood cheese: "*She* needs your help."

Jess put down the not-an-iPad. "While I was waiting for you to come back and fight it out, Gorman made all us specialists sign non-compete clauses, like yours. I can't quit, and I blame you entirely."

"Sounds familiar." I nodded. "But alright. Help me with this case, and when it's over... you're fired."

"Thank you," she said.



Eager to get started, I hurried to the lobby and hit the elevator's down button. The receptionist said, "Mr. Park? There's a man here to see you. Says he's your dad?"

A man in rich-guy-casual clothes stood up from the sofa. "Step-dad," he said.

Stuart Fitzpatrick. Also known—by me, anyway—as "Sleazy Stu".

"Adam," he said. "I heard you were back in town."

“Well,” I said, “you can fuck right off,” and strode towards the stairs.

CHAPTER SIX

My *actual* father had been a plumber of generous girth and massive heart, a heart my mother loved so much that even when Sleazy Stuart Fitzpatrick tempted her with an extra-marital affair, she still could not bring herself to leave him, or our two bedroom terraced house in a street where we strung washing across the road to the home opposite, and where one family's Union flag spanned the length of their property, emblazoned with "Leeds Utd AFC". These patriots, though, not only did they refer to it incorrectly as a "Union Jack", but they rigged it upside-down, and no one dared correct them on either mistake. We lived without the trappings that made my school-friends' lives complete; no games-console or flashy sound system or holiday in Greece. Perhaps it is because of their marriage's near-miss that I never resented doing chores for pocket money. In fact, when it was time to clean the caravan, Dad and I laughed and splashed one another and generally treated it like a family excursion. Sometimes, I was even allowed to use the hose. He always promised we'd spend a whole summer in the caravan someday, not just here, but in France, maybe all the way to exotic Spain, if our fifteen-year-old Volvo would hold up.

However, a fortnight before my seventeenth birthday, while repairing the TV cabinet for the umpteenth time, Dad collapsed, having suffered a massive heart attack. I screamed at my mother to call an ambulance and I pumped his chest and breathed into his mouth like they showed us on TV, but he lay there, motionless and pale, growing colder by the second. He died before my mother even picked up the phone.

After a couple of months of scraping together enough money to eat and get me to school each day, Stuart Fitzpatrick came back a-calling. He swept my mother straight off her feet and into a four-bedroom house in the sort of area where if you left a sofa in your front garden, the neighbors would call the police rather than waiting for a family of rats to move in, compelling the council to shift it on bin-day. My mother told me to be grateful.

"No more compromises," she said.

For her sake, I tried. I really did. In fact, the fortnight Stu took us sailing on Lake Como and taught the seventeen-year-old me how to pilot a powerboat, it gave me such a charge, a literal tingle that made me whoop and cheer, I almost forgot to hate him. Almost. Our shared time behind the wheel of a throbbing water-bound rocket probably informed my only long-term love—adrenaline—but to this day, even as I fled his presence in the office I built from

scratch, I could feel nothing around him, except the urge to turn my back and take myself somewhere else.

The two floors directly below Park Avenue Investigations had, for many years, been occupied by recruitment consultants, but these had now closed and the properties were being renovated. The constant drilling and banging would annoy the crap out of the other residents but you wouldn't hear anything on my floor due to the insulation that Roger Gorman insisted upon. Today, the only sounds emanating from the sites were the wind blowing through the empty space and the snapping of plastic sheeting used to protect the building's shell from the British weather.

I emerged into strong sunlight, stretched my arms to tease the bruise in a pleasantly-painful way, and I slowly became aware of something not quite right. This area attracted people with Porsches and Aston Martins, sometimes the odd Jag, but rarely did a blue Ford Mondeo show up in the lot. From a couple of hundred yards away, the driver was indistinct, but I swear he was looking straight at me. I wondered about Benson's surveillance, about whether he would be so blatant.

Then I forgot about him, concerned only with the man who'd just caught up.

We walked, Stuart and I. The office complex was built in a crescent, backing onto the Leeds-Liverpool Canal, and we seemed to be heading that way. I knew exactly why, so I texted Harry to inform him of the change in venue for our chat.

We passed under the archway at the back of the crescent and over a small iron footbridge to the towpath, and we strolled some more until we entered a residential area, a gated community of barges with fun-tastic names like *Dun-Roamin-Gone-Boatin'*, *Home-from-Home*, and my personal tragi-favorite *Bat-Boat*, owned by a bachelor aged forty-four who lived there permanently and, yes, had painted it in the Adam West-era Batman colors, with added "Splash" and "Whoosh" decals.

After a while, Stuart said, "It's not even that valuable."

"So you keep telling me," I said.

"I'll do her up, get her back to the standard your mother maintained."

"I know."

"Would your mother really approve?"

"She didn't consult me when she married you. Why should I consult her about selling the only thing she left me in her will? The one possession she would use to go off by herself when the pretense of loving you became too much to take."

Wow, could I sound any more like a stroppy teenager?

It was close to four years now since my mother was struck by a jet-ski whilst swimming off Stuart's yacht on Lake Como, an accident no one could have avoided except, perhaps, the inexperienced helmsman who didn't see her, or even my mother herself if she'd heeded

Stuart's warning to not venture out too far. I may have hated Stu's smarmy guts for taking advantage of a widow's grief... but I didn't blame him for her death, even if *he* did.

We'd come upon the *Miss Piggywiggy*, named after my mother's favorite childhood toy, a canal barge she bought herself with the sale of our house. Once emerald green with red stripes and black trim, now the paint was peeling and crusted, the windows caked with grime, and the body shuddered when you sneezed too close. It now set me back a few hundred a month in mooring fees.

I said, "Make your offer."

He nodded. "I'm seeing someone. She's called—"

"I can't believe you haven't twigged to the fact that you actually mean nothing to me. Just make your offer. Then fuck off."

"A hundred and fifty thousand," he said. "Straight cash. No conditions."

One hundred and fifty thousand pounds for a barge worth more to the council on Bonfire Night than as a functioning vessel.

No more compromises, she'd told me. Damn right.

I said, "No deal."

"Fine," he said, and held out his hand for me.

I had never shaken it, but he always held it there for a few seconds longer than someone with real dignity ever would. He withdrew it and walked slowly away, leaving me alone with my mother's boat, and something of a headache, reminding me how early I rose that morning, of the lunchtime beer, and of how much caffeine I consumed to drag myself past two p.m. I wanted to get to work on finding Sarah Stiles, but now armed with the DDS software, I needed the information Harry was bringing me.



I boarded the *Miss Piggywiggy* and ducked into the galley. The barge creaked under my weight, and the air clawed, hot and musty. The whole furnished interior felt damp. I opened every window I could, and took a six-pack of mineral water from the deactivated fridge, only one of which was missing. The bottles were glass, so I had no worries about them being out of date, even though they had resided here since the day I took ownership. I downed one and felt marginally better, but with still no sign of Harry, I stepped into the bedroom where a mattress with no bedding waited.

The air was even more oppressive in this, the smaller space, much like a three-dollar-a-night room in a hot country. No window, no fan. You get used to it eventually; the humidity, the heat, the lack of breeze. Right there, lying down with my hands behind my head, the residue of Mikey's fist slowly lifting, I could have been back in Thailand or Columbia or

perhaps some village in Senegal. Whatever I was thinking, whatever I was remembering, I floated down, gently, into a deep sleep.

Then I awoke almost immediately to a clattering noise. At least I thought it was immediately. I sat up. Assessed my surroundings. It was still light out. I checked the time: quarter to three. Just a power-nap. Whatever—I was on the barge and someone was banging about in the galley.

“Bloody hell, Adam. Where do you keep the milk?”

I opened the bedroom door.

Beard turning to grey and a rumped manner that suggested he’d make a great tramp one day, Harry Riley had found the kettle and some cups and a jar of coffee. He held up the jar, grinning like an idiot. “Coffee, sir?”

“Just water, thanks. That jar is at least four years old.”

“You’re such a bleedin’ snob.” Harry unscrewed the jar and sniffed. “Smells like coffee.”

“Wow,” I said. “The life of Riley. Glamorous. You should invite the queen for afternoon tea.”

“If I’m havin’ tea with the queen, she can stomp up for a Starbucks.” He held a mug under the tap, turned it on. A mass of brown sludge plopped out.

I picked up two of the glass bottles and handed one to Harry.

He said, “This ain’t some expensive vintage is it? Cos I won’t appreciate it.”

I tossed my lid in the bin and downed half the bottle in one. When I breathed again, Harry had taken a sip and was now looking at me, fingers working around the bottle.

“Curtis Benson.”

“Dodgy bloke,” I said.

“Yep. I’ve done all the legwork as far as he’s concerned. No need to go pokin’ round there.”

I rubbed my chest and when Harry clocked the movement I quickly dropped my hand.

He said, “Already been to see him then? Idiot.”

This wasn’t like Harry. I said, “They scared you, didn’t they?”

“Not at first. But later, yeah. Got a phone call emphasizin’ I weren’t allowed in the club anymore, and blah blah blah, casually mention Jayne’s name and where we live.” He produced a Taser electrical weapon from his coat pocket, the sort you press against someone and hit a button, sending anywhere between one and ten-thousand volts through their body.

“Jayne know you have that?”

He put the weapon away. “Jayne’s talkin’ divorce just for sendin’ Caroline to find you. Said I should let you stew ’til you’re ready to come home, sort things out like a man.”

“Is Jayne here?”

“You think she’s rushed straight out to see you, can’t wait to welcome you home? Nah, she knows you’re busy. Says if you need her help, ask. Otherwise, she’ll see you when you bring Sarah back safe.”

I dropped into an armchair. Dust erupted around me. I pretended I wasn’t surprised. Harry lowered himself slowly into the one next to me.

I said, “She doesn’t understand.”

“No, and neither do I. Run into problems, so you abandon yer business and bugger off cowabunga-ing around the country. *Very cool, dude*, but not exactly dealin’ with the problem.”

“Okay, fine, I’m a coward.”

“You’re anythin’ but a coward, son.” He pointed his bottle at my chest. “That’s why you end up hurt more often than you would if you just bleedin’ listened to me.”

“The insurance,” I said. “Benson wouldn’t talk about it. What isn’t in the file?”

“Right.” Harry sipped from the bottle like it was a wine sample. “I can’t put me source in there in case it goes to court, but it’s a solid mate. On the Monday morning, Curtis Benson filed an official complaint about one of his birds liftin’ money from his safe. Crime number got issued. The investigation lasted one day, then got nixed from way up high. But no one interviewed Caroline. *No one*. The guy she spoke to was prob’ly one of Benson’s goons. As for the actual police, the missing persons report on Sarah is a separate file. No one’s lookin’ into it. And no one’s investigatin’ the theft.”

“Who can order a black-out like that?”

“My source ain’t got clearance to probe deeper.”

“But the insurance paid out.”

“Because they got a *crime number*.” Harry said this as if dealing with a remedial class. “Benson will have to repay any money he gets back, but stoppin’ an investigation dead, it’s heavy duty shit.”

I said, “That girl. Lily? I don’t suppose you traced her home address? Surname? Anything?”

“Why? You already probed her didn’t you?” He sipped his water with a “Carry-On” movie lift of the eyebrows.

“I got her in trouble.”

“Jesus,” Harry said. “I assume you don’t mean you knocked her up already. How bad is it?”

“Provided I do as he says, Benson won’t hurt her any further.”

“Any further?”

“He’ll kill her. Or he’ll violate her.” I drank from my bottle. Licked my lips. “Listen to

me. *Violate*. Okay, I'll say the word: *rape*."

"Rape," Harry said.

Still a weapon in today's gang warfare, the tactic dated back to the beginning of conflict itself. The threat kept both men and women in line, and during the actual invasions, it was seen as a perk of the job. Sack a town, take what you want, do a bit of raping, drink some mead.

"She's a stripper, Adam," he said.

"So's Sarah. Is Lily worth any less?"

Harry ran a hand over his face. Rubbed his neck the way he did when he couldn't find the words, when he couldn't tell me what he thought I needed to hear.

"A man," I said. "He wants another man to do something for him. If the second man fails, the first man will take a young woman, hold her down, and force himself inside her. He will thrust and he will thrust. She will tear and she will bleed."

Harry closed his eyes, shook his head slowly. "You're gettin' into that zone again, Adam."

Yes, I was in "that zone." The zone where I latched onto some injustice in the world and could not rattle it free from my conscience. Some might call it a flaw.

I said, "She might fight, but if she does they will hurt her even more. She will never, ever forget what happened to her. *That's* the reality."

"You're such a feminist."

I smiled, although it probably didn't look like a smile. Yes, I was one of "those" men. I'd heard us referred to by both sexist men and some hardline feminists as "white knights", a somewhat derogatory term to indicate that, while we were on the side of equality, we tended to dwell there out of guilt, or the sort of protective urge that came across as patronizing. . Gorman called it "pretentious." Harry often called it "sanctimonious." I call it commitment. I didn't give such terminology a lot of thought, though; I just acted in a way I believed was right.

I said, "Don't take the piss, Harry. You're better than that. You know it's wrong that *date-rape* isn't straightforward *rape*. You know if a man punches his wife in the face and then hugs her and says, 'Oh, I'm so sorry, look what you made me do,' that's *domestic-violence*, while if I punch some random bloke in the pub, it's simply *violence* and carries a harsher sentence. This situation, here, now, it's a real girl. Under real threat from real blokes."

"I know, Adam. But you need to stay focused. Sarah is the priority. Bring her back, and Lily is fine."

"We don't know that."

"What you gonna do? Leap in like Batman? Disappear with her in a puff of bleedin' smoke? Maybe you could stash her in that idiot's *Bat-Boat* down the way."

And that was it. Sometimes it took a fella from another generation to show me how dumb I was being. Did I mention I wasn't always right when it came to this type of argument? I stood by the morality behind my case, but accepted Lily's best chance was for me to locate Sarah.

I finished my water. "Okay, Harry. Lecture over. But you have to tell me what's special about this case."

"Nothing," he said. "I need that magic computer tool thingy of yours to show us where she is."

"Bollocks."

He studied me a second. "Alright. It's a case you used to jump right into. Girl missing, people bullshittin' us. Plus..." He smiled as if he'd been caught out at something. "Maybe it'll do you good. Get back to yer roots. Put this corporate shit behind you. Rucksack on yer back, dirt under yer nails, cockroaches in yer sandwiches."

Of course. *That corporate shit.*

He said, "I feel bad for Lily. I do. And I want you to help her. But the best way to do that is keep yer eye on the prize. Get Sarah back. Then we'll make sure Benson keeps his word." He flashed me his Taser again.

"You have Sarah's financials? My magic computer tool thingy should snag a couple of leads you couldn't access."

"I assume I shouldn't ask how it works?"

"Doubt you'd understand it anyway, old fella."

He gave me a clip around the ear and passed me a small notebook with a spiral binding, a fresh one he'd obviously written up—or rather had Jayne write up—especially for me: bank account numbers, credit cards, phones.

"If I'd needed you sooner," he said, "would you have come?"

"Yes," I said. "Why didn't you ask me sooner?"

"Didn't need you sooner. I'm pretty good at this, if you remember."

"Yeah, I remember."

He held my eye a second and said, "If yer still in Leeds come Sunday, Jayne's ordered you round for a roast dinner. Beef."

"Thanks," I said, standing. "I'll find her."

Right after figuring out exactly who all the players were in this annoyingly opaque case.

CHAPTER SEVEN

I accessed the Deep Detect System via my Windows phone and input the numbers associated with Sarah's life—financial data, phone numbers, email addresses—and waited. Over the years, Park Avenue Investigations had acquired backdoor access to many banks and financial institutions, which is where the “bot” would start, anchoring itself in the information I fed it. From there, the system would burrow through any matches linked to that data, first in Britain, and then around the world. If it came up against firewalls that could not be decoded, it would shoot spam at a random selection of employees with a virus hidden in a web link instead of an attachment; no one opens uninvited attachments anymore. We did not tempt them with penis enhancement or miracle weight-loss, instead bestowing them with retail voucher codes. All they had to do was click the link to their preferred shop, and the redirect site first installed a bot on their computer, then sent them to the genuine retailer for the discount, thus avoiding any suspicion. Once anchored within, DDS organizes transactions chronologically and links to any other people's data with whom the subject came into contact. When tracking complex financial fraud, this would instigate a spider's web of intel, branching out to nail the perpetrators *and* their accomplices or paymasters. In the case of a runaway girl, if she accessed any of her regular accounts, we would see which hotel she stayed in, who else stayed there at the same time, the last ATM she used, and any tickets to destinations either inside or outside the UK.

Of course, DDS has its limits. All it throws out is raw information. It's up to the user to interpret it. If the subject is clever about their crime, they will not touch any of their regular accounts or even use their own name if they can help it, and since I already knew Sarah procured a fake passport, it was better to back it up with good, old-fashioned detective work.

Through the streets, I checked the reflections in shop windows for people whose gaze lingered upon me, and reversed direction twice to memorize faces that may have repeated themselves at an inopportune time. No one. No Mondeo either. Perhaps it was just an oddity in the car park that didn't require a direct explanation. I doubt I would even have noticed it if Benson had not presented those surveillance photos.

Back at my apartment, I called Caroline to let her know that I had a little more information than Harry uncovered, and told her I was confident that Harry had been correct about Sarah absconding to Paris, and that I would be on the first flight out tomorrow. She

thanked me and didn't ask me to elaborate. I was glad for that because there really was no reason I shouldn't be on a plane within a couple of hours, but I could not stop thinking about what may have been happening to Lily right now.

What was happening to Lily... *because of me.*

I had to *do* something.

Keep yer eye on the prize, Harry said. On the surface I agreed with him.

No more compromises, my mother told me. Beneath the surface, I agreed with her.

That's why, instead of catching the last flight of the day to Paris, I watched over Blazing Seas from a £5 parking spot two streets away in a Vauxhall Astra, the least conspicuous car I could hire at short notice. I used my time to call Harry via one of three brand new phones that Jess procured for me via PAI's Tech-Hive: one for this venture, a cloned duplicate and a nuts-and-bolts text-and-voice model whose battery would last over a week. I informed Harry of my plans for the night and asked him for background on Gareth Delingpole, and gave him a brief list of other items, some of them costly. Using the other smartphone, I transferred more cash than he'd need, just in case.

Following an hour of nothing suspicious, I moved to a bench beside Leeds Art Gallery, a hundred yards back from the road next to a World War II monument. I flicked through Empire Magazine and, between reading how cool the latest superhero movie was and saying hello to Jason Isaacs, I could see anyone entering or leaving Benson's club. About eighty-three, after the sky had dimmed and the traffic calmed to a steady stream, Lily emerged alone in sweat-pants and a green coat, and hobbled into a white BMW that pulled up and flicked on its hazards.

As the car pulled away, the impressive lens on my phone zoomed in on its plates and snapped a photo, which fed into DDS. The system took that number and returned a name of Marley Holdings, based in the tax haven of Jersey. Marley Holdings was then cross-referenced with as many bank accounts as the system could find, whilst simultaneously whittling away at the company's charge card. I split the screen on the phone and saw the card purchases ping up on one half, with the suspected links to Marley Holdings on the other.

One thing that drew my attention was a regular shipping manifest leaving Liverpool docks on the second Monday of each month, dating back over a year. I could find no destination on DDS, but if there was a kink in Marley Holdings' security, I'd soon know exactly where those shipments were headed, and what they allegedly contained. Every link to the company, though, hit a dead-end right there, a combination of firewalls and fake account numbers. In the hope she could dig more deeply, I emailed Jess all the data so far, and switched off the illegal software. All I had were theories and more questions.

In a way, the supposed theft was good for Benson: I return the money, he bags it up, disappears the thieves, and the insurance has still paid out. Double-bubble on the cash *and* send a message to anyone else thinking of stealing from him.

Was his reputation that important? I doubted it. He'd tried to throw in a clause under the radar: *any other items in their possession*. Lily's mention of Gareth's SD card was the obvious theory. Perhaps that linked to the shipments.

Let's talk about that.

No, let's not, you clever fuck.

If Benson employed people who could hack through PAI's firewalls, he had access to either high-level politics or law-enforcement, or even interested foreign parties. Whatever Benson's source, Roger Gorman was taking extraordinary steps to oust me from a controlling position, skirting closer to the legal line than I'd ever seen. He avoided tax without an ounce of guilt, and circumvented international sanctions through a network of companies more complex than the human nervous system, yet here he was, willing to bribe a dodgy psychiatrist to certify me unfit to make decisions at an executive level.

But, with Sarah missing, and Lily under threat, I had no time to address Gorman's plot.

Yesterday's storm was creeping north, almost blown out, but carrying a fair amount of drizzle. For no other reason than I didn't particularly want to get soaked, I decided it was time to do my thing. I stood up sharply, and ran as fast as I could around the corner, waving my arms like a madman.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Okay, it's a bit of a hack trick. I mean, like, first year spy-school stuff. Or PI school. Harry actually taught me this one in my second week after agreeing to work with him. Move quickly, move suspiciously, but do it unexpectedly. Take in as many reactions as possible, and if you have a tail, you'll get the reaction you want. I got that two seconds into my sprint.

The guy was in his forties. He was sat at a table outside a coffee-shop with a near-full cappuccino. While everyone else gawped at the crazy dude who suddenly took off running, this guy, in his cheap grey suit and blue shirt, kept his gaze firmly on the book he was pretending to read.

The second tail was walking towards me. Others heading the same way rubber-necked as I passed them but, like his colleague, this slightly-overweight chap in a way-too-tight white t-shirt gave zero reaction.

Around the next corner, I slowed to a walk. I donned a baseball cap and allowed a smooth wooden cosh to slide out of my sleeve and sit discreetly in my hand. The object had been a gift from a Japanese Catholic priest, presented to me upon my departure from the soup kitchen in which I was volunteering in downtown Tokyo. It was inscribed with Japanese kana meaning, "Love, peace and happiness".

I used the reflection in a bank's window to confirm one of the men had followed. I continued down one of the city centre's main streets called the Headrow, noting new stores had opened since my departure, then turned right onto Briggate, once a major city-center thoroughfare clogged with diesel fumes, now a sand-blasted precinct of a shoppers' paradise. It still had its narrow, enclosed alleyways, though. Up one of these lurks the Angel Inn, which may have seen a number of renovations over the years but it was still, at its heart, a pub for drinkers. Compact and narrow, I passed by the entrance and slipped round a corner into what regulars call "the courtyard"—basically a scattering of bolted-down tables and chairs to one side of the narrow passage. It was empty at the moment. I used the cosh to nudge the three floodlights upward, and within seconds the motion sensors got confused and extinguished the bulbs, darkening the alley. Not completely, but enough to conceal my

movements as I backed into a recess that used to house a drainpipe.

Seconds later, Cheap Suit and Tightly-Whitey came in from separate ends. Tightly-Whitey stopped a few feet away as a third man approached from Cheap Suit's direction. Seemingly immune to the fine rain, he sat at a table and lit a cigarette. He wore a blue suit and had greasy hair and a square-ish head, like a doughy Frankenstein's monster.

The third man said, "Alright, let's be all civil then."

I stepped out of my hiding place and approached the trio, stopping an arm's length away from Cheap Suit. I said, "Not so covert any more then?"

Cheap Suit said, "Want a word is all."

"Okay. Go for it."

"Back off."

"That's two words."

Cheap-Suit came a step closer.

The cosh sat conspicuously in my hand.

Cheap-Suit said, "It's none of your business. We don't want you in the way. Don't want you getting hurt."

"Right," Tightly-Whitey added.

The third man said, "Hey guys, this gonna get violent?"

"It might," I said.

"Okay." He shifted away from us, and positioned himself for a better view.

Cheap-Suit said, "It doesn't have to get violent."

"Then fuck off," I said.

Cheap-Suit reached in his pocket. Before he could remove whatever was in there, I kned him in the balls and he doubled over. As Tightly-Whitey moved forward, I swung the cosh in an arc—a foot-and-a-half of wood, infused at the business end with a couple of pounds of lead—and slammed it down on Cheap-Suit's thigh. He stumbled, took his hand out of his pocket, but before I could see what was in it, Tightly-Whitey was on me. I pivoted, threw him over my hip and onto his back without landing a blow, while the third man laughed throatily.

Cheap Suit said, "Hey." Still unable to stand fully-erect, he held up an item.

I stepped back to improve the angle, Tightly-Whitey gearing up for another shot at me. But Cheap Suit flipped out his warrant card: West Yorkshire Police. Detective Inspector.

I said, "Oops."

Cheap Suit said, "Yer under arrest, smart-arse."

The third guy ceased laughing. "Nah, don't worry about it."

Cheap-Suit deferred to him. In turn, the doughy monster-guy came round this side of the table and perched himself casually on the edge.

He said, "I'm Frank," and held out his hand.

I still held the cosh on my shoulder, ready to strike, the pose usually associated with coppers fending off a mob of protesters. I said, "What the fuck is this?"

Frank lowered his hand. "Rich, grab four pints, hey?"

Tighty-Whitey frowned.

Frank said, "Now would be *great*."

Tighty-Whitey skulked off. My guess was he was a copper too, not used to being ordered to bring refreshments to someone they were tailing. For whatever reason.

Frank said, "My investigation has no room for civilians, Adam. Go back to your surf-school."

I said, "What if I don't want to?"

"If you bugger off now, we won't requisition the CCTV of you assaulting a couple of police officers."

I still wasn't convinced this was entirely legit. I said, "Let's see some ID."

Frank shook his square head. "I'm not the sort of guy who carries ID."

"But you get to order around local cops who do carry it."

"I know it may not be obvious right now, but you and I, Adam, we're on the same side." He was using my name too much, like he'd been on a "building empathy" course. He said, "I want to locate Sarah too. But I have to tread carefully."

I lowered the cosh so it rested by my leg. Non-threatening, but visible. "What are you, Benson's money-man? His accountant?"

Frank wasn't built like a fighter. That didn't always mean a lot, though. The guy under whom I first studied Muay Thai was as round as a beach-ball.

Frank said, "I don't work for Curtis Benson."

"What sorta police don't carry ID?"

Tighty-Whitey returned with four pints of Black Sheep bitter. As he set them down, he said, "Not police, you idiot."

Black Sheep is a beautiful drink. Doesn't travel well, though. Brewed a few miles from Leeds in North Yorkshire, I'd tried it down south, but it just didn't taste the same as it did back home. Although I was tempted to gulp down a half-pint in one go, I kept my focus on this "Frank" character.

He said, "I work for a special unit. Organized crime division. I won't bore you with the acronym."

"MI5," I said, and a few things fell into place. "You managed to shut down the police

investigation. How? Terrorism threat?"

Frank smiled. *Agent* Frank, I should say.

"And why?" I asked. "Why would you do that?"

He said, "Phil, take a walk. You too, Rich."

Cheap-Suit looked kind of insulted. Tightly-Whitey just shook his head and trudged off with his pint. Cheap Suit followed with his own.

Still perched on the table edge, Frank plucked up one of the two remaining beers and took a good gulp. "It's not just a missing girl or a missing guy. It's not just some cash." His tone now sounded all dark and mysterious. Smug, I guess.

"You're a bit behind on my progress, Frank." I secured the cosh in the back of my trousers. "I already know it isn't about a robbery. Benson wants me to work for him now."

Agent Frank gave little away, but a tiny shift in his features told me it was new information. "Why?"

"Same reason you want me to back off. Other items in the safe."

"Go on ..."

"Okay. Benson requests the police don't investigate the theft too much, and the guys he has in his wallet, they tell him 'no problem'. But really, it's *you* who stopped it because you didn't want to spook Benson or his smuggling friends. Likewise, you blocked the missing persons report because you don't want Sarah and Gareth to see the cops closing in, and dump whatever they took."

"Gareth's known associates are linked to some far-right protests that attacked mosques in the past. As far as West Yorkshire Police are concerned, Gareth and Sarah haven't disappeared. We say we're watching them, and we don't want local plod scaring them off."

"But you're not watching them."

"No." He fiddled with a cigarette, lit it, and blew smoke away from me. "So why does Curtis Benson want a private eye to do his legwork for him?"

"You've been making in-roads lately. Arresting smaller operators in the human trafficking racket. He doesn't know who to trust." I thought some more. "What is it that Gareth took?"

"In all honesty? I don't know. It's got Benson worried though. Accounts probably, or details of other gangs, maybe politicians and police on their payroll. Who knows?"

"Accounts?" I said, thinking about the shipments every second Monday and their hidden destination. "They really keep those things in safes?"

"It's called *organized* crime for a reason." This time he blew smoke in my face. "So, Benson and his partners, they all want Gareth and Sarah found, but they're too paranoid to mount a visible operation? Sounds about right. We're at a pivotal phase. We need to play it right."

“Still want me to back off?”

“I let you go about your business I risk exposing my guys. You get in trouble, they’re good people. Some of them might even blow the case to help a dumb amateur.” He cocked his head with a wry grin. “They’ll kick your head in afterwards for fucking up, years of work, but they’ll save your life.”

I had little to come back at him with. He was right. “You’re not looking for Sarah, though.”

“We need what her and Gareth are carrying. If we need to help her, we will.”

“But if Gareth is threatening her—”

“Domestics aren’t our department.”

“You want whatever they took from the safe, but I’m concerned with *her*. Nothing else.”

Agent Frank stood and faced me, lager-breath mingling with cigarettes. “Then we’re gonna have a problem.”

“Need me to sign a disclaimer?”

“What? Exonerate my people if you die?”

“Sure,” I said. “Whatever you need. And consider this: you can’t *actually* stop me going after them. Unless you have time to manufacture some evidence of my terrorist intentions.”

Agent Frank rubbed his face, thinking. Paced a second. “You are one dumb guy, Adam. But you’re right. I can’t stop you.” He stubbed out the cigarette. “But I can give you this warning. If I hear even a hint of you breaking *one* law, endangering *one* of my people, or if I get the slightest inkling you’re thinking of returning Curtis Benson’s property to him, there’ll be a European arrest warrant with your name on it before you can say ‘human rights abuse’. You get that?”

I should have been insulted, but it actually felt like progress. I now knew who, in addition to Benson, was following me, and I knew why the police investigation got nixed.

I said, “I understand.”

“No backup, no help,” he said.

“Yeah. I get it. You mind if I crack on now?”

He did not reply. Instead, he picked up his pint and the one intended for me, and headed inside the Angel Inn, leaving me with just one loose end to tie up before heading to France.

CHAPTER NINE

I got back to my apartment around ten p.m. Harry handed me a beer and, in my kitchen, the breakfast bar greeted us full of various foodstuff: pizza from a local takeaway, finger-foods from the frozen section of Sainsbury's, and drinks both alcoholic and soft. Nibbling at this, sat on my tall chairs, were Caroline Stiles and Jayne Riley, Harry's wife. I hadn't been expecting all this company, but Harry explained that Caroline had come round and when I contacted him they both insisted they see me before I left.

As soon as Jayne saw me, the first time in nearly two years, she came over and hugged me. She looked at me properly and tutted. Didn't ask questions, just embraced me again. She smelled strongly of coffee; ten p.m. was roughly two hours past the sixty-four-year-old woman's bedtime. She finally let me go and opened my laptop computer to the side of the food; she clearly still remembered my passwords. Jessica Denvers' face appeared, looking off to the side. Jayne smiled proudly at me.

I said, "Looks like someone's been keeping up with technology."

Jayne patted me on the arm. "You know what Harry's like."

Harry heard but pretended he didn't. "Are we all here now?"

We all sat around the table, with Jess a disembodied face in one corner.

I said, "The money is no longer the key focus. Curtis Benson has added to the problem in a big way, along with his Odd-Job-wannabe henchman."

"What's an Odd-Job?" Jayne asked.

"James Bond villain," Harry said. "Little chinky guy with the hat."

Jayne said, "You can't say 'chinky' anymore. It's racist."

"Is it? Thought it was like saying 'Brit' or 'Yank'."

I coughed and they turned their attention back to me. I then outlined everything I learned since dropping Caroline at home, highlighting that Benson believed Sarah was still in France with Gareth.

Caroline said, "Who's Gareth?"

Harry opened a file on the table and took out two photos. The first was a CCTV still

taken from above while Gareth worked the door, showing him to be of rangy build and with short-cropped hair. The second was snapped upon Gareth's arrest. He had a round face and full mouth, yet his eyes gave off a rodent-like quality. Too small, too close together. He was thirty-three.

"Sarah's boyfriend," Harry said. "Two wives behind him, suspicion of four assaults. All on women. Two convictions."

Another glance to Caroline, who looked away.

Harry said, "Wife number one was beaten up in the street with Gareth listin' her crimes fer the neighbors. Stuff like wearin' a skirt. Back then, the police could only prosecute with a complaint from the victim. She just wanted out, so all they did was help her get away from him."

"That's stupid," Caroline said. "All she had to do was run to a shelter and call the police, and she'd be free."

"That's what I used to think too," I said. "But men like Gareth are extremely clever. They lavish affection, create dependency, isolate their victim from friends and family. And then the fear starts. The threats. The violence. It's not that simple to break free. It takes real strength and real courage. Traits these abusers lack."

"Lower than whale shit," Harry said.

"What?" said Caroline.

"Bottom of the ocean, dear," Jayne replied.

Harry continued. "Wife number two came along after the law changed. The police don't need victims to press charges any more. Just evidence. He served fourteen months. Divorced after three."

He stopped to pretend to read the file. I caught Caroline's eye. Her nod meant, "Carry on."

"Next girlfriend we know of was a more headstrong sort. She fought back, and he didn't like it. Details are sketchy, but essentially a bunch of her friends missed her for five days and went to see her at Gareth's place. Terraced house, middle of an area called Chapeltown. Gareth claimed she'd moved out, but the friends muscled their way in. Found her in the cellar, on a mattress in her own filth. Forced imprisonment, assault, it all cost him five years. He's been out eighteen months, but was still on license until a month ago. Fancies himself as a landlord now. Bought a new house out in Birstall, bringing in a couple of lodgers. Sarah's the latest."

"Property," Jayne said. "Perhaps he's behind? Needs the money?"

"No," Harry said. "He pockets a wedge of inflated rent from the tax-payer. Unemployed family living in his Chapeltown property. It's enough to cover the mortgages on both houses." He fished out copies of letters from an energy company. "But he cut off the utilities to his Birstall property the day after Mr. and Mrs. Gallway flew to gay Par-ee."

“What does ‘on license’ mean?” Caroline asked, voice a little high.

“Parole,” I said. “He served his time, then persuaded Sarah to help rip-off a load of cash and run away with him.”

“But... she told me she was coming *home*.”

“If she’s in love,” I said, “if she’s worried he won’t love her anymore, wouldn’t she take direct action? Mission mode?”

I expected Caroline to break into tears, but crying didn’t seem to be something she did. Not unless she chose to.

Jayne said, “Perhaps we can move on to another subject for now? Like finding her?”

“Right. Anything on this Mikey guy?”

Harry said, “We think he’s Michael Durant, former Captain of the North Yorkshire Fusiliers, who saw action in the first Gulf War. Most of his unit were killed during an ambush. Left the service right after his tour, and disappeared. In the late-nineties-early-noughties, Michael Durant surfaces as a private contractor, leadin’ raids into Bosnia, escortin’ vulnerable people outta war-zones.”

“Sounds pretty honorable,” I said. “Okay, we’ve nothing on Sarah’s phone or bank cards, so we need to get dirtier. We know they got *fake* cards when they bought the passports but we don’t know the numbers. They can be anyone’s stolen identity.”

Jess took over. “I’ve hacked the retail arm of BAA—the firm that owns Leeds-Bradford Airport—and we got a few hits on new credit cards.”

To Caroline, I said, “Plenty of people take out a new credit card for holidays. Offers protection against cancelled flights and such-like.”

“Thank you, Mr. Trivia,” Jess said. “I got a list of all cards taken out in the past month paying for goods both in the airport *and* in Paris, then used DDS to eliminate all those that couldn’t be Sarah or Gareth.”

“That’s extraordinary,” Caroline said. “Who *are* you people?”

Jess continued. “A couple of cards went on to Spain, one to Belgium, half a dozen to the US, one to Vietnam, some Middle East countries too. But we’re sure she hasn’t left France, right? So we can scratch those spending in onward destinations. Only *five* cards were all taken out less than a week before Sarah left, only *five* ceased spending in Paris. No hotels, but one did buy something at an internet café situated in *l’Hostel Centrale*. The same day Sarah sent her last email. That was the final transaction.”

Jess didn’t say any more. She didn’t have to.

Caroline was the first to speak. “So she’s laying low or she’s... dead.”

Harry said, “We’ll find her, love.”

Caroline hugged her legs. Jayne Riley’s first instinct was to comfort. Caroline’s first instinct was to pull away. “Illegal hacking, gangsters... it’s all so... surreal. It all sounds so

dangerous. I don't know if I want to go this way. I could try the press again, the foreign office—”

“That isn't possible,” I said. “You know that.”

Jayne refused to pull away. Rubbed Caroline's shoulders. She said, “What Adam has put himself through in the past so he can help strangers, if I needed someone to find my sister or my daughter, or my niece... I wouldn't want the police. Nor MI5 or He-Man or James Bond. But *Adam*. He's who I'd want looking for her.”

“Thanks a bunch,” Harry said.

Caroline levelled a stone-cold stare my way. “You've done this before? With this much danger?”

Harry said, “Tell her about Thailand.”

“I don't think that's relevant,” I said.

Harry and Jayne often tried to get me to talk, and Harry even proffered some dumb amateur psychology lesson that maybe it made me more willing to face physical problems than emotional ones. I thought it was bollocks.

“Adam,” Harry said. “This lass needs to believe you can bring her sister home. If you can offer her some hope that you're actually hot shit at this travelin' malarkey, maybe she'll sleep tonight.”

I stuffed another chicken pakora in my mouth and chewed slowly. All eyes remained on me until I swallowed. I said, “Give me another beer.”

CHAPTER TEN

I had lived in Thailand a little under four months when a third local case pinged into my email account. According to John Baldwin, his wife, Sheila, had disappeared from their Bangkok hotel room two days earlier. It sounded like the police would be better off handling this, but he'd tried already, and they concluded she probably left him. They'd "keep an eye out," they said. John told me Sheila used to have a gambling problem and suggested she might've got involved with that sort of crowd. I figured I was good enough to locate her; I was experienced now, an expert. I had tracked maybe fifty people, and studied martial arts on three continents, so I knew I could handle anything.

But what I couldn't have known was that John was lying. I didn't even think to check out his version of events, just blundered head-long into the Bangkok nightlife. I got the gist of who Sheila was, her likes, her passions, and followed up based on that. But in the end, all that was left was the gambling angle.

I was pulled beyond the cigar-fog of backroom sessions and into the world of high-stakes hold 'em, where a hand could lose or win you a Mercedes, and a bluff without the finance to back it up could cost you a lot more. I flashed Sheila's picture, asked questions with no replies, bribed barmen and waitresses and even a policeman to provide the flimsiest of rumors about possible games. Eventually, as I was about to give up, they came for me.

I awoke on the floor of a wooden construction far from any traffic noise; a room, ten-foot square, heat radiating off each wall. I was covered in sweat and grime and a sticky patch of blood from where they'd knocked me out, though I had no idea how long I'd been unconscious. I insisted it was all a misunderstanding, but the four heavily-tattooed Thai men who guarded me did not want to talk, so I soon gave up trying.

I'd seen people knocked out on TV and in movies, but the medical reason you lose consciousness is because the brain has received a severe shock through its protective fluid. It basically means that, when you wake up, the brain is still swimming around, trying to repair itself. Nausea isn't uncommon. I comforted myself with that as I threw up on the dusty concrete.

The four men stepped back and one of them spat on me. They dragged me out of the room by my legs, and down a short passageway and out into a yard with two mongrel

fighting dogs slamming against their chains and yowling to get at me. The dogs' jaws chomped down inches from my feet and the men would not let me back up. Not that I could go far.

The street beyond the hip-high wall was deserted, lined with small square houses whose paint had peeled off long ago. The road was once tarmac but a combination of human neglect and the willpower of nature had other ideas, and the humid night air made the stench of open sewer even meatier in the back of my throat.

Two of the men moved to position next to the poles to which the fighting dogs were attached, ready to release them, while another watched the street. The fourth sat beside me and observed in silence.

About half an hour later, the man in the suit arrived.

He climbed out of a 4x4 that I could not focus on, and pushed open the gate. The dogs shut up immediately. He came straight up to me, crouched, and spoke in accented but precise English. "Stop looking for the woman."

Then he stood and turned. Evidently he thought this would be sufficient.

I said, "No."

The man in the suit waved a hand and the men next to the dog leashes reached to release them.

"How much did he owe?" I said.

"Who?"

"Sheila's husband."

By then, I'd heard enough about John. *He* was the gambler, not her. When I received a dozen blank looks from those games, I asked about John and got a few hits. I checked up on him quietly and learned he ran an online poker school back in Britain, but further research revealed these places were about as useful as those books "guaranteed" to power you to a career writing Hollywood movies.

The man in the suit gave me an oddly-camp look. "You think he owes us money? His debt is paid." He then spelled it out like I was four years old. "He wagered his wife against my apartment in central Bangkok. He lost."

If I hadn't been so woozy I'd have gasped or showed some level of shock. "I could buy her back," I said. "Forty thousand US dollars." It was the sum total of my savings. "Cash," I added.

"I am sorry. It is too late for that." To his men he said, "This person is no threat to us. Make sure he knows it."

The man in the suit sauntered out of the yard, and the four Thai men closed in on me and dragged me back inside.

When they had finished punishing me, the van they drove me away in had windows out

the back and I vaguely acknowledged that the sun was low in the sky. I felt like everything in my body was broken. My lips were swollen and bloody, one eye closed entirely. I don't know how long we drove for, but I eventually found myself being dragged yet again. This time I landed with a soft *whumpf*. I heard the van drive away, and I lay there. Hurting.

I slowly became aware of a texture. I moved an arm. Pain shot through my shoulder. My hand touched the ground. Sand.

Through the blood pounding around my head, I heard the ocean. I was on a beach.

Voices. Kids, adults.

Someone expressed concern. Then shock. Then revulsion. A man told a woman to keep the kids away. A shadow fell over me. A British voice asked if someone could hear him. *Me*. He was asking if *I* could hear him.

The man told me he'd get help. And he did.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Harry and Jayne were the only ones present who knew the story as I told it. Jess knew the abridged version.

Caroline asked, “What happened to Sheila?”

“Shallow grave,” I said. “She’d been dead about a week before I even started looking for her. Her husband stuck with his story. Said she went out and never came back.”

“Someone should do something about him.”

“The man in the suit already took care of the husband,” I said. “Couldn’t resist going back for more, and this time he didn’t have a wife to use as collateral.” I slapped the table and painted a grin on my face. “So come on, Caroline. What’s it to be? Do I go find Sarah or what?”

This time, the single tear rolling down her cheek seemed to be in spite of her willpower rather than because of it.



I sent Caroline and Jayne home, but Jayne insisted on tidying up first. While the others buzzed around me, I asked Jess what she had come up with regarding the registration plates of the BMW. Naturally, she had dug up all the same stuff I had relating to Marley Holdings, but the Beamer itself had been harder to trace. In the end, the car’s alarm company was one in which PAI had contacts and was able to trace the GPS movements for the past twenty-four hours. It took Lily to an area of Leeds called Seacroft. Jess pinpointed the final stop before the car turned around and went back the way it came, then checked council records for the first name “Lily” and identified only one address on that street: a studio apartment occupied by one Lily Blake.

I collected the thick packet Harry had left for me and we drove the Astra out to Lily’s address. By midnight, the street was silent but for the buzz of streetlights and the occasional distant engine. I expected a dog to bark but none did. Semi-detached council houses lined

one side, while two-story blocks of flats occupied the other. Harry and I negotiated the washing machine and sofa strewn on the grass, and climbed the stairs to the first floor. The flats' windows opened onto the passageway, and all but one was in darkness. Our feet crunched over a slew of broken glass and number eight's net curtain twitched.

A muffled, "What the fuck do you want?" came from within.

"Are you alone?" I said.

"Course I am. I try to go anywhere, he'll find me."

"I have something for you that can help with that."

"Unless it's Curtis Benson's head, I don't want it."

I knocked on the door and felt stupid for doing so. "Please hear me out. It's a good thing."

A pause, then, "How good?"

Harry said, "Love, I'd take this offer even if I didn't have some knob-head threatening me."

"Oh," she said. "You again."

Movement within. The door opened a crack. Lily's face appeared. Boyish hair. Wide brown eyes, a bruise to one cheek, her lip swollen. I hadn't noticed her eye-color before.

She said, "If I let you in, you leave when I say you leave. Okay?"

"Deal," I said.

She unchained the door and we entered a hot room that smelled of Chinese food. A couple of cartons were stacked in the kitchenette's sink. The lounge contained a sofa-bed pulled out into bed-mode and a TV tuned to a 24-hour news channel.

While Harry kept watch by the window, I placed his packet on the side of the kitchenette.

"That for me?" Lily said.

"What do you think?"

She limped over and emptied the contents onto the worktop. The first thing she picked up was one of two passports.

"It's me," she said. "Paula Grainger. I don't look like a Paula."

"You will," I said. "Harry is going to drive you somewhere. Nowhere I know about, but some sea port. Hull, Portsmouth, somewhere like that. When you get to wherever you want to go, buy yourself a rail ticket and keep on going until you choose to stop."

"He found Sarah at the airport easy—"

"That's why there's two."

She opened the second passport to meet Lilith Hughes.

"Lilith?" she said with disgust.

"It's close to Lily. Easier to remember. The cards are in Lilith's name too."

She examined the two credit cards. A standard silver one and a gold one.

I said, “Use Paula Grainger to leave the UK. Then burn the passport. Literally burn it, so no one can see who it was. Harry bought that one from the club forger, so when Benson finds out, he’ll think he knows your identity. Then you use Lilith Hughes to get around. She’s been created by my own contact, a rush-job couriered over from Liverpool. No association with Blazing Sleaze.”

I paused in case she had questions. She didn’t.

“The silver credit card is for small purchases—food, clothes, drinks. You need cash, keep it to a hundred euros a day. It’s connected to my own account, so it’s all my money. Do not go wild on it. It’s not for buying fifty people champagne. If you do that, the card will cease working.”

That was a lie, but I wanted some limits in place.

“The gold one is for more expensive purchases. Travel, accommodation, that sort of thing. Plus instructions on how to get them replaced if you lose them.”

She stared at the documents. “Your plan is to send me on a *holiday*?”

“You said you’d hear me out. Listen for two more minutes and—”

“You can stop talking.” She bit her lip, her bruising a nasty blue. “I’m actually okay with that.”

“You are?”

“Shit yeah. I’ve never been abroad before. You wanna pay, I’ll take that.”

“Great,” I said. “I’ll get in touch with you once this is all over. Until then, you cannot contact your family—”

“No problem. They’re all dicks anyhow.”

“Or your friends. No Facebook or Twitter or Instagram. Leave your phone, buy a pay-as-you-go outside of Britain. Move cities a lot, stick around somewhere if you like it, but do not get sloppy. Do not reveal your real name. Okay?” I waited for her to respond, but she poked around at the health insurance certificate and the driving license. Her photo came from the DVLA servers, where PAI—yep, you guessed it—had a contact who let us in the backdoor. I said, “Lily, focus.”

She snapped out of it. “So I can go anywhere, right?”

“Anywhere except Paris,” I said.



I left her packing minimal items into a gym-bag, advising her to pick up a rucksack at the earliest opportunity. I left her with Harry, gave him the car key, and called a cab.

Back home, I packed my usual equipment: binoculars, digital SLR camera, gaffer tape, a folding tool kit smaller than my phone, and an iPad with a company SIM card. Then I dug out a razor, but figured I would shave in the morning rather than pack it. Hopefully I would be back in a couple of days. Finally, I weighed the wooden cosh in my hand. Easier to use than a knife, infinitely less messy, and far more legal to transport between countries. I tucked it into the middle of my bag, surrounded by items of clothing. With everything ready to grab and go first thing, I hit the sack for what I hoped would be a decent night's sleep.

However, four hours later, at six a.m., I awoke to my phone ringing. I hadn't dreamed, so it took me a while to realize where I was. I answered it, still groggy.

Curtis Benson said, "Are you fuckin' shittin' me? You think I don't know it was you and that Gruffalo motherfucker who took her?"

I said, "You'll get what you asked for. Just give me some space."

"Space? I'll give you *space*—"

"If you were really going to do something you'd have kicked down the door already."

A shuffling sounded on the other end. "You got a pen?"

I picked up one of the other phones and told him I was ready. He gave me a number with a French prefix, which I typed into the phone's memory.

Benson said, "You gonna be on a short leash, *fucker*. You get to Paris, you call that number. You don't call, we'll come lookin' for you and whoever you care about."

"Who is it?"

"Name is Vila Fanuco." He spelled it for me and I noted it down. "My contact over there. He runs everythin' worth runnin'. Remember? Lord of the fuckin' underworld. Play any fuckin' games, show any reason I can't trust you, and I'll know. Got it?"

"Sure," I said, and hung up.

It was pointless going back to sleep, so I took a cab to Leeds-Bradford airport and booked myself on the ten-thirty flight to Paris. I was wearing beige combats and a loose cotton t-shirt, carrying a rucksack. I looked like anyone else embarking on a trip abroad, and I felt that tingle I always get when I'm about to cross another border.

I was finally on my way.

EUROPE

FRANCE

CHAPTER TWELVE

Armed only with an Inter-Rail ticket and a desperate need to flee as far away from Leeds as possible, Paris had been my first stop when I originally departed Britain. I read a lot after moving into Sleazy Stu's house, my key text being Bill Bryson's hilarious and perfectly-descriptive *Neither Here nor There: Travels in Europe*, and for months afterwards I yearned to turn up in random places and find a room, perhaps some remote village smack-bang in the middle of their Festival of Welcoming Foreigners or something. But that first evening, as I rocked up in Paris with wide eyes and a fast pace, a major car convention had hit town, and there was not a single vacant hotel, hostel or guest room. My pace slowed and I wandered the streets all night, sampling one late night cafe's wares after the next, alternating my intake between the sweet aniseed liqueur called *pastis* and strong black coffee. Unlike the UK, there was no hurried last-orders, no groups of lads downing several pints to beat the bell. There were just people, enjoying the coffee, the alcohol, the food; a young family dined at eleven p.m., lovers ignored their drinks in favor of one another's mouths, and elderly men sat on pavement tables, their legs spread wide as they sorted out the world's problems in a fog of aniseed. I did not sleep, and I hardly noticed the fatigue. In the morning, when *Gare du Sud* opened for business, I used my Inter-Rail ticket to hop the first train south, and by mid-afternoon I was in Marseille, paddling in the Mediterranean.

Today, the rail link from *Charles de Gaulle* Airport into the heart of Paris was as clean and efficient as I remembered. It deposited me not far from a Metro station, but the first thing I did was pop into a narrow café where a full-bosomed *madame* greeted with me an enthusiastic, "Bonjour!" and I returned her greeting in my schoolboy French, and purchased *un café-noir*. I fought off sleep most of the short flight, instead reading through the DDS info on Benson again, so I needed this boost.

Adam's smug travel tips #15: To get oneself into the mental space necessary to acclimatize to a foreign country, fine coffee in a tiny café (or whatever the local specialty beverage happens to be) is a great place to start.

I left the cafe with a clear head and went straight to a tourist information booth.

Due to the ease with which Benson had monitored my other activities, I did not book

accommodation in advance, and I was concerned that staying at Sarah's last known location could have tipped off the pair, or—more pertinently—whoever caused harm to befall them. The lady at the desk presented me with a couple of options and I chose one called *Le Grecian*, paid her in advance, and descended into the bowels of the Metro, Paris's underground rail network. I took the pink line to the Opera station, where I emerged into the afternoon sun.

Four hours after leaving Leeds, this was my first proper glimpse of Paris in years: a wide, busy road, lined with three and four-story buildings. The windows all bore wooden shutters, with iron railings for residents to lean upon, as many were now doing. Scooters whined by, some honking, although not bad-temperedly; more of a "Hi, pleased to see you" honk. Every street corner boasted a zebra-crossing, with red and green traffic lights, along with a walk/don't walk red and green-man guide.

I made it inside the Hotel Grecian and tried out my French on the receptionist. I didn't get far, but she seemed happy that I at least tried. My room had a soft bed and a fifty-year-old dresser, and the bathroom came furnished with a four-foot bath with a shower over it, and a sit-on toilet. The whole space smelled a bit like the *Miss Piggywiggy*.

I pushed the net curtain aside, opened my window, and leaned on the railings. Sounds of the city floated by: engines, car horns, the occasional argumentative shout. Tobacco swam through the air, blending with Mediterranean dishes sizzling a couple of buildings away. It was three-thirty now and the sun was lower than back home, filtered orange through the mild smog, hanging between the old white buildings. It's a scene, an *atmosphere*, no other place can provide: Paris in the afternoon, preparing for evening. But I had to venture out into that evening pretty soon.

Back inside, I left the window ajar, and dug out the number Benson had given me. Figured I was better off calling than not. No need to antagonize these people further.

A gruff, "Allo?" greeted me through the earpiece.

"Vila Fanuco?" I said.

"Adam Park," said the man.

"I'm supposed to check in with you."

"Yes."

I couldn't place his accent. Certainly not French. Eastern European? Russian? The name *Fanuco* was Spanish in origin but his lilt was a million miles away from Spanish. I wouldn't expect *Vila* or *Fanuco* to be genuine anyway.

"I can assume you will start your assignment straight away?" His English was near-flawless.

I said, "I'm planning on a visit to the police first."

"Oh? To what end?"

"I'm looking for a missing girl travelling with a violent thug. It's a courtesy to check in with local police to let them know I'm snooping around their city. Otherwise, things can get

a bit tricky if I annoy a gendarme.”

Fanuco laughed. “Okay, Mr. Park. Very well put. Logical. You sound like the sort of man I would like.”

“Cool. Let’s have a beer sometime.” *Why the fuck did I say that?* Mr. Glib returns.

“Mr. Park, you should take this situation more seriously. Your stay in my city will be far more comfortable if you behave.”

“I’ll be good as gold.”

The man breathed for a couple of seconds. He said, “Enjoy the Grecian,” and hung up.

I sat on the bed, listening to the various sounds of Paris through my window. It took me a moment to realize I had not mentioned the name of my hotel, and that I had used my mobile to call him, so any caller-ID would have been irrelevant. I’d taken the usual precautions, but still they’d learned where I was staying as simply as flipping on a light.

I put that out of my mind, and used the hotel wifi and my iPad to research Parisian law enforcement. After shunning the cops in Bangkok in favor of feeding my ego, I now made it a habit to befriend the local police. It pays to keep people like that on-side, especially with the threats under which I was working. I hoped—really hoped—it would give me something of an edge.

I hope you enjoyed this extended preview. If you like this and would like to read more, please visit:

<http://addavies.com/dead-and-missing-xl/>