

Bubbala, Biker Scum and the 'T' Girls

Book 1 from the Strange Aid Trilogy

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Jacky Yanovsky

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Jacky Yanovsky

I was born into a middle class, mid level Jewish family in the suburbs of London and one of three children.

My parents met in a Russian Communist Club and my father named me after a famous London strip bar.

I kid you not.

My mother never cottoned on. I take after my father who was and up to this point, as well as being into martial arts, still is an unrequited academic who along with cryogenics was infatuated with the metaphysical poets and other obscure philosophies.

I really broke out in my adolescence, left home at fifteen, the day after I left school in fact and hitched to India with my friend.

I was only allowed to go if I went to Israel first, as if they could stop me! I travelled extensively, abroad and in England, having experienced war zones, and in true hippy style, living in a variety of dwellings including caves and boats.

From my early war experiences I realized that life is short and not a rehearsal. I married my friend and we have been pretty happy and lucky so far.

In my mind I am still travelling and fortunately we are both pretty similar so who knows where we may end up.

All I know is that I have this terrible urge to make people laugh and share some mad moments with me.

Hence this book!

Oh and food is never far from my mind, as you will see.

JB Y

This Book Is Dedicated To:

The man who haplessly coerced me into participating in his cryogenic experiments involving liquid nitrogen, snails (which I had to collect), cutting edge high powered microscopes modified with tins cans and Duct Tape, on the kitchen table on Sunday mornings.

The man who used to greet all the paper delivery people, wearing nothing but a gorilla mask before descending into his dungeon.

The man who tried to usher me inside his front door brandishing an unsheathed and deadly thirteenth century Samurai sword, using it single handed to protect me from the three thousand Egyptians which he was certain were around the corner ready to attack.

The man who once said, that just because we are genetically related, we don't have to like each other. Fortunately I do!

To my father, responsible for all of the above and so much more, whom I love dearly and who has always inspired me in more ways than he could imagine.

Prologue: About twenty years ago, we think sometime around April 1983-ish, very early am...

Jack the Ripper would have loved that morning. A good, grey almost woolly dank mist hung over Spitalfield's Lamb Street. Dark brooding corners that could hide any drug induced monster, imagined or real, with bends you couldn't see round. An impending sense of doom welled up inside Rich as he rode on his crap Superdream 250. He had a cold and his nose was blocked. How he managed to get a blocked nose was a wonder of science and physics considering the amount of Charlie (cocaine) he had been snorting in the evening and speed (amphetamine sulphate) during the day to keep him going as always. His blocked nose was the cause of an accident which was to change his life forever.

Rich's life had not been an easy one. He was a fourth generation Polish Jewish immigrant and therefore the butt of many jokes within and without his family. The fact that he had an immense intellect, very typical of Polish and Russian immigrants, but used it in very untypical ways, was neither here nor there. Rich had a big weakness. He had several, as anyone has, but in his case, given the people that he hung around with, those weaknesses were his undoing and his making at the same time. I think you can gather he was a mishmash of contradictions.

His contradictory nature was another but less significant weakness due to his parentage of two warring, feuding families that were reluctantly joined by Rich marrying one of his father's enemy's daughters.

The fact that he later inadvertently killed her as he tried to push her out of the way of an oncoming truck with great risk to his safety was completely ignored by all those present including both warring families, they did nothing, they saw that Rich had put her under the wheels of a swerving Lada. This didn't help the family's view of him. The poor totally misunderstood tortured soul had lost everything he held dear and therefore he found an alternative reality to compensate. You can't blame him for any of the past or what happens here in this book as he is really a good soul who is a victim of one of the aforementioned weakness. Oh, did I forget to mention the aforementioned weakness?

The first being helplessly attracted to beautiful young ladies or damsels in distress. The second having an uncontrollable and raging thirst for knowledge and first-hand experience, after the result of imbibing such knowledge, which often took him into some strange situations.

The second character of this prologue, is introduced with a short potted character analysis or assassination depending what your moral values are and the wretched misfortune of a poor and actually rather noble Mr. Lorenzo Albalo. Mr Albalo was now being divorced from his mercenary, heartless but beautiful wife of approximately eight years. Eight years in which he had built up his fleet of lorries with national accounts, in London and the Home Counties, his tried and tested and mostly loyal staff of drivers, accountant and administrators and his property portfolio in Camden. The bitch was going to take it all. So he hadn't maintained the fleet for the last six months.

He had told his most trusted staff what was happening and thereby had given them the chance to move on because he was sure they would be exploited to the max by her (Mrs. Marta Albalo). He had resigned himself to his fate. His fate and Rich's fate were uncannily and closely linked at this point. We don't know about the Czech's.

The wide trail of diesel spilling out of the fuel tank from Lorenzo's un-maintained lorry about ten minutes preceding the event was the key in all of this. As well as the poor Czech motorbike courier (the third character of this prologue) who was unfortunate enough to be working at the same time and in the same spot.

Poor lad, when he moved out of his home town in the Czech Republic he had hoped that a new start in one of the most open minded countries in Europe would have saved his soul. In fact, it really did save it as unbeknown to him his long time girlfriend was plotting with his mother for the wedding of the street, back there in cosy downtown Czechoslovakia. She, at his house cosily sitting in the kitchen with her intended future mother-in-law, and him, at the station planning on leaving

that night and buying his train ticket out of there. He had saved all his money from his cleaning job at the university where he had passed his degree in 'most things' computers specializing in photography. He had got a first, was the youngest person in his school and class to get into university and was actually a near genius if truth be told.

He had invented new software systems that linked to digital cameras and was privately considered a protégé by his tutors who had hoped he would put their town on the map. Our rather sweet young Czech lad knew he needed to get out of his suffocating homeland and into the world.

He wanted mostly to go and photograph glaciers. He found the cold and the wondrousness of it all a purifier for his otherwise decidedly unholy, according to his mother, being. Whilst being near genius, as is often the case, he had no common sense at all. Consequently he didn't know what hit him when he arrived in London with money to survive for two days. He ended up working as a courier four days after his arrival in north London's Kentish Town. He bought a totally illegal and uninsurable motorbike, registered for work with someone else's name and address having gotten all details from the net and using his considerable skills was thereby being completely legal on the outside but hugely illegal on the inside.

The other genius in question, Rich, also had a missing link where common sense is concerned. Rich and the Czech had quite a few more things in common that morning.

Both had not registered and could not insure their bikes, both were illegally working on the black and both were involved in a not so slow and hugely uncontrolled slide, side by side, not quite making it round the blind bend. The inevitable happened. Over they went, each rider slammed to the floor. The mist dense enough to hide the road surface which was thickly smeared with Lorenzo's diesel, which neither of them smelt, Rich because his nose was blocked and the Czech just not clear headed or experienced enough to take in the significance of smells when you are riding.

The bikes slid down the road, Rich's front wheel going under a parked car and the Czechs hitting the kerb and then a lamp-post. The Czech came off worst with a seriously ripped jacket and torn jeans. The poor soul had gravel rash that would keep him in pain for weeks. Plus the inevitable dislocated thumbs. Rich, who was so used to hitting the floor, was much more relaxed and got away with scuffed leathers and just one dislocated thumb as he twirled round on his back like a grotesque version of a Wurlitzer at the funfair. He looked like a dead ant on its back. Parcels and post were scattered all over the road, spewing out from the split top boxes.

The Czech went into an 'adrenalin aided' flee mode. Possibly because he was an illegal immigrant. He made the immediate decision to cut his losses and disappear before the police or anyone else started to ask difficult questions. Rich went into 'thief mode', gathered up all the post on the floor, well the important ones that he knew about of his and some more of the Czechs.

He left some of the Czechs post, left the bikes and left the area pronto, disappearing into thin air, his mind racing like a Laverda Jota, possibly the fastest road bike at that time, thinking of what he could do and who he should and shouldn't call in order to work out just how he could profit from the situation...

CHAPTER 1

Christian Lake entered the reception of L.G.W. (Lativan, Gouldewater and White) Solicitors. It was empty. He looked around for a brief second, not noticing how very similarly bleak this part of L.G.W. was to any Social Services reception in any town in any part of the UK, even in this brave new century. He leant his un-toned and flabby hulk against the counter and drummed his stubby grimy nail-bitten fingers on the fake wood-like Formica in a desultory and laconic kind of way, although Christian himself wouldn't have used the word laconic in that context as he would have thought that 'laconic' was something to do with faecal emissions. 'Laid back' was more his style given his monosyllabic tendencies.

In actual fact, 'laid back' was remarkable for Christian. He was feeling kind of beatific, another word he would never have used, syllables notwithstanding. I think you get the picture. He gave himself a smug little smile. This had the effect of making the swastikas tattooed on each of his ear

lobes do a little dance, as if in mock salute to Himmler, the master himself.

What was even more remarkable was that Christian's 'How Fucked Off Am I?' internal barometer showed a 'fair and sunny outlook'. His internal needle hardly EVER got past 'stormy-high pressure'.

The reason for this rare and pleasant calmness, mingled with the smug grin, was that Christian was a father again, to a little girl no less. This time he was allowed to stay for the birth. Last time he had been thrown out because of the fact that his wife had bitten him so hard during the thirteen hour labour that he finally called her 'A mean fucking bitch...' and told her that he was going to 'fucking clock her one if she didn't get her fucking teeth out of his arm'.

This time there was no biting involved, as he cleverly surmised, the drugs were so much better now, so he was allowed to stay. Coming out of his family reverie, he moved his large fat head slightly towards the small door behind the reception. Someone was coming.

An odour of 4711 cologne preceded Mrs. Gouldewater Senior as she finally shuffled through the door and into the reception. The usual maroon tweed wool suit, neatly blending into the dark and musty colours of the decor, hanging on her thin frame as if, it too, was appalled and protesting about being anywhere near this ginger, wiry haired, sour faced old woman's person. Her face first registered resignation on seeing this, in her opinion, barely human being in front of her, but then somehow it morphed into her set 'customer reception' look, not that much different, as she remembered her good manners. In the Synagogue last Friday, the Rabbi Hershaw had said that as a congregation and a community they must all try to be more inclusive.

This was a good thing for Mrs. G Senior, as more inclusive meant possibly more business for her son Mr. Gouldewater, partner with Mr. Lativan and Mr. White, Solicitors. So with this inclusiveness in the forefront of her lizard like mind, she welcomed Christian Lake.

"Today you're different. What's different?" she said (also laconically).

"Is it that you are doing so well at this courier business that you can smile like that and so early in the day for you too. Why is this day different from all other days?"

"You are blessed with insight Mrs. G" chirped Christian, "Indeed this day of the twenty second of March is the second day of the birth of my baby daughter. I'm a daddy again. Here, let me show you a picture"

A picture thought Mrs. G Well, pictures of children, anyone's children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews were right on target with Mrs. Gouldewater. She held out her hand being careful not to actually touch the grimy digits in front of her. Christian proudly showed Mrs. G the picture of his newborn baby daughter, including the unmistakable bloody, full colour graphics of Mrs. Christian Lake delivering her.

"Look! Here's another one I took after they cleaned her up a bit. She's a little doll isn't she?"

To her credit, Mrs. G didn't flinch and went gamely on, holding on to the fact that she too was a woman and that God himself had created women's' bodies to do just this, so why should she be feeling so sick?

"Well mazeltov Christian, how much did she weigh? What have you called her? My, she looks just like you. Even at this age she takes after her father."

Mrs. Gouldewater had visibly softened and melted on hearing that this short, fat, bald-headed, unwashed person who smelt of decaying human flesh and fabric, wearing a ripped waterproof jacket that looked as if it had been driven over by a truck. Who had what seemed to be perpetually dirty fingernails. Who had been picking up and delivering packages and post to and from this office for over a year now, had indeed some kind of connection with the rest of the world and human beings in general. He was a father, fathers she understood. What was faintly worrying was what kind of father, indeed, what kind of family, lurked among those five million or so people living in London, could Christian Lake belong to and, God help us, perpetuate.

In the back of her mind was the phrase 'They should all have been killed at birth', but then Hitler had said that about the Jews hadn't he? So she renewed her efforts to be a good Jewess and to be all-inclusive even if it was just to avenge Hitler and her conscience. She said a silent Brocheh (pronounced 'Brockah' and is a Yiddish word for a blessing) for Christian and his family.

“We’re calling her Kay, after her Grandmother, God bless her soul, and she weighed 7lb 1oz and she came into this world screaming, just like her mother!”

“Well I wish you every joy,” said Mrs. Gouldewater, “You’re lucky to have a daughter. I hope she marries well. Braces, I recommend braces at 13 or puberty, whichever comes first, that’ll keep those boys away”

Christian looked at Mrs. G in a new light. Such good advice he thought to himself, so wise, his HFOAI (How Fucked Off Am I) barometer still on ‘sunny climes’. With that, he picked up the package waiting to be taken back to the office, fiddled around for his keys and put on his battered lid (crash helmet) and clumsily made his way towards the door calling out a thanks to Mrs. G who hadn’t even heard him as she made her way back into the security of her little office in the secret hidden chambers of L.G.W. Solicitors.

Once outside, Christian started his GT550 Kawasaki, his courier bike painted in matt black road-rat style, and went out to try to disappear into the traffic, his still smiling face hidden behind the dead flies, bird shit and road grime on his visor.

CHAPTER 2

Alf Napier was hiding out just off Smithfield, sprawled out on the bench recently vacated by the local all dancing, all singing care in the community resident. He was watching a London pigeon pick at one of the sweets he had thrown in the road and was waiting to see if it could eat it all in one go, or whether said sweet would be stuck on the road and impossible to get.

This could provide hours of pigeon fun he thought to himself and a great insight into the minds of pigeons. The radio strapped onto on his Trans Vehicle Services bib i.e. the plastic jacket that all couriers should wear to advertise their company, which all couriers hate wearing as it gives the police something to go on, started cackling, buzzing and beeping at him. This didn’t disturb the pigeon, which was now trying to remove the sticky mess of the sweet from its beak, using its feet to try to get to the green and blue goo which was clinging to it in hard to reach places.

“Yo muthafucka.” said the radio.

“Yo muthafucka.” he replied.

“Watchya doin?” said a deep but well articulated voice on the radio.

“Experimenting in pigeon mind control” replied Alf.

“Is there food involved?” inquired the voice.

“Used my last sweet” replied Alf “and I need further supplies. See you at Mazerati’s. If you get there before me, make sure you get the last of the apple crumble for me”

“What makes you think you deserve it?” said the voice.

“Because I’m a Bastard” replied Alf, and switched off his radio.

He took one last look at the multi-coloured sweet smeared pigeon, which was now fending off other pigeons that were trying to eat the sweet off its neck, put on his lid, hoisted his courier bag over his shoulder and jumped on to his VTR (a very fast motor bike) and headed towards Farringdon in central London and Mazerati’s Café for breakfast, mission accomplished.

Mazerati’s was in full swing. There were about seven bikes parked outside varying from super bikes, road bikes, scum bikes, insurance rip off bikes and Christian’s bike. Inside, radios were beeping merrily like caged finches and equally ignored, throughout the café. The café wasn’t huge but had become a meeting point due to the patience of the owner, Norma, her two Hungarian waitresses, who had now left after they both became engaged to rich bikers in Holland Park and her uncontrollable gambling habit. She would take business anywhere she could get it.

As well as the couriers the café was populated by blue or orange boiler suited manual workers, normally loaders at the nearby Smithfield meat market, the late night/early morning gold toothed, ‘rock’ chewing dealers and the odd stray ‘suits’ and sales ‘reptiles’. The suits and reptiles usually ate up quickly having, seemingly to them, stumbled into a café of iniquity and left fearing for their lives and belongings. The dealers talked in dialect amongst themselves and on their mobile phones and kept sweet with the meat loaders and couriers. After all everybody needs meat and the couriers

usually needed chemical assistance, everyone was happy. Today Norma was the proprietor and also the waitress. She was taking an order from Eileen one of the few female couriers in the business, who was also receiving orders from her controller, known as Brash and Bollocks to all the couriers from T. V. Services.

Now controllers are a peculiar bunch at the best of times. They're the ones who allocated the delivery jobs from their clients to the bikes, cars, vans, push bikes, whatever their company used. A courier company is a bit like a private post office except hugely more expensive and often with more psychopaths working for them. The controllers can make a courier's life hell or heaven, profitable or not, when they give out the jobs, decide on the order of who gets what and who goes where and how often.

So imagine if you will, that a controller who does not know a large city in which his courier company is based, is like an air traffic controller who doesn't know where north is or thinks that it is always the direction you are facing. You can therefore see the potential for cock-ups that can ensue in a place like London especially if you have a controller who is directionally challenged or just plain thick. Add a few twists like the controller doesn't like you, didn't get laid the night before, has a grudge against educated erudite people who happen to like bikes so much that they want to work all day with them, or is on a serious comedown, you could very easily see the potential to encounter problems when working with them. Brash and Bollocks was a mixture of all those things, good and bad.

He knew most of the routes, had grudges against couriers when he thought that they had somehow insulted him, but he was too thick to work that out most of the time. He was scared of women bikers and really believed that people like Christian Lake were more fitting for the profession than our other chums, who were on route to the café, namely Nathan, Alf, Eileen and Dave. Fortunately from all those except Christian, the abuse that he received generally went over his head. So all in all there was a workable arrangement, albeit on a knife edge most of the time.

Indeed, if Brash and Bollocks had been a little smarter and less lazy, none of our couriers would be able to get away with what they did or so they thought by common agreement. Needless to say, Brash and Bollocks was kept well out of the loop regarding Mazerati's, and other forms of skiving and pigeon watching.

Eileen, one of the women bikers that B&B was particularly scared of, with good reason, also worked for T.V. Services. She was firing off a breakfast order as Brash and Bollocks was giving her the next job. Her expertise at doing both simultaneously without B&B suspecting their whereabouts was noteworthy and a tribute to her intelligence, masked by her Irish brawn and confusing, for some, by the choice of her husband.

"Toast, fried eggs, bacon, black pudding and bubble & squeak. (Beep). Roger that (Beep). First floor (Beep). Make that twice, one for me one for Dave, he'll be along shortly (Beep). Is it sign or post room? (Beep) and a portion of chips (Beep). Rog" (Beep).

Having got everything sorted, she sat down at the six seater table. She was expecting Dave her husband, also a courier, and the others at any minute, business having been taken care of for the next two hours by the devious setting up of Christian and Bone-Head, a courier who fitted his nick name like a coffin for a corpse, to be on call and therefore cover for them. This was a common occurrence, every day in fact. The controller Brash & Bollocks being such a dickhead had no idea of the ingenuity of this jocular group of scheming motor biking scum working the roads in this particular part of London.

As predicted, no sooner had Christian turned up and drunk his tea than his radio went again calling him off to WC1, EC1 then Parkway for a wait and return. Bonehead had been sent off to pick up nine jobs on the E14 run.

Alf's VTR pulled up outside reasonably sedately for him. Alf was about 5'11" and today's choice of clothing was black Gore-Tex waterproof trousers and jacket both armoured, with protective Sidi boots that had been well worn in. Apart from the boots, all exterior gear was in good nick.

In fact most of the couriers in this particular group had good gear, apart from Dave, because they knew it would save their limbs if and usually when they slid down the road or encountered other

bits of moving traffic. It was actually quite a dangerous job being a motor-bike courier in London and although most of them looked as if they didn't know shit about anything, they had all been doing this for a long time and as yet they hadn't done any serious damage to themselves, this in itself proved that they were good.

Many other couriers had suffered serious accidents and in some cases had joined the great big motorcycle club in the sky. Alf walked with a North London swagger and could do wheelies at 120 m.p.h. He swaggered into Maserati's feeling satisfied and justified with the mornings proceeding because of his pigeon antics. A few moments later, a brand new black Bandit 1200, tuned to the bollocks, screeched to a gravel shattering halt, peppering the window like buckshot, his owner doing it because he could! A tall well-built man wearing armoured black leathers grinned, dismounted the beast, and made his way to meet his friends in the café. Nathan.

"Yo muthafucka" said Alf

"Yo muthafucka" said Nathan, "I bet that scheming bitch has had the last of the apple crumble".

"Oi I heard that" yelled Eileen "No, today I'm on a diet so you can have the apple crumble to your muthafuckin self. Dave and I are going out later so we don't want pudding."

Her five foot eleven, long, red-headed angular frame settled on a chair. Eileen was wearing men's Gore-Tex waterproof gear as all the girlie bike stuff didn't fit her nor was it protective enough, the designers obviously not expecting Eileen's contours in their profiles. Eileen was not exactly pretty, but she was disarming. She had pale freckled skin, with the most brilliant blue eyes, she also had a resigned air about her that kind of indicated she wouldn't tolerate fools too easily and you had better make your point quickly before she gives you huge hugs or annihilates you, depending on her view of your performance and intentions.

On first appearances she was indeed very intimidating but to those who knew her well knew she had an almost naive compassion that could transform her into the most gentlest 'Amazon' of a woman you could wish to meet. The problem was her trusting and respecting you enough to get past the scaly and scary dragon lady image she gave to most people she encountered. For those who had taken the time to completely ignore all of that, she was a very big warm hearted leprechaun in bikers clothing.

She chose her seat. She put down her tea, put in three sugars and stirred it. As expected, her five foot five equally long red-headed string bean of a husband Dave turned up on his orange CB500. It was really Eileen's bike but Eileen was riding the MTV while Dave's bike was being serviced. Dave happened to be the exception of the collective skills of the couriers. Dave was an accident waiting to happen. Eileen was better than her husband, but no one mentioned it, not even when it was really tempting. They all thought that it was Eileen's prerogative to emotionally destroy Dave, not theirs.

Alf, Nathan and Dave joined Eileen and sat down, comfortably eating their breakfast with little conversation. Alf, Dave and Eileen all were having the fry up, Nathan having the fry up and the steak pie. He was quite fortunate that due to life's little quirks his metabolism was a little different from most and he used energy in strange and mysterious ways.

There was a good humoured gentle hum of peace, tranquillity and munching throughout the café. Very rare moments indeed, in this environment, but wait...

Eileen leapt out of her seat and onto the table.

"Don't any of you move!" she screamed, "This is a shrubbery. Any of you motherfuckers move and I'll electrocute every motherfucking last one of you!"

Her chair had gone flying out of control, flung across the industrial lino floor into the diners behind her, spraying hot blobs of bubble and squeak everywhere. Swirling around in the chaos she had created, her thick hair coming loose and wild, poised, ready to pounce, elbows at ninety degrees to her body ready to be used as weapons and for leverage, she was pogo-ing on the table, which, surprisingly held her weight, shook her head madly, bared her teeth and shoved her hand into her jacket.

She stood on the table amidst the baked bean and sausage chaos, in a crouching position as seen on TV in CSI Miami and definitely and clearly showing the whites of her eyes. Nobody dared do anything. They all just watched helplessly as Eileen leaped around amidst the mess sending

everyone diving for cover. Silence.

Still nobody moved or did anything, everyone too petrified and stunned to think.

Time stood still the static of fear filled the air. The gold-toothed dealers were silenced, the 'suits' and 'reptiles' turned a paler grey, the couriers shrank in their leathers. As ordered, no-one moved. The whole café was riveted to the spot in suspended animation, staring at Eileen who had a wildly insane, that's a deeply profound understatement, grin on her face, one that would have done Jim Carey proud, as she twirled around on the table like the grim reaper on LSD, waiting to catch you. Nathan, Dave and Alf were cowering under the table whilst Eileen was stomping around hissing and spitting at everyone.

"Do something Dave, she's your wife!" hissed Nathan shoving him and trying to get him out of his state of rabbit in the spotlight daze, and clock on to what his crazy beloved was doing.

Dave tentatively poked his head out from under the table and stared at his wife, his eyes wide but not comprehending fully. Then the slow realization of the fact that she may have well and truly lost it and really flipped her lid this time and he was going to have to deal with it dawned on him. He was petrified and shrunk back, riveted to the floor. Nathan shoved him harder.

"Fucking do something NOW before she gets herself arrested or sectioned!" He hissed even louder and grabbed Dave's testicles to get his full attention.

That did the trick. He looked at Nathan with grave indignation then very slowly raised his hands and again tentatively poked his head out from under the table for the second time and tried to very carefully get her attention in some effort to hopefully placate his wife. He didn't get a chance to say or do anything before she reached into her jacket in what seemed like the slow motion frames of film and pulled out what, to everyone's further and frozen horror, seemed to be a gun.

Dave dived back under for cover. Eileen with a gun was not a laughing matter as she had been known to use her air rifle to shoot out the windows of her neighbours opposite, in their high rise flat, because they were doing DIY at 11.45 a.m. on a Sunday morning. The whole café took an intake of breath and clenched everything as she slowly revealed the weapon.

Nathan in true Nathan form was busily analyzing the situation and was going over her words 'This is a shrubbery...!', Eileen was now laughing hysterically, wired and wide eyed, she was the only one who was. Nathan took a deep breath put on his lid for protection and tried to peek out to see what Eileen was up to.

Alf and Dave both scrambled to get their lids on too before Eileen shot them or something. They all slowly and gently raised their heads out from under the table like three mute black headed beetles, only to have a very strange feeling, a bit like a dentist's drill, powering through their crash helmets.

They met Eileen's insane, laughing hysterical eyes, and slowly they caught a glimpse of what she was using to drill on their crash helmets. Nathan had to blink twice to make sure of which reality he had landed on. Dave wasn't even looking and had pulled down his tinted visor, he was too scared of what he might see. Alf's jaw dropped. Shocked they stood up knocking over more chairs and plastic ketchup bottles, struggling to make sense of the scene before them. The rest of the punters in the café started to very carefully move away from the couriers not sure what was going on but that they definitely wanted to get distance between themselves and her.

After what seemed like an eternity the reality of what she had done and had in her hands hit them. All of them, stared at her, still paralysed. Grasped very tightly in each of her hands they saw the huge thick shiny plastic twirling and wobbling purple vibrators. As if under a spell, they were still mesmerized as she slowly turned on the buttons, held each one aloft to each ear, grinned, then slowly and erotically licked them and ceremoniously held them out to for all to see and listen to their loud, proud and lonely hums. Then she did a funny little dance on the table and turned to her captured audience.

"Gotcha!"

In retrospect, they were not sure if they were more shocked because she pulled out a couple of vibrators than a gun or because it may have been a new kind of gun weirdly designed as a vibrator, but there was a deeply bemused silence, except for the sound of the humming and heavy breathing.

You could sense the mixed emotions emanating from various individuals, that Eileen's little act had triggered throughout the café. Nathan was anxiously looking round now to make sure no-one was about to leap over the tables and try to kill her. He was amazed at every one's restraint. Mind you no-one in their right mind would take on Eileen, sane or insane. He breathed out slowly, releasing all the unwanted adrenalin.

"Fuck sake" said Alf finally breaking the moment by starting to giggle. As if responding to a signal, the Café gently went back to a kind of surreal normality as Eileen clambered down and retrieved her chair. None of them said anything for a while, they were waiting for the surrealism to pass, and given their collective history that shows how fucking weird that little scene really was.

"I thought I was going to have to knock your wife off the table" whimpered Alf, who was by now rolling on the floor laughing. Dave however was looking at his wife in absolute admiration.

"That was truly magnificent" he said, "but you fucking do that again and I won't give you any dope or blow jobs for the next three weeks. Why our vibrators?"

"She's got balls, I'll say that for her" chipped in Nathan, who, having uncrossed his eyes was now trying to gather up and put away fifteen years worth of all the mental images of death and destruction that had been unleashed and were running loose in his head.

"It was well planned, well thought out, well executed, you have far too much free time Eileen. I worry about you."

Eileen just kept on grinning. The suits had now come out of their shock, Norma actually smiled towards them in a weakly reassuring way, glad that everyone seemed to be OK and not dead. The dealers grinned back and fired up their mobiles, making sure that they were still cool, the meat loaders roared their approval stood up and applauded her loudly.

They would be talking about that for a long time to come. Eileen stood up and took a bow- it was after all a performance worthy of an Oscar. She had been planning it for weeks. The couriers were all grinning from ear to grime covered ear. Alf was now laughing so loud he nearly fell off his chair again. Nathan who had had a particularly nasty flashback to his police days when he was actually shot at, was saying a little mantra to himself '...I'm in this layer of reality,' he hadn't said it in years, but it reminded him he was still alive and had all his bits intact.

In fact, after the initial shock, they were all perversely brimming over with pride that one of their friends could actually do that and a woman as well, how about that!

The conversation eventually returned to normal after letting Eileen go over and over her cunning plan and the reasons why she did it, which still no one really understood. They were now on a more comparatively comforting subject, moaning about Brash and Bollocks' controlling skills or rather his lack of them and Slithery Paul's, a fellow courier, latest sucking up to the boss.

"Here's what we could do" said Alf "let's collect those pink gay stick-on triangles they're giving away with the Pink Press and plaster them all over Slithers brand new TDM. We could write his telephone number on them too."

"At least he'll feel loved and wanted when he gets all those calls," remarked Nathan grinning in between sipping his tea.

"Teach him to arse-lick," said Dave.

"My friend Rich did that once" went on Nathan, "no not arse-lick, Eileen, the sticker thing. He did it to one of the van drivers in a firm I used to work for. It changed the bloke's life you know. He was last seen at Madam Jojo's dancing with blokes wearing leather chaps of many varieties. That reminds me" he said "I got a package from him, Rich, about a month ago. It was an old key wrapped in some old paper. He asked me to put it in a brief case, which I have been keeping for him for about four years now."

"I'd forgotten all about that. Remember Rich, Alf? I've not seen him since he did that cheque job and had to emigrate to Holland. Last I heard he was living above a brothel in Utrecht looking after some guy's hydroponics grass system."

Nathan paused for a moment, thinking back to the letter, Rich and everything. He continued.

"Funny that, as Rich knew nothing much about growing plants, only about smoking them."

Nathan's eyes grew vague when he got flashbacks, as he often did, this one was of him, Rich and

Alf cutting lines in a flat in Kilburn, his future wife's flat as it happened, all of them completely wired and discussing theology. Rich was really into theology. He had originally wanted to be a Rabbi, but his mother had sworn that no son of hers was going rabbinical.

So he had been brought into the family business, antiques dealing, for want of a better term, in the Portobello Road Market. Rich's knowledge of antiques, theology and logistics had really helped the family, one of the positive uses of his weaknesses, but his liking for smack one of the negative uses of his experiential weakness, had got him into a bit of a fix. As such he, as a good Jew, had grasped opportunity by the horns and rather than embarrassing his family due to his smack habit, had opted for life as a courier instead. This in turn was how he had got himself into that 'bit of bother' mentioned earlier culminating in him having to leave the country pronto but taking someone else's shit load of dope, cheques and assorted other goodies with him. Holland seemed to welcome him.

"Yeah" said Alf, "Rich was weird one. Funny about the key though, what was it like?"

Alf had an interest in keys and locks. This interest was more than just a passing phase. This particular interest had led him into some very interesting jobs in his past which in turn had led him into some very good money, all used notes and untraceable.

Except that on one job, it wasn't, they'd traced them back to Alf. Once more, he'd been back in lock-up, where this time, even he couldn't break out, for about fourteen months. During that time he had learnt several things. He had learnt that he was dyslexic. He had learnt to keep very quiet and invisible to the screws and he had learnt to make sure that if any of the other guests at that particular HMP even tried to touch him, they would never want anything but one-way traffic in a very personal place. Alf could get a fork, plastic or otherwise between anyone's buttocks. He couldn't read, but he could fuck your mind up for life if he felt you weren't being respectful.

However, he respected Nathan, Dave, Eileen and Esther. They were his friends and to him along with Dob his dog, were family and so were important to him. This meant that if Nathan was puzzled over something then Alf was there to help, when he felt the need to or he actually could.

"So this key then. Is it small, large, brass, nickel? Give me a description."

"Well it's like an old barn door key, you know, big heavy brass thing, long stem with a kind of balanced feel to it."

Alf sat thinking for a while, mulling over what kind of lock would need this key and what it may have locked.

"I'll have a look at it later tonight if you can bring it over. Beer's at my place around seven everyone. Rita'll probably turn up a bit later after he's had her nails done. I don't know if Sandra's coming over, I've told her not come. She kept me awake all last night asking me if I love her, it's driving me mad, all I want to do is sleep and then she keeps asking 'what am I thinking?' and 'Do I really love her? Christ, she's in my bed, isn't that enough?' Alf really meant this stuff about his long suffering girlfriend Sandra, in all seriousness. Dave and Eileen exchanged knowing glances with each other. Dave raised an eyebrow and nodded in support. Nathan look resigned. He gave up trying to educate him regarding his treatment of women not long after they became friends, way back when.

"Yeah bro," he replied to Alf's dilemma, subtly taking the piss, "Sleep's important. Christ, with all these idiots on the road, especially these born-again bikers, they can kill us. You've got to be alert and on your toes."

"Don't call me a lert, muthafucka"

"Surely I can call you what I want"

"Don't call me Shirley either" quipped Alf. With that he got up and left. His drop had been waiting for over two hours now, a wallet for some rich guy who had left it behind and needed it shipping to Ohio. Alf had 40 minutes to get it to Heathrow Airport. Plenty of time.

CHAPTER 3

Nathan gathered up his stuff and called Brash & Bollocks. To his delight he was given a distance

job. This meant more money, but he would be home late. He thought he'd better call Esther and let her know that he wouldn't be able to make it to Alfs with the others and that the key would have to wait a bit longer. If he didn't call her she may worry and he never liked his wife worrying. In the past it had made for complications for which he had paid dearly with no sex or supper for far too long. No, No, No! He always let Esther know what was happening now, for his own security and because he loved her. Nathan called the school number where she worked, and got no reply. He also tried her mobile but it was switched off. He'd drop in on her and tell her, just in case she'd planned something special.

He pulled up outside the Pupil Referral Unit. This particular PRU was a place of education for fifteen year old girls who were not in mainstream education for one reason or another i.e. bitch trolls, bullies and/or victims or any other reason why they couldn't or wouldn't be included in the already overcrowded and underfunded mainstream schools. Esther was the teacher in charge and manager. He rang the bell, approached the office where he found her in the middle of talking to one of her pupils.

"Look, do me a fucking favour Marie, and see sense. If he's screwing someone else, nicking your brothers scooter and making you unhappy then he's playing with you and you're letting him and he's doing it because he can. Here, have another ciggy."

As Nathan looked through the door. Esther waved him in and exploited him for the benefit of her young charge, the situation and because she could, offering what she called the 'school fags' around to everyone. Her logic being that she had these girls for a precious year to get through their GC.S.E's and turn their lives around, empower them and repair years of emotional damage. Having them detox and suffer withdrawals on top of all that pressure was too much for anyone and in her mind totally illogical. They could do that after they left her and moved on to the jobs, training or the further education they all managed to get once they'd left left the care of her and her team. No one argued with her, her track record said it all.

"Oh, hi darling! Marie, you remember Nathan, my husband? I'm just sorting out Marie. She can't finish her English coursework because of this bastard she's going out with, we all know his kind." she said, starting to get annoyed "Marie, do you want me to give Nathan his address? If you want this git of a boyfriend to leave you alone, you know, be taught a lesson, it's not a problem. Just give us the word and it shall be done."

Marie's face did a little dance that would have made any mime artist proud, she was not too sure whether to take this seriously or not. Given this was Esther she was talking to, with her husband present, she thought she probably meant it so gave a serious answer.

"No, it's alright, but I'll think about it. I'll try to finish this coursework. He's fucked me up enough and I'm not going to let him fuck up my education too."

"Atta girl Marie. Do you want another ciggy for later? Take one and tell the others I'll be there in a minute."

Marie went away convinced that both of them were quite serious about mysteriously causing something quite nasty to happen to her boyfriend if it would help her.

"Counselling another one?" asked Nathan.

"Yeah, she's so smart that one but gets used so much."

"You know how that feels don't you," replied Nathan softly.

He knew Esther's weaknesses. Esther let him know them. He went over to Esther, a small but well formed and curvy woman of indiscriminate age and thick and wavy black hair that fell loosely around her shoulders like something out of a Botticelli painting. She was his princess and he was her proud and extremely protective knight. He put his arms around her, almost smothering her and gave her a hug, rocking her gently in his arms. They did this a lot, any time, any place, anywhere.

"Listen, I've got a distance to Portsmouth. I may be back late, is that OK?"

"No problem. Are you OK?"

"Yeah, look I've got to go. Give my regards to the girls, see you tonight, don't wait for me to eat, I'll pick up something later."

"That's OK hun, I'll defrost some of your chilli in the micro and you can have it when you get in

if you want.”

“That’ll be great, see you later tonight, I’ll call you when I get there.”

He gave her a kiss and another quick hug and was gone. Esther walked back into class.

“Everyone OK?” she enquired.

“Yeah, how ‘bout you?” enquired one rather gorgeous girl with an angelic face, looks can be deceiving, with a pink ribbon, butterfly clips and feathers in her hair.

“Oh yes, he just dropped in to tell me he had a distance job. He sends his love to you all.”

Esther turned her attention to her class.

“Ok. Marie, nice piece of writing....”

The sound of the Bandit drowned out her words, but that was not a problem. The girls were used to Esther and her husband. They both kept them safe.

Nathan’s tall Nordic frame sat comfortably on his bike as he worked his way through the heavy London traffic. He saw the gaps and went for them, reading the road and car driver’s minds like a shrewd politician. He had been riding since he was seven, off-roaders, anything he could get his hands on. His publican parents, so busy working all the hours God sent tried to ignore his passion. He had spent hours, days, weeks, months chanting ‘bike bike bike bike’ at them, but in the end they were too exhausted, so to stop his chanting they gave in.

Consequently bikes slid into Nathan’s life and had not stopped since. He absolutely had to have a bike in his life, it was an underlying need which permeated his soul. No bike, i.e. not having one, equalled severe depression for Nathan, a bike, i.e. having one, equalled happiness, lots of bikes equalled sheer paradise. That’s just how he was.

When Nathan was riding he was at peace, Zen like, well, not quite, not all the time, the exceptions being when people tried to overtake him. Then he was like the cousin of Thor, loud, intimidating and almost merciless to whoever got in his way.

Once he’d put distance between them and him, preferably with a nice corner involved, then he was a happy courier, until the next victim unwittingly got themselves caught in Nathan’s game of tag. Sometimes he found someone else who liked to play. Both of them tearing up the roads with large, stupid, big kid grins on their faces, fellow adrenalin junkies. However, this time Nathan was not quite Zen like and once out of London cruised at 70 m.p.h. Illegal equalled normal for Nathan but this time slow definitely equalled not normal. Something was playing on his mind and he needed to work it through.

This was the best time and way through it for him, a distance job on a warm dry day. He found himself thinking about Rich again, Rich and his key. He worked out that if Alf had gone on about the key thing then he must have picked up Nathan’s feeling of being not quite right about something. Maybe it was the key.

A key of dope would’ve been nice, or even better, a key load of charlie, but a key load of, well, key? This key thing was weird, but then Rich had always been cryptic. Maybe the key was meant to signify something Nathan should know, but what? He thought back to the early years when he’d never been that naive but was nevertheless young and much thinner and a young police officer walking the beat in Kings Cross, a very busy and seedy part of London at that time, the hub of it Kings Cross main-line station.

They’d cut his long blonde hair to regulation length.

His Judo training with the judge, his father’s friend from the pub, had made him lithe but muscular. His height always made him quite conspicuous which he used to his advantage when still in school. There the bullies had laughed at his shyness as they tore up his poetry in the playground when he was young. They’d seemed more like killing fields to a sensitive and lonely little boy.

Those same bullies hadn’t noticed how the shy and vulnerable victim of their jokes and fists and therefore the physical evidence of their power had changed.

Suddenly the killing fields were Nathan’s. He left the strongest ones till last, savouring their physical agony, their bodies and egos a bloody mess on the school tarmac.

He won the battle, won the girls and lost his virginity. A fair swap thought Nathan, a fair swap indeed. His girlfriends loved him. He was tall, blonde, strong, funny, and emotionally literate and

rode motorbikes.

He rode off into the world, or at least to the next village, earning good money as a welder and roofer. He was always incongruous though. You didn't often see a solitary roofer sitting a hundred feet up on an RSJ reading war poetry, eating a sausage sandwich and drinking a bottle of champagne in his lunch break. Inevitably, the big smoke called, the jobs having dried up in Middlesbrough. Nathan joined the police, it was good money.

The Judge had given him the idea, knowing that when you truly looked into Nathan's eyes, you could see his humanity, his support for the underdog and his cold cynicism in measured and equal parts.

"Go and join the Metropolitan Police" The Judge had told him, "It's the best Force money can buy".

The speed helped his memory and the whisky helped his courage. He passed his entrance exams with flying colours and he was in.

It was on his time off that he found a sleazy bar in Chelsea, far from his station in Holborn, where he could relax and be himself after his shifts. Nathan having been brought up in pubs could talk to anyone about anything and they began to know him there. He was as comfortable in front of a bar or behind it. Mostly he was in front of it. However, he had helped Harry, the owner, once or twice. Once Harry had been so out of it after a dose of strong acid that Nathan had found some Mogodons, strong sleeping pills, to bring him down and then took over the bar for the night. If one of his squad came by, not likely, 'who gives a fuck,' he thought.

So one early morning, his bike parked outside, Nathan was propping up the bar with Harry, who was just about to close, in comes this guy, nothing spectacular to look at, small compared to Nathan, stocky with black hair and a beard.

"Harry, I've come to collect" he said.

Harry looked anxious and was jiggling with a beer mug.

"What, now, at this time. Here?"

Nathan's 'trouble radar' started pinging wildly in his brain. Great he thought, this little shit's going to start something and I'm going to have to find another place to drink and I like this place. Nathan waited for developments.

"Harry" said Black Beard, "How long is it since I last saw you, two years?"

"About that yeah" replied Harry cautiously.

"Have I called you or asked for anything in all that time?"

"Well" Harry paused for a while and thought. "No, not that I recall" he replied.

"Have I ever let you down on any deals?"

"Well no" repeated Harry miserably.

"Have I ever got myself in a mess over a woman?"

"Well yes, most definitely" enthused Harry feeling a bit more like he was getting some kind of edge.

"And have you?"

"You know I have" responded Harry a little more crestfallen now.

"And what did I do for you Harry? What did I do?"

"You let me stay with you Rich," muttered Harry, now knowing he had completely lost whatever edge it was he had been trying to gain.

"Yes Harry, you stayed with me. Was it good?"

"Yeah, it was" conceded Harry, knowing that somehow he was really letting himself in for it.

"Were you scared of me, my friends or of what I might do at any point?"

"No" he whispered.

"Then you know I am an honourable man?"

"I never said you weren't," replied Harry, genuinely distressed now.

"I know that" Black Beard replied gently, "But now I need a place to stay, not because I'm hiding or running, but because I need to study for my theology exam and my mother is driving me mad. The dog's always barking and my nephews are over."

“You’re the only one who knows about this and now, this guy too” he said, pointing at and addressing Nathan. “Please don’t be insulted, but as you can see, I have a problem here.”

“No offence taken,” said Nathan, beginning to warm to this character.

“Harry, can you help me or not?”

“You could always stay in the bar,” said Harry, “Would that help?” hoping that this would appease him and lessen the impending doom, whatever it was.

Apparently it did and Harry breathed a relieved sigh as the inquisitor with the black beard visibly brightened.

“Harry, I love you,” said the guy now known as Rich.

“By the way” said Harry, feeling more confident now that he was back on some kind of equal footing, “Nathan here is a more than a regular. He’s helped me a lot, he comes from generations of publicans, just so you know, Nathan’s all right.”

You picked a lucky night Rich, “ he continued “A lucky night.”

“That’s no surprise to me,” replied Rich “I’m one of the chosen people of the twelve tribes of Israel,” he said as he walked away jauntily to get his things.

Nathan turned round and watched Rich as he headed towards the door. When he turned back there was whisky set for three people.

These are good people thought Nathan, and felt that after all, it might be his lucky night too.

Inevitably, Nathan, Harry and Rich became good friends. Nathan was intrigued by Rich, an eccentric Jew amongst other things, and his theology. Harry was a good barman, which meant a lot to Nathan, but Harry didn’t do the theology thing well and tended not to get too involved. Nathan and Rich discussed theology, women, alcohol and both found a common love for all things that were fun, decadent and hallucinogenic.

Rich claimed hallucinogens helped him to visualize the theological situations, his weakness for experiential reality blossoming, especially when the words actually became real and started to have minds and actions of their own. Rich found this was especially good with Corinthians II where the bible stated that women must not adorn themselves. Something to do with the letters L, S and D he said, qualifying it by adding that he felt more at home with the theologian’s and their theories when the words seemed so concrete (literally) instead of abstract. Nathan agreed and felt that it definitely enhanced Shakespeare, especially Hamlet as well as The Grateful Dead. Also Nathan knew that between Chiswick roundabout and Richmond on a cool night, it was very exciting and satisfying when these three little letters began to play with your mind and your speedometer.

Through all of that time, Rich had never once asked Nathan about how he made his money. Nathan had never asked how Rich came to be so rich. There was a sense of protocol and integrity to each other and life.

Four years later Nathan was asked to leave the police force for belting his sergeant who had bullied him once too often. It was either that and pay £2000, or be put in jail along with those he had put there. In that sergeant, the killing fields came back for Nathan. His slow fuse exploded and took five of his boss’s teeth, some of his jawbone along with Nathan’s police identity card.

In the long run it was probably a good thing as Nathan was by then drinking at least a bottle of vodka a day to enable him to walk his beat, his humanity having been nearly destroyed by joining the force designed to protect people from each other. On the other hand it was a pity as he was about to sit his detective exams. He’d been advised by one of the guys in the squadron’s boxing team that he would make a good detective. He’d hoped to go into the drug squad or fraud squad, after all he was quite an expert in both branches.

One day shortly after that Nathan found himself with Rich in Harry’s bar and he mentioned to him that he was looking for work.

“Work with me” said Rich.

Which is what he did. Rich operating the courier vans, and Nathan the bikes. Together they supplied the whole of Camden market with variety of most definitely illegal solids, liquids and gas, and legal repro-antique furniture. Business was good. Business was booming. Business went on like that for a long time, Rich and Nathan changing companies whenever it was necessary.

Suddenly, business boomed with a loud bang for Rich. He'd branched out into other areas unknown to Nathan. Had he known Nathan would have strongly advised Rich against this development as paper can be traced but it was understandable nevertheless. And that's when Holland, which always had seemed to Rich to be a country well versed in sleaze, seemed a good idea. The fact that Rich also thought that anonymity seemed a good idea was a bonus. Rich just left. The incident with Mr Albalo's spilt diesel and the Czech's collision seeming like a sign from God to Rich that his time in the UK was up. He got a message to Nathan a week later.

The messenger, a sorry looking courier, gave Nathan a note, which stated that Rich was in Holland and couldn't come back and could he keep his briefcase. Nathan had then decided logically that it was time to stop this particular form of livelihood. He lay low for a while at a friend's house in Khatar, United Arab Emirates, to see how things developed. When he felt that it was safe, he came out of hiding and returned to London all cleaned up. No alcohol where he'd been.

So, on his way to the Portsmouth drop, Nathan was re-living all of this and more. Something definitely was afoot. He didn't know what it was, but he felt he was being put in a situation on purpose by Rich and that key.

Something was going to happen, he knew that Rich knew that too. That was OK, Rich also knew what Nathan could handle, and therefore, it must be something that he could easily cope with. He reached Portsmouth, did the drop and called Esther. He got home later that evening, ate chilli, watched stupid TV, made love to Esther and went to sleep.

He woke up early the next morning at his usual 5.30 a.m. Esther was still asleep, as usual and as usual he went out into the expectant world.

It was coming, whatever it was and it was coming soon.

CHAPTER 4

Under a bare light bulb in the sitting room which doubled up as a bike scrap yard, in one of the many non-descript and run-down council estates in North London, Christian Lake had been kept up all night by his baby daughter. This particular morning however was not the norm for Christian, for he was still somewhat beatific but his HFOAI barometer was now juddering dangerously close to 'unsettled' as he made his way to work for his first delivery of the day.

Mrs. G was not in her office, instead, Mr. Lativan came out to give him the package. Mr. Lativan looked how he sounded, kind of Latvian, ancient, burly, dark haired, deep growling voice, navy suit. He gave Christian two packages dismissively and then left reception. Christian looked at the addresses, one normal run for Oliver Bowles Financial Advisers, at Liverpool Street, the other for Mr. Brooke, the director of Trans Vehicles Services, the company our biker scum pals worked for. Better get the one for the boss in quick thought Christian and moved out pronto, radioing the office to let Mr. Brooke know he had an urgent for him and was he in?

Nathan, Alf, Eileen and Dave were all in Mazerati's arguing as usual as to who, this time, would have the last portion of apple crumble.

After the last little performance a few of the regulars kind of winced in case this was a next time she may lose it and even more spectacularly. Maybe today, this time, it would be for real and not just vibrators. Who can blame them?

"Today is a bad day for me and therefore, for you, I have serious PMT and cramps so be warned." snapped Eileen.

"So what makes you think that it is your right to get the crumble then?" retorted Alf.

Nathan thought that this was brave but dangerous banter given the circumstances and remembering how well Eileen had slipped into character on the vibrator/gun day and how far she would go.

"Because I fucking can!" yelled Eileen, her eyes bulging. The whole café seemed to shrink.

There then followed complete silence for approximately two seconds before common sense and survival prevailed.

"Yeah, you're right," said Alf as the café seemed to take on its own life and held its breath until

all the big men conceded to the big woman with the big bulgy and by now wild and crazy looking eyes.

“Wise move man,” whispered Nathan.

Eileen immediately unclenched her fists. The tension in the café slightly reduced while they all waited for her to be a bit more relaxed and sitting quietly eating. When they thought Eileen had got enough starch and sugar in her to calm down they started to chat again. By now, their bleeping radios were sounding like whimpering pups.

“Hey, that’s Christian’s voice,” spluttered Dave in mid bite of sausage, “What the fu....”

“Rog” said Nathan grabbing the radio, he listened to what Christian had to say. His eyes started rolling to the ceiling and his jaw set.

“Bad news guys, all bikes have to unload and process the paperwork direct, new directives from the boss man.”

The following incident explains just how dangerous the day had become. The day had turned dangerous for many, but more so for an anonymous, or he thought he was at the time, little shit on a Piaggio scooter with all the lights.

Mr. Anonymous thought he was 'King of the Road' today. He had shiny wheels and he was going to use them. Anyone in his path would see just what guys with scooters with shiny wheels and lots of lights could do. He was thinking this, mulling the whole idea pleasantly around in his non too occupied brain yet still going far too fast as he forgot the whole concept of waiting to see what was coming when you pull out on onto a major road from a side road. All this was happening as he listened to an Xtreme track with a particularly deep base beat, heavy and solid. Then he hit the motorcycle.

His lights, his beautiful lights. He shot up off the floor, and went straight for the owner of the offending lump of metal even though they’d had the right of way and blocked his fall as the two machines met. Although he was on a scooter, he was quite a tall young man and he hurled himself at the rider of the bike that was also on its side.

The fallen 'king' being first on his feet was just beginning to get his second kick aimed at the head of the the idiot who had broken his daydream by being in his path. The motorcyclist, who was still clad in a crash helmet was still on the floor after that first kick to the back of their body had landed true.

The head, still on the floor, moved sideways then a hand shot out and grabbed the 'Kings' boot just as he launched his second kick, and pulled him to the floor. Now the head rose off the tarmac along with its body. Both hands were lifting the scooter rider up off the floor also before, none too gently, depositing him back on his scooter where he could feel the foot peg boring into his back, his neck was at a funny angle to his shoulders and now the pain, which had been laying in wait for him, started to kick in. That was not the end of it.

He smelt burning and scorching flesh and more pain in his right calf, which was gradually welding itself to the exhaust. He was facing the sky and out of the corner of his eyes he could see he was dangerously near the back wheel, which was still spinning. He struggled to get up but there was a dead weight on top of him and two crash helmets were bearing down on him.

The motorcyclist took off her lid and scooter man’s eyes widened with fear as screaming twelve stone of a hurt, enraged Eileen jumped on him. Alf happened to be near when the scooter-riding bastard pulled out on her and he jumped off his bike and threw himself at Eileen trying to pull her off the idiot scooterist. He had seen what happened but he knew that she would have killed him if he had not happened to be near.

He acted more to prevent Eileen from putting herself in jail for GBH rather than saving the little shit that had hurt his friend. He kicked the little shit for good luck and got Eileen in a calm enough state of mind ready to talk to the police as someone was sure to have called them. They would be arriving shortly as sure as eggs is eggs. The extra kick for the shit had gone unseen as per practice in nick. Some skills were never lost, just unused.

After the police had arrived and taken statements Eileen and Alf checked over her bike and gave it the all clear. Then she did the same for herself. Her very bruised and both of them very angry they

made their way to Mazerati's. Alf had got the scooter riders number and would circulate it amongst the others. The 'Kings' days were numbered in this part of town.

There was danger involved in doing anything to get Eileen enraged right now and Nathan was taking no chances, but Alf was a little more careless, given the circumstances.

"You are joking" exploded Alf to anyone who would listen, including Eileen

"The vans get £25 extra for processing and unloading, are we going to get extra too?"

"Hang on a minute fellas" said Nathan. "This is getting ridiculous, we work hard and now they're moving the goal posts."

"Well what are we gonna do about it then?" said Eileen through tightly clenched teeth. She'd only just managed to calm down. The boys had helped her with her bike, Dave had gone into the loos with her and checked her over for any serious bodily damage. The lads respectfully did not keep an eye on the time.

Nathan thought he heard a definite challenge to her voice, the same as Esther, he knew the warning signs... Danger! ACCIDENT+BAD COME DOWN+PMT = VERY CONFRONTATIONAL would be a good description he thought to himself.

The mood she was in, a combination of collisions and periods. Something would have to be sorted out before she stormed into Brook's office, bitched all over the place and got her and her husband fired. This had happened before but the other way round. Dave had got into a confrontation and was very hung over from a small coke addiction at the time, it still was an off and on thing and had got them both fired when they worked together in another company.

Even though the collision between her and Mr. Scooter Man was actually a regular type of occurrence, Nathan knew that Brookes wouldn't stand up to Eileen because he was too scared of her and would find it easier to fire her than try to reason with her. They were his friends and he couldn't allow that to happen.

"I'm going back to find out more before we all have a shit day for nothing, let's wait and see first before we get ourselves upset," and before anyone could argue, he was off, heading back to the office.

He parked up the Bandit and steadied himself, determined not to get angry, counted to ten slowly, then headed in to see the boss man. The office was housed in a jumble of warehouse buildings in an industrial estate near Borough High Street. They were all like red plastic Tupperware boxes, stacked on top of each other.

They were functional and did the job. These particular buildings were well adapted to the courier trade and actually held the many parcels and other items that were being shipped and couriered all over England and indeed the world. T.V. Services were expanding rapidly which was surprising considering the people who were running it.

Nathan, his bladder still full of Mazerati's tea, thought it best to go for yet another loo run and then he made his way over to Mr. Brookes office to try and sort out the latest pile of official crap descending on his friends and himself from above.

"Ok, what's going on John, we heard about this processing and unloading from the bikes, what's that all about then?"

The boss was a youngish thirty year old normal looking bloke. In actual fact he could be a dead ringer for Jon Conti on a good day and the elderly John Sarandon after a night on the razzle, but looks can be deceiving. He was about 5'10", wearing a dark green woollen blazer, black jeans and dock martin boots. He also looked a bit exasperated.

"The unloading, yes, well, the vans have complained that the bikes are never around to process and unload their stuff, and they have a point because they unload and process your stuff now since we lost two guys in the office."

"So for an extra £15 a week would you all unload and process your own bike stuff?" before Nathan could reply, he added "Oh and by the way there's a letter for you."

Nathan was so stunned by the news of a letter, his greatest fear being the tax man, that he went momentarily blank. He was racking his brains for which scam had the greatest defects causing HMRC to have eventually caught up with him and what could he say or do to mitigate all or any of

the circumstances to save his hide.

Nothing immediate came to mind, there had been so many of them in the past. He took the letter quickly and tried to concentrate on the issue at hand, namely Eileen and the unloading shit.

“Ok” he said “I’ll explain it the others, but let me talk to them about it before you say anything, so I can try to sort out what will work for all of us”

John Brookes shrugged his shoulders and muttered something under his breath, after all if it made his life easier then why not.

“Go right ahead,” he said and walked off into the warehouse.

Jesus, thought Nathan, the others are going to be a bit miffed and it could mess up Mazerati’s but Brookes had a point, and the vans were his main business, the bikes would be more expendable. Nathan liked this set-up, he liked the people in it. It had been like this for at least four years now, well, as long as he had been there anyway. You didn’t get a courier company that was as easy as this for such good money. OK, you had The Gut, another of their controllers and Brash & Bollocks to deal with, but you had controllers like that in every company. Nathan cradled his head in his hands and thought carefully.

“Right” he muttered to himself, “I think I can sell it to the others. Now, what about this letter”

He opened it up, not liking how his day was going.

Inside there was a torn bit of paper, similar to the one which the key that Rich sent was wrapped in, and with it there was a note. There wasn’t much to the note, it simply said ‘*April 26th, 2003. 5.30am Holland. Cheque the Tall Mud, they’re all there on the beam at FPS.*’

Nathan stared at this cryptic note for some time without moving. Today was April 26th!

“What the!How did..... hang on, hang on” he muttered “I can do this, I can do this one. That son of a bitch Rich, what the fuck is he getting me into this time?”

That it was from Rich was obvious, and hadn’t he been waiting for it anyway, he’d told himself that this morning as he kissed his sweet, well, sometimes sweet, wife’s head. ‘Shit, he doesn’t know about Esther’, he thought to himself ‘I don’t know what to do now. Anything that would upset or cause us to split for any reason, Rich could well drop me in some deep kind of shit here, is just not acceptable’.

Rich had often dropped Nathan in shit but back then it was something they laughed about. They were young, they were invincible, they were out of it and they were on a well designed personal cocktail of specific drugs to keep them that way for a very long time. However, that day in the past when our young Czech rider and Rich collided in time, smog and diesel fumes, was very significant. Somewhere in Nathan’s brain, which was at that time ostensibly on standby/lock-down, he had always known there would be something that would come back and get him in the future. Nathan’s strong inner instinct for survival had never left him no matter what condition he was in and now it kicked in, for better or worse.

He had the capacity to be really quite cold and clinical about situations. Looking at life and people and their actions dispassionately. He had a gift for attention to detail whether it was for images like a street scene or for human behaviour patterns. His uncle, who part owned the pub with Nathan’s father and had therefore been present through all Nathan’s childhood years, had helped him develop this by his cold, constant and very vocal public appraisal of his nephew. Using words in the most vitriolic way possible in order to toughen up what he thought was a sissy.

His father and uncle had been in the army where there was no room for emotions, emotions got you killed. They’d certainly nearly killed both of them on several occasions. For his father, it was only the love of his wife that kept that family together, and for his uncle the love of himself and his brother. His parents were mostly exhausted emotionally and physically and his uncle didn’t really care, consequently there wasn’t enough of it for Nathan.

The emotions that Nathan had for humanity were ones he had worked hard on, not having been given very much guidance by his family. His capacity for reading body language linked to a very clear sense of detail and logic made Nathan what he was. Once an extremely good policeman now an extremely good courier, also an extremely good dealer, obscurely clear headed in everything.

Rich had seemed to understand him and had actually brought the best out in Nathan. Nathan

knew that deep down in his heart and was eternally grateful to Rich.

There had been repercussions from that collision, lies and deceit to family and friends that Nathan had only just managed to slide away from. But only just. There were many people from both sides of the law and the Inland Revenue at that time who were very interested in them both and certain items missing after the collision.

Fortunately due to his old Police connections, particularly the more shady ones and the swift actions of various accountants and insurers who had welcomed them with open noses, Nathan managed some kind of damage limitation. That was then, this was now. He didn't have his faith in his invincibility any-more, he didn't have the huge disrespect for his own life he had then and he didn't have access to his chemical cocktails either. No, now, for Nathan, anything that would threaten Esther's happiness and their love, things like death or even prison didn't bear thinking about.

A slow sickening feeling was developing in the pit of his stomach. He loved Esther more than life itself. She was his reason for living. He had told her that and she really was. 'Fuck Rich, fuck this, fuck this day' he screamed inside his head. Nathan was in serious emotional turmoil and it was only half eight in the morning.

He would have to sort this out somehow he reasoned. For Rich to do something like this after all these years meant that something was up and it was serious. Rich was his friend, he cherished his friends, and he cherished Esther. He knew Esther cherished him.

Before Esther, he couldn't have cared about himself, he'd only been passing time before he'd met her and Rich. That was why he and Rich were the way they were with each other. This was different, everything was different. He looked at life through different eyes, saw different visions without letters and buildings and sounds dancing in front of him in many colours. He looked at life with Esther dancing in front of him now and he didn't want it to stop. For her, or for him.

"Oh what to do" he groaned out loud "Think man, think and clear that muddled brain of yours."

He tried to think the whole thing through logically, like he used to do in the force, searching for that clarity he had about life then and realizing he was way out of practice.

The key was the big clue, 'ha bloody ha' he thought to himself, 'the key was the key' and the paper, wait, wasn't the paper the same as the paper wrapped around the key. What was that paper? Did the key open something to do with the rest of the paper? Why was cheque written as 'cheque' and not 'check'? How were the paper and the cheque and the key linked? That could be easy if he found out what the key was for. What was the Tall Mud – a bar – a place even, and somewhere where there are beams, sounds like some sort of bar, bars have beams, cheques and keys. Maybe a bar called the Tall Mud. Alf might know if it's anything to do with locks.

Whatever. He knew he needed help on this. However, he had no time for further ponderings or even panic, the radio beeped.

"Yo muthafucka, what's happening?"

"Yo muthafucka" he radioed back, "stay there until I meet you in Mazerati's in ten. Rog."

For the first time in a long while, Nathan got back on his bike and rode really carefully and slowly back to Mazerati's. He had also been given six drops to do on the Heathrow run so he didn't have much time. When he got to the café, Alf was waiting, Dave and Eileen had got jobs and had left.

He explained all about the processing, carefully, quickly and calmly. Alf asked if there was much paperwork, him being dyslexic, paperwork could sometimes be a problem for him. Once he was reassured that as far as Nathan knew, no change on that front was obvious, Alf was OK about it.

"Look," Nathan added, "Could you explain it all to Dave and Eileen before she blows a gasket, I've got to run. Something else has come up and I've got to go, but I want to see you later on. Something really bizarre has happened you may be able to give me some answers."

"Sure" grinned Alf, "But answers ain't really my thing. Call me later."

With that, they both went their separate ways, for the day for both would be full of changes. For Nathan, this was the start of many days like this and he knew it. He did what he always did when he felt unsure about anything, he called Esther. It didn't matter whether she was at work or not it was a

two way agreement. They called each other whenever they wanted to or whenever they needed to.

In this particular instance, there was less of a want because he felt that his life with Esther was now mysteriously under some kind of strange threat instigated by his oldest friend and therefore more of a need. So he called her and tried to keep himself calm and act as if nothing much had happened.

Esther was in the office speaking to a social worker when Nathan called.

“Hi Babe, sorry to bother you. I’ve got a package with what I think is written as Tall Mud. Any ideas?”

There was a slight pause as Esther stopped to think how she could help her husband and deal with the social worker at the same time.

“I can’t do anything immediately darling, but I’ll check it out later on the net if you think that might help”

He knew he could trust Esther to come up with something. Give her a problem and she just has to try to solve it. She couldn’t help herself. Something to do with being a Jewish Mother she always said, which made Nathan think about famous Jewish women and mother hens and bless her, thought Nathan she would give him a lead.

“Yeah ok, call me when you can. Bye, I love you”.

“Bye, I love you “she replied.

The social worker, a rather plump woman dressed in a navy pleated skirt and white blouse and low heeled sensible shoes that said it all, looked at Esther indignantly, after all, she had interrupted this meeting by answering the phone to her husband. She raised an over plucked eyebrow.

“What can I say” said Esther directly to this rather pompous person who clearly thought this situation was now being handled very unprofessionally by this strange woman wearing leather trousers. “He loves me” said Esther “Isn’t it wonderful to be loved?”

In the subtext the social worker knew there was a ‘and fuck you too’ directed at her in it.

CHAPTER 5

Over in Wood Green, North London, was a little house facing a well tended triangle of grass and trees. Dogs wandered around marking out their territory as did Nathan sometimes just for the hell of it, in the dark of the night when he couldn’t sleep. The house was made of London brick and had a well kept garden, and a black wrought iron gate that seemed to say ‘friends welcome, foes come on in and let us play dirty with you and see if you like it.’ Inside the house, a comfortable couch and a warm lived in atmosphere awaited Nathan on his return from work. Esther was pottering about in the kitchen as usual, which was small but was well equipped complete with a full set of remarkably well sharpened Sabatier knives. The house smelt of cooking, flowers and love.

The ‘Tall Mud’ turned out to be a dead end on the Net, Nathan found out later that evening. ‘This isn’t looking good’ Nathan thought to himself. Esther noticed immediately that something was wrong. She tactfully waited for him to finish eating and had calmed down a little. When he was like this, her first thoughts were always what had she done something wrong, her Jewish sense of always feeling guilty, which is very similar to the Catholic sense of feeling guilty, was always there like a big dragon on her shoulder.

“Is there anything I can get you? You seemed stressed earlier today.”

Nathan looked at her, his face softening.

“No, it’s alright babe, just a difficult day. Some new crap they are trying to pull on us”, as he explained about Eileen and Mr. Scooter man and Brooke’s new rule and how it could affect Eileen and Dave. In fact he mentioned everything except the letter.

Esther listened to all the stuff about the processing and how angry Eileen had been and the accident with the scooter twat and agreed that indeed, it could go badly for those two. So when Nathan said that he needed to see Alf she wholeheartedly agreed, kissed him goodbye and carried on watching Rick Stein’s Food Hero’s on the TV all the time knowing that there was more to this than met the eye.

Twenty five minutes later, Nathan was at Alf's and had told him everything. Alf had also known Rich. Maybe between the two of them they could work it out.

"Let's look at this key then" said Alf.

Nathan brought out the key in the bit of paper and the letter.

"What's this paper?" asked Alf.

"I don't know" replied Nathan "Does it ring any bells with you?"

Alf looked at Nathan with a patient look on his face, as he always did whenever Nathan was being an idiot.

"Yeah I think to a dyslexic guy who was in remedial and lock up, it would really ring lots of bells, St Clements, St Martin's even Big Ben, that bit of paper!"

"You need badger milk then mate" said Nathan and giggled.

"We need beer mate" said Alf, and went into the kitchen where Dob, his dog, was splayed out on the floor on his back looking at Nathan in the living room. They were friends, Nathan and Dob. Dob's tail was wagging, he liked to wag his tail when lying on his back. It was almost as if it was a party trick of his because then everyone could see his huge testicles jiggling in the breeze, enjoying themselves. Nathan fed him a sweet as if in approval and respect for the size of Dobs balls and in the manner in which he had chosen to display them. It was a bloke thing, what can you say? Alf came in with three bottles of beer. He gave one to Nathan, put one down for himself and poured half of the other one into a bowl on the floor for Dob. Dob rolled over, jumped up and came to join the boys. He drank his beer in one gulp and then sat on Nathan's feet. All the boys were bonding!

Alf asked Nathan if he could take an impression of the key.

"You never know" he said.

"Can't do any harm" replied Nathan. So, a few beers later and nothing else solved, Nathan left to get back home. Esther, had been waiting up for him. She greeted him warmly and asked if everything was OK now.

"Not quite" he replied.

"Don't let it bother you too much", she said trying to reassure him, "It'll all work out alright."

She knew that wasn't much of an answer but sometimes having someone else say everything will be alright can help.

In Cricklewood, Dob was sick later that night because Alf had gone to bed and left some whisky in a glass on the floor. Not mixing your drinks seemed to apply to dogs too. Over in Kensal Green, Eileen was being really crampy so Dave had fallen asleep holding her hand while she cuddled a hot water bottle.

In Neasden, Christian was rocking his new baby daughter to sleep whilst smoking a joint and listening to Marylyn Manson, consequently, the rocking was rather jerky. Kay didn't seem to mind, indeed she seemed to like it.

"Shit" hissed Christian, not wanting to wake Kay.

He'd suddenly remembered he had forgotten to pick up his last drop from his box at the office.

He gently put his daughter down, brushed the ash off her pink nightgown, and went to call the office to ask them to get Nathan to drop off the package to Lativan, Gouldewater and White by 8.30am tomorrow and could they please put the package in Nathan's box ready for him when he got in. Christian didn't start till late so he couldn't do it himself.

This was not unusual for Christian, he often forgot things. The Gut, the night controller sighed, left the package in Nathan's box and carried on watching 'Venuses Valuables' on the web cam, his three thumbs busy.

CHAPTER 6

Nathan didn't sleep well that night and he woke up 'out of sorts'. However, he willed himself to get up and put on his waterproofs, it was raining. He knew he wasn't going to enjoy today. Not just because of the bad night's sleep, he often had those, but more because he knew he was going to get hot and sweaty in his waterproofs. He got hot very easily and had been that way since he was a

child, which Esther had pointed out to him because originally he thought he'd really messed up his body thermostat with all the drugs he'd taken.

"No darling," she had said, "That's just how you are, but you're in luck because that's how I like my men, hot and sweaty."

Still, it bothered him and today was no exception. It was quiet at this time of day in London as he went on his usual route. At the office he cursed Christian for making him go over to Finsbury Park because the dickhead had been so stoned that he'd forgotten his last drop. Nathan was fuming because he had to go out there and get even more hot and sweaty for longer. Now he had to travel from WC1 to bloody Finsbury Park before he could get to Mazerati's for breakfast. By the time he turned up at Lativan, Gouldewater and White he was in a really foul mood. There was no-one answering the bell, so now he was ranting to himself. Here he was, waiting in the wet for some stupid little receptionist to turn up, late inevitably, because she wouldn't have been able to decide what shoes to wear and meanwhile he was still waiting in the rain, hungry and dying for a piss.

At 8.47 a.m. Mrs. Gouldewater arrived and opened up. It seemed that they didn't employ receptionists any-more as they had Mrs. G

"Where's Christian" she asked, no 'Hello', no 'Good morning', just a dead-pan face as she unlocked the door.

"We expected that letter late last night. Well at least you've made an effort, why are you hopping around like that, do I scare you or do you need the potty?"

Nathan took off his lid and looked at her over his glasses. He was seriously thinking of turning on his heels and walking away and telling them all to go fuck themselves. By this time he was staring hard at Mrs. G. Mrs. G was staring back. It reminded him of Esther's mother, he shuddered at the thought.

"Oh" said Mrs. G "Why didn't you say, you need the potty? The Little Schnooks room is second on the right, Little Princesses is first, take your pick."

Nathan threw her his best withering glance and got a better, more withering one in return. My God, he thought, I hope Esther doesn't turn out like her mother, but then he smiled grimly and thought to himself I hope I don't turn out like my father. He decided on the Little Princesses' room just to annoy Mrs. G. He bet she would check to see if he had left the seat down. So there he was, emptying his bladder for what seemed to be an age, reading the notices on the board Mrs. G had obviously put up for herself.

There were newspaper recipes cut out from the Jewish Chronicle, a calendar with Chanukah, a bit like Christmas except you get presents for eight days and Pesach, which is the most important ceremony in the Jewish calendar, related to Moses freeing the Jews from slavery in Egypt. That's where the bit about the twelve plagues, the killing of the first born Jews and the parting of

the Red Sea comes in. No presents in the Pesach ceremony but bloody fabulous food, usually about eight courses. Depending on your family, it could be either a really good light hearted affair, or if you were a religious family a very drawn out long one with lots of Hebrew prayers in it.

Also on Mrs G's personal notice board, there was inevitably the number and address of the local Jewish delicatessen in Willesden, a card for home delivery of gefilte fish, Jewish fish cakes and equally scrummy, from a private company in Golders Green, a notice about a Bar Mitzvah which is a thirteen year old Jewish boys coming of age ceremony, again involving food and family. A kind of welcome to being a Jewish man type thing, a bit like a late baptism.

There was also an invitation from a friend to Frampton Park Synagogue, and stuck just underneath this was a tailoring agency card in Stamford Hill, a well known area of London where you can buy all things Jewish. Nathan was surprised that Mrs G actually had friends. The lives people lead, he thought, himself included. After he'd checked that he'd not left those little tell tale drops on the floor and everything was 'just so', he left the Little Princesses room, looked to see if there was a pick-up and left Mrs. G to her reception and her own private notice board. He wondered if Mrs. G was Mr. Gouldewater's mother. If so, poor Mr. Gouldewater, he bet he was gay.

It was a quiet day so Nathan decided that since he was in a morosely reminiscent mood, he would return to his favourite haunt from when he pounded the beat, the place where he used to reminisce

the most. It was just off the Farringdon Road, near Hatton Garden, a well known area for gold, jewellery and diamond merchants. There he knew a little unremarkable café that actually served good Italian coffee. It was just a short distance away from one of his old beats.

He didn't even notice the traffic, he was riding on automatic pilot, not much thinking involved so he arrived there not even remembering how he got there but just knowing that he had. He sat in a window seat, his usual one in the old 'blue' days except that then he was usually plain clothes and worked zealously in getting the bad guys, getting something extra out of it for himself and later on for Rich too.

Nathan's father, the cynic that he was, had always upheld the law, but in his own establishment held the view that you had to help the 'little fish' or they might not survive. Coincidentally, at that time, his father considered himself and his family part of the little fish cohort, so he took his share in whatever way he could and had taught Nathan well.

So there was Nathan gazing out of that same old window again, the one that still faced Hatton Garden Jewellers (established in 1947) with a coffee and a Danish pastry. Looking out through the drizzle at the jewellers merchants. Suddenly it felt like old times and yes there was something going on across the road, but he couldn't really believe what he was seeing.

Three guys, dressed 80's style following another guy into the jewellers. Nothing particularly amazing about that, except the guy they were following like puppies was an old pal of his from his days in the force, one of the undercover guys.

He was intrigued and just as you stare at someone and they turn round, so did good old Ray. Ray stared straight at Nathan and Nathan knew that Ray had clocked him. There was that slight turn of the head, a funny little mannerism that could only be done by Ray. You only noticed it if you had got seriously rip roaring drunk with the guy when he was off a case.

Nathan popped out to buy a newspaper and then went back into the café. He paid his bill and left the newspaper with a note tucked inside it for Ray at the counter after instructing to the waitress to give it to him when he came in later, as Nathan knew he would.

It was an old established routine of theirs whenever there was a bust and Ray or Nathan wanted to sell something on or communicate off the record. He may or may not be expecting a call from him at some time. No contact was just as informative as some contact but Nathan knew that contact would be made one way or another and another thing, Nathan was sure he had seen the other three guys before but just couldn't place them.

He cursed himself for his bad memory, because he knew he knew them and all that information was stored in his brain somewhere, but like an old worn out book, his index was in smithereens. Something about those three were stirring around in his memory but there wasn't enough to jog it. It left him disgruntled for the rest of the day. He would have to wait until he made contact with Ray and ask him then.

Nothing else developed that day, other than the usual. Alf had placated Eileen and Dave so now they would all meet up at the office at odd times too. Christian asked Nathan if he had done the drop and asked how Mrs. Gouldewater was. This surprised Nathan, but at least it was a harmless surprise.

"Yeah, I think she's Mr G's mother" he informed Nathan in response to a particular line of enquiry, "I've met him, he seems a bit weird though."

"In what way?" enquired Nathan, finding it amusing that Christian could possibly say another person was a bit weird.

"Well, he's got manufactured nails."

"Don't you mean manicured nails?"

"Oh no, I know manufactured nails because I was with a bird once in Bethnal Green. She was going to give me a hand job for £3.50, but when I saw those talons mate, well, it was a no show, they scared me, but I still had to give her the £3.50 because she said it wasn't her fault if her manufactured nails intimidated me and turned my Ford Cortina in to a Morris Minor."

Nathan had to admit it, Christian could be funny, and he didn't mean to be funny which made it even funnier. Manufactured fingernails. His mind went drifting off to the girls he had known with

manufactured and other man-made attributes. This inevitably led him wandering down memory lane, wandering in a not particularly direct route to Harry's bar. Then it came to him, beams, bars, and Harry's bar. Maybe that's where it would all make sense. A wave of hope overcame him and he thought 'Jesus wept' after all how many ridiculous and bizarre things had sometimes and somehow made sense in the time zone of Harry and his bar. Yep, maybe Alf will come with him. He radioed Alf.

"Yo porn king, do you feel like an excursion to an old watering hole of mine? There's beer involved."

"When and where?" was the curt reply, Alf didn't mess around when it came to beer, he cut straight to the chase.

"Saturday evening, I don't think we've got anything on so far. I'll drive, rather I know Esther will, do you want to bring Sandra?"

"What for?" Alf asked and radioed off.

Alf made a great friend but Jesus, thought Nathan, he pitied any woman who Alf was involved with because that was it exactly, he was not involved with them. Those poor deluded females thought that Alf was deep and strong, that they alone would be able to set him free from his misery and release him from his silent and what they believed emotional turmoil.

They were right and they were wrong.

Yes, he did have hidden depths but not for them and they were wrong if they thought Alf was unhappy. Alf was very happy, turmoil or no turmoil. That's how he was, end of story. No discussion, that's how strong he was. So they just kept on coming, lucky Alf, poor Sandra. Saturday would be coming round all too soon, in the meantime Nathan was still not quite himself.

The others had to cope with un-routine stops at Mazerati's and Esther waited patiently for Nathan to reveal all, for she had never known him to be quite like this and didn't want to overreact. She thought she had done something really wrong and she too was going over everything to see if she could work it all out. Saturday couldn't come too soon for any of them. At least Esther got to drive.

CHAPTER 7

The small bright yellow targa-top, long-nosed 500 TVR Griff, a present to Esther from the results of one of Nathan's scams from times past, spat and grumbled like a caged and furious tiger through Hammersmith with Esther at the wheel. It was beautiful, the body shimmied tantalizingly with every gear change and 5000cc'd tension. Esther loved her little yellow plastic racing car which she had nick-named The Canary. She loved driving it, she loved being driven in it, in more ways than one! Nathan's huge hulk was folded in the passenger seat beside her, singing Iggy Pop's 'Turn Your Lights On' at least that what she thought it was. It was one of those heavy beat slow build up songs that is full of minor keys. Just ripe for getting really drunk to, and singing your heart out.

That's what they were doing now, the old times still not a too distant past, still coming, still with them in the here and now. Clint's voice popped into her head. 'Do you feel lucky?' 'Yes, I fucking do' she thought. She was glad that Alf had tactfully said that he would make his own way there because he knew she would take The Canary. Otherwise they would all have gone in the 'Strange' Rover, which would have been alright. But for smiles per mile, The Canary was a winner every time.

They hadn't been to Harry's for years. After they'd moved to a different part of London and Nathan got this job with a 6.30am start, they hadn't got round to going back there, so it was kind of exciting visiting Harry's again. She had only been there a few times with Nathan, but she felt his excitement.

It didn't seem strange to her that Nathan just said 'let's go to Harry's', Nathan just did things like that, she was still surprised at his ability to surprise her. Like the time about six months before when she'd come back from work after a particularly distressing day during which one of her charges made a very disturbing disclosure regarding her father. Slowly and painfully her young charge had described her life with her father and what she had to do and go through.

It turned out that he was the head of a paedophile ring and the daughter the community dessert. Esther had spent a long time, going well into the early evening, with that very fragile and vulnerable young girl who was by that time, too scared to go home for oh so many reasons that other lucky children do not have to worry about nor endure.

The school team kicked into action smoothly and meticulously. Discreetly writing up statements, (the first person who hears of a disclosure about abuse is legally allowed as a witness in court) sending off reports to the Social Services and making sure she was homed somewhere safe.

Always with a loving supportive volunteer family who had experience with such damaged young people like her. The school had a superb reputation for all these things because if the needs of the girls didn't exist in the conventional educational system, they tried to create some sort of other and appropriate support.

It was the school as a team who got all the services talking to each other, had managed to get volunteer foster families on call and had help set up a special unit with the police for abused and at risk children in their care.

That particular young woman had taken a lot of counselling to encourage her to press charges against the people involved, even though she had made the disclosure. By law if there is child abuse the school has to act and cannot promise confidentiality.

That was very, very hard for those vulnerable young people to take on board and as the victims, often saw the teachers as betrayers and then all confidence could be lost and their hope down the drain. This was truly life changing stuff for them and had to be handled with extreme tact, sensitivity but often brutal truths.

After patience, love and a lot of ciggys' Esther had managed to get the victim to agree to going into a foster home that evening. Talking to the social services and police had been emotionally exhausting for all of them and Esther was completely done in. Once she had made sure her charge was safe and OK, Esther got on her bike and headed for home where Nathan insisted that she did not change out of her leathers but that she got on the back of his bike.

She remembered screaming at him but he took no notice and physically lifted her onto his bike and set off to Golders Hill Park where he opened the top box, laid out a comfy blanket and opened the chilled champagne he had brought. After he put it into the ice bucket he put her favourite food onto plates, he told her to drink her champagne while he read to her from her favourite book. One the Sackett stories by Louis L'Amour. He'd thought of everything and she was very grateful and loved him even more.

She had, many times in the past told him how much she loved him, but never why, as he was a weird fuck with more sides than a dodecahedron. One of his many sides was his penchant for alternative and/or hidden agendas,

he was once a cop after all. It was also just one of the things she could be ambivalent about. She knew he wouldn't do anything to hurt her emotionally or physically on purpose, but he could be a devious bastard when he wanted to be.

A mystery, she thought later that Saturday evening as they headed for Harry's Bar. Also a ticking time bomb with a slow fuse. He could be inordinately patient waiting to get what he wanted, he was good at waiting. Waiting for love, waiting for revenge. Indeed, a complicated man, just like her father. They were very similar, which was no bad thing in Esther's opinion.

Both were Leos sharing the same birthday. Nathan could be her father's son except he was blonde and blue eyed. Her father, Monty, had black hair and blue-grey eyes. Both strange eccentric men, both plotters, both deviant, both analytical to the exclusion of social niceties, both loose cannons, and both family now. It's got to be the most ridiculous arranged marriage in the history of Jews she often thought to herself wryly, which was why she was grinning now.

"What are you grinning about?" asked Nathan as she parked The Canary outside the bar.

"You" she replied.

"What have I done now? It wasn't me. It wasn't my fault. I didn't do it, no, no, not at all. It must have been someone else. I wouldn't do a thing like that. He made me" he said and pointed to Alf, who had just parked his bike and was casually sauntering past them. Nathan called to Alf and

beckoned him over, and promptly asked him who fault it was, Alf didn't flinch or hesitate, nor miss a beat.

"It was the badger milk what made him" said Alf "It can get to you that way," and carried on walking. He knew Nathan only too well, and the badger milk response seemed to cover everything, he didn't break his stride and headed off towards the bar.

Esther turned around and raised an eyebrow at her galoot of a husband.

"Get out you eedjit" she said in a very poor imitation of Eileen. Nathan unfolded himself out of the car, and started to follow Alf.

Esther didn't have the time to think of a longer equally daft response, but she would tget her revenge later and apply whatever was needed when she had got him where and how she wanted him. She sneaked a peek at Nathan, he was smiling too, he knew just what she was thinking and looked forward to the sweet revenge!

The last time Esther had been to Harry's she was a little slimmer then. She could remember she was wearing a slinky and very clingy little red number a bit like an elongated swimsuit. It was a Christian Lacroix in fact and the reason why she could remember it was because she had been hoping it was going to be her wedding dress one day. Nathan had been wearing a fabulous suit he had got from Camden Market, a Zoot Suit whose lining was made from cream silk decorated with pin up girls in bright colours.

He had looked fabulous and the pair of them had really turned heads. This was quite an achievement for Harry's Bar.

Harry's is an old fashioned style bar with muted dark wood tables and floors, brass wall lighting and comfortable chairs and couches in heavy brocaded material. The clientele at that time were into cool and if you were cool you didn't stare, but they did at Esther and Nathan that night. It brought a warm glow to her as she remembered that evening. It was that night, she knew, when Nathan had made up his mind to ask her to marry him. Which he'd done a week later.

Again she brought herself back to the present quickly as she nearly tripped over Alf who was prancing about in front of her. Alf was chattering on about something as she glanced at Nathan. He too was smiling, maybe he was remembering that night, years ago as well.

She squeezed his hand as they sauntered into the bar, their eyes adjusting to not quite completely sleazy gloom.

Harry hadn't changed much, nor had the bar, this was a good thing. Before they got to the bar whiskies were lined up waiting for the three of them, Harry, being one of the best barmen in London hadn't lost his touch or his memory.

"Well well well, not all of you together, I need to up my insurance now do I? Please leave your weapons behind the bar and I will sell them for you later and by the way, how much for the woman, I can give you twenty five camels."

"Wow we have gone up in the world. You can afford twenty five camels? You only offered me three for the last one Harry. You got a deal, but I get to watch. How are you, you old bastard?" enquired Nathan finally.

"Expecting you" replied Harry "About four years ago."

"I don't suppose you remember that luscious little tart I was with before, not the three camel's one, the one after? Well I married her and bless her she's still the tart I loved then!"

Nathan beamed at Harry and Harry beamed back. Alf just kept drinking his whisky, and shook Harry's hand firmly when there was a gap in this good natured bullshit session.

"Hi Harry, howzit hanging?" said Alf.

"Hanging well my man, hanging well, and yourself."

"Well hung man" retorted Alf.

Harry poured another whisky for Alf and turned his attention to Esther.

"And Esther, queen of the tarts, good to see you again, married life suits you, not sure about your choice though"

"He is young but he will learn" said Esther solemnly "After all I'm in the education business, discipline and all that stuff you know"

“I’m not even going to go there” said Harry quickly, “it’s good to see you all, so what brings you to my door?”

“Can’t we just turn up and see you for no other reason than your wonderful nature and free whisky?” enquired Nathan.

“No you can’t” said Harry “Because you’re a devious fucker. So what’s on your mind?”

Although this was said in absolute good humour Nathan and Alf were quite taken aback, both of them thinking the same thing. Harry knew something. Esther, still not sure what was really going on waited patiently to see what developed. Alf and Nathan carried on the banter a while, both of them deflecting all reference to the business at hand, mainly because Esther did not know the full story as Nathan had broken his own rule about telling Esther everything. Alf was giving Nathan meaningful looks, meaning, tell her everything and quick!

In his opinion, she really did need to know everything now, a bit like the three ‘mousecatiers’ except that they were more like rats he laughed to himself, but definitely all in it together now. Ordinarily, Alf wouldn’t interfere in Nathan’s decisions about how much he would tell Esther. But, he thought if he knew those two, then Nathan had better tell her everything, because God knows she would scalp the man later for his poor judgement and lack of faith in her.

You don’t ever tell Esther what to think because if you got it wrong, she gave you ‘THAT’ look in ‘THAT’ tone of voice that would want you make go you go and howl into the wind in deep misery, indeed he had witnessed the poor guy doing just that. He never wanted to see it again either, and another thing, they were great together, apart they were both shite, but together, great.

To Alf’s relief, they found a quiet corner where Nathan brought Esther up to speed about the letter, cheque, key, strange paper, tall mud and beams. Esther listened quietly, she had been expecting Nathan to tell her something sooner or later, his behaviour and moods all pointing to it.

It was, after all, her job to read people, she just had to wait for him to do it in his own time, like now. Boy was she relieved when she realized it was nothing she had done to cause him so much upset. She repeated back everything that they had told her, to make sure she’d got it right and to let them know she had listened and taken them seriously. She knew Rich too and agreed that this was some deep shit he was in and that yes, she thought Harry knew something too, now that she had as many pieces of the jigsaw as they had.

To Nathan’s relief, Esther seemed to take it all in her stride, not knowing that Esther was too relieved that she hadn’t done anything wrong to take this situation as badly as he thought she would. That was the thing about Esther, she couldn’t understand how people saw her as this strong willed and very sussed person when inside she knew she was deeply insecure and still felt like a child, all be it a very devious and mischievous child, but definitely not a grown up. She shook her head as if to rid herself of the worry which had quietly been gnawing at her over her fear of upsetting Nathan and gave them her full attention.

There was nothing new to be gleaned and after a short summary about the situation so far they came to a dead end.

“Let’s ask Harry what he knows” suggested Alf, “After all, that’s what we came here for isn’t it?”

“No” said Nathan, “Let’s see what Harry has to say first, just to see if it’s a different or new bit of information. Look, something’s just occurred to me. Why didn’t Rich just send us a letter or a phone call, wouldn’t that have been easier? It’s either because he can’t or he didn’t want to. If he couldn’t, it’s because he’s in trouble. If Harry doesn’t know the same things it’s because Rich didn’t want him to, he doesn’t want us to know all the same things, which means he must have thought it was safer or better in some way that we don’t have the same bits of information.”

“It’s like the sum of the parts is greater than the whole. He’s protecting us or him or both. I think he wants the parts to somehow meld together to save him or something or even someone else. Are you all following this because I don’t think I can say it again?”

“I’m not sure I get it yet” said Alf “But I’ll go along with it anyway.”

Esther wasn’t surprised at this, she knew Alf kept his thoughts and ideas close to his chest, never or rarely letting on what he’s doing or thinking, he’d be a good poker player she thought to herself.

“OK”, she said, “When it’s quiet, let’s let Harry say what he wants to say, as he clearly wants to

say something from what I can gather.”

As predicted, when everyone else had gone Harry told them about some unusual events which was why he wasn't surprised to see them.

He poured more very stiff whiskies, one for everyone except Esther who had volunteered to drive and having made sure he had everyone's attention he told them about a visit from some young Dutch guys.

“The odd thing was, not that they were Dutch, even though I think the Dutch can be a bit disarming at times, but because eventually, after they had seemed to check me out, in a most friendly way I might add, they asked if I knew someone called Rich. They tried to drop it in the conversation like you do when you are visiting a small town. Except this isn't a small town. Its fucking SW fucking London. Asking if I knew a guy called Rich was a bit like asking if I knew a Mr. Patel in fucking Bombay.”

Harry took another swig of his whisky, clearly rattled by the whole thing, which was unusual for Harry, being the best barman in the world meant that he wasn't that easily rattled.

“Anyway,” he continued “Eventually it got round to ‘yes I may have known him, so I waited till they let on that they knew he was a definite regular here which is when I asked them how they knew him, if he was the same person they were talking about. So, like I said, I asked them how they knew Rich, and no change there. It was through business. No one we knew would talk about Rich and business in the same breath, you never knew if it could incriminate him or you in some way, so God knows what kind of business they were involved in. Not something that Rich would knowingly set up, if you are asking for my opinion.”

“They said they were trying to get something special for him but didn't make it very clear what. I don't know how much they know about us and Rich, but they were pleasant enough and again, I might add, very free with their dope. They smoked it like cigarettes and bought me drinks.”

“I actually liked them but they offered me no real answers when I asked how Rich was, you know just muttered banalities. Strange when they were supposedly trying to get something for him don't you think? At least, that's what they wanted it to look like. So when you guys turned up it was no surprise, given our history.”

They all stared into their glasses after Harry had told them this, each one trying to work out what was going on.

Nathan went into detective mode and asked Harry enough about the Dutch people to almost draw an identikit picture.

“Have they left the country or do you think they are still here?” asked Esther.

“I'm not sure,” replied Harry “If I was to guess, I'd say they are still here.”

“When did they come in?” asked Alf.

“About the end of last month I think. So what do you think then?” asked Harry “It's not a coincidence you turning up, do you have any ideas, he must have got you into something too for you all to come down here.”

They all waited for someone else to say something. Esther side tracked him by asking him a question. Old Jewish ploy thought Nathan, answer a question with a question.

“Do you know what a ‘Tall Mud’ could be, because we thought you might know?”

“Yeah Tallmud” said Alf, running the two words together.

“Of course I do” said Harry, “The Talmud is the Torah, the Jewish book of prayer, the central text of mainstream Judaism, come on you guys, you should all know that, especially you Esther. So, Rich said something about the Talmud and you all turned up here.”

“Seems so” said Nathan, “Hey I didn't get it, you know, Tall mud, Talmud. It's only Alf's dyslexia that clued us in on that one. Don't get yourself fixed Alf you clever fuck. Look Harry, let's leave it there for now OK?”

Esther took up the hint.

“Yes I'm sorry, but I have coursework to mark tomorrow and I can't drink because I'm driving.”

“Listen Harry,” said Nathan as he tried to pay him for the drinks, “If they come back again or anything happens, call us and we'll do the same thing. What Rich is up to I don't know, but let's

hope we can get to the bottom of it. Thanks for the whiskies, we'll be in touch."

They all left rather too quickly for comfort, and everyone knew it. Harry felt slightly affronted at their abrupt leaving but knew Nathan well enough to not push it, a time and a place for everything he thought to himself. Nathan, Alf and Esther also felt guilty about their quick departure and not letting Harry in on everything they knew so far.

"Oh come on" said Esther, "This is how Rich wants to play it, and Harry knows it too. Yes, it feels bad but you guys have a history together, it can certainly survive this. Indeed, it's my guess that that is exactly what Rich is banking on."

They walked to their respective vehicles in a thoughtful silence. It wasn't that late and there were a reasonable amount of people on the street whom they dodged using the same tactics as if they were riding. Nathan even looked behind him as he headed towards the curb to get out of the way of two lovers holding hands who happened to be walking in the opposite direction. All of them were still thinking the same things through.

At least they knew what the Talmud thing was all about and were now trying to work out how that was important and how it all fitted in with Rich's thinking. But they still didn't know what the hell was going on. No one yelled 'Eureka, by Jove I've got it' because no one had.

They said their goodbyes not quite in a depressed mood but not far off it. Alf got on his bike, Esther and Nathan manoeuvred themselves into The Canary. Nathan and Esther smiling again, Alf frowning to himself behind his visor they headed off towards their respective homes and the remainder of the week-end.

CHAPTER 8

The weekend brought no new developments and uneventfully drew to its close leaving them all feeling flat and out of sorts. Their adrenalin having done its job and now it had worn them down. Monday came around far too quickly. Alf didn't want to go to work, Christian turned up early, his wife was murderous as she had the baby blues and he thought it would be better to prolong his life by keeping out of her way. Something that prison had taught him. Brookes was in a foul mood when Nathan bumped into him.

"Hey, you need some happy juice boss," being as irritatingly happy as he himself could muster, bosses were fair sport in his opinion.

"I need a sleep" said Brookes, "I've spent the whole weekend getting a new important contract which involved lots of drink and drugs, and now I am running around like an idiot trying to make sure of the deliveries with NO FUCKING RIDERS or with riders with no brains."

He said this last bit pointing at Christian. Nathan, who often spent weekends that way but got up at dawn and didn't get a sniff at the money that Brookes got, was not surprisingly unsympathetic, but when people shouted, and Brookes had shouted, he went into calm mode.

This was probably as a result of years of saying the wrong thing at the wrong time of the month and with one particular girlfriend, ending up being thrown out and having a large record collection smashed. Yes, he was very calm when people shouted now. He just stood, going inside himself, willing that by the power of suggestion, the dickhead would combust internally while he continued with his tirade.

"Now you wouldn't like to put your arse, bike and brain in gear and get some fucking work done?"

"It's what I live for" said Nathan drolly, "Here's a thought though, Gordon's free if you need another rider today. I know you fired him but a bike is a bike and he's good, he knows the drops and hell, you've fired us all at one time or another."

Brookes looked done in, this last hissy fit having taken it all out of him.

"Oh fuck it" he said, "Get the mutha on the phone, I've got airport runs waiting for 4pm and in the meantime kick Christian into a pick up at Kennington Studios on his way to W1 and Nathan, thanks mate."

"No problem big chief wallaby" replied Nathan looking as serious as he could, and went to call

Gordon.

Later on when the couriers had managed to snatch some time, Alf was now waiting in Mazerati's. Eileen had conned a younger pretty boy to do her drop for her. She'd told Dave that the fact her fist was approaching the poor sweet young lad's testicles at a rapid speed of knots was all part of her feminine persuasion techniques. Nathan turned up a few minutes later.

"Yo muthafuckas" he greeted them all. He stood with his hands on his hips, wearing his lid on back to front looking like a 1970's style alien or something from 'Mork and Mindy'

"Did you bring the cheezy peas?" asked Dave.

"Indeed, I couldn't" Nathan replied "The badgers stole them all and I suspect they are using them for unthinkable illegal sexual acts of badger pornography."

"Damn badgers" remarked Eileen.

"Where's Gordon?" asked Alf.

"She's getting her nails done, she said she'll be here shortly, but that was about twenty minutes ago.

"Typical woman," retorted Alf "Always late and having..."

A roar of red howling motorbike drowned out his voice and screamed up on the gravel like a vampire with a toothache. The apparition was a red leather clad rider with black high heeled boots, black lid with tinted visor sitting astride the machine. Her long jet black hair falling away as she removed the lid daintily, revealing a face made up for a Cleopatra movie set and blood red lips. She dismounted and put the bike on its stand then wiggled her way into Mazerati's waving regally to the mesmerized crowd with a hand spiked with long red fingernails.

"Nice nails Gordon... Rita" Said Alf.

"Why thank you kind sir" she replied in a surprisingly soft and not too husky voice, preening herself Gordon sat down.

"Which one of you will get me a tea, my heels are killing me."

"We thought you were walking a bit funny" said Eileen. Had a rough night?"

Rita gave her a withering look which was completely lost on Eileen, who obviously didn't wither that easily.

"No" said Rita equally unfazed at the unfazed "I'm wearing new boots and bought a new bra which I'll have to take back, so all in all I would really appreciate a tea with little effort or movement at this moment in time, thank you."

Nathan grimaced at the thought of Esther wearing a bra that had been returned by someone like Rita and went to get him her tea. As he waited for the tea he thought of Rita's change of sex. Rita was a close friend of Nathans, and he found it hard sometimes to deal with. The person who he had been that close had started out as Gordon and would turn into Rita, when the papers came through and he'd had the nip and tuck.

Nathan was musing. Funny how life is, he mused. Musing had always been good for Nathan, this time it was no exception. He suddenly saw a possible link. Christian had said that Rich's letter came from Lativan Gouldewater and White he'd also said Gouldewater had manufactured nails, same as Rita's.

Maybe Rita could find out more. She was well known in the clubs, she helped manage some of the clubs that ran in various parts of London and the transvestite/trans sexual club world was quite, well, intimate. Perhaps she knew of him already.

When he got back he asked Rita how the club scene was doing, it seemed like a good opening without necessarily letting on too much.

"Oh, we are getting very popular, Alana's thinking of starting up in our own premises."

"It would be great if you were involved in that" said Nathan and genuinely meant it.

"Then you could stop having to beat naughty boys bottoms" said Dave.

"Oh never" declared Rita, "Do you know how many more clients I've got now? They increase with my bra size. Christ, I'd be able to retire if I ever reached a 36 C, 32 double D was easy compared to my 34B now, and it's exhausting."

"Have you ever done a drop or pick up at Lativan, Gouldewater and White?" asked Nathan

forgetting about any subtlety.

“Well it depends what you mean by a drop or pick up, do you mean in the biblical sense or otherwise? Why?”

“It could be either actually, because Christian told me that Gouldewater has got manufactured nails, like

yours Rita, and I was wondering if you knew him in another guise.”

“Not off-hand, but it would be easy for me to make further enquires. The TV world is quite small and gossipy. Why do you want to know?”

Nathan shrugged his shoulders

“Oh the usual stuff, blackmail, extortion, ex-copper curiosity you know”

“No problem sweet chuff nuts” giggled Rita, “It may well be my pleasure, also, we could do with a solicitor if we start the club and who better than a Tranny.”

“Don’t you ever call me chuff nuts again,” said Nathan, “That’s Alf’s name, you can call him chuff nuts as much as you like.”

“No”, said Eileen, “You can call me chuff nuts” as she got up to follow Dave who’d left earlier.

This left Rita, Alf and Nathan who continued his current line of questioning

“Do you remember Rich, who went to Holland?” asked Nathan of Rita.

”Rich? Straight?”

“Yeah.”

“Rich, round faced, dark beard, off his face most of the time?” she continued.

“That’s him.”

Rita looked closely at Nathan holding his gaze.

“You’re asking a lot of questions lately Nathan, my feminine intuition is telling me something, but seeing as I’m only a young woman at heart, I’m not sure what it’s telling me.”

Nathan thought to himself, that he really needed to refine his interrogation skills. He decided that he will now have to let her know what he was up to.

“You’re right, some very strange things have started to happen, and since you are The Priestess of Strange, the High Priestess being my wife, I think you ought to know what you may be letting yourself in for if you decide to take this mission, don’t you agree Alf?”

Alf nodded his agreement, and listened while Nathan told Rita what had happened so far.

Rita was ecstatically happy, she loved a mystery and she could help her best friend too. Rita was extremely lucky with her friends and she knew it.

Many transvestites lost all their contacts and loved ones and were very lonely. Nathan, Esther and even Alf hadn’t flinched when she turned up one day in a dress, wig and make up and explained she was a woman trapped in a man’s body.

There were discussions, not heavy handed and hostile, there were humble and innocent questions about the impending op and how she felt, not because they didn’t believe her but because they wanted to know.

If they felt any kind of animosity or disapproval they kept it to themselves, respecting Rita’s wishes to become Rita in every way and any way she could. Their overwhelming response was that as long as that is what she wanted, for he was a she in their eyes by now and that was OK by them. It didn’t stop them taking the piss out of her mercilessly at all, and she expected no less.

CHAPTER 9

Rain and sunshine had dampened and lifted Nathan’s spirits in unequal measure. He equalled it with Calvados. Esther equalled it with roast beef and sex. Christian was now sleeping on the warehouse floor and hadn’t made the connection between wash and wear. He missed out the washing bit. Alf was in between patting his dog and petting Sandra, they both got equal amount of time, though not simultaneously and Rita was enjoying gathering information inbetween clients or through clients, either way, the clients got the equal amount of pleasure or pain, depending on Rita’s moods and her clients wallets.

Then the call came. The Dutch were at Harry's. This was Thursday evening and a work day. Alf couldn't go, saying that he couldn't afford another day off work so Nathan decided that he and Esther would go on their own. Rita said she would turn up later, she had a client in a couple of hours and needed to shave her back in preparation.

Dear reader, don't ask !!!! We're still not sure as she has never informed us of how he shaves her own back, and maybe we really wouldn't want to know!

Nathan made sure he told her to make out that she didn't know them. Harry didn't know Rita and that, in Nathan's opinion may be helpful too. So after a prolonged shower using far too much soap, they both set off.

At about ten thirty Nathan and Esther strolled into the bar. Nathan recognised the Dutchmen at once from Harry's description, the identikit scenario from the previous visit paying off. They sat at the bar and drank whisky. The Dutchmen were sitting in a corner and watching everything and smoking. Harry was right, they smoked joints like cigarettes.

"Do you think we should get them talking?" suggested Esther.

"Not just yet" said Nathan, "Let's wait for Rita to turn up."

He looked over and saw that there were four of them, three men, and one woman. The woman had a small, angular but firm figure, shoulder length mousey blonde hair. Nathan thought she looked kind of attractive with symmetrical features, typical Dutch, wide jaw, pert nose, blue eyes and thick eyebrows, but discontented.

One of the guys was tall, not as tall as him, slim, hair to his jaw, dark with light highlights, glasses, with a slight gut and a short goatee beard. He seemed at ease and actually quite harmless. The one next to Goatee looked almost Arabic, shorter rounder and fidgety. He was dressed more conservatively almost 70's style and looked very out of place amongst them.

He was talking to the girl mostly, the girl seemed to be smilingly tolerating him but with a cold look on her face. The other guy was stocky, blonde, clean-shaven, not particularly good looking but had smiling intense blue intelligent eyes. Nothing ominous here, thought Nathan. He asked Esther what she thought.

"Not what I was expecting" she said "These seem like normal friendly typically Dutch people, apart from the girl and the Arab looking bloke" she added. "They seem affable enough the girl seems a bit of a cow, but otherwise very kind of non-threatening."

"That's what I thought too." said Nathan. "Why and how would Rich be involved with them in some bad way?"

"It's got to be drugs" said Esther, "Either that or receiving stolen goods and they don't seem to be the type who would receive stolen goods, and they certainly don't seem like drug runners. They are so obvious and relaxed. These are normal everyday people. I don't understand it."

At that moment Rita turned up alone. She was wearing tight light brown jeans, a silky dark green blouse, silver bracelet, matching earrings and necklace, hair loose and shiny. Her shoes said it all, red suede, pointed stiletto's, they were talk to me shoes, show me shoes. Fuck me shoes.

She knew it would not take long for the shoes to work. That's why women love shoes, they have a language all of their own that works just like pheromones. Guys don't stand a chance with shoes that talk. She didn't acknowledge either of her friends, but walked towards where the Dutchmen were sitting and took a table near them.

As she predicted, the shoes worked and within half an hour she was at their table, laughing coyly. The girl looked frozen, definitely not happy. Goatee looked relaxed, Blue Eyes was listening with a smile on his face, and Arab Boy was enraptured. He couldn't take his eyes of the femme (homme) fatale in front of him and Rita played him oh so exquisitely. Harry kept behind the bar, poker faced the whole time. He would find out later on, but he had an idea the she/he had something to do with Nathan and Esther.

Rita went to the ladies just as Esther was on her way too.

"Well?" whispered Esther in the loo.

"Loads of stuff to tell you, but later. I'm going back to their place for a bit of a party tonight. They know Rich alright, they are after him for something but it doesn't make sense so far."

“You be careful” hissed Esther.

“Don’t worry, I’ve got protection!”

“Don’t get pregnant” giggled Esther, “Protection or not, and call us as soon as you can, we’ll be worried about you until you do.”

“That’s what I love about you Esther, you care for everyone.”

“Yeah, unless I’m paid to be uncaring and cause pain in varying degrees, we have that in common. Easy money” said Esther.

“Yep, easy money” grinned Rita. They hugged each other quickly.

Esther went out first and told Nathan what was happening, he then told Harry they were leaving and that they would fill him in later. Harry nodded nonchalantly and went over to the partying Dutchmen to clear some glasses. By now were all dancing to Rita’s tune. The night was still young and there were plenty of man-made molecules around to keep it going.

CHAPTER 10

The life principles of Akbar Moshad were slowly being eroded away with each flick of Rita’s hair across Akbar’s now bare chest. His eyes were riveted on Rita’s face which spoke of a thousand promises with the slow flutter of her long black lashes. He had not been warned about people like this.

Certainly, his mother had never explained anything about the myriad of different cultures he may come across in life. His mother was educated but may as well have been mute when it came to anything except mathematics and cooking. She was an unusual lady, still calling herself Persian and proud of her achievements when the Shah was around.

Seeing her sister’s hair cut in public by the Mullah had made her a private person now. His father did his job, the epitome of a conservative Moslem. They’d worked hard and had sent him to university to study computer science and economics, the family in Holland had offered their help. The rest was history.

He followed the faith, desperately trying to ignore the pin pricks of doubt about the magnanimity of his culture compared with the magnanimity of Holland and its temptations shown to him by his new friends who had now brought him to England. His father’s cousin was a dark horse it was true he often thought to himself, but he had introduced him to these new friends, smiling and laughing with them in a way that Akbar had not seen in the family gatherings.

However, this was out of the family and not wanting to appear rude, ignorant or indeed ungrateful Akbar did the same as his Uncle. Now he was more their friend than his Uncle was. Yet they were a constant reminder of his Uncle and therefore his father and therefore his culture.

It was like two powerful forces pulling him apart and always that little dark place in his heart and mind where the doubt grew and crept into his synapses. In his fantasies Rita had finally made him crumble. His friends looked on approvingly. Celine, the blonde girl who was originally against Rita joining them looked quite relaxed, stroking Carls beard with her eyes closed as she listened to Sister Bliss and the Faithless playing on the Juke Box. They took her to a cool mellow musical place.

The man with the blue eyes was deep in conversation about higher consciousness and how all the prophets, artists, poets and many of the Nobel Peace Prize winners had embraced natural highs to reach their true genius and potential and helped to make the world a better place. If he’d heard of Alistair Crowley or Nietzsche then he chose to have a selective memory, but Rita thought his heart was in the right place. These were indeed really nice people. They had a kind of pureness of spirit if not a little naive, so what harm could they be planning for Rich? Rita was far too shrewd a lady to let on her interest. ‘They will come to me’ she thought, ‘Mohammed will come to my mountain and it will all become clear.’ She carried on doing what she did best. Enjoying herself.

The next day at work Nathan told Alf all about Harry’s and the Dutchmen. He still hadn’t heard from Rita and was now worried.

“Don’t be an idiot, she probably hasn’t got to sleep yet.”

“True” said Nathan, “They seemed good people, but I don’t know, why it has taken so long for

Rita to call? She must be finding it difficult to find out what they want with Rich, which means they're not all they seem."

Brookes came over to Alf and gave him seven deliveries for the Heathrow run.

"Has anyone seen Christian or even smelt him. Christ I hope he's gone home for a wash, can someone call him, he's got a pick up at L.G.W."

B & B radioed Christian, the radio beeped just a few seconds later.

"Getting Tampax and aspirin for Beatrice will be about 15 minutes. They haven't got Super, gotta go to another shop" and he beeped off.

Brookes looked shocked, Alf shuffled his feet, Nathan was grinning from ear to ear. Brookes got himself together, shrugged his shoulders as if he thought he hadn't heard right and told Nathan to do the L.G.W. pick up on his way home.

"It's not on my way home, but for the sake of Beatrice and the gallant help from Christian in the women's stuff department I'll do it anyway. Just book my overtime for me. They're going to be a really expensive packet of Tampax for you Boss, next time keep some in the office, Rita might need some one day too."

Brookes was just about to say something but before he could open his mouth Nathan snapped.

"And don't go on to me about women riders and motorbike scum, we are good, very good. Try and replace us and you know you'll get slow, stealing, lying scum. We aren't slow and we don't steal."

With that he turned on his heels and headed off to the Solicitors, feeling good about himself. Brookes needed to be put in his place sometimes, especially over the women riders.

He turned up at L.G.W.'s dying to empty his bladder, as usual, the phrase 'I'm getting too old for this,' whirling around in his brain.

"Little girls room please" he barked at Mrs. G.

She waved him through not even looking up. He had just defended his female colleagues and yet here was this battleaxe of the same gender, mind you, he thought, Rita will soon be of the same gender. Nathan shook his head and his dick, unable to work it all out and caught sight of the notice board again. Apparently Mrs. G hadn't changed anything. There was still a Bar Mitzvah at the Frampton Park Synagogue.

"Fucking Hell" said Nathan out loud, "Talmud, FPS, Frampton Park Synagogue!" He thought 'I'm so stupid,' then he berated himself, 'The letter came from here, and Christian picked it up. Frampton Park Synagogue! Oh shit, I hate churches, I hate synagogues even more and now I gotta go and check out FPS. Rich if you are laughing at any of this you sick fuck...'

He calmed down a bit and remembered to zip up his fly before he met Mrs. G. He wondered if Mrs. G would know anything but he couldn't think of how to ask her so he decided to talk to Esther about it first. She'd know what to do next.

He picked up the letter, which was for a drop just slightly out of his way home, and left.

CHAPTER 11

They were eating supper after Nathan had had a bath and changed into some soft cotton trousers and a Hawaiian shirt.

"What's up hun?" asked Esther before he could say anything.

"How do you know any-thing's up?"

Esther just replied with that look accompanied by a slight raise of her eyebrow.

"OK, I think FPS is Frampton Park Synagogue."

"How did you work that one out then?"

"Listen, the letter came from L.G.W. via Christian. We know it's to do with a synagogue because of the Talmud" and he went on to explain about Mrs. G's notice board.

"Could be" said Esther, "How does Rich link with that particular synagogue and L.G.W.?"

"That, I don't know" he replied.

Esther started to wiggle about on her seat, which was always a sign that she was excited about

something.

“Let’s look up the synagogue on the internet, you never know.

“It’s a start, I’ll open a bottle of red wine while you log on.”

It took fifteen minutes for Esther to log on from their old computer but soon she was looking at the synagogue website. It seemed they were hit number 16,527.

“Wow, I never knew synagogues were that popular.

This must be some synagogue.”

“Let’s look at FAQ’s “suggested Nathan it’s often a good place to start.”

Esther clicked on the icon.

Here are some of the questions that were being asked on this particular website.

Does it cost more to have a face lift than a tummy tuck?

How long does bruising last on nose refinement?

Why don’t Jewish people eat shellfish?

Can you supply me with information about penis enlargement?

How do you make Jewish Chicken Soup?

The list went on in the same three veins, surgery, food and philosophy.

“What’s a nose job got to do with the synagogue?” asked Nathan.

“Search me” said Esther as she trawled through some more FAQ’s.

“Aha” she shouted “FPS is also an abbreviation of Federation of Plastic Surgeons, which would explain all those questions.”

“Do you think Rich is talking about plastic surgery?”

“No” said Nathan, “Because of the Talmud.”

“Oh look” Esther was pointing at the screen, “Can you believe it, they have an icon for ‘Ask The Rabbi.’ How Jewish is that? Let’s ask about the Talmud and the Beam, maybe the Rabbi will be able to do an Alf and make some sense of it all.

“Maybe he’d have to be a dyslexic Rabbi.” chuckled Nathan.

“I don’t think that would be allowed but, hey, according to the blurb, the sermon for the week is about inclusivity, so maybe dyslexics are included. If they can spell it!”

“Alf could turn Jewish and feel comfortable.”

“Not with a foreskin his size.” quipped Nathan.

Esther turned to look at her husband. “How do you know about his foreskin then?”

“Eileen told me about it” said Nathan.

Esther didn’t even bother to make any further enquiries about Alf’s foreskin or any other of his bits and changed the subject.

“All we have to do now is to wait for a reply. This is quite a switched on synagogue. Maybe we ought to visit it anyway.”

“Oh yea, just turn up on the bikes and ask to join, I think not little poop.”

Suddenly Esther started wiggling again.

“No, no, listen. I need to do something with the girls about religion. We’ve got OFSTED coming in, you know, a government inspection, and the one thing we haven’t dealt with is Religious Education. How about if I try to arrange a visit and check the place out?”

“Esther,” said Nathan, “You’re not just cute but smart and dangerous. I like that in a woman.”

“I aim to please” she shrugged “I can be good sometimes.”

“Yes but you can be bad whenever you want!”

“How bad?”

“Very bad.”

“As bad as this?”

“Ohhhmmm, badder...”

The next day at work Esther spoke to her boss and told him about the need to visit a religious establishment and that she knew the perfect synagogue.

“It’s inclusive” she went on. At which point her boss stopped her in her tracks telling her she would get her own way anyway. He wasn’t going to even try to put up a fight, he knew she got the

results, he wasn't going to question her. He just wanted to know when, where and how much.

Her last OFSTED result had been exemplary, he would just let her and her team work their magic again. After all, what did he know, he was only a guy, even though Esther had made it clear to him she thought of him as an honorary woman.

Esther got on the phone and within minutes the visit was arranged, the Rabbi Hershaw saying how delighted he would be to see them next Tuesday. Ten thirty. Education and Religion must move with the times, he'd said, that was what in his opinion modern Judaism was all about.

Tell that to the fucking women still going to the Mikvah, she thought to herself. She thought of her cousin who married a religious Jew and how every month her poor cousin had to go to the Mikvah which was a mini wash pool in the synagogue and 'purify' herself through religious washing and prayer because she was menstruating. What an insult to women, as if they were dirty and unclean and never washed. She shrugged off the thought knowing it could irritate her all day if she let it and called Nathan to tell him the details of the visit. He and Alf were having a coffee in Spitalfield's in between jobs.

"Alf says see if you can see any locks that might fit that key. Also Rita's called and wants to see us all this evening"

"Curries all round then" said Esther and rang off, she had an English lesson to teach.

Esther had noted the relief in Nathan's voice and as she went through into the classroom she too was happier knowing that Rita was safe. Rita could handle most things but this really was in the twilight zone and beyond everyone's experience, except perhaps Nathan's and even he'd been worried.

Nathan was in the middle of a drop for Goldman Sachs when he got the call from Ray, who just happened to be just around the corner, Nathan knew this was not a coincidence. Somehow Ray had known where he would be. This left him feeling rather uncomfortable as he knew he must have been watched by either Ray or one of his guys. Ray was so devious that he had picked out all the other untrustworthy people in the force and had now created his own underground personal squad.

It seemed that even after all this time he had not been pulled up over it. Either that or a blind eye was turned. Ray got results, so maybe a blind eye was turned. Even so, Nathan was glad to see him.

He was the only one who could get some information on what was happening with Rich. Clearly Ray could still pull strings and fly beneath the radar of ordinary mortals. He even looked shifty. How he hadn't been dismissed, even with his results was still a wonder to Nathan.

Today, Ray looked like a cross between a drug dealer and an east European pimp and was equally furtive. They had little time for preliminary greetings, Ray was on a job and Nathan had drops to do. The subject quickly came round to what Ray was up to with the men who were following him into the jewellers and why Nathan had wanted to meet up with him again.

"That motley crew you saw me with the other day, from the café, are dealing in stolen diamonds, smuggled out of god knows where. I've built up a good relationship with the jewellers that we went into. They're trying to source the origins of some diamonds while posing as bent jewellers interested in buying them" Ray explained further. "The Russians will only deal through me as will the jewellers, so in effect I have both ends tied up. The Russians need to get cash to start untraceable accounts. It just so happens that I'm their man."

Ray was delivering all of this information without taking a single breath and not once were his eyes resting in one place but scanning every part of the street watching for anything that didn't quite fit.

"OK, then why did it seem that I knew them from before then?" enquired Nathan.

Ray's eyebrows made an almost unnoticeable trajectory skywards.

"You mean you really didn't recognize or remember them? Fucks sake Nathan you must have really frazzled your brain. The guy with the limp. You gave it to him. You beat the shit out of him when he was starting pimping on Kings Road. The others are all part of the same crew. But they are all older now. They were in court when the case fell through, they laughed at you because you were a green-back right then and you helped them get off on a technicality. You really beat yourself up about it back then. I think it was two bottles of vodka that night if I remember right and that was

when you started to lose patience with Sergeant Goofy”

Goofy was named Goofy from the day that Nathan knocked the Sergeants teeth out at the end of his career in the Metropolitan Police Force. Also Sergeant Goofy had been partly to blame for the fateful technical hitch due to his own incompetence on supervising Nathan through a difficult and complicated case.

Sergeant Goofy of course made sure that his own back was covered at the expense of Nathan’s hard work and professional self esteem. Ray had been incredibly supportive of his new comrade in arms and had helped Nathan deal with his sense of injustice through the hand of friendship and the neck of a bottle both of which was just what Nathan needed at that time. Ray, like Rich had turned out to be a true friend, there for him when help and support was needed. Knowing that he couldn’t ask for help and that one sign of pity or disrespect would have destroyed Nathan.

Nathan in turn would have happily taken a bullet for Rich or Ray at that time. Each of them was well aware of what their seemingly cold exteriors actually belied and trusted each other more for it. Each of them quietly comforted by that friendship.

Nathan caught a quick flashback to his past remembering more than he actually wanted to but not quite enough to recall all the details of the case. Ray was right, things definitely started to go slowly downhill from that point onwards for Nathan and London’s finest. Nonetheless, Nathan was genuinely surprised.

“Christ almighty, I must have really fried my brain not to remember those three. Look we haven’t got much time,. This is about Rich.”

Ray didn’t say a word, didn’t indicate any surprise at all, he just waited.

“Well I think he’s in trouble” with which Nathan gave Ray a quick précis of everything including the Dutchmen and Harry “If you’re not too busy, can you see if you can dig up any information about all this because it’s not only about Rich, it could affect me and Esther, let alone the rest of my friends. I know your method of operating and how you just love to hang on to all sorts of information that might get you somewhere or give you an edge.”

“Before I forget, what’s the score with the Russians? Is it going to be worth all the hard work or is it a little bit more than that?”

Ray looked at Nathan and grinned, his Irish eyes twinkling.

“Now that would be telling, but since it’s you, you’d surely know the answer to that question my friend. Now you can do a little something for me” he said.

“I have these guys under surveillance of course, but my main man’s going on paternity leave, can you fucking believe it, in the middle of a big one too. So in your travels can you do what you used to do so well? Follow unobserved if you can when you see them, because they’re in this area all the time making contacts, report back to me discretely in the same old usual way” he said looking hopefully at Nathan.

“No one was ever aware of our system then and now they certainly have no idea that you even exist. I checked them out on that one ages ago to make sure you were safe. Oh yes, and give me any hunches you may have. It’ll be just like old times!”

Nathan should have been sensible and made it clear that he didn’t want or need to get involved that much with these Russians who had caused him such grief all those years ago, but he felt on the other hand that maybe after all justice will be done, and isn’t that what it’s all about?

Additionally, he wanted his old friend Ray watching his back, Nathan’s old adrenalin buzz had fired up again. So much for being sensible. They left quickly after that, Ray up to his old tricks, same old same old. Nathan revisiting his past.

Chapter 12

Over empty foil food containers and beer Rita held court recapping her last few days of partying with the group Dutch people. Apparently she’d got really friendly with them and taken them to a few clubs. In return they’d given her an open invitation to visit them in Holland whenever she wanted. Also, they had offered her a supply line of grass whenever she wanted it, hinting that they

had a few operations going on.

“So they are dealing then?” asked Esther.

“Well yes and no” replied Rita. “They only deal in natural drugs and they won’t touch any Class A’s. They really do believe in expanding consciousness and all the old hippy shit, and seem to be on some kind of crusade.”

“They believe natural drugs are good for mankind and that it’s the other chemical man-made drugs that cause the violence, greed and robberies blah, blah, blah. They want to make natural drugs easily available to anyone who takes drugs anyway.”

“You cannot be serious!” The others chorused.

“Oh yes, they’re really serious about it, only they have a little problem, which is where I think Rich comes in. They told me that one of their larger operations failed because the guy forgot to set the hydroponics on automatic while he went away for two weeks.” she said smiling and continued with her tale “Consequently, they lost a shit load of money and some good contacts and now they need to get the money back from him. They couldn’t track him down but apparently his ex-girlfriend got very stoned and blabbed.”

They’d explained to Rita their methods and she relayed their reasoning to the others verbatim.

“We would never use violence, we are pacifists, but we know how to make people talk. Get them stoned on drugs of their choice and the rest is easy!”

“So, according to them and Henrietta, the ex. Does that name ring any bells? There’s this guy, possibly Rich in my opinion, who has access to a lot of money stashed away somewhere in London and that’s what they’re here for.”

“They just want to collect the money so they can make good their contracts and recoup their losses. They’re not after Rich necessarily, but they are in a hurry.”

“How did you find out all of this?” said Nathan, who was impressed at Rita’s undercover skills.

“They’re not the only experts who can make people divulge things through natural highs, I’m a trained professional at both.”

“Yes but how do we know that this was Rich’s operation?” asked Alf.

“Because from what I can gather” said Rita, “The operation that was fucked up was in Utrecht. Isn’t that where you said Rich was?”

“Bloody hell Rita, you’re right, and it would be just like Rich to forget to water the bloody plants and Henrietta definitely seems to ring a bell too.”

By this time Nathan was pacing up and down, and on a roll He’d wisely decided to withhold all information regarding Ray, his renewed contact and involvement with him. The less they knew about Ray the better for everyone.

“Did you get a description of the guy they were after?”

“No, but I know one more thing” went on Rita “There was a lot of money involved.”

“Have you any idea what they plan to do next?” asked Esther.

“Well, I’m not sure about this bit. They mentioned something about visiting a synagogue, which I thought was very strange.”

“Oh shit” said Nathan, “They’re on to it already, and did they mention a specific synagogue?”

“Kind of, just one in north London, but they weren’t sure where, they said they would probably know by next weekend.”

“We’ve got to know more about this synagogue quickly” said Alf.

This was Esther’s chance to tell them about the planned visit to the F.P.S. Esther jumped up and down, getting excited.

“Here’s a thought” she continued, “My brother is into religion and his kids go to a Jewish school around there. Alex, my nephew is about 16 and I get on quite well with him, he’s a Goth and quite a guy. I’ll ask him if he knows anyone or anything more about the Synagogue. I can say it’s about the visit.”

Nathan nodded his assent, it seemed an OK idea so far.

“Right Esther, you do that. Rita, you keep track of the Dutchmen and Mr. G, Alf and I will go to Harry’s.” he exclaimed “I have a feeling that Harry may spot some signal or message because I

think Rich is really somehow aware of all of this but is trying to protect that money and/or something else. He'll most likely send a message or something, probably through Harry, though it still doesn't quite all add up."

"I think I'll revise my shit about keys" said Alf.

"Might be wise" said Nathan.

Nathan thought about his contact with Ray. He really wanted to see if Ray could find out more about anything to do with a Dutch drug ring and Rich. He was now also sure about his decision that no one else was going to know about Ray, although it would be very hard to keep it from Esther. He wasn't sure why but it just felt right. Ray had also known Rich and they had been very close in their own way too.

Rich had often given Ray some valuable information about the nastier elements of criminal life, especially when it came to child prostitution and pornography.

Unbeknown to Nathan, it was Ray who had suggested to Rich that he went to Holland. Ray had thought that the least things people know in some situations the better for everyone. Not telling everyone everything for their own good seemed to be a theme for all of them at the moment.

CHAPTER 13

Akbar's uncle was sitting in the living room with some of his friends. Now, Akbar was a trusting young man but even he was a little bit disconcerted to see his Uncle and his friends, having come straight from the mosque, drinking whisky through straws. All of his friends had their own straws and were smoking cigarettes through clenched fists. He had seen the smoking method many times and knew it was a way of smoking without the smoke touching one's lips as decreed in the Koran. Imbibing in alcohol through straws was a completely different matter altogether and it sat uncomfortably with him.

It did this for several reasons, the main one being that he did not like to think of himself or his uncle as a hypocrite. He himself had never wholly embraced the more ancient rules of the Koran and he tolerated smoking, but if you were going to smoke, just do it. Don't smoke and then pretend it's OK as long as it doesn't touch your lips.

He was far too intellectual for that nonsense, the same for whisky. Just drink the stuff and don't go to all this rigmarole to get round the Koran. He poured himself a whisky into a glass and savoured it noisily in front of his uncle and his uncle's friends. Instead of the disapproval he expected, he got cheered!

He had to admit to himself he was just a little bit disappointed in this response, he was secretly hoping to be seen as a little rebellious, although he was too scared to seriously question himself about why he wanted to rebel. Another thing, he'd met one of the Koran's 'evil people' and liked her. She was fun, witty understanding, had a soft gentle touch, a rich responsive rosebud mouth and the sexiest voice he had ever heard in a woman. She even looked a little Asian with her long black hair, red nails and heavy black eye make-up.

OK, the figure wasn't that curvy and she had large feet, but the thought of her made him blush. He took another drink to hide these immoral thoughts from his Uncle's house guests.

"So my dear young nephew, are you having yourself a good time here in London? Are you coping with everything? Tell us everything that you are doing?"

This was from his uncle who seemed to be a kind of ring leader amongst these other older men.

"Yes yes, we want to hear it all, even the bits you wouldn't tell your mother, come on, indulge us, help us to relive our youth through the hanky panky of yours." Cheered another of his uncles friends, who looked as if he had gone from child to old man, missing out the youth bit altogether.

"Well" said Akbar "I have been taking my first year exams. The other students are very nice and we seem to work well."

"Yes, yes, yes" cut in his uncle "We all know about daytime study, what about night time study eh?"

His uncle reached across and poked Akbar in the leg.

“Come on now, tell us about the girls have you met, have you gone to any of the famous clubs that, you know, swing like the British sixties. Tell us all about things like that. We promise we won’t tell your mother. Indulge us, we are just old men.”

Akbar was completely thrown by them expecting to hear about his private life. He looked blank and gazed at them all, feeling like he had some kind of stage fright.

“Oh, he looks guilty” chuckled another of the old men, “My, my, he must have done something.”

“Yes tell us about that something,” said another.

“Or someone” piped in another.

This was all too much for Akbar, he blurted out about his Dutch friends and going to a club and to bars, rushing through it just to get them off his back.

“Oh, what bar did they take you too, did you meet any ladies, and you know, not our ladies, their ladies?”

Something in Akbar’s brain signalled danger. He did not want to tell them about his new lady love just yet. Why had they wanted to know all this stuff? Where’s my privacy he thought. He knew that privacy was a rare thing in his culture, everyone knew everything, but this was London. This was different, she was different. He feared that he was beginning to be different too and he didn’t know how to handle that right now. He just wanted them to go.

“With greatest respect uncle, I need to prepare for my lessons tomorrow. I’m sure you understand. Shall I call you and we can arrange to meet next week. Maybe I could have dinner at home with you. I am a poor student and need to be fed.”

“Of course, of course” his uncle said fluttering around.

He clapped Akbar on the shoulder, as the others took the signal to leave. They all stood up at once and made their way out of his tiny now smoke filled sitting room. The air felt lighter by degrees as each one of them left. Next time he would deal with the whole family at dinner, even his toothless and smelly Aunt, rather than have those old men round acting, well, he wasn’t quite sure how they were acting.

He just knew he didn’t like it or them. He turned on his computer, clicked on to his latest piece of work and sank into the scientific and unemotional oblivion of Magnetic Theory and Mechanization.

CHAPTER 14

The coconut and pineapple scented aftershave from the early morning commuters had even managed to permeate the deepest darkest air of North London. Esther smelt it, even through the exhaust fumes, as she rode into work on her Suzuki 650. It was electric blue and had pink Tinker Bell fairy lights in the headlights, pink titanium end stops on the bars and valve caps. She loved her bike and loved so obviously being a girl on a bike. It was a good day for riding but she was in a hurry. She was on her way to pick up the minibus to get all the girls to the synagogue. Letters had been sent to parents.

Extra money for lunch had been arranged through Jesmina, her boss’s secretary. Lena, Esther’s number two, Marion her part timer and her teaching assistant Claire were all waiting for her as she drove the minibus into the side street which was laughingly called the school car park.

It had taken longer to pick up the bus than she’d expected as the one she was going to use from the LEA Community Transport link had broken down the night before. Easier last minute repairs had been done to the one she was now in. It was a bitch to drive, too old and tetchy with a crap gearbox. The girls and staff all stood or sat where they could, smoking and laughing. There were 15 of them in all, 4 staff and 11 girls.

“Hi everyone, sorry I’m late, this old bitch is a replacement as the one I wanted had broken down.”

Someone started to whistle the tune to ‘We’re all going on a summer holiday’. Claire started to sing it too, and soon there was a rousing chorus. It wasn’t intended to be rude. The girls didn’t need to be rude, they were just taking the piss, and who could blame them, Esther laughed.

“Yea, yea, yea, I get your point and you’re right, she’s a heap of shit.”

“It’s better than doing English” shouted Kelly.

“Too right” replied Esther “It’s a day out even though we have to have an educational one, we can still have a good time.”

“I’m looking forward to seeing a synagogue” said Sheuli, a gorgeous quiet Bengali girl.

“Well it’s about time Sheuli had some fun” retorted a big burly red headed girl wearing a too tight T-shirt, leggings and high heels.

To those who weren’t in the know, this whole three seconds could be taken as some serious bitchiness but it was far from it. The big red head, Kayleigh, had been a serious bully at school. Sheuli had been seriously bullied but couldn’t do anything about it because she hadn’t enough English to defend herself and she had a quiet nature.

At their initial interviews with Esther and Lena each girl had discussed all their issues, good and bad, in depth. When she had finally got them to admit their strengths, their weaknesses and their mistakes she told them that the bottom line was that their school on Sorrel Street was a family of women.

“It’s a hard world out there, Sorrel Street should be a place where you can come and feel safe. No one is going to get at you, no one should be saying things about you behind your back. No one will be given dirty looks because if they do they will not see the floor on the way out.”

Esther did not mince her words and she stood by her promises to all the girls in her care. She made it clear that girls nasty bitchy bullying would be dealt with and not tolerated. She figured that it was a hard enough world out there as it was and that everyone needed somewhere they could go and not be on their guard, including the teachers, this was her litany.

Once the staff, who all thought the same way, had got to the bottom of where it had all gone wrong for each one of their charges the girls were generally kind, funny and supportive of each other. Esther wouldn’t have it any other way. They all worked harder at this school than they had ever worked in their lives, including the staff. So a day out was a day out.

“Right, ground rules, one of you fucks up through bad behaviour, we all go back and do English, plus letters sent home. No mobile phones in the Synagogue. Please listen politely even if it’s boring, you’ve managed it with me enough times.”

“True” piped up Shirley, a tall thin frail girl who used to be too shy to speak at all.

“Thank you Shirl, I’ll get you for that.”

“Yea, yea” retorted Shirl. Esther grinned.

“And finally, I don’t know if there are any nice Jewish boys there, but no swapping telephone numbers. I don’t want any of you getting married to a Rabbi’s son, not unless we’ve vetted him at Sorrel Street. OK are we all set then?”

They piled into the minibus, lighting up more fags, drinking coke, talking or listening to their personal stereos, the atmosphere good humoured and kind.

It was the usual heavy traffic round the East End of London, with all the markets in full swing and the locals out shopping. The pedestrians seemed hell bent on bashing their way to the front of the queue with their trolleys and elbows.

They were spilling out onto the roads in their haste to get the best bargains before heading home.

No matter, Esther drove the minibus the same way, well nearly the same way as she drove her bike. Seeing the gaps and anticipating other drivers lack of concentration. Luck and her motto of ‘She who hesitates is lost’ got them to the synagogue just ten minutes late with no fatalities.

The girls put their ciggies out before getting out of the bus in the most ladylike way they could manage. They were all on best behaviour. Esther glanced at the staff and they nodded back. So far so good. The others had no idea of Esther’s other reason for the visit. She looked around at the steel gates to the car park and made a mental note to check to see if this was all new security.

The building itself didn’t look anything special, just a breeze-block community centre stuck onto an older part built in red brick with some stained glass windows and the Star of David, the symbol of Judaism. All the girls had been told about the Star of David or the Mogein Dovid, so they didn’t ask about it.

They were met by a tall man with bright blue eyes, slightly balding, wearing a dark suit, blue

shirt and yellow tie. He had on a Kippa, the little hat that all religious Jewish men wore. His face lit up as he met them and ushered them into a brightly lit but pleasant enough reception area with comfortable seats. Once they had all settled down he introduced himself as Rabbi Hershaw.

One by one he asked them their names and then asked if they knew of any of the history their names or what their names meant. He was good this Rabbi, thought Esther. He could give them a little bit of historical origin of nearly all of their names. Tanya put up her hand.

“How do you know all that?”

“Ah” he replied, “I was waiting for one of you to ask that. Well, it’s all about similarities.”

With that the girls got completely engrossed in hearing the traditions and ceremonies. All the while he was pointing out the similarities not the differences in religions or cultures. Again Esther looked around and gave a mental measurement on how well things were going. Just one look at the girls and staff faces reassured her that she had done the right thing. Now for the locks.

The building was mostly modern and in some places very modern. Esther had brought her camera in order to record the day not only for Ofstead purposes but for Alf’s purposes too.

She wondered if the Talmud and the prayer hall would be in the old part of the synagogue. Her hunch proved right because after the discussion and a break for tea and biscuits, they were led into a beautiful old hall with beamed ceilings and ornate wood panelling. Esther wondered if those were the beams that Rich was on about.

The Rabbi asked them to be seated and having got their permission, blessed them in Hebrew. This was the first time any of them had heard Hebrew. The Rabbi translated and explained each part as he went through the blessing. He also asked if they wanted to learn their names in Hebrew.

Again, he held their attention. The locks held Esther’s. She started taking photographs as previously agreed by the Rabbi. Soon, she realized that the only place that she hadn’t managed to photograph was where the scrolls were locked away in a glass cabinet. Just as she realized it wouldn’t be long before one of the girls asked what those things were in that cupboard on the stage, the Rabbi spoke.

“On the stage is the ‘Bimah’ a special platform, where we read from the scrolls, and those are the words of God in the Torah, our holy book,” All the while the Rabbi was pointing at the scrolls and the Talmud.

“Why are they locked away?” asked Katie.

“He doesn’t want them nicked, stupid” retorted Keighley.

“Anyone would want to nick them” chipped in Sally, a not particularly bright girl, but well versed, along with the rest of her large extended family, in summing up whether things were nickable or not.

“What other reasons might we lock them away then?” asked the Rabbi.

“In our village, we have shrines this is like a kind of shrine. Our shrines are sacred to our village and our God and we don’t like it if people touch them and are not respectful. Is that why you lock them away?” asked Sheuli, in that wonderful calm voice of hers.

Lena looked at her with pride as did Esther and the rest of the staff. Sheuli’s forced marriage was out of her control and everyone in the centre was scared for her and very protective.

“You’re right, it is a kind of shrine but to only one God.”

“I am respectful of your God” said Sheuli solemnly, “Can I look at it and say a prayer of my own?”

The Rabbi was visibly taken aback at this. He had had many visitors wanting to look at the exquisite handwritten parchment scrolls, central to any synagogue, mostly out of curiosity and he had always managed to negotiate a polite ‘No’, but he was a spiritual man and he believed in his own convictions of being all inclusive.

This child was different, she really meant it, he could feel it, to say no would go against everything he truly believed, and yet to say yes could put the scrolls in possible jeopardy, he was in a dilemma.

“Rabbi” said Esther sensing his discomfort, “Sheuli is well respected and loved in Sorrel Street. No one would mind if only Sheuli was allowed to touch the scrolls and pray. Sheuli really does

believe in her prayers and right now she needs all the support she can get from her friends, family, prayers, spiritual leaders and any God she cares to talk to. If it would help, I will accompany Sheuli, if she feels OK about it. I really am sure no one else will mind, they all want to help Sheuli however they can.”

The girls muttered their agreement, their body language showing clear support in Esther’s proposition and Sheuli’s request. The Rabbi was touched. Indeed, how could he not be, it was straight from the heart, if not the soul and God himself. As Sheuli was beckoned up to the stage, the Rabbi waited ceremoniously for her as she gracefully ascended the stairs almost as if she was gliding. She was a truly remarkable young woman. Esther followed her, feeling a little out of place and uncomfortable. She had declined a Bat Mitzvah, which is the young girls version of the Bar Mitzvah, as she didn’t believe in God or religion, thinking to herself ‘...and now I’m here in my leathers, about twenty years later and still feeling crap about anything to do with synagogues and mounting the stairs to the ...THE FUCKING BIMAH!... Oh Fuck, that’s what the beams were in Rich’s letter.

Esther’s revelation about the Bimah had brought a beatific smile on her face which the Rabbi caught. He gave what he considered a look of empathy as if he too was overawed with emotion about being in this holy place. Little did he know! He drew them to the pulpit and went to the ornate display cupboard that held the scrolls. Esther watched, transfixed as he pushed some kind of button and the heavy glass panelled doors rolled back silently.

The Rabbi had put on his holy shawl, a tallit and kissed it in respect of God as was tradition. He led Sheuli and Esther to the scrolls and let Sheuli touch them. They were always covered and in this case in old but beautifully gold embroidered heavy rich blue velvet with deep gold tassels. The scroll handles were topped with ornate covers of deep embossed silver. He laid out the scrolls and the Talmud too.

The old familiar mumble of prayers reached Esther’s ears as the Rabbi said a prayer in Hebrew from the ancient tomes of Judaism while he opened the holy book and uncovered the scrolls handing the magnificent velvet scroll covers to Esther so she could lay them carefully on the nearby table. He then took the beautiful leather bound prayer book and carried it to the Bimah.

He then passed Esther the book, on which the whole of the Jewish religion and way of life was based. Esther took a moment to inspect the beautifully tooled leather work of the holy book and the velvet of the scrolls.

She noticed that the binding had been repaired but not as well as she might have expected. Something seemed to bounce and ping in her brain. It seemed very bulky in parts near the spine. She was quite surprised at this, given that this was a really holy and valuable book, but maybe that was how it was when they got it and so hadn’t done much about it. It may have a tale to tell about it and so was more appreciated with its flaws than if it was perfect.

Funnily enough, the velvet scroll covers and embroidery were in the same state. She knew a fair bit about these things as Nathan loved and collected old leather bound books, and she’d had to study textiles for her Home Economics degree and as part of the textiles course she’d chosen to specialize in corsetry and embroidery as well as leather work.

The history of all these arts were fascinating as well as the actual designs and fabrication. You can make beautiful embroidered leather corset if you had the knowledge and Esther had always been interested in anything to do with corsets and leather. The embroidery was something she loved to do as a child to keep her mind active and to stop her brothers driving her mad. Her reverie was interrupted as the Rabbi laid out the parchment scrolls on the pulpit and readied a little silver pointer to enable him to follow the script.

“Repeat after me” he said to Sheuli, “If any of you wish to join in, please do.” he said looking at the others.

The Rabbi paused, making sure of the silence and respect for the occasion, then he started uttering one of the oldest prayers on earth.

“Baruch atah, Adonai Eloheinu, Melech haolam...”

Esther balked at saying any prayer although all the girls were trying to support Sheuli and

repeating after the Rabbi, she focused her attention on the beautiful piece of fabric in her hands, marvelling at the ornate stitch craft. She caught a glimpse of the soft leather that lined the inside of the velvet. It would have to be lined like that to protect it all these years.

Then, some uneven surface beneath the embroidered plaque and other places again caught her attention, the pinging in her brain started again, it just didn't feel right, something was out of place.

The prayers were nearly finished, she had to hurry. The feel of the lining did not tally with the design and cut of the velvet. Something was in between them. Desperately, she tried to find out what it was but could only feel that it was stiffer than the rest of the velvet, as though there was some kind of paper or even card there.

Too late, there was no time left, the prayers had ended. She quickly looked up to see if anyone had noticed her furtive fingering of the cloth, hopefully not. She handed them back to the Rabbi and thanked him, thanked Sheuli and praised the girls.

All the girls clapped Sheuli and the Rabbi, the Rabbi clearly overcome, indeed, everyone was, this was a visit to remember.

"Excuse me Sir, why don't you come to our school?" said Kayleigh.

Esther glanced at the Rabbi who was still beaming.

"I would love to" he replied.

Kayleigh was momentarily shocked that the rabbi would actually come to the school.

"Come and have lunch" she enthused "We do lovely lunches, not like school dinners, we have coleslaw and ham and cheese."

"And prawn cocktail sometimes" said Amy, another of Esther's protégées.

"What do you like to eat for lunch Sheuli?" asked the Rabbi, thinking of his Jewish dietary laws and how similar they were to Muslim ones.

"Usually a cheese sandwich" said Sheuli.

"We could have MacDonald's" piped up another girl, exploiting the situation for all it was worth.

Esther raised her eyebrows, she knew how this could go. Fortunately, so did the Rabbi.

"I'd be happy with a cheese sandwich" he said "But Donuts would be nice."

"No problem" said Kayleigh "Is it Esther? We could get donuts for the Rabbi couldn't we?"

"No problem at all" grinned Esther "It would be our pleasure. Before we go, has anyone got anything more to ask?"

It seemed that the Rabbi had done a really good job and covered most things they would have been likely to ask, so there was a silence.

"Well, I think this is a good time to leave the Rabbi to his duties. On behalf of everyone at Sorrel Street, thank you for a really special day. Thank the Rabbi ladies" prompted Esther, which they all did with genuine feeling and enthusiasm.

The girls piled back into the minibus and immediately lit up. Esther and her staff did too. Soon they were heading home with a good natured easy atmosphere sweeping over them as they all smoked and watched the traffic go by.

"Cool Rabbi" said Kayleigh.

"Yeah" said Sheuli and patted Kayleigh's hand.

Esther's thoughts were now racing as she drove the girls back to the school. What had happened to the lock on the display cabinet? There were keyholes but they were not used. It must've been something to do with the bookcase because that was when the doors to the cabinet opened. Oh fuck it, thought Esther, her mind spiralling, they've got an electronic system. Maybe that key no longer fitted any of those locks because the locks had been replaced.

She knew she was grasping at straws because in her heart of hearts she thought that Rich had led them to the right place but he was way out of touch too. Better get the guys round to see what we can do. She would get the photos developed with a set to Alf.

Maybe he could work out from the photos if there was a remote chance that that key would fit any one of those locks. What about that stuff hidden in the Talmud, what's that all about? Is that normal? Her brain tumbled and turned with no answers, just more questions. She couldn't think about it all now and she knew she had to concentrate and get everyone back to school safely and at

this rate she'd crash the minibus. So she managed to put it to the back of her mind to keep for later.

Esther focused on the traffic and getting everyone back to the school where they would all go their separate ways for another evening. Getting up to God knows what. That included the staff. A short while later she drove back home on her bike as carefully as possible but dying to get hold of Nathan and tell him about her day and her news.

She hadn't wanted to tell him on the mobile, this news was far too good. It was a sit on knee or eat lovely diner or munch away through two bars of seriously good chocolate telling the news.

She would just have to wait until he got home.

CHAPTER 15

Celine was clearly discontented, she was on her own in her room in the Bed and Breakfast. The little house had a typical London Victorian façade, with original sash windows and was also of old London brick. The small garden at the front was well kept with a beautiful display of summer flowers. Inside it was deeply carpeted and decorated in the Victorian style with well worn antiques.

There was a smell of baking and cut flowers. The rest of her 'friends,' the people from Holland, were all in the lounge, drinking tea and talking happily amongst themselves. They didn't seem to miss her at all and though they were well pleased with their progress so far, they knew they had to find the right synagogue soon. Henrietta should be calling them.

Their promise to Henrietta of an unending supply of excellent grass and a small cut of the profits on their next deal had gone down well. So there they sat, talking and laughing.

All except Celine who was still upstairs where she was more than definitely, seriously discontented. This was small fry stuff. She knew that after she had been involved with this particular bunch it was over a year now and she had not managed to get her new car or afford the holidays she'd promised herself in the Caribbean. She made the call and told of the latest developments.

"You've done well" said the voice at the other end of the phone. "Call us when you've got all the information,

we'll do the rest."

She put the phone down and felt a little better as she went downstairs to join the others, allowing herself a small smug smile.

CHAPTER 16

Alf, Dave, Eileen, Nathan and Rita sat around the large table in one of the pubs in Cricklewood. Alf was the one who wanted to meet in the pub, mainly because he was fed up of clearing up the mess in his flat. Dave was getting slowly pissed and it was only 7.15 p.m.

"So it's an electronic system then" said Alf to Nathan. He had looked very closely at the photographs that Esther had taken and had his doubts about the key unlocking anything that he had seen so far.

"I don't know how to break into that kind of electronic and possibly quite technical security."

"I checked with Harry too" said Nathan, "He hadn't heard anything at all from Rich, the Dutch people or anyone else. It's almost as if we have come to a full stop."

"No, not yet" said Esther "I'm still waiting for Alex, my Nephew to call, he might come up with something."

Dave was pissed and bored by now, a rather disastrous mix if past experiences had anything to do with it. He started whistling. Eileen, in support of her husband and who was not following that far behind in the 'how quickly can you get pissed' competition, started whistling too. Soon, they were all whistling 'If I were a rich man' Nathan did the 'diddy diddy diddy dum' bit in a deep if not rather nasal baritone, it all sounded lovely.

The big fat burly bloke sitting at the bar did not agree and curtly told them to stop.

"And who the fuck are you then" demanded Eileen. With a slurred and repeating echo from Dave.

"I'm the fucking owner that's who and no fucking whistling!"

"Well you ought to be ashamed of yourself talking to us like that. We aren't doing any harm."

"You're whistling. I don't like whistling!"

"Oh go fuck yourself" slurred Dave, and started whistling the theme tune to 'The Great Escape'.

"You're leaving" said burly landlord git.

"What, now?" said Alf indignantly, "We've only just bought these drinks."

"Then drink up and get out!" fumed burly landlord git.

One by one each of them joined in the whistling and painfully slowly started putting their coats on. One by one they got up and formed a line and slowly sauntered around burly landlord git.

"Call the police" said burly landlord to one of his red faced and clearly long suffering staff.

"And what, arrest us for whistling?" asked Esther, getting up. She went to some of the other tables, round the corner in the pub, smiling at their occupants who were completely unaware of the developments in another part of the room.

"Excuse me" she said sweetly to a mixed group of drinkers. Please, humour me by joining in the whistling, it's my birthday and I love this song, it's better than happy birthday don't you think?"

Well, put on the spot like that how could anyone refuse without seeming churlish. So the unsuspecting customers heartily and happily whistled a rousing chorus of the Great Escape, repeatedly which soon caught on at the other tables in the pub. Wouldn't you know it, soon the whole pub was whistling and the friends slowly marched out, bowing to the innocently whistling crowd and leaving a severely stressed burly landlord git, unable to control the now rambunctious musicality of the remaining customers.

"Can't go back to that one then" said Dave chuckling to himself and dribbling at the same time. It looked kind of cute on him.

"Wouldn't want to" said Nathan, handing him a tissue, enough was enough.

"OK" said Alf resignedly "Everyone back to my place."

After an animated discussion as to where they might have left the car they eventually left for Alf's, Esther was driving and and it was not unusual for her to forgot where she parked. Rita's mobile started beeping.

"It's from Akbar" she said, shaking her hair back from her face, he wants to know if I know a synagogue called Frampton Park Synagogue?"

"Oh shit" said Nathan, "They've caught up. How the fuck did they do that. This is all happening too fast now. "What do we do next?"

Rita smiled to herself.

"I think I'll go and see Akbar, maybe I can loosen his tongue."

"Wear your best dress" said Alf.

"And shave, for fucks sake" said Esther.

CHAPTER 17

Alex, Esther's Goth nephew was playing his guitar in his bedroom and had the amp running through the headphones. Abigail, his girlfriend was sitting on his bed writing out her piece for her Bat Mitzvah. As usual, she left everything to the last minute. Alex's clothing and style of his room was true to every young Goth. Pictures of skulls abounded, black sedition trousers, black sweatshirts, the uniform of all Goths, were discarded on the floor with the rest of this previous weeks clothing. However, he came from a good family so he didn't smell. Most Goths come from good families or were students. Alex's socks and underpants were clean, Marks and Spencer's, bought by his mother and there was evidence of deodorant, but that could have been the smell of incense to cover the smell of sperm and skunk.

Abigail had come straight from school and was still in some of her school uniform. Her underwear wasn't from Marks and Spencer. She was a little bit more adventurous than that, a far cry from most fifteen year olds, even by today's standards. Age was not relevant to the sizes of black PVC peek-a-boo bras and thongs.

She prised one of the headphones from Alex's head and said petulantly.

"I want you there on my Bat Mitzvah."

"Do I have to?" he pleaded stopping in mid thrash.

"Yes, because I am scared. You know my dad is too ill to be there, I need a man around."

"But I'm only sixteen" he wailed "I'm still a boy."

"If you're old enough to tie me up and fuck me stupid, you're old enough to be there on my special day. No sex until you say yes."

"I don't need sex if I can play my guitar!"

This was from Alex with a look of a martyr.

"Bollocks" said Abigail and opened his flies.

"OK, I'll be there" said Alex a few moments later, "Just please don't stop."

"You give your word" demanded Abigail, looking up

"You have my word" Alex hissed through clenched teeth "Now hurry..."

The things I do for lust thought Alex to himself later that evening when Abigail had gone home, whistling the theme tune to the Great Escape.

CHAPTER 18

Esther and Nathan were lying in bed watching Saturday Morning Kitchen. It was nearly midday. They were ogling and drooling watching the chefs drumming up the simple but stunning chocolate fondant when the phone rang.

"Let it ring" said Esther "I don't want to talk to anyone right now."

The answer-phone clicked in but the voice made them both jump. It was Harry.

"Are you both awake. Put her down Nathan and pick up the fucking phone!"

Nathan just managed to reach across and get it before Harry clicked off. He was always impatient when he wasn't behind the bar.

"What've you got Harry?" Nathan didn't take time over niceties.

"Do you know any Dutch transvestites?" asked Harry.

"I don't, but Rita may, why?"

"Because I've just had an enquiry on the phone about me selling the bar. The guy said he had heard I was selling. News to me, I didn't know I was selling my bar."

"Yes, but where does the transvestite bit come in?" asked Nathan patiently.

"Well, that's my hunch. He said her name was Carla and he had a Dutch accent."

"How did he get your number then?" enquired Nathan, now he was really curious.

"Said that someone called Henrietta gave it to her. I think Henrietta was Rich's old girlfriend" said Harry.

"This is a Rich connection and I think you are right about Henrietta. Are you sure it wasn't Rich himself?"

"I never thought to ask" said Harry, "I was in too much shock."

"What about the last known number thingy, didn't you try that?"

"Didn't think about that either" said Harry his tone of voice giving away his forlorn feelings.

"I think that this is a warning from Rich. If you sell the bar for example, not saying you will, but if you did, you would be out of danger, yes? So this is Rich warning you to keep out of things. Who else knows about Henrietta? They had a kid you know. I bet you never knew that did you?"

"Maybe that's who he's trying to protect or Henrietta is. Mind you, she was an anorexic junkie."

"I'm surprised she's still alive. I don't know why Rich even got involved with her."

"I bet he was trying to rescue her from herself" said Harry "He always picked the most ridiculous women. If he could rescue them and they would shag him. That was his only criteria."

"Hey don't knock it" retorted Nathan, "That guy got more women through the words of the Torah and the powders in his pocket than any priest or barman."

"OK, I'll take that back" said Harry reluctantly, "But he's really wierding out on us now, I don't like it. Perhaps I should sell the bar and go and live cheaply in Thailand."

“If you open a bar in Thailand we’ll come too.”

“No way mate, my life was peaceful until you showed up again.”

Nathan was left with a dead phone in his hand. Esther was looking at him, wanting to know what the latest developments were. All Nathan wanted to do was to dive under the duvet and emerge in a year’s time when all of this may have blown over.

Instead he told Esther to listen while he called Rita, and repeated Harry’s hunch for both their benefits, and left it to Rita to put out the feelers on the TV wire.

In another part of North London, the large multi-coloured plastic windmill had been tastefully placed on the mustard coloured stone clad home of Akbar’s London relatives. He never thought he would welcome a family meal more in his life. He needed to touch base with normality, normality being a rarity for him nowadays. What with his uncle and his weird old cronies and the lovely Rita, who was not all she made out to be. But what could he do about love.

He decided to give himself a rest from his internal turmoil and sink himself in the bosom of Bollywood films, rolling chapatti and helping his young cousin with his maths homework. The smell of cooking gave him a wonderful sense of security as he made his way past the pink sail of the plastic windmill to the front door of his Aunt’s house.

The moment wasn’t to last. His young cousin, Koyas, had no math homework, the video had broken down and his Aunt had locked herself in the upstairs toilet wailing that she had married below her status and wanted to go back to Bangladesh.

He was about to turn on his heels and head back to his little flat when his young cousin caught him and asked if he could help with his other homework. Gratefully he sneaked past the wailing Aunt in the toilet and went to help with the homework in an upstairs bedroom.

It was Religious Instruction homework, ‘The similarities of Islam and Judaism. Discuss’, which he had to admit didn’t know the first thing about.

“Oh, but when you go to visit the synagogue with your Dutch friends, you can find out for me” said his young cousin.

Akbar’s surprise must have been apparent but as Koyas patiently explained to him his father, Akbar’s uncle, had mentioned that the nice Dutch people were going to the synagogue. In fact his father had suggested Akbar should go with them, so obviously it was logical that Akbar could help him with his essay.

Akbar’s bewilderment was now overwhelming. He’d had enough and pleading a headache made for the door, down the path past the windmill and bolted towards the station, he wanted sanctuary.

How did his Uncle know so much about his private life?

Suddenly his mobile rang, interrupting his thoughts, he wanted to be doing something nice, here was his chance. Rita’s sultry voice was asking him if it was too early in the day for tea and cakes. Here was something traditional, tea and cakes. Here was something that wouldn’t puzzle him or make him frown. Rita beckoned him to the honey trap and willingly he ran to her.

Later on and back in Wood Green, the smell of roast pork and mashed potato hung in heavenly shrouds as Esther opened the door to Alf, the last to turn up for supper. Nathan and Rita had been waiting for him.

Alf blamed Dob for his late arrival. Dob had decided he needed more attention and had refused to move off Alf’s bike keys that had fallen on the floor invitingly for Dob’s nose to smell rear end pucker. Alf, not wishing to have to fish under Dob’s rear end and risk inadvertently grabbing Dob’s pucker as he inevitably would, had resorted to trying to haul him off the keys instead.

The shiny wood floor was the perfect surface for a squashed dog pucker and keys to slide along, scratching the floor without harming the pucker. Eventually, Alf had managed to persuade Dob that chocolate Jaffa cakes were a much better deal than sitting on keys, now pleasantly warm and moist. Dob eventually relinquished the keys for the Jaffa cakes. Alf gingerly picked up the keys after putting on rubber gloves, washed them dried them and sat and had a cigarette until he was calm.

Then he got on his bike and belted down the Hammersmith Flyover to get to Nathan’s in time for his favourite supper of pork and mashed potatoes followed by bread and butter pudding with apricot compote.

Fortunately Dob and his pucker had not spoiled the meal. The slurping noises and yummy sounds made for the little conversation. This was serious grub and needed their full attention. Esther was delighted with all, heaping on more mashed potato and gravy when required and followed by second helpings of bread and butter pudding. Only later when everyone had loosened their belts and moved to more comfortable chairs did they turn their attention to the business at hand.

Nathan told them all about Harry's phone call from the possibly transvestite Dutch guy called Carla. Esther filled them in on the security problem at the synagogue.

Nathan and Esther had agreed that it was best not to tell anyone else about the strangeness of the leather binding on the Torah and the velvet coverings of the Scrolls. They thought it was too vague for them all and not necessarily part of the mystery, more of an interesting observation on Esther's part. The most interesting bit was discovering what the beams were.

So that was all discussed first then it got round to Rita.

Having met Akbar for tea, Rita found out that the visit to the synagogue by the Dutch people had been suggested by Celine. She had explained to Akbar that they wanted to explore a culture and religion different from their own.

When Akbar had asked her what was so special about that synagogue, Celine had replied that it came up first on the web search and its site said it was proud of its policy of inclusivity, also it was local and fitted in with the plans of his Dutch friends.

Akbar had told Rita that he had asked his uncle how he knew about the visit. His uncle had seemed surprised that Akbar didn't know earlier about a planned visit to a synagogue. According to Rita, Akbar was quite shocked that his uncle had even considered it an option to let his nephew go, let alone encourage it. However his cousin Koyas's religious instruction essay seemed to have persuaded Akbar's uncle that Akbar really ought to go and to make sure he found out what all the fuss was about over the scroll. Akbar had also been asked to take photographs for the essay as it would help to get Koyas top marks.

How could Akbar possibly refuse, in fact he was by now intrigued himself. His life was changing very fast, he had expanded his ideas and was less afraid of breaking from his traditions. He was willing to embrace new ideas, even eating pork and kissing lady boys, he was still alive. His mortal soul did not feel bad or endangered. In fact, it felt quite excellent.

"I don't understand where Akbar and his uncle come into this" said Alf, "There is something not quite right, but I think Akbar is quite innocent, it's his uncle that seems to be the dicey one."

"I totally agree" said Rita "Akbar is a really sweet young thing. He seemed genuinely upset over how his uncle is acting."

Between you and me, I think Akbar is beginning to distrust his uncle, but then maybe I'm being over protective of him and seeing it all through rose tinted glasses."

"You are seeing him through a hormonal mist" snorted Esther "Believe me that could be dangerous, look where it got me."

Nathan looked at Esther with a huge pretence at indignity.

"Yeah, don't trust hormones, look at her taste, and see what she got. I on the other hand have excellent taste, see, no hormones" said Nathan.

"Well my pretty unshaven chum, if your taste in dresses is anything to go by then I don't trust your idea of Akbar at all" said Alf.

This was directed at Rita who was wearing what at first glance was a black and purple sweater but was in fact a very short dress. Rita gave Alf the finger, Alf returned it which Rita promptly sucked using plenty of tongue and lips. Alf backed off rapidly and looked at Nathan for support as he was too scared to do anything else.

"Don't look at me muthafucka, you took her on and now you deal with her" yelled Nathan from the kitchen munching on the last bit of crackling, "Have some beer you'll feel better."

Esther decided she'd better take charge of the situation.

"Right you guys, I include you in this Rita, stop farting around and listen. We need to get to that synagogue real soon. We need to get past their security somehow and find out what is in the scrolls. My hunch and my dear errant husband's is that its paper of some sort as it had a kind of

crackling feel to it.”

Esther was talking in her teacher tone as this was important. Big mistake. The boys were now on the last of the beers and talk had drifted to Christians daughter being spawned by a troll (the troll being Christian’s wife).

Esther gave up all hope of saying anything sensible to them, least of all defending poor Christians wife, and poured herself a large brandy instead.

CHAPTER 19

Shutters were down, lights were off on the main drag of Finchley Central. Those that were out and about looked furtive and haunted. This was Friday evening at 4.00 p.m. and it was the Sabbath. No good Jew was on the street and only those not in the know went in search of supplies. Rabbi H and his mother lit the candles and said the prayers for the Friday night service. He was talking to his mother about how the young girl Sheuli had written to him and thanked him. She had asked the Rabbi in her letter if Jews had arranged marriages and what a Rabbi’s thoughts on the subject would be. She had also asked if she could come to see a traditional ceremony with her friend Keighley.

The Rabbi was over the moon and felt that he truly was spreading the word of modern Jewry. His mother listened patiently, pleased for her son but not so sure about this cross cultural stuff. She wanted him to find a nice girl, get married and give her some grandchildren. She was just waiting for him to find the right one, but so far there had been nothing serious, nothing seemed to last.

However, she supported her son in everything he did and felt that apart from the lack of a girlfriend, she had done a good job of bringing him up, nearly alone after Solly died when David was young. The Jewish community had helped and now her son was well loved and respected, even if he was a little radical in his ideas.

So she helped and made him tea and latkas, a delicious potato and onion pancake, a bit like a bahji but without the spices. He did his correspondence before sundown, including writing a reply to Sheuli and her friend. The house was peaceful and quiet now, it was, after all, the Sabbath.

The Sabbath didn’t mean much to Alex. Suddenly he remembered, in the middle of his favourite computer game where he is killing a beautiful but evil woman about to destroy the nuclear submarine, that he hadn’t phoned his aunt Esther. He finished the bitch off and picked up the phone and dialled Esther’s number.

Alex’s call came as Esther was on her second brandy and giggling at a joke that Dave had texted. Dave jokes were usually filthy and they all came from his mother. That’s army families for you. Nathan found the phone down the side of the chair, greeted Alex and passed it to Esther.

“How’re you doing” slurred Esther, “How’s that deranged father of yours?”

“Oh same as usual, bossing everyone about, getting on mum’s nerves and still wrecking the house in the name of DIY.”

Alex and his father had got to the stage of testosterone rivalry. They didn’t know it yet, but that was nothing compared to the oestrogen rivalry that was about to be unleashed between Alex’s sister and his mum.

“What’ve you got for me then?” asked Esther smiling into the phone. She liked Alex, Alex liked her, he was smiling into the phone too.

“Funnily enough, Frampton Park Synagogue is the synagogue that my school is attached to. I went to Hebrew classes there for years and now help the Rabbi teach the younger ones. He’s great because he lets us use the hall for band practice for free.” Alex continued “He’s quite a strange guy for a Rabbi actually. He tries to keep up with the times which, as you know, is really unusual in the Jewish community. I like him, he’s OK.”

Esther’s eyebrows wiggled. They did that with brandy.

“I know the Rabbi, he was great when I took the girls for a visit. So you think he’s an oddball then?”

“Yeah, for example, he likes to get really involved with international Jewry. We have a lot of visitors to the Sabbath meetings and other do’s. People from all over the world. He really exploits

having cross-links with the plastic surgery stuff. So we have weird people who turn up because old Hershaw has persuaded them to try Judaism and happiness before liposuction and silicone. He actually counsels a lot of them. Strange, but his heart is in the right place. I do a lot of stuff too it helps me keep a bit of power over the boring and frumpy teachers at school. Hey I can exploit too!”

“It seems to run in the family” said Esther, “I blame your Grandfather myself. So, what bit do you, do then?”

Esther was doing a number on Alex now.

“Oh, lots of different things apart from teaching the basics, I help with functions, you know, weddings, funerals, Bar Mitzvah’s. I’m doing my girlfriend’s Bat Mitzvah next week. She’s unusual in the fact that she’s having a Bat Mitzvah at fifteen. Her father was nearly dying and her mother had a heart attack so she was the one looking after everyone until the school intervened and got her father into a home and her mother some home help.

Rabbi Hershaw was adamant that if Abi wanted a Bat Mitzvah later on she would have one. And he kept his word. Pretty bloody radical for a Rabbi don’t you think. So, because her Dad’s too ill to attend, I’m taking his place. That’s a bit scary though.”

“What, having a girlfriend or helping with her Bat Mitzvah?”

“Both” replied Alex. “She’s really got me in a corner over this, don’t even go into how, but she has and now I’m caught in her trap.”

“I’d love to see her and you in action. Shall I come and embarrass you?”

Nathan raised an eyebrow as she said this. Esther put her finger to her lips. She was at the point of turning the whole situation to her advantage and didn’t want Nathan to stop the flow.

“You couldn’t embarrass me” said Alex, who now had unknowingly fallen into another trap.

Esther closed in on him.

“Ok then, see you next week for the Bat Mitzvah. If I can’t embarrass my nephew in front of his girlfriend then this family is becoming boring.”

“Oh shit” said Alex, “You did that on purpose and I fell for it. Bloody women.”

“Yep” said Esther, “You’re smart but you’re young and have a lot to learn little puppy, and it’s too late now, you can’t back out. I promise to buy her a lovely prezzy though, which I know you will enjoy.”

“Is it legal?” enquired Alex not really cheered by the turn of events.

“You’ll see next week” said Esther.

“Oh double shit.” said Alex and hung up.

CHAPTER 20

Nathan was waiting in a famous Italian coffee shop in another part of London. He was having an iced chocolate with a vanilla ice cream in it. This was to round off the egg, tuna mayonnaise with avocado ciabatta sandwich he’d had for lunch. He’d breakfasted with the guys at Maserati’s at around eight that morning and had been feeling rather peckish. He’d also got a call from Ray and was watching the door for his old friend. Late as usual, Ray came in, ordered a coffee at the counter and sat down next to Nathan. It was Nathan who looked out of place in this very cool, trendy and hugely expensive coffee bar.

“Why here of all places?” complained Ray.

Nathan passed Ray a taste of his chocolate and waited for his reaction, his eyebrow raised in anticipation.

“Fuck me,” exploded Ray, “Get me one of those motherfuckers now.”

Nathan signalled to the girl behind the counter. They didn’t normally serve customers, it was one of those places that you had to queue and order and pay at the counter. They especially didn’t ordinarily serve motorbike scum couriers. But as you are beginning to realize, Nathan was no ordinary courier.

He’d noticed this place as soon as it opened and was one of their first customers and had been coming back regularly ever since. They now made his favourite sandwich to his liking and

perfection. He knew all the staff's names, was on first name terms with the manager and was often their guinea pig for new ideas. He even made suggestions for them to try, like the egg, tuna and mayo sandwich. Anyone who knew Nathan soon realized that he was a food obsessive. But he wouldn't eat crap unless he chose to, e.g. sausages. He loved crap sausage sandwiches with Daddies sauce on crap white bread, but that was his choice.

Nathan was meeting Ray here because the others didn't know that Nathan ate here. He hadn't kept it a secret, he just didn't tell them. Nathan sometimes liked to keep certain parts of his life separate. Esther and he had often eaten here if they were on the way to an opera or show. So it was the perfect place to meet Ray without any of the others bumping into him.

Once Sally, the waitress, had brought Ray his chocolate ice cream drink and Ray had wiped the cream off his upper lip, Nathan began telling him what they'd found out so far. Ray sat and slurped and listened carefully considering all the information and trying to tie it in with the bits that he knew and more importantly was willing to disclose.

Then Nathan asked if he'd found out anything more about Rich and Henrietta or the Dutch drug gangs in Utrecht.

"Ok" he said now that he didn't have his face full of chocolate drink.

"I know of one small gang in Utrecht. They may be the guys you were asking about but I don't think so. However, my Russian friends the dickheads, they really are dickheads, may know a little more given that many diamonds go through Holland and they're in the diamond game.

I could put a few indirect questions to them in the name of opening up another possible market for them. If you don't mind I am not going to ask my Jewish connection in Hatton Gardens, because I don't think that will go down too well and it would look too kosher on my part."

"Don't forget, these Russians, if you remember, are still like 1960's criminals. Remember Starsky and Hutch, well they're caricatures of the criminals that Starsky and Hutch fought."

"They're full of brawn and macho crap and flashy bollocks and not much else. I have no idea where their brains are. But I suppose they have the connections and in their country muscle and looks still count. I suppose in a way it's easier because they're so predictable. I tell you, my boss is going to be pleased because these guys are going to bring the whole caboodle down with them, when they go down. Which I can assure you my old buddy they will." After a moment he continued "That brings me to my next question. You haven't seen any of them at all have you?"

Nathan stared at Ray just a little too long before replying.

"So after all the bullshit you've just given me about brawn and brains etc. you've gone and lost them?"

"I'm not sure about lost. Lost implies a kind of permanence. I think it's more like missed them in passing, as it were."

"Well I can't help you there mate, sorry, I haven't seen them either. They can't be that far off because I bet that the only way they will get rid of those diamonds is through your Farringdon Road jewellers. If I know you. all other bets will be off."

"No, I think they are just checking out what their other options are."

"Come on Ray, you know this stuff. I sense all is not right with you. Are you getting cold feet and being insecure all of a sudden? This is not like you. What's up?"

"Oh I don't know. Perhaps I'm getting too old for this, everything seems to have changed. The technology is getting beyond the force, we can't keep up with everything and the bloody bureaucracy is driving me crazy. I think my days are numbered and that I am becoming a dinosaur, I think I've lost my knack, that's all. I used to be able to predict and pre-empt and kind of know the minds and actions of my prey. I don't think I can do that anymore. Maybe I'm past my sell-by date!"

Nathan took a few seconds to mull over what Ray had told him.

"Ray, how long have you been doing this? How long have you had to live secret lives? I bet you still don't have someone special and that your friends have all moved on, look at us, we did. You need a break. Wouldn't you like to have a holiday? I bet you haven't been away in years. That's

what I think's wrong. That is if you are not imagining all this shit."

Ray shifted in his chair, hiding behind his glasses, unsure of what to think but listening anyway.

"After your next bust why don't you take a holiday and recharge. You look great to me, but you seem tired. If the chase doesn't do it for you any-more, then stop chasing for a while. Anyway, I know I haven't told you what you want to hear, but you know I mean well, I really do. Go out and get the bad guys then take a holiday. If I see the Russians I'll leave a message as usual. In the meantime hang on in there pal. It's not you who's the fuck up. If anything I think you are just a little weary. Anyway, I've got to go, I'll get the bill. See you soon."

Nathan gathered his things, saluted Ray and paid the bill. He glanced over his shoulder to catch a glimpse of Ray. He hoped he had been able to help him. He knew Ray well enough to know he had needed someone to offload onto. It must be hard for him thought Nathan. After all this time Ray was getting tired and he knew it. Poor Ray. He really did need a holiday, maybe he actually did need to give it up finally. But what else could Ray do, Nathan couldn't imagine him in any other situation other than the Met. Well he would help Ray in any way he could.

He owed him that after everything they had been through together. Waves of guilt swept over Nathan as he realized he hadn't been in touch with his old friend in years and that it didn't seem to upset Ray in the least.

There had been no recriminations, in fact quite the opposite, almost as if it didn't matter because they would always be friends so what difference was a few years. Nathan was yet again humbled by this man's very hidden but huge capacity for love and friendship, and hoped he could live up to his promise. On his way out, he turned on his Radio and the familiar beeping began.

CHAPTER 21

The 18 carat gold jewellery glittered invitingly, laid out on the deep purple bedspread. Incense sticks were burning, leaving powdery spiral trails on the chipped white paint on Sheuli's windowsill. She played the heavy gold chains through her fingers mechanically without thought. To her they were meaningless almost symbolic of herself. Her dark eyes only mirrored what her parents wanted to see in them, an object to be exchanged in the name of duty, without any consideration of her nature or dreams.

Sheuli re-read the reply she'd received from Rabbi Hershaw, particularly the bit about following God being not just duty but a spiritual duty to find oneself in this world, this lay uneasy with her. She had always been a victim of duty. So where was her own spiritual path? Did it really lie in marriage? She knew her heart screamed no, but to listen to it was far too dangerous.

Blackness descended on her soul like treacle beginning to clog up all hope. No, not all hope. She phoned Keighley and asked her if she would go to the synagogue with her. She knew Keighley would, but it was only polite to ask. She could not stay on the phone long because her parent's monitored who she talked to and for how long, so Sheuli had to prioritise what she needed to say, politeness won, Keighley did not let her down. She felt better on all counts, a) duty and b) her spiritual path on which she had bravely started to wander. She slept fitfully that night, as did Alex, Nathan Esther and Akbar.

Rita didn't, she didn't sleep at all, and she couldn't have slept if she tried, not with the cocktail of drugs inside her, prescribed and otherwise. Her pursuit of the Dutchmen and the trail of Mr. G had finally coincided like a chaotic pathway of crazy paving in bright garish colours. The bright garish colours were not just in her imagination.

They were the colour of silky skin tight suits, glittering nail varnish, swirling dresses against a backdrop of black PVC, rubber and leather accessories. It wasn't just the music that heightened the senses, it was the smell of controlled chaos, on the edge of consenting perversity and the hunt of each individual's quest, spiritual or otherwise.

Rita took a moment to reflect, it was all she needed. She had been to that space in her mind many a time, knew it well and was comforted by it. She was still whole, still sane, still true to herself and still on her mission, now nearly completed. She moved on the dance floor to the lights and the

colours and the delighted person dancing with her in a lovely see through electric blue negligee over a black shiny PVC corset and thigh-length boots.

Mr. G, for indeed it was he, also took a moment to reflect and he too felt at one with himself, if only for the moments when his friends, old and new celebrated their clandestine moments of freedom. Mr. G didn't recognize Rita and would have no cause to anyway. At this moment his world of work and his mother was far from his mind. He just wanted to be herself, they both did. So they danced, talked discussed the best clubs, who they both knew. Rita listened, seeming innocent and approachable.

Her motives were always pretty harmless even in the most heightened moments of corruption, but never to add more hurt to already brave people, she knew that from her own experience. However, information was currency and power and Rita, innocent or not, had always had a liking for each of them. As such, Rita's people handling skills in areas of subterfuge were getting quite good. Good enough for the Dutch, good enough for Akbar and now good enough for Mr. G all of them walking that same crazy pathway.

Monday morning was a reality shakedown for Eileen, she hated Mondays. Not because she disliked work, that much wasn't true. She just liked to be girly on weekends, she had that in common with Rita and Mr. G and her working leathers reinforced her self-doubt about her own femininity. The fact that she was a married woman, to a man who was a real man, who happened to adore and cherish her didn't always cut it, even though she knew it should.

So when she found herself face to face with Mrs. G over the formica counter in the basic, functional reception of L.GW. Solicitors on this sunny Monday morning, Eileen was feeling a little vulnerable and Mrs. G didn't help.

"Before you even handle these letters go and wash your hands, you're a woman, and you should take more care of yourself. What are you doing in a job like this? Eyy, I know a job's a job, but couldn't you find something better? The little girls room is just down there and wipe the grime off your cheek too while you're at it. Here's a tip, go and see a manicurist, it's not so expensive, and it makes such a difference, gives a person class. I should know, even my son goes to a manicurist!"

In normal circumstances Eileen would have let her, now bruised, Irish pride run free and risk losing the contract defending her right to confront Mrs. G and her thoughtless personal remarks, but the revelation about Mrs. G's son going to a manicurist on top of all the other stuff that Nathan, Esther Alf and Rita seemed to be going through took precedence over her feelings. The nails won, Eileen got out ASAP and called Nathan, gabbling at him down the radio. Nathan's only logical response involved food.

"Time for apple crumble babes, on me because I can't understand a word you're talking about right now."

Nathan radioed off and called Rita, who was cleaning her bike wearing frilly yellow rubber gloves, blue overalls and diamanté flip flops.

"Eileen's called, she may have some more information for us, meet us in Maserati's if you can"

"Be there in five, save me some crumble. I wanted to see you all anyway. See if you can get Alf down there too."

"Rog that doll". Said Nathan.

"Doll", said Rita to herself. "He called me doll, I love that!"

Nathan had got to the café first and ordered three portions of crumble just to be on the safe side. He secured a six seater table making sure there was enough seats for Dave should he arrive too. Since the vibrator episode none of them ever had trouble securing a six seater, people hurriedly and willingly moved tables. He heard Eileen's bike pull up, then Alf's a few seconds later. They had just managed to settle down with their tea when the gravel scattered to the sound of a breaking fairing.

"The silly fucker's done it again" said Eileen. She knew the sound of her beloved's bike, they all did.

"When will he learn? He shouldn't try to do anything flash on Monday's, his brain can't take it, it hasn't clicked off from Sunday yet. I'm not going to help him. Someone go and see if he's damaged himself, I want to eat my crumble."

Nathan had just about reached the door as Rita pulled up. She'd changed out of the flip flops, even the sight of the yellow lacy rubber gloves couldn't put a smile on Dave's face, he felt even smaller than he was, but nevertheless, he was grateful that the gloves had caused more of a stir than his collision with the gravel.

The suits pretended not to notice anything, trying to look cool and unfazed, but they ate faster. The dealers just waved hello, giving Rita the thumbs up over the latex lovelies as they talked into their mobiles. Eileen slapped Dave over the head, silently, while eating crumble. Her silence was more effective than any verbal or physical assault. Rita pinged of her gloves and ran her fingers through her hair.

"I love cleaning, makes me feel so wholesome."

"You don't clean, you get one of your slaves to clean" said Nathan.

"Not today though" said Rita, "My, my hands are moist"

"Oh stop being so bloody camp" grunted Alf.

"Please" said Dave meekly "Let's be nice to each other, it's Monday, let's not make it any worse than it is."

"What were you trying to say to me Eileen?" enquired Nathan, "You sounded all het up."

Eileen hadn't even started on her crumble yet so Nathan realized that something important was about to be revealed.

"Mrs. G's son goes to have his nails done at a manicurist!" She blurted out.

"Considering all the stuff that's going on at the moment, I thought you ought to know. Also, she's a fucking ignorant bitch and please make sure that someone else does the drop next time or I'll swear to God I'll put my inelegant Irish fist into her fucking inelegant teeth."

Dave stopped looking down and brooding over his tea, damaged fairing and damaged thumb and looked at Eileen, concern written all over his face. 'Emotional barometer at 75 degrees and rising' thought Nathan, 'Christ they're going to blow, they're nearly as bad as Christian, at least he can cope with Mrs. G'

"I'll have a word with Brookes" said Nathan,

"Christian, myself or Alf can do them. Don't fret yourself Eileen. None of us like to see you upset, enjoy your crumble."

Dave was about to start up about Mrs. G. Alf pressed down hard on Dave's right foot where all of a sudden to his surprise he found further damage and pain. Alf pressed harder to get the message across. Dave groaned in agony, while Eileen ignored him.

Rita told them her news, listening carefully now, intrigued by it all. Alf, Nathan and Rita hadn't told Eileen and Dave everything in case they either fucked things up or put themselves or others in danger. Too late now, Nathan had forgotten about the 'need to know' policy and it was time to let them in on the situation.

Eileen had picked up the gist of things anyway, albeit she didn't know that they had already made the connection between Mr. G's nails and his involvement. After all, none of them had got it either, so now was the time to let them in on the whole thing. They might even be able to make some sense of some of it.

They may be a little drug fucked but they were also quite clever and devious thinkers, a plus in this sort of situation. Nathan glanced anxiously at Alf and Rita hoping for approval, which he felt he didn't get or deserve, as he told all. Dave and Eileen for once both listened without interrupting. Even more surprising was the fact that they both remained silent, even after Nathan had finished. Eileen had even left some crumble.

"Fuck's sake Nathan" said Dave after those few heavy moments of silence, "This is some shit going on here. How can we help?"

Nathan was touched by the sincerity of his two friends and even felt a little guilty at not trusting them from the beginning, but, as he reasoned to himself, he couldn't take chances when he wasn't sure what effect a pair of loose cannons like Dave and Eileen could inflict on God knows who or what. Too late now, they were in.

"That's really kind of you both" he replied, "But at this moment, I'm not sure what to do next. I

need to speak to Esther. She's going to F.P.S. for this Bat Mitzvah."

"Not on her own surely" said Eileen, "That's daft, I'll go with her."

In truth, Nathan hadn't thought much about Esther going to the synagogue 'do' on her own. He hadn't seriously considered going with her either. Eileen was right to raise this and was disgusted with himself that he hadn't worked it out for himself, wondering helplessly if all women were smart or just the ones he liked and loved.

He thought back to Esther's quip to Alex, 'you have a lot to learn little puppy', thinking to himself that he was more of an old mongrel and yet he still hadn't learnt much. He shook himself out of feeling sorry for himself and focused on the efforts and support of his friends.

"Eileen thanks for your offer sweetheart, but I'll go with her, let's see how it pans out about whether we need anyone else there or not and Rita, you did brilliantly. In all honesty I really can't think straight any-more today. How about if we all meet up tomorrow and see if anyone's had a brainwave or something?"

"Yeah, I'll go and speak to Dob about it" said Alf, "I think he's got the best chance of a good plan right now."

"Sarcastic muthafucka" retorted Nathan, relieved that good spirits and humour had returned to his little band of friends.

Alf raised himself on his two big hands and leaned across the table over to Nathan looking as though he was going to nut him one and jabbed a finger in his face, stabbing at every word.

"Yes, you're a big man but you're out of shape and for me it's a full time job!"

Then Alf did a little jig throwing his hands up in the air relishing his timing of his favourite Michael Caine quote.

"Don't you throw those spears at me mate."

Nathan's Michael Caine accent wasn't quite as good as Alf's but it made Alf grin. Nathan threw some money on the table for all the food and yelled.

"See ya muthafucka's" as he went out the door. He wanted to get the day finished and get home to Esther and sanity. Fat chance.

CHAPTER 22

Nathan had reached NW London in good time and they were both now in the kitchen and he was sitting at the table with a steaming cup of Earl Grey while Esther was poaching a chicken breast. She would save the stock to cook the French beans and reduce the rest to make a lemon butter sauce. Cooking was another of Esther's passions. She read cookbooks as other people read magazines. It was almost as if she'd eaten the meal she was reading about. He'd even caught her licking her lips after reading one of Gary Rhodes recipes and swallowing after looking up sticky toffee pudding from Nigella.

Coming from a Jewish household she was used to cooking for large amounts of people as most of the Jewish religious ceremonies and festivals involved copious amounts of food and people, but she created complete havoc in the kitchen using every pot and covering every work surface as she went. Nathan could never understand quite how or why she did it but he always cleared up willingly. The arrangement worked well, she loved to cook and Nathan loved to eat. Their kitchen was the hub of the house, sometimes Nathan cooked as he was pretty damn good too, but mostly he preferred to let Esther cook while he sat there and talked, read or just watched her move around the kitchen destroying order and creating chaos and going on about nothing in particular or very important. Nathan was stirring his tea idly, mulling things over.

"Tell Rita to get Akbar to invite her to the synagogue" suggested Esther, "We need a spy in their camp. Rita's good at spying and he's camp, we can't lose."

Nathan shuffled about on his chair still out of sorts, trying to get comfortable and still stirring his tea which he hadn't touched and was now cold.

"It can't do any harm can it? Having her there I mean."

"Not unless we ask her to do any harm" replied Esther chuckling.

Over in Hendon, Abigail was sitting on her bed cross legged and plugged into earphones with Hole, her favourite all female Punk Indie band, hollering songs with obscene words and phrases directly into the left side of her brain. On the right side of her brain, Hebrew words translated themselves to form her point of discussion as tradition required for any Bar or Bat Mitzvah. Her chosen subject was 'Did the Torah foresee a place in Jewish law where women had the right to speak at men's meetings?' The subject matter on the left side of her brain being incongruous with that on her right side. No matter, she was plugged in and plodded on, making sure she was sure of herself and her topic by the time her Special Day arrived.

Also, in Hendon, Celine, not a million miles away from Abigail, looked lovingly in the car showroom window at a £25k Mercedes 280 SL sports car. She knew it would be cheaper in Germany, but who cares, she had been told that soon she would receive her percentage of the deal plus a stake in future profits as long as she kept them informed of all movements and plans of the relevant parties. This was not hard for her. These particular Dutchmen were so simple minded having no realistic vision other than half baked ideas of another sixties style revolution, for this bunch the drugs had got them first!

That lady boy Rita, didn't seem to be much different either, she just liked to party. The Dutchmen had offered the silly bitch free drugs. Celine laughed to herself at that, knowing that nothing in life was free. Everything had a price, you just had to see if your gains were worth it.

In Celine's case, they usually were and she thought anyone else who thought differently was a mug. She'd no time for mugs, and thought Rita or Gordon or whatever she called herself, was a mug too and was therefore dismissive of her.

In another part of North London, on the plate of a lucky diner sat a huge edible fan made from coconut and rice flour. This Dhosa was so big that it partially blocked the view of the faces of the two diners sitting opposite each other. Gordon, who was definitely more than just a little bit Rita today, took Akbar's hand in hers as they watched to see how the other diners reacted, while Akbar pondered how to eat his fan.

"If it was me" murmured Rita, looking steadily at Akbar, "I would take the whole thing in both my hands and delicately nibble at it, bit by bit and savour every inch whilst admiring its construction."

Still holding Akbar's gaze, she licked her lips slowly. Akbar blanched.

"I would love to see you do that, shall I order one for you,? My Uncle tells me he has it on good authority that this is the best vegetarian restaurant in the area."

"What else did your uncle say?" asked Rita as she gently stroked Akbar's hand.

"That I have to go to the synagogue, but to tell you the truth, it makes me feel very uncomfortable."

"Poor thing! I'd like to go to the synagogue too. Can I come with you, and then maybe you won't feel so alone?"

Akbar raised his sweet puppy face and sad eyes to Rita's.

"Would you do that? You seem to be the only one who really understands how I feel. Thank you for being so kind and good to me."

Rita didn't blink because she didn't have to hesitate. What she said was true. She really did love being with him.

She went on.

"Are you sure you want me to go with you knowing that I'm, you know...."

Her voice trailed off, eyes lowered demurely, letting Akbar gracefully back out, but knowing that he wouldn't. From the look on Akbar's face she knew he meant it, for he looked horrified. Rita was not playing now, this was for real, a turning point and the last thing she wanted to do was to hurt or abuse this sweet precious man who could not lie or be deceitful if he tried. She really needed to know that he did accept him and would be comfortable being seen with him, as Rita, in public. Not just in any place, a holy place of all things.

"I am who I am, soon I will only be Rita, and Gordon's body will no longer exist. Could you accept me going with you this way?"

"I am who I am" he replied hotly, "You accept me, I accept you. Please don't ever ask me that again. Just be you, and then I can be me."

Rita was truly taken aback at the ferocity of Akbar's outburst. She welled up with emotion and unexpected tears of happiness. For the first time in many years she started to feel really loved in every sense and on every level for who she really was. It was liberating and wonderful. She just held on to his hand, no need for words between them, something wonderful had just happened and they were both in awe. Conversations disappeared into the background of all the other diners, and their relationship with each other took a turn in another direction.

Reader, I invite you to observe the public scenario. In many cases the slight touch on the wrist or shoulder of a lover, the almost imperceptible arch of an eyebrow, the rub of a hand on the back of the neck raising the breast seductively, a crossing and the uncrossing of legs, a just so slightly too long gaze held by the other.

All this and more sucked our newly discovered pair into the teeming cross fire of the secret and sometimes puzzling messages given to each other in circumstances such as this. A common condition the world over which has afflicted humans since time immemorial.

CHAPTER 23

Ray was feeling particularly sorry for himself. Talking to Nathan had comforted him but also disturbed him at the same time. He knew in his heart of hearts that he was truly very burnt out and envied Nathan's simple life, but knew he couldn't live like that.

He was caught in a typical Irish dilemma brought on by his insatiable curiosity about anything devious. He decided to make some more investigations himself. You know, just finding out about how bad things can get. Or perhaps just how good. He called up his Russian 'friends' and arranged to buy them a drink at his club, Groucho's. Yes, this scruffy detective had far reaching connections indeed, mostly seedy and infamous but some glamorous too. He had been around the streets of London for a very long time saving many people's reputations, marriages, jobs etc. by being just that bit more informed than most in his line of work.

He usually managed to have an edge for someone when they needed it and if, in his opinion they deserved it. There were many of the rich and famous who had also come from poor backgrounds and had wanted to do something good to help others but had got themselves into serious problems through being exploited or just innocently caught up in someone else's shit. He had rescued them, given them ways out without anyone knowing except those who'd had most to lose and they were usually the bad guys anyway.

All in all things usually were a win win situation for him. He was quite happy being the one who was a bit of an enigma. He didn't have the ego for bragging, he had the ego for being the best in his job and for looking after his team, even if he did use the most bizarre and unconventional methods i.e. a fine line between each side.

He wasn't married, had no kids. His emotional and private life had very little boundaries by normal standards. No, as far as Ray was concerned you should be guided by your heart, your soul, your willingness to play all the games, as long as you were intrinsically honest and your motives were true. In reality he was a man way out of time. They hadn't invented Ray's world yet so he had to make a start without them.

In the following days, he found out more about the Dutchmen. His car dealer friend, a lithe and beautiful and erudite Columbian man called Raul, who has always liked Ray since he'd helped him get rid of a kilo of Mazari Sharif No.1, the best Afghan black hash, EVER. This was in the days before he made detective and he'd just tipped him off about enquiries from a nice young Dutch girl.

This communication between Raul and Ray was a regular occurrence as they were sometime lovers and were still meeting regularly. Not necessarily out of romance but more friendship. The tip-off was inadvertent on Raul's part as it was just mentioned in conversation. However, you may well now realize, one of Rays gifts was to put seemingly useless apparently unrelated bits of information together and come up with something really fucking interesting. Raul, was used to Ray's little ways

and unusual requests and so was not surprised when Ray asked for her details.

He texted them to him the very next day. Documents that are not usually allowed public scrutiny, such as private phone bills etc, were looked at by our dear detective and slowly Ray formed a fantastic plan and wondered if it could be tweaked, ever so carefully, in favour of both himself and Nathan?

Oh yes it jolly well can, he thought.

CHAPTER 24

Numbers were being crunched in favour of some and against others. Deals in the financial world were being thrown across tables in office blocks in towns and cities across countries and continents. The players had to succeed, especially if it was their own money and fuck' em if it wasn't.

One such player, a relative of Esther, had an in-between moral position of the bigger picture. The big boys had plenty of money to forget about losses, the little ones couldn't afford to lose. As such, Julien made sure that he kept a low profile but had plenty of information to make his status unimportant. A seemingly small player in the very big game, he was as unnoticed like a shadow, watching for the gaps and the opportunities to change fortunes for those who needed it. He himself was confident that he had the high moral ground. Knowing that the real thieves and inadvertent murderers, who knows how many deaths had been caused by the heartlessness of those big players, were at liberty.

Julien had known of some of the circumstances surrounding some of those deaths caused by these free, heartless, powerful people in the financial world. Some by suicide, the cause and effect, it's still death. Therefore, Julien robbed the rich of information to pass on to the needy. He moved in mathematical grey areas which only top level players would understand if they weren't so complacent. Their complacency was his advantage, He was an ideal candidate. The receipt of a letter delivered by Christian Lake to his office at Lloyds, caused him to do his research as requested, on company time of course, and then he waited.

That same day, a letter was waiting for Nathan when he got back. Esther wasn't home, she was at a staff meeting and that could go on for ages. Nathan was home now.

He took off his leathers, had a quick wash and eased into comfortable loose pants and another Hawaiian shirt. He then marinated the lamb in garlic, rosemary and thyme, olive oil and freshly squeezed lemon juice, poured himself a single malt whisky, a ten year old Laphroaig being his favourite, Ardbeg being pretty close second when he could get it. He sat down to read the days mail while he waited for her to come home. He opened a letter, read its contents and shot out of his seat, paced the floor furiously, downed the whisky in one and went to get another, downed that and sat back down to look at the letter again.

It only contained one sentence.

Contact Julien. You'll know when.

He looked at the date, yesterday, WC1, London. He was going through all the possible people and connections to WC1 and Julien. Who could have possibly written this letter? Muttering to himself as the minutes went by. This was how Esther found him, muttering and gibbering to himself.

"What the fuck has Julien got to do with any of this?" he screamed as soon as he saw her.

She dropped her bag on the floor and moved right into his space.

"Stop! Sit! Here, have another whisky, talk some sense and stop screaming!"

Nathan dropped into the seat Esther was pointing at, hunched over and hung his head dejectedly in his hands.

"This is too much, read this" and he handed the letter to Esther.

"Julien?" she echoed.

Nathan looked up at her "So how will we know when? Can we assume that Rich wrote this or someone else?"

“Ah” said Esther, “My guess is that it’s Rich. I bet he had advice from Julien at some time or another, seeing as he’s in the money business and is a class act himself. Talk about keeping it in the family.”

“Is this ‘when’ then?” asked Nathan, half to himself.

“I don’t know, but I suppose that if we have to ask then it’s not.”

“Good point, it’s the only thing that makes any sense and that’s not saying much. God I wish this would sort itself out, I want to go back to our old life. Should we call Julien?” he asked again, searching desperately for reassurance of some sort.

“No” said Esther again, “I don’t think we should do anything as obvious as that, I think that Julien would probably call us if he had to. The other thing is, I don’t know, I just get the feeling that if we call Julien now we could be making a real fuck up, instinct only, but let’s run with it for now.”

“I don’t care any-more. I don’t want to think about it.”

Esther could see that there was no point in discussing anything further with Nathan, he was done-in and depressed, better to leave it for now.

“Whatever you say sweetheart,” she said and passed him another whisky.

The lamb was left to marinade itself.

They ordered a take away that evening, all thoughts of love making and creativity knocked out of them by that one sentence in the letter.

That night, as Esther was sleeping noisily beside him, her snoring was reminiscent of Charing Cross Station at rush hour, Nathan slipped out of bed and went to call Ray. Ray was only slightly surprised by Nathan’s call, not because of the time of night, but because of the day of the week. Sunday’s were a rare occasion for them to meet in the old days, as it was usually recovery day for the farce of being ready for work on the Monday shift for both of them. Their extracurricular activities during most of their weekends having usually, been paid for by our dear government, under the heading of Gathering Information.

They agreed to meet at the old place By Carl Marx’s grave in Highgate Cemetery. For once, Nathan took the car as he knew Esther would wake at the sound of the bike and he really didn’t want her to know that he had contacted Ray. She didn’t know about Ray to any extent and he thought that somehow, it might be better for her in the long run if she didn’t have another person to worry about. Particularly one who was also an unknown quantity. This is one action that none of the others would know about, unless things really did go wrong and that’s how Nathan hoped to ensure his friends and loved ones safety and if necessary innocence in a court of law.

They both looked like a couple of ghouls sitting there in the dark, and although it seemed a good time and place to reminisce, especially after the last conversation Nathan had with Ray, Nathan did not bother with small talk, and Ray, knowing Nathan of old knew he would somehow benefit from all this. Either in his career or in his pocket. So he listened, not interrupting whilst Nathan gave him the full account of things so far.

“Oh Ray, just one more thing before I have to get back, those guys who were following you into the jeweller’s? I can’t remember everything. Tell me what happened with them, you didn’t have time before”

“My God Nathan, you really don’t remember?” exclaimed Ray. Ray had a strange voice. It was slightly effeminate, not high pitched as such but one could feel a kind of feminine slant to it without it being obvious.

When Ray was surprised, like now, the higher pitch was more obvious.

“Those were the same guys we tried to take down and take a cut from about eight years ago, before the Russian mafia got to be so organized. The smaller one, who you totally did over, was not exactly resisting arrest, but more like resisting a donation to the cause, our private cause, i.e. some of the profits out of Russian black market drug funds. Please don’t tell me you can’t remember that!”

Nathan sat there for a few minutes squirming, he didn’t want to tell Ray that he really didn’t remember the incident in detail. As Nathan had often explained to Esther when she was incredulous at his lack of memory, he really had lost his index. Trouble was that Ray guessed his dilemma.

“OK you moron. They were the Russians on that diamond job. We had tracked them for months then we got them to try to rob other jewellers so we could arrest them but only according to our time scale, so we could take some of the diamonds. I had pretty much most of the jewellers in on it for the insurance, don't you remember that? We used Julien for that one. It went wrong but with just enough time for us to pull out clean and we were never discovered as undercover. Thankfully we still aren't because they contacted me a few months ago for another tie in. You witnessed the meeting a few days ago. Man I still can't believe you forgot that one, we would have pulled in thousands.”

The mention of Julien did the trick and then Nathan remembered the whole business. He grinned in the darkness.

“Yeah, now I remember, so they want to try for another go. Well Ray, good luck to you man. I don't think I can take the strain of all that anymore, not now that I have got to keep reasonably straight because of Esther” Nathan sighed “I know you are not feeling so hot yourself, but I really cannot countenance Esther being hurt, or losing her for that matter. I feel that she's in danger now, or maybe that's me being paranoid. I must be, otherwise I wouldn't have had to call you this time. But I don't know how else to protect her and I don't even know what I am protecting her from. Oh God this is really a fucked up situation. I'm sorry to drag you into this but there is no-one else who I can trust and who could help. I'm sorry it had to be you.”

“Jeez, what a pair we are. I feel sorrier for you though because you have been dragged into this involuntarily. Me, it's my job, even though I don't like it right now, but that's just how it is. Yea, sure I'll help as much as I can. I'll see what I can do about keeping watch over Esther for you, but to be honest, your pals seem scarier than mine, especially Eileen and Rita, well she's just scarier in a different way, I don't even want to go there! You'd better get back to Esther. She may have woken up and is lying there worrying about you. Go on, get yourself home.”

“What about you, what are you going to do now I've kept you awake?”

“Oh, I'm going off to this little bar that I know for a night cap then home to bed where I'll leave my brain to ferment a plan, until my phone wakes me. Good night Nathan. Hasta la vista baby.”

They left each other with Nathan promising to keep Ray up to speed on everything and Ray promising again to keep an eye on Esther and to see if he could find out anything more. Ray promised to tread very carefully around the Rich enquiries as he too agreed that things could turn nasty given the situation and his experience of just how these things could go. Another factor of course that intrigued Ray, was not only that he would be able to hopefully do the right thing but more so, he had a hunch that there may just be a fair amount in it for him and as such, as usual, he was going to do nothing by the book, except the one he wrote that is. They left each other as quietly as they arrived.

The third letter to be received that day was addressed to Rabbi Hershaw it was from a Carl Ingerson who was Dutch. He said in his letter that he had seen the website and was intrigued by such open views and the idea of inclusivity within religions. Would the Rabbi object if he visited the synagogue during his time in London. He went on to explain that the only problem being that his time was short but he felt that this was an important and often overlooked part of British culture. Would it be possible to visit next Saturday week? Carl ended his letter saying that he looked forward to the Rabbi's reply at his earliest convenience.

Rabbi H. looked at the the seats in the synagogue and realised how few family members Abigail would have to celebrate her special day, poor kid. There would be plenty of room on Saturday, for her Bat Mitzvah, for one more mind to open and he felt sure that the more the merrier for her Bat Mitzvah would help to make her feel special indeed.

There was enough money from the generous donations of the community to pay for extras and this was his goal and his message of inclusivity, besides, on Pesach, it was well accepted to invite any Jew who couldn't go to a Passover service of their own. They would be made welcome here.

Well, the world had moved on and it wasn't just for Passover and it wasn't just for Jews. He telephoned Carl, had a heartening conversation with the well spoken and charming young man and reassured him that he would be able to visit on Saturday week for morning prayers and after that, a

very important tradition in the Jewish religion, for a very special young woman.

He also said it would be a lovely gesture if Carl could bring a little gift and that there would be members of the congregation available to show him around afterwards and to answer any questions he may have. Would that be helpful and was that what he had in mind?

The telephone call ended with Carl thanking the Rabbi profusely, enquiring as to what kind of gift would be suitable and how much he was looking forward to the visit and the Bat Mitzvah. Carl turned to the others who were waiting to hear the result of the telephone conversation, in the sitting room in that lovely little Bed and Breakfast.

“Just as I said, next Saturday. Relax everyone, it’s all going to plan.”

CHAPTER 25

His yellow tinted glasses were all askew and if looked through at that particular level, one would see a horizon of approximately thirty four inches or equivalent to an inside leg measurement from the floor. Esther tried to straighten them but in vain, Nathan just kept on jiggling. She decided a closer inspection was absolutely necessary. Nathan jiggled some more and managed to poke Esther in the eye with his large and fully extended dick. Nathan’s impression of Elephant Man wearing glasses and sneezing could be dangerous at the best of times. She got off her knees, momentarily to take a swig of hot tea and did her own impression of biting off more than she could chew. Elephant Man turned, didn’t move and stood to attention for his second morning cuppa. The phone rang. Esther deliberately stopped and looked up at her husband whose expression would have been understood by most men as ‘what the fuck, oh help me Jesus!’ She paused and stared at him hypnotically for just exquisitely too long.

“Shall I answer do you think?”

Nathan rolled his eyes wildly.

“You bitch!”

“Yes, but shall I answer it?” she asked mildly and took another slug of tea, much to Nathan’s relief in more ways than one! After partaking tea in a more conventional manner, Nathan dialled last number recall to see who the bastard was whose timing couldn’t have been worse, or better depending on how you look at it. It turned out to have been Rita. She had some news that had them both sitting up to attention. Akbar had told Rita about the visit to the synagogue next Saturday morning with the Dutchmen.

“Well, we knew about this visit anyway didn’t we” said Esther.

“Yes darling, but listen to this,” Nathan said “Akbar couldn’t understand how they knew about which synagogue and what date. He hadn’t discussed it with them, he only heard about it from his uncle, so how did they know about it?”

“That’s easy, they were his uncle’s friends first. That’s how.”

“I suppose so, but all of this is a bit suspicious, too many coincidences for my liking. I never thought I’d see the inside of another bloody church again, let alone a synagogue. I don’t think I want you going on your own.”

Esther didn’t say anything. They both sat sipping tea, each thinking things through.

“Ok“ she said, “What good will it do, even if something does happen?”

“Oh I don’t know, I could kill anyone if they hurt you, maim a few Philistines, run amok amongst the Cholla (special bread that is eaten on the Sabbath and at other ceremonies) get drunk on Sabbath wine. I’ll find plenty of things to amuse myself either way.”

Just as an aside, Dob’s eye level view was also a strange one that Sunday, upside down actually and very jerky. He had eaten a golf ball that had, one assumes, accidentally been putted into Alf’s back garden. Most people would have gone into a major panic, but Alf had actually made a particularly unpleasant character eat a golf ball once a long time ago. Alf still justified this because of the large bruise and bloody nose of his mother.

It was his father who’d been pinned to the sofa by Alf when he tried to force the said golf ball down his throat. Not that his father could see if it was the golf ball, due to the black eyes he’d

recently received from his son. But nonetheless, who's worried about looks at a time like that. So when his father had miraculously swallowed it, Alf realized that it was not worth doing time for manslaughter over that bastard, so had tipped his father upside down and used a generous amount of brute force and a modified Heimlich Manoeuvre or something like it to dislodge the ball.

So back to Dob and now, Alf calmly grabbed Dob by his hind legs, shook him out like a pillow case and thumped Dob heartily on the back too, also using the Heimlich Manoeuvre or something like it. After two attempts, the ball was ejected. Dob was put down, wagged his tail and went for another go. A kick in the testicles from Alf put a stop to all thoughts of continuing with this new game, the phone saving them both from more exertion, and the dog from more pain.

CHAPTER 26

The telephone conversation with Abigail and her Grandma went like this:

Grandma: "This is what I have written. Today is Sunday, Abigail my Grand-daughter is coming to see me. I don't know what time she will arrive." "So may I ask whose calling?"

Abigail: "I'm Abigail, Grandma."

Grandma: "I'm your Grandma then."

Abigail: "Yes Grandma, I am coming to see you today."

Grandma: "Oh yes, I remember something about that, I wrote it down. Hang on a minute, I've got a piece of paper with everything written on it. What day is it?"

Abigail: "It's Sunday today Grandma."

Grandma: "Oh, then you're coming to see me, but I don't know what time. I've got a cousin called Abigail I think. I think she's coming today too."

Abigail: "I'm Abigail your Grand-daughter, you haven't got a cousin called Abigail."

Grandma: "That's strange, I am sure I have a cousin called Abigail, She used to live with me when I was a girl in Canada. It's lovely to hear you again Abigail, Do you remember swimming in the lakes when we were young?"

The conversation carried on like this for some time. Abigail had fond memories of her Grandmother from when she was a little girl. She remembered playing with the toys from the big basket in the sitting room, remembered eating chocolate cake and olives with her Bubbala (Yiddish for Grandmother) when she was waiting for her mother to pick her up after work.

She remembered Bubbala Celia singing, as together they made coconut pyramid cakes for Passover, the most important holy ceremony of the Jewish year. Remembered holding her hand when she came to pick her up after school. Abigail had enough memories for both of them, so it was OK to her that her Bubbala had lost most of hers to Alzheimer's.

Bubbala Celia was happy enough though. People came to see her and brought her nice things to eat. Although sometimes she couldn't remember eating them. Bubbala Celia still lived in her father's old bungalow, Abigail and her mother lived nearer to the hospice where Abigail's father was. They had wanted Bubbala to come and live with them, but Bubbala Celia loved the bungalow. She was happy shouting at the squirrels who insisted on burying things in her beloved back garden. She knew where everything was in the house and as long as someone phoned her and told her it was time to go to bed, she could turn off the fire at night and turn it on again when she woke up in the morning. Also making sure she put the dead match in water before it went into the rubbish, just as someone called Minnie, her daughter she thought, had told her to.

Bubbala went into the kitchen, talked herself through how to make tea and started to make a sandwich for her visitor. After all, if she didn't know what time this person, what was her name again, was going to come she had better be prepared.

Bubbala hoped it wouldn't be too long, she got bored with anything that took too long. Restless, she looked through her diary. Unfortunately she sometimes got into even more of a muddle not being absolutely sure it was Sunday and March when really, it was a Wednesday in May depending

where her diary fell open. Bubbala Celia had EVERYTHING written down. 'Abigail's Bat Mitzvah on Saturday'.

'Oh no' she thought, 'Today's Saturday, I need to get ready for the Bat Mitzvah. I hope that nice young woman on the phone gets here soon or I won't be able to go.' Bubbala looked in the mirror to see if her hair was OK. She liked her hair, it was thick and silver and down to her shoulders and it curled under at the ends. She patted the curl, smiled at herself and looked at her figure.

"I'm a lucky woman" she said out loud. "I have lovely hair, a good figure and lovely people come to see me. Now, what shall I wear to the party?"

She went into the bedroom and started looking through her clothes. 'Are all these mine?' she thought to herself, 'I don't remember buying these at all, but still, I'm a lucky woman, having all these clothes.'

Bubbala Celia was a lucky woman. She was lucky that she remembered why she was lucky. She was lucky that as yet her brain had not completely blanked out all her senses and that she knew she was loved.

Back at Alf's in the kitchen, Alf was cooking scrambled eggs, a little runny for him, firmer for Dob, his farts were unbearable otherwise. He was having a conversation with Nathan, cradling the phone into his shoulder but still stirring the eggs at the same time.

"Yep, I agree, Eileen's right, it just took you a while to catch up. No, she can't go alone. So you'll be wearing one of those little hats then?"

"Don't you take this any further" warned Nathan "Or the dog gets it."

"The dog nearly got it this morning, I'll tell you about it tomorrow, see ya muthafucka."

In his usual way, Alf hung up before Nathan could say any-more. Back at home, Nathan went into the kitchen where Esther was chopping a Savoy cabbage, to go with roast duck and home-made apple sauce laced with Calvados and potatoes roasted in the duck fat. The carrots and parsnips were prepared and ready to add to the roasting tin later on. 'God I love her' thought Nathan as he watched her chop the cabbage. He poured himself some more Calvados, swiped at the apple sauce, avoiding Esther's deadly sharp Sabatier swooping down towards his hand and hugged her from behind, nuzzling her neck. She carried on chopping the cabbage, both comfortable in their silence, happy in each other's company.

He'd met Esther in the hazy times of his drug filled heydays/years with Rich. Esther had opened a delicatessen/restaurant near where he worked. He didn't know her then but he knew her father from before, as they were good friends. Esther's father and Nathan had a passion in common. This entailed leather, bondage, whips and chains. Nathan's girlfriend at the time was making money humiliating and torturing young wealthy accountants and middle management types.

He'd met Monty, Esther's Father at one of Monty's dungeon parties where Nathan's dominatrix girlfriend Clare had a client who was to be initiated by public humiliation instead of private. Once a slave, always a slave. Nathan had always attended Clare's bookings in the evening as security as he was an expert.

Monty was an erudite eccentric, self educated man who appreciated intellectual stimulation in conjunction with the act of physical and emotional debasement of his submissives. He was a Grand Master, known throughout the sado masochistic scene of London as the Godfather of the London and European clubs and party's, private or otherwise. He was also well known for the manufacture of torture equipment. He'd been a sewing machine dealer before he retired. There was an immediate friendship between the two men even though they were generations apart.

They both had an appreciation of the subtle side of the application and execution of domination and bondage. Indeed, Monty was an artist and Nathan didn't know much about art, but he knew good art when he saw it. Hence Nathan and Clare were constant guests at the dungeon parties and the men's friendship grew beyond that. Also they shared the same birthday. Consequently, Nathan knew Monty before he knew Esther. It was only when Esther did the catering for one of Monty's specials that he recognized the woman from the deli next door. She looked as good out of her clothes as in them. He watched as, now the catering was sorted, like father, like daughter, she was ordering her own particular slave to get her whips, get her drink and then get down on all fours and

start barking like a dog. She then laid into his PVC lined shorts with her favourite crop, telling him to shut up he was a bad dog. She slipped his gag and collar on after she had shredded the shorts and led him round the house occasionally kicking him and flicking him with her whip, clearly with practised dexterity.

Clare was in the upstairs dungeon earning her money. Monty had put his live-in slave into the cage with another young, barely clad nubile, ordering them to put their tongues in every orifice until they were both licked clean, he of course would decide when that would be.

“Have you met my daughter Esther, Esther, meet Nathan. Nathan rides motorbikes.”

“Do you like to scare young women with your motorbike?” enquired Esther with a piercing stare and an incongruous ‘Mona Lisa’ smile.

“Do you like to be scared?” retorted Nathan.

“Only when I permit it,” she replied with a lizard like licking of her lips.

Monty looked from one to the other and got up to go and get more ice for his drink, leaving Esther and Nathan in their own world and in the midst of what could only be described as a feminist nightmare. Except most of the women were being beaten by women as were most of the men, who were either gagged, dragged or splayed on various bits of equipment. This was after all, an Equal Opportunity Dungeon Party.

Nathan and Esther bantered with each other but quietly taking each other’s measure. They got on well, very well, each time they met after that, even at her Deli. Clare was conceited enough not to notice, but Esther was in love with someone else and then they both lost contact. Years passed, Clare had taken the last of Nathan’s sanity and all his antique furniture, and Esther had been kicked into touch by her lover.

She had gone bankrupt and four years later was a teacher. Monty had taken things into his own hands. Nathan and Monty had always kept in touch through birthdays and other things so he arranged for Esther to re-meet Nathan and hoped that Nathan would save Esther from her broken heart and help her to start living how he thought she should live. Decadently. Nathan was the key. After all, what else is a father for? So they met thanks to some devious manoeuvring by Monty, fell in love and here they were in the here and now ‘When Harry Met Sally’ eat your heart out, but with a major fucking problem on their hands. So back in the kitchen, Nathan is still nuzzling her neck.

“I’m going to make you suffer later.”

“I’m going to make you suffer now” she said and turned around and started undoing his belt.

The evening passed with banter and food and lovemaking in no particular order, until they both fell asleep in a heap on the bed. Esther woke up feeling very out of sorts. Nathan who couldn’t sleep again, probably for the same reasons, had gone for a ride on the bike, the house was empty. She went downstairs and made herself a cup of tea and stirred it aimlessly. This whole thing about the synagogue next week was not sitting well with her.

It was all focusing in on the scrolls and on that beautifully bound and illustrated holy book. The one she’d seen on the Bimah. She was now quite certain that the book and the scrolls she’d seen had been tampered with. She played the whole thing over in her mind again and again. The feel through the leather and the subtle unevenness of the coverings of the scrolls.

The parchment scrolls contained the holy words but the paper in both covers remained the mystery.

Now the only mystery.

This was the focus then, for all of them, even if she didn’t know who all of ‘them’ were. She was certain that the paper she suspected of being in the covers was what everyone was after.

What else could it be? And what kind of paper could it be. She wasn’t even sure that it was paper yet. Just going with a strong feeling that could cause so much havoc in people’s lives if she was wrong. Should she even risk it? Perhaps she should call it all off, but then what would happen to Rich. And let’s face it as soon as Julien was involved, it seemed as though they might be on the right lines. But more importantly, how would Nathan live with himself, knowing he had let someone like Rich down?

Rich knew he was a knight in shining armour and obviously how to press Nathan’s buttons.

However he clearly didn't know how Esther ticked. He'd just assumed, she supposed, that she would think all these things through and come up with what? With telling Nathan to give up this stupid idea of saving Rich? Esther knew that it could definitely come between them. If it went wrong and something terrible happened, that would come between them too, and Rich knew that as well. Either way they were doomed. Even if they did nothing.

So that was it, the bottom line had been reached as far as the decision to continue was concerned. They had no choice but to continue. She hoped Rich knew what he was fucking doing and that it had better be worth it, or else she would make it her personal vendetta to take her revenge for messing with their lives. She picked up the phone and called her nephew Alex. It answered on the third ring, Alex had been waiting for Abigail to call.

"Why aren't you at school then?" she asked when she got through.

"Study leave" he replied, "Are you really coming next week?"

"Ah" said Esther "That's what I wanted to talk to you about."

"Please tell me you're not coming" He begged, a note of hope in his voice.

"Well actually, we're both coming. It might be a busy day for you. Have you got a few minutes to talk? I'm going to ask you something very strange."

"Shoot" said Alex.

"I don't want you to question it, I certainly don't want you telling your father anything about it, which is another reason I don't want to give you any explanation."

There was silence down the phone.

"It's not going to embarrass me even more is it?" asked Alex.

Esther sometimes forgot he was only young.

"Yep, I'm actually going to ask you to embarrass yourself more."

"Oh no!" groaned Alex, "Don't ask me, please don't ask me."

"Listen carefully Alex, this is actually quite serious and not a joke. I need you to create a diversion on Saturday. Do you trust me and do you want a new drum kit?"

"No and yes in that order"

"Well, if you want the drum kit you have to trust me."

"Can it be any drum kit?"

"That depends on what you are going to, shall we say reclaim for me" another silence.

"This sounds really dodgy. What do you want me to do?"

"Use your ingenuity and creativity. I want you to, as I said before, create a diversion at the Bat Mitzvah, then I want you to rip open the lining of the scroll covers and take out the papers that have been secreted in them. I'll give you one of my sharpest knives for this job that you may keep. Then I want you to hand me the Talmud and, equally importantly, hand me the papers and not look at them or ask me any questions."

"Fucking hell Aunt Esther, what makes you think I can do all that, even if I wanted to?"

"Actually", replied Esther, "You have no choice, you have to do it or someone may well get hurt, please don't ask any more about it. It's safer if you don't."

"Why haven't you gone to the police if it's so unsafe?"

A good question thought Esther.

"Because I have no firm evidence of anything, just snippets of info that I am not prepared to divulge to you or anyone. However, if things go wrong I have enough evidence to ensure you do not end up as one of the bad guys, quite the opposite in fact. If things go OK, you will definitely end up as one of the good guys with a new drum kit. There, how does that sound?"

"Why me, why me" wailed Alex.

Esther interjected before he got too far into his wailing.

"Why you? because you are a victim of the situation and circumstances. Because you are there and because you are the only one who can. If you can't create a diversion, I will, but you must get some papers out from the scrolls, grab the Talmud as well and get them both to me."

"You're really going to do it aren't you?" said Alex softly. He was just beginning to catch the note of absolute conviction and seriousness of the situation coming across in his Aunts voice and

her silences.

"I have to Alex. I'm sorry to involve you in this, believe me. I couldn't think of any other way, but on a lighter note, you could be a real hero in this if it ever comes to light and at worst you'll be an unsung hero."

"What about Abigail, will she be a heroine or will her day be ruined?"

There was more than a hint of sarcasm in Alex's voice, it was scathing, which Esther was not surprised at. She felt guilty and pained as hell, but there was nothing she could do.

"Darling, I'm sorry to say her day is going to be ruined anyway, whether we do this or not. The best I can do for her is to make you her hero and definitely a day for her to remember. For Abigail, this is damage limitation, seriously. You must not tell her any of this, you can't tell anyone. I really am not joking here Alex, lives may depend on you keeping silent."

Esther actually surprised herself when she said it, only just realizing it was possibly true. She gulped, scared for the first time, scared for her nephew, and his sweet girlfriend, who was going to have her special day ruined. She started shaking, took a deep breath and calmed herself quickly for Alex's sake.

"Are you there Alex?" she said gently.

"Yeah" he replied "Thank God I've got no exams this week."

"Yes" said Esther, thinking the same, "That's a blessing.

"If I can't come up with a diversion, can you do it Aunty, I need to get the scrolls sorted out mostly don't I?"

"Yes sweetheart, you do, and Alex, thank you. You are a brave young man and strong too, I did well to ask you."

"See you next Saturday then" he said. Esther could hardly hear him.

"Yes, see you next Saturday" she said and waited for him to put down the phone.

Next day she phoned in sick, it wasn't a lie, she really did feel sick, sick with fear and anxiety. There was no way to stop anything. What she said about damage limitation was too true. Damage limitation. Julien. She knew now was the time to call her brother.

Julien picked up the phone on the second ring and didn't seem at all surprised to hear his sister's voice. Esther was quite relieved, even though she was caught unawares as she had no idea what she would say to Julien about any of it.

Julien seemed to know about it all anyway. She supposed that the way things were going she shouldn't have been so surprised really. Julien was smoking, she could hear him blowing out smoke.

"So Esther, apart from how are you and all that shit, I will have everything arranged at my end and ready."

Esther's eyes widened.

"What's everything and what do you mean by ready?"

"Just everything, really, you don't want to know any more than that. You know where I am, that's all you need to know."

"Well how do you know that's all I need to know" asked Esther exasperatedly.

"Look big sis," went on Julien, "That's all I'm allowed to know. I have been given an instruction, that's it. I'm just waiting on you now."

"I can't talk about this any-more" said Esther thickly, "Sorry Ju, you've answered the question that I didn't even know I had and now I can't speak. Sorry to be rude but I've got to go, bye."

"No probs sis, it'll be alright" and he heard the click as her phone went down.

Esther called Nathan, he was unavailable, she tried Alf, Eileen, Dave and Rita, and they were all unavailable. Now what was going on? She made herself another cup of tea, went back to bed and turned on daytime TV to try and stop herself thinking.

Oprah couldn't make it alright either.

CHAPTER 27

Four Kippa's and one Tallit later, (Kippa's being the little cloth skull caps that Jewish men wore and the Tallit being the holy shawl that is worn by Jewish men in synagogue or when praying) the shop selling Jewish religious articles in Stamford Hill shut for the day. The world is getting smaller thought the owner of the Kippa shop. Even the Dutch are coming to Stamford Hill to buy Kippas. Didn't they have any in Holland? Maybe they were bought as a souvenir. That's a thought, selling Kippas' as souvenirs, would it be a sin against God? He'd have to ask the Rabbi.

After three near misses in a dress shop, they were too small, too girly or too tarty, Rita, with Akbar in tow, had finally bought a 'going to a synagogue dress'. The mission now was a hat, she couldn't possibly miss the opportunity to wear a hat. Besides, Esther had always said she used to only go to synagogue when she was a kid to listen to the choir and look at the hats. The black netting on a chic little number was irresistible to Rita, she had to have it.

Nathan was leaving all the religious paraphernalia to Esther. He had an old Kippa somewhere from way back when Esther wanted him to attend/suffer a Passover Service with her. He would never forget it a) because of the horrendously sweet and sickly Passover wine and b) because in the obligatory photographs all her family had mistaken him for a visiting Rabbi. He was not amused.

Esther in the meantime had dragged her weary self into work as staying at home had given her too much thinking time, which for Esther was almost a contradiction in terms.

It was the pigeons who had seen most action over the last few days as Alf, Dave, Eileen, and Nathan had set them a kind of obstacle course around the square. This entailed a trail of various treats, Hoola Hoops, Chocolate Digestives and Polo's all leading to a waste bin outside a city slickers pub. Once the pigeons had beak trapped themselves by the unmanageable Hoola Hoops, smeared themselves with Chocolate Digestives and stuck with sticky toffee, put in as an addition after much thought and deliberation. They tended to land on the side of the bin where ice cream had been deliberately slathered. The pigeon or pigeons then slid into the bin. Bets were placed on which pigeon got out quickest, with extra points for style. The pigeons weren't hurt or upset as they were forever chasing food in bins and therefore trying to get out of them. Bonus points were awarded if any pigeon's organic matter got onto the Brokers suits or into one of their drinks. Constant vigilance was necessary.

Alex and Abigail were reciting the Talmud off by heart in between bonking furiously, loud thrashing bands covering up the noise of their loud thrashing, thus passed the week.

The tension caused by Abigail's Bat Mitzvah was strung out like a wickedly sharp glinting thin steel wire across the boroughs. Except for the sweet innocent house of Rabbi H. and his mother. On the Saturday of Abigail's special day our gentle Rabbi, had risen as usual, eaten a huge breakfast, prepared by his mother. It comprised of fried vorsht, a kind of salami omelette, followed by four slices of toast and a cup of tea, no sugar.

He'd said his morning prayers for that day with the usual earnestness and enthusiasm he adopted when talking to his God about the day's events and ask him for wisdom in everything he dealt with.

Today he was going to need a triple helping. Meanwhile, that wire was beginning to twang in everyone else's brain but his. Perhaps that's how he was blessed today, he was saved from that particular twang. He walked the short distance from his house to the synagogue, opened up the gates, humming as he went through the usual security routine of checking and unlocking doors, cupboards and then finally blessing the the scrolls. All everyday stuff which didn't need his full attention, only his spiritual attention.

He thought of sweet Abigail, who, if he was that way inclined would meet any mans fantasy, lucky Alex and lucky her on her special day. He gave her a little blessing. He did the same for Sheuli, then that nice young Dutch man and finally of course his congregation. He smiled to himself and began greeting the regular members who came in every Saturday to help him do God's bidding, set out the chairs, prayer books and make plenty of tea.

Celine had chosen a simple summer dress of cornflower blue, cut on the cross in cotton chiffon and lined for modesty. 'Very appropriate' she thought to herself for her special day too. Goatee was wearing tailored beige trousers and a light white cotton crew neck sweater, his tan looked good against the white.

Bubbala was in trouble, as usual, she'd written notes to herself to remind herself what day it was and what she was doing but had got them muddled up. Consequently, she couldn't decide if it was Sunday, when Abigail said she was going to come over for her after Bat Mitzvah or Saturday, when she had to get dressed and wait for the taxi to pick her up and take her to the synagogue. She knew what clothes to wear, which is where the confusion really lay, because she remembered wearing them recently, so she must have been to the Bat Mitzvah already. Then she had a brainwave, which for Bubbala now, were rare occurrences indeed almost a miracle. 'Of course', she thought, 'either way someone will come, either Abigail or the taxi, so I'll wear something special as Abigail is involved in both days'.

She thought about Abigail for a moment, trying to work out if this Abigail was a cousin, niece or daughter. She went to look at her photo album to see if she could work it out. 'More likely to be a cousin', she thought, 'I've got loads of cousins.' Wherever there were cousins, there were parties. 'I need to wear party clothes' and she went to choose something that would suit the occasion, whatever it may be.

Sheuli's eyes opened and flickered as she recognized a day of possible enlightenment. She smiled and thought about how she had tricked her parents, with Keighley's help by saying she was going to help a school friend with her homework and look after some children. She had arranged to meet at Keighley's house where she'd secreted a pale yellow cotton Sari with white embroidery on it. Sheuli had got up, done her chores quickly but thoroughly, made a big deal about phoning her various aunts, as she did every Saturday morning and went on her way after kissing her mother goodbye.

For Dave and Eileen, the day had started with unusual clarity due the fact that they had restrained themselves from getting into the usual Friday night, Saturday morning state of oblivion. Eileen absent-mindedly played with her St. Christopher while Dave cooked bacon and eggs before they got ready to go to the synagogue. Her eggs were done in her favourite style, sunny side up.

Sunny sides up were also going down a bomb in some quarters of London, in the shape of little yellow pills.

They were of course uppers and just the ticket for those who required them for getting through a Saturday when Friday hadn't really ended.

The dawn thudded in for Nathan and Esther with comfortable shoes, more important than hats. Nathan watched Esther carefully, judging her mood and movements, aching for her as he knew how scared she was. Still he couldn't tell her about Ray to reassure her even a tiny bit. Esther had talked him through all her plans last night. He couldn't fault or improve on her ideas.

1. Creating a diversion. (Good start)
2. Getting Alex to get whatever was in the scrolls and the Talmud and give them all to Esther. (Only just plausible).
3. Calling Julien for some reason. (Wide of the mark).
4. Then leave the rest to, well, whatever. (Hopeless).
- 5 Protect Rich from the Dutchmen. (How and why?).

All of the above was the only part they were really stuck on. Why were they bothering, why not just walk away.

Why not?

Because they couldn't. If it didn't end now, somehow, it would just go on in a different and perhaps worse way. They'd both come to realize that, otherwise Rich would have never have got Nathan, Harry or for that matter, Christian involved. It seemed to Nathan that a lot was at stake but he didn't know what that 'a lot' was. So he'd made his own plans, he had called in some favours to

protect Esther no matter what, if it was necessary. Ray had come up trumps. He hadn't given Nathan any other details as he said that he was still making enquiries in order to collect conclusive evidence rather than the hearsay he had so far. He also refused to let Nathan know anymore, which Nathan thought a tad unfair but he was in no position to argue now. He had to take whatever Ray would give him as he'd knocked the ball into Ray's court in an attempt to safeguard Esther.

Other preparations that Nathan had made were checking the TVR, making sure that there was money and passports ready in the glove compartment and that it had a full tank. He'd also called a friend in France, just in case.

He took Esther by the hand, tilted her chin and kissed her long and hard. She melted in his arms, feeling like a soft trembling kitten to him, wide eyed and scared.

"You look beautiful" he said to her "I love you more than words can say and I am here for you no matter what." He couldn't look at her, he just held her and knew she was crying. He stroked her hair until she was calm, then together they headed towards the door.

Alex and Abigail, both in their separate houses were both feeling sick. Abigail because it was the day of her Bat Mitzvah, and Alex because he knew it was going to be wrecked and he would have to rip off the most holy of books and rip apart the scroll covers.

Time moved relentlessly on for all of them.

CHAPTER 28

The car park was full with a mixture of Volkswagen Golfs, Honda Accords, Jaguars and the obligatory Volvos. FPS elicited mixed feelings amongst the local residents. On the one hand the traffic and parking was horrendous on Saturday's. On the other hand, they were proud of the Rabbi and his success in spreading a more acceptable and modern face of Jewry as well as his unending goodwill to everyone he met.

So this Saturday was no different to any other for most part. The usual congregation was there in their finery, with a lot of old pearls and chiffon being flashed around by the women, a sea of blue suits from the men, plus the usual extras dressed like slaves at the foot of their God, Marks and Spencer.

Rabbi H. greeted everyone as they entered the auditorium, handing out the old, worn prayer books. He was looking for Sheuli in particular, having made sure that Abigail was as settled as she could be. He'd instructed Alex to look after her, with a sly wink, and she had gone off happily with him. He didn't give a second thought to Alex as he wore his normal early morning veneer of goodwill over his early morning scowl. He spotted Sheuli as soon as she came in with her friend who he recognized from the recent school visit. She looked so alive, but so serene, she had a special quality that young woman and he beamed as she took the prayer book from him. Sheuli beamed back and was pulled away by her friend.

The Rabbi was also looking for the Dutch man, and thought he spotted him amongst a small crowd. 'My, we're really busy this morning' he thought to himself, 'The business of God is booming.' He barely had time to greet the Dutchman when a loud shrieking voice was heard above the crowd.

"Who is Abigail and where is she?"

'Ah, Bubbala Celia' thought Rabbi H. and caught Alex's eye to escort Bubbala to sit near Abigail. Bubbala looked slightly awry in a soft mauve silk dress, topped with a bright orange cardigan, her blue raincoat set against her red headscarf, her whole apparel made him smile, Bubbala Celia was ready to party. He left Alex and the regulars to sort out the rest of the congregation and made his way to the little side room to say his private prayer before the morning service began. Then he did a few breathing exercises in preparation for singing. He was a Cantor, a Rabbi who has been trained to sing the holy prayers and he would be the only singer today. As he walked onto the Bimah, the crowd hushed and the morning prayers began, the atmosphere was crackling with expectation.

The service was twenty minutes in before it was time for Abigail to actually do her part, Rabbi H. glanced over his congregation, allowing himself a little piece of happiness as he beamed warm and

loving thoughts to everyone inside his house of God.

The time had come and he felt enormously proud for Abigail. She had not had an easy time of it and to her credit had turned out to be an intelligent, strong and forthright young woman with an outward appearance that belied her soft and gentle heart.

Abigail was called up to be introduced to the congregation. She got out of her seat with as much dignity as she could, her face set in determination and pride, this was her day. A million thoughts raced through her mind, she wished her father were here to see her and was grateful and proud that her mother was here along with her Bubbala and Alex.

How would she have got this far without him? Yes she knew the sex was good but so was he. Today she would prove herself to her father and her ancestors and the people who had woven themselves into her life. A respectful silence lay over those in the auditorium. Alex held Abigail's hand and gently guided her to the centre of the Bimah. She looked small, alone and proud. She glanced over to her mother with a look only a mother and daughter can give each other at sacred moments like these. But it was Alex she looked at saying the words from the prayer book, as tradition decreed before her special part, with flashbacks to particularly good fucks. He smiled to her and she had to look away to the congregation. Bubbala smiled back and waved her hanky like she used to do when waving hello or goodbye when she was little.

Rabbi H. started singing. The mark of the beginning of Abigail's special day, for it was her time now. He pressed the button to his right and the doors to the scrolls rolled silently back, exposing the beautiful and ancient writings to everyone and now waiting for Alex to take them to Abigail. Alex looked desperately at Esther. Esther was waiting for the right moment.

Nathan glanced around the congregation and went pale. There were the Dutch, Dave and Eileen, Rita and Akbar. The courier crew must have come in late and for once silently. He felt strangely comforted by them all being there with him and Esther, but was also alarmed as he would have to manage them somehow. If what happened?

He didn't know what was going to happen, he couldn't predict the actions of anyone once the diversion started as part one of the plan, so like the rest of the congregation, he listened, he watched and he waited until something, instinct, whatever told him the time was right. For Bubbala Celia, the time was now and the wait was too much.

She stood up pushing her chair forcefully back into the knees of the person behind her with a screech. That person receiving the chair yelled in shock and pain as Bubbala waved her arms in the air spinning like a dervish, first one way and then the other.

"When are we going to dance" she cried, "All this has gone on for faaaar tooooo long? When is he going to stop, it's time for a party. Look everyone, I'm, going to sing and clap my hands and dance with my fingers, you can all join in, come on everyone."

At this, Bubbala turned to face her audience, took off her raincoat and twirled. There was now a complete and horrified silence, as the whole congregation tried to take stock of and make sense of what in the name and house of God was going on.

Had Rabbi Hershaw completely lost it and actually planned this madness, or was it just one small Jewish Bubbala completely out of her mind and out of control. The latter seemed more plausible knowing what Jewish Bubbala's are like. By now the whole congregation was transfixed, mesmerized by Bubbala's slight and gaudily dressed body and particularly riveted to the sight of Bubbala Celia's dress tucked up into her knickers which had caught and trailed at least four feet of white toilet paper. Then the wrath of the God of chaos was let loose.

Alex didn't know whether to run to Abigail or help sort out Bubbala, he didn't have to do either. Bubbala was by now grabbing all the appropriately aged and in her opinion sexy men by their jacket sleeves, lapels and collars and tallits' with only the determination of the dementia'd, trying to get them to dance.

Rabbi H. leapt from the Bimah, arms and legs not exactly in a ski jump position but not far off it, to try to sort out Bubbala, knocking over some of the chiffon and hatted lady folk, who had recovered from their frozen state and were also trying to contain the barmy lady.

The Dutch headed straight for the scrolls in one swift movement and out of the corner of his eye

Nathan could see Rita and Akbar pursuing them. Rita's long black hair wild and inconsistent with her white lace gloves and in sharp contrast with the sombre attire of Akbar. Dave and Eileen were following them with the intensity of Celtic Picts on a death dance.

Eileen looking for all intents and purposes, like a modern Boadicea without a shield and Dave with the grimace of a devil mask. Things were looking ugly, the regular congregation summed up their ancestral roots, they were warriors in a far off time after all and were all up in arms screaming about Gods house and respect.

The Dutch were pushing on, saying sorry in Dutch which was understood as German and they were then met with some of the choicest insults that only Austrian, Polish and German Jews could give each other in a synagogue. Nathan looked at Esther, she was grey, Esther looked at Alex, who suddenly realized that this was the moment, slipped the knife into his hand and feeling sick to his stomach, slit open the velvet covers he was holding in his hands. He glanced around him and saw the pandemonium and then eased the papers he found there out of their resting place and into his pocket.

He had worn the best jacket he could find for carrying old and large papers, one of his father's seventies numbers actually. Alex looked frantically at Esther for direction, but she was not looking at him anymore, she was talking to an Asian girl in a yellow sari.

He shrank into the background grabbing the leather clad holy book, hoping he would suddenly and mercifully become invisible. To everyone else but Nathan, he was. There was far too much chaos for anyone to notice Alex, who exploited the art of disappearing in a crowd remarkably well for one so young.

In all of this, Sheuli who found talking in public difficult and was shy by nature, kept to her calm nature and had spoken to Esther, the best person she could find to resolve a serious problem. Esther had in turn done the same and had rushed over to Nathan.

"Oh my God," breathed Esther, "Sheuli has just told me that she heard a bunch of those Asian guys talking in Bengali, about destroying the scrolls. She overheard them when Abigail's Grandma started to party. What the fuck is all that about?"

Nathan's police training and his uncanny ability to keep cool when his back is against the wall took over.

"Get to Rita and tell him about the Asian's, maybe Akbar can intervene. Then go and get into the TVR and stay there, if things go badly look in the glove compartment."

He turned towards Alex, Nathan had spotted him trying to be invisible, now he raced over glancing behind to see if anyone was following him or watching where he was going. So far so good, everything seemed to be in chaos and ridiculously this was a good thing. Nathan's face and grip persuaded Alex that he had to give the papers and the prayer book to him immediately. Alex was only too pleased to get rid of the evidence and passed them over at once. As soon as Nathan caught a glimpse of the papers he nearly stopped in his tracks.

They were in the same style as the papers that the key was wrapped in. He hadn't time to stop but he had a fair idea of what they were and what they were worth. Where had Rich got these from? Surely not from the Cheque job years ago, he thought that they'd just been cheques. No wonder he had done a runner so fast.

As he headed towards the door he caught Dave and Eileen's attention and saw Alex running to Abigail to get her out of the way. Behind Alex, Nathan saw the Asians move in towards him, they didn't seem to recognize Nathan.

'Who were these people?' he thought as he headed towards the exit. 'Where do they fit in to all of this?' His mind was racing, he did what he thought was best, and that was get the hell out of there clutching what seemed to be the focus of attention. Particularly those persons who didn't seem to have the right or reason to be in that synagogue today.

The Asians by now were beginning to get up on the Bimah and were pulling at the scrolls. Rabbi H. was torn between protecting the scrolls and protecting his congregation. Bubbala was happily finger dancing in a corner, dress still tucked into her knickers, hurling abuse about no good men and German Jews according to her, the worst bunch of the lot.

The Russian Jews on the other hand were a much better lot and she was glad that some of them were here to dance with her. Meanwhile, the Dutch/Germans were enraged, to the surprise of everyone who noted it and were being suddenly being attacked by the group of Russians that Bubbala had recognized. She'd learned a little Russian and had greeted them in their own language, they had responded politely thinking that she was all part of the plan. Though slightly amazed that the Asians had been so clever as to find an ageing Russian Grandmother, who was so clever and brave in her diversionary tactics. They thought that the Asians must be giving her a big slice of the action because nothing would have been so plausible without her.

The Dutch were seriously surprised that a) they had been attacked by Asians and b) that anyone would desecrate a synagogue. Unknown to everyone else, that was not ever their intention and realizing ethically that people were number one priority over greed and drug deals, they blocked off as many clearly racist infidels as they could. The Dutchmen were quite tall, but were no match for four six foot two inch transvestites who, still on sunny siders, and increasingly furious over the treatment of their friends and the ruination of their hats.

The quartet went back to their original gender and proceeded to haul away all incoming enemies, their wigs awry but nevertheless, still mindful of their nails. Nathan stood and watched this scene with incredulity, unable to tear himself away.

The Asians were huddled together, the Dutch were outside. Where were those Russians and how were they connected anyway? He hadn't foreseen any hint of a Russian connection and where was Ray in all this? How the fuck had this happened?

In the midst of this scene he heard the unmistakable dry and booming voice of Mrs. G talking to Sheuli and Keighley asking 'where were the police' when they were needed. The roar of motorbikes drowned her words as Christian Lake and Alf turned up, (Eileen had called them) Christian to defend Mrs. G and Alf to defend his friends and all those associated with T.V. Services.

Alf made a beeline for Nathan, the Asians were now in a huddle, having been rounded up by the Tranny quartet and were being played with by three of the larger breasted models. The Russians had vanished as quickly as they had arrived. They'd left the synagogue the minute everything went haywire, (that was Plan B as directed by Ray, should things get out of control).

Plan A had concerned a diversion and the theft of the Scrolls as there was no doubt in Ray's mind that the Scrolls contained Bonds, but everything seemed to have worked out anyhow.

"You need me for anything muthafucka" said Alf to Nathan, grinning.

"Yep, get these to Esther's brother, he knows what to do. Here's the address" he said as he passed the all important papers and the Holy book to Alf. Alf then waded into the crowd, which was no mean feat as he was not in normal synagogue attire and as far as they were concerned was another disrespectful infidel who was desecrating their synagogue. They were no match for him. Alf barked at them in Dob speak and was gone.

The pandemonium continued, everyone was shouting, shoving and trying to get to somewhere else. The bikers went to support the 'T' Girls who were by now easily defending all the right people and things and watching everyone else and dying to have a cigarette, sunny siders seemed to make you crave for a ciggie more than usual. As there was no 'somewhere else,' the congregation also seemed to lose their momentum for panic and slowly realised that the bikers and the 'T' Girls were actually on their side.

Rabbi H. by now had got as many of the congregation into the teaching rooms where they were safe. Again to collect a congregation of hyped up Jews protesting for what they believed was ethically and morally right. His mother was a little less stoical than usual but that could just be the shock any how she went into the kitchen and started to make tea and looked for the Passover wine for those who wanted something a little stronger.

Outside, Nathan thought he heard the TVR and then he heard the police sirens. 'Fuck it' he thought 'she hadn't got away in time' as he leapt over bodies and raced for the exit to try to see if Esther was safe. She was sitting on the bonnet of the TVR talking to Eileen and Christian, Eileen had instructed the other bikers, friends of hers to make sure that the Dutch and the Asians were not allowed to leave, so they had rounded up those who were not in the custody of Rita's Tranny

formation. The inevitable sound of police sirens were getting closer. Nathan was dismayed. 'How the fuck am I going to explain this without dropping everyone in the shit?' he thought to himself. He held Esther close to and then realised that he just had time to speak to Esther about the Asians before the police started getting involved. He needed to know everything and quickly.

"What was the deal about the Asians and Sheuli?" He asked her.

"Well, you know about Sheuli overhearing the Asians wanting to destroy the scrolls, so she did what she thought best and told me."

"What about Akbar" interrupted Nathan, "Does he know anything?"

"Oh yes he does, he left as soon as he could, but he said to Rita that his uncle and those strange friends of his were among the group. But what is their connection then?"

"Fuck knows" said Nathan still cuddling Esther. He looked around and saw Rita talking to the Dutchmen.

They looked really angry and were turning on the girl, Celine, who in turn looked very scared and kept shrugging her shoulders, picking bits of non existent fluff off her dress. 'Hmm' thought Nathan, 'let's see what's going on here then.' He slipped over to where Rita was, to eaves drop and to see what he could learn.

"She's furious" said Rita, "Going on about lost opportunities and the money she's lost on the down payment of a new Mercedes 280 SL. She called them a bunch of Dutch Smeuler Vixers, that's German for wet wankers and said that their idea was always pathetic."

"And?"

"Well Akbar threatened his uncle who said it wasn't his fault but that it was all that girls fault and had pointed out Celine"

"Do the Dutch know that?" enquired Nathan hurriedly, he was really worried about the impending police statements now.

"Oh yes, apparently she sold them out to the Asians for a cut of the profits of the whole hydroponics operation, i.e. the Dutch's contacts and therefore other contracts, as well as Rich's secret stash which she told them about. Poor Akbar is distraught about his uncle's behaviour and about what they did or wanted to do to the scrolls and the synagogue. He's ashamed of himself and his family."

"Where is he now" asked Nathan

"At my flat, he can't face them."

"He can help, can you contact him?"

"Yes, but what's your idea?"

"Don't let on about the drugs or Rich's connection."

"Why not?"

"Don't ask, but I think I can see a way out of this where you and he will be fine, and so will Rich."

Rita looked at her friend as if to say something but thought better of it.

"OK, he'll do anything for me, so it might save his pride and our chances if he keeps his mouth shut as you ask, even if he doesn't know why."

"Look it's a slim chance, but it might work, just do as I ask. If it goes wrong there is nothing worse than the truth anyway. I need to speak with the Dutch guys, how are you with them?"

"No probs, I'll see if I can grab one." Rita went off in their direction walking as elegantly and purposefully as any girl could in that situation.

Nathan was all the while looking for Alex and

weighing up how much time he had to speak to Alex and Julien before the police took statements. He ran to the side door and managed to grab Alex.

"Don't tell them about the papers or the Talmud or you won't get the drum-kit. By the way you did brilliantly, sorry about Abigail" he said and ran back to Rita and the bright eyed evangelical Dutch bloke that she'd persuaded to come and talk to Nathan. He was trying to calm his heart rate down so that he at least looked under control even if he didn't feel it.

"Look, no bad feelings here, I know more than you realize as Rich was my dearest friend, this is

why we're here and how you got involved with Rita. I can get you your money but as far as the police need to know you were just visiting. I know Rich fucked up and he did owe you that money. I know the Asian thing is nothing to do with you, I can't say any more. I hope you can trust me, but if you can I might be able to swing it so that we can all walk away from this. Got to go now, I hope you make the right choice about what to do and what to say."

Bright Eyes, whose eyes were on stalks by now didn't have time to reply before Nathan was gone. Nathan called Julian, who said two words to Nathan 'valuable bonds' and that was all Nathan needed to know. Things were beginning to piece together.

He glanced back towards the Dutchmen and saw Celine turning on the tears. Bright Eyes was quietly talking to Goatee, who was chewing his lips more and more, when flash-lights started to go off. The press had arrived. The Jewish Chronicle no less. 'Strange that they work on the Sabbath' thought Nathan.

Rabbi H's police interview was interspersed by interruptions from his mother, her parting shot.

"I told you inclusivity never got you anywhere."

The police could question him as much as they liked, but his mother's wrath finally broke him and he burst into tears.

"I've never seen those Asian people before, we had a full congregation today, we are international and inclusive" he explained to a poker faced police woman.

"The Dutch men were previously invited and were helping to defend our synagogue and the Holy Scrolls and dear sweet Sheuli came along after a visit from her school, her teacher is here too, she arranged the school visit in the first place, she is Alex's Aunt and Alex is Abigail's... Oh poor, poor Abigail. Alex is Abigail's boyfriend. Yes, of course it's normal for Alex to handle the Scrolls and everything else, he looks a bit of a scruff but he could be a wonderful Rabbi if he chose to, as it is he wants to be a civil servant."

"Now I must get back to my people, please can I go?"

The police woman looked over her extensive notes and waived him away, making a beeline for Abigail who was sitting crouched in a corner looking vacant. Alex was with her, holding her hand, he wanted something out of this. Aunt Esther was right, this could go either way and he had protected Abigail, the Scrolls, the synagogue and his Aunt as best he could. Nathan winked at Alex just as the policewoman was approaching him.

"I only know what I saw," was Alex's opening line and he steeled himself for a rocky ride. But rock was his business.

The Asians, minus Akbar, of course, were now in handcuffs and being marched towards the police van, glad to be away from the taunts of Andrea, Leonie, Simone and Paulette, still slightly sunny sided up, and now adjusting their underwear. Simone was asking if the lovely policemen would give them a body search, and was kicked with the heel of a four and a half inch stiletto belonging to Andrea.

"Why are we here?" Simone looked at each of the persons in blue with exaggerated disbelief after one of the Mets finest had asked her the same question.

"You ask why we are here? Why? Because this synagogue is inclusive, we've changed sex, God knows why we can't change religion? We just came to suck it and see!"

Rita had already primed them in the event of everything going pear shaped and they never missed a beat.

"We just happened to be here and are friends of Rita, who is a friend of Esther's, who is Alex's Aunt, we were all models and bouncers in a former life, so we held and detained them just like old times really."

Again, no further questions by the relieved police men who, as Nathan knew personally, never quite know how to approach transvestites or transsexuals. He knew that for the police, nothing had been stolen unless someone yelps, and so far from the body language he thought no one had. He kept his fingers crossed and even said a little prayer to God to look after Esther and the Bonds. The Talmud will be returned he should imagine even before anyone knew it had been 'lent out'

The police though, as usual, took one look at the bikes outside and targeted them as criminals.

Thank goodness Alf had got away in time.

The Jewish Chronicle had taken close ups of the bikes and bikers but ignoring the TVR and were clearly putting the blame on the biker's heads. Christian being the most obvious target, until Mrs. G came out of the synagogue, into the car park, screaming at them.

"So, you think you know it all do you. You decide on a judgement before the police and the Lord on his home turf. How little you know. These people are heroes even that one with the scruffy trousers and the swastikas on his ears. Do you think God cares that much about transport and decoration if his word is threatened? You can write this down. These people were here because they were asked to come when the synagogue was under attack by racists. They were here to protect the synagogue and the very people you give your name to, the Jews of the Frampton Park Synagogue."

"I can vouch for every single one of those couriers" she continued "They've been delivering valuable documents to our company Lativan, Gouldewater and White, Solicitors for years. So if you write one wrong word not only will we sue you but we will cancel our subscription. Nathan you need the little boys room, you're hopping around again?"

Nathan was hopping because he was laughing so hard, not only at the astounded Jewish Chronicle crew, but also at Mrs. G who was doing a fair impression of a wry grin and slid a sly wink at Nathan. She addressed the J.C. crew regally and with disdain.

"Go speak to the police that is my statement, sworn in the name of God and the Torah itself!" and with that she turned on her heel and flounced off to find the Rabbi.

The Jewish Chronicle crew were actually foolish enough to follow her and found her and the Rabbi standing by their principle of inclusivity to murmurs of assent throughout the congregation who were still drinking tea and sipping Passover wine. There was no way they were going to leave now those nice 'boy-chicks' and 'girl-chicks' had sorted out the bad men.

Mrs. G had given the all clear to Christian, Eileen, Nathan and Dave. They all needed some tea, Rabbi H.'s mother kept stoically pouring, driven by guilt at questioning and doubting her son.

It was Esther who approached Mrs. G and asked her what the connection was with the letter that set this whole thing off. Clearly Mrs. G knew more than she was letting on and was also trying to protect something or someone.

Nathan had hoped that Esther being a teacher and all may have a little more credibility in Mrs. G's eyes. She'd gently sidled up to Mrs. G looked directly at her and took a leap of faith and asked Mrs. G outright what the connection was. Mrs. G looked over her glasses, sighed and put down her tea. She looked tired and for a moment Esther thought she would get that notorious cold shoulder treatment. Mrs. G looked at Esther again and caught Esther completely unaware by asking if she and Nathan were married. Esther braced herself for the unknown and decided that being honest with Mrs. G was her only hope.

"Yes" replied Esther "He's a good man."

"Do you love him?"

"Most of the time, all of the time and deeply enough to want to grow old with him and look after him till death do us part."

Mrs. G smiled at Esther. One would love to say that it changed her face and made her beautiful but it didn't, it just made her look absurd, poor Mrs. G.

"I'm jealous. You have love. I lost my love, not my faith. I wish it were the other way round sometimes, but I am not dead yet. The real owner of L.G.W. is Mr. Lativan Senior. The Lativan's and Gouldewater's have been linked for years. The White part was the father of my fiancé. The letter came through a family member of Mr. Lativan Senior."

"It's Mr. L Senior who decides what companies we use and business we take." she said "It's one of the reasons why we still use T.V. Services, even after all this time and why we put up with that young man Christian! In a solicitors office I ask you, that's all I know. My son is Mr. Gouldewater, born of love out of marriage. The firm and its founders have stood by me and the synagogue as long as I can remember and I'll stand by them. Rabbi Hershaw is a good man too. I know a good man when I see one. Hang on to Nathan." She sniffed, got up and walked over to Mrs. Hershaw and tried to take over tea duty. Mrs. H. wouldn't let her.

When Esther told Nathan, they were still puzzled and things still did not fit, but they were surprised by Mrs. Gouldewater.

However, they were waiting for Alf's call to say that the Bonds and the Holy Book had been delivered to Julian. A kind of anti climax settled over them and by now people were drifting off. Abigail seemed the most upset, her day had really been ruined and Alex couldn't do much to comfort her. He came across to Esther, angry and hurt.

"Look what you've done to her, how can you just sit there and let it happen. You make me sick."

"Alex please" said Esther gently touching his arm, "What happened here may seem bad, but your actions have actually saved this synagogue and I'm not sure yet but may have even saved a life. I'll tell you both everything when we ourselves know everything but I promise you this, Abigail will have her day. I guarantee it."

"Your guarantee means nothing."

"On the contrary, my guarantee means everything, if I give my word I keep it. You know that, you are the same, you can't help yourself. Go to Abigail and get Bubbala, I think she's locked herself in the loo."

CHAPTER 29

They were all back at Alf's, drinking beer and talking about the day. Julien had taken the leather bound holy book and very carefully taken it apart, removing more bonds and then given it back to Alf, in just as good condition. He'd slipped back into the synagogue unnoticed and returned it. They had all managed to keep the police off their backs, partly because of Mrs. G and partly because bullshitting and lying to the police was second nature to all of them. They stuck to the script and there was nothing the police could do. Yet still things did not add up.

"So we have Rich linked to the Dutchmen because of his fuck up with the hydroponics. We have the Asians linked to Rich by Celine and poor Akbar. Rich had hidden stuff in the synagogue."

Nathan still hadn't told anyone else about the Bonds yet. He and Esther agreed it wouldn't be safe for anyone if too many people knew. Nathan still hadn't told anyone about Ray either and couldn't understand why things had been allowed to get so out of hand as they had. Nathan went on.

"How is Rich linked to L.G.W. which is where it all started?"

"And what about Harry being threatened and told to sell, that's weird too" added Alf.

"Does it all end here then, this mystery?" piped up Eileen angrily, "Because I for one will be really pissed off with this guy Rich if it does. Who does he think he is putting you's all through this? The guy's a tosser."

"Eileen, I hope you're not right" said Nathan, "Yes he can be a real fuckwit sometimes but he is one of the cleverest people I know. I still stand by him, it ain't over until the fat lady sings and I've only heard the Rabbi so far."

Fortunately, he didn't have to do more pleading on Rich's behalf, the phone rang, and it was Julian.

"Go to Harry's" said Julian, and rang off.

"Why is he always so fucking cryptic, that was Julian, he said go to Harry's and then he put the phone down."

"What now?" said Alf, "We've done enough for today"

"Maybe the fat lady will sing" said Nathan, "Come on, we'll get taxi's, then we can all have a good drink."

By the time they arrived at Harry's they were all completely wired. It was still reasonably early for Harry's so the drinks were ordered and Harry had time to hear the full story.

"So I suppose you want to read this letter that some guy has just delivered. Fucking weird time to deliver a letter if you ask me, but there is no logic to any of this and I refuse to sell my bar so don't get your hopes up."

"Give us the letter" demanded Alf.

"It's for Nathan only" he replied handing it over to him. Incredulously, or maybe not so

incredulous, given the day, it was from Rich. Here's what he wrote.

If you have this then you deserve some answers and just as I suspected you all came through somehow. For that I cannot thank you enough because my life and Gary my son's are now safe. I owe you and everyone you conned, cajoled, lied to and bullied into helping you, other than your friends who obviously have helped you.

You and I knew they would and I salute them and will forever grovel to them.

I say you saved my son, well this is how. The Dutch were sold out by one of their own. The Asian drug gang were amateurs but nevertheless serious. So the Asians had threatened to hurt Gary, my son, if they did not a) take over the Dutch contracts, and b) get the Bonds.

My stupid bulimic junkie ex-girlfriend told the sweet talking evil bastards about the Bonds. Do you remember? She covered me when I was on the run after that cheque incident, in return for a large financial investment in her person.

Through her, they tracked down Gary. It was he who called Harry and told him to sell the bar and made it obvious he was a TV in the hope it would give you something to go on regarding L.G.W. My son is disabled thanks to the bulimic habits of his mother while she was pregnant, and a transsexual. He has suffered greatly and I have tried to help and support him in every way I can. You can imagine how I felt when his life was threatened as he's been through so much already.

So to go back a few years, yes, I hid the Bonds in the Scrolls and in the Talmud in the synagogue, my family synagogue, when I was having far too good a time and doing..., well, you know what.

Those Bonds were security for what was originally to be my life, but as it turned out, they're now for my son's future. I couldn't let anyone take them or my son. Especially after it was me who started this enormous fuck up in the first place But I also think it would have come to something like this anyway.

So what about L.G.W? I know you're wondering about that Nathan. Well, my Uncle is Lativan Senior. They nearly went bust, I helped support them with money from a, shall we say a spare Bond. He took on Gouldewater, a secretly transvestite solicitor, through Gary who knew he would find it hard but the Lativan's and Gouldewater's have been friends for years, so I was glad I could help. How is Gouldewater Junior? I hope he is happy. And finally, you may still be asking, Nathan, 'How did Brookes get my letter?' Have you never asked yourselves why none of you get sacked...?

"Wait, I get it now, he fucking owns T.V.S" said Nathan "The little theological shit, yeah T.V.S that's a Rich type joke, I bet that's what it is, we've been working for Rich all this time. I don't..."

"Shut up Nathan" said Harry, "I want to hear the rest of this letter." ... what has T.V. Services got to do with anything? Well here's the surprise. I own it. I am senior director of T.V. Services. I repay my friends, Christian, you and various others who have helped me over the years.

So you see Nathan, you will never be out of a job, nor will Christian, bless him, who in reality is a fucking liability, but hey ho. I have been watching you over the years, don't forget I know Monty, Esther and Julian. I also have connections in the S & M scene, so I know about you and Esther, for all the risk you took with her, I am sorry. That was truly a test for her and for you, but you did it, you all did it, and I promise I will never fuck up like that again, I may fuck up in something else though, but then I will try ever so hard not to involve you at all, Ever.

Please don't try to find me, don't look a gift horse in the mouth and don't forget both my son and I will be forever grateful. My love to you all, the bar bill is on me, Harry knows

Love, Rich'

They drank, they were stunned, they were angry, they forgave Rich because that was the kind of people they were and they were relieved that it was all over.

But it wasn't for Nathan, he had loose ends to tie up and fish to fry.

CHAPTER 30

Here's a small recap, Ray's side of the story and his ingenious intervention...

Ray was feeling particularly sorry for himself and talking to Nathan again, especially in that

cemetery, had comforted him but also disturbed him. He knew in his heart of hearts that he was truly very burnt out but he also knew he could never take any other option. He was caught in a typical Irish dilemma brought on by his insatiable curiosity about anything devious and his habit of thinking things through. He'd decided to make some more investigations. You know just finding out about how bad things could get, or even just how good. He called up his Russian friends and arranged to have a drink with them in his club. In the following days, he found out more about the Dutch from his car dealer friend and slowly formed a fantastic plan, tweaking it ever so carefully in his and Nathan's favour.

So it was hardly surprising to Ray and his team that there was a fracas at the Synagogue, and thanks to old family and friends' connections, (like Julien), they were ready for the call. The Russians, the Asians, the police, in fact everyone except Nathan and his pals were ready. It was simple, it was so sweetly perfect, Ray and Julien could hardly wait for Abigail's big day.

Ray, knowing that the Russians wouldn't deal through anyone else, had told them that the Jewellers were getting itchy, and that they didn't want to go through with it and that he had a better idea. 'How would Bonds suit them?' Untraceable, cash-able, no questions asked, no laundering fee, just a one off payment, not too much for the man who passes them on i.e. himself. Because he knew he couldn't cash them himself as he had far too much to lose. Technology in the force would soon catch up with him and as a cop in prison how long would he live? So no thank you, a one-off payment will do just fine, and yes it's a pleasure doing business with you.

They bought it, Bond and Bat Mitzvah day loomed closer. On that eventful day as Alf returned from Julien with the prayer book to be reinstated in the synagogue, Ray gave the Russians the signal. The he and his team prepared for a meet at a prearranged rendezvous, which had been set up by Julien, having called in a few happily given favours.

The police had been drip fed with information from Ray ever since he came up with this master plan, of which Nathan was completely unaware. My, how things were humming in North London that day, hence their not so extensive enquiries, but their rather lingering interrogation at the fracas.

So, outside a quiet warehouse in an area used for just such situations, the Russians meet to exchange diamonds for Bonds. Ray has made it just a little more complicated believing that if it was too easy they were sure to be suspicious. Also he knew Eastern Europeans get off on bumpy rides. He knew this for sure after having several Polish, Hungarian and Russian lovers of either sex. He spoke almost fluent Polish some Czech and really appreciated their country's jazz, intellect and passion for climbing mountains and Glaciers. His Russian wasn't too bad either.

Consequently he understood far more than was prudent to let on. Everything went to plan, even the planned unplanned bits. Finally, after the Russians had done all their checking, openly and surreptitiously and satisfied themselves, as Ray had no doubt they would, that he was a meticulous planner in a haphazard kind of way. They agreed to make the exchange for the Bonds. Diamonds for Bonds for Ray, Bonds for Diamonds for the Russians.

Only it wasn't quite like that for everyone, it was for Ray, but not for our Starsky and Hutch type criminals, the Russians that is. He knew there were guns, his crew and their crew, but everyone it seemed was prepared to take that chance, it was the knives that surprised him. Not from the Russians, but from two old time members of his special elite group. Even before a gun was brought out, one of the Russians got jumpy, the knife was thrown just missing his ears, but pinning the poor guy's cashmere head scarf to the garage door.

The Russians were also not expecting knives and it was enough to give everyone time to take stock and calm down, after all no one had got hurt and the knife throwing shit really impressed the Russians. So everyone started to collect their extremely valuable belongings ready for departure and go their separate ways. With uncanny timing, the best of the London Metropolitan Police came in and did the clean up. Of course, Ray and his team were also arrested, it was all part of the plan and later at Kings Cross Police Station, he was congratulated for the whole operation.

Ray was a hero for everyone, the Met Police, his own loyal and dependable group of Metropolitan misfits and he would be a hero later to Nathan, Esther and a whole lot of other people. Julien and the Bonds, well not all of them, were still buried deep in the shadows of his tiny office in

the city. The diamonds, well nearly all of them, were now in the hands of the Metropolitan Police and Hatton Garden Jewellers who always preferred to help the police any way they could. They would of course be duly returned to their rightful owners, who would give huge donations to the Met. Police Retirement Fund in thanks for their return.

Ray and his special elite force stashed their own personal selection along with all the other goodies they had secreted away all these years for a rainy day which, according to recent weather forecasts, was just around the corner. Ray met up with his crew later that day in his local and distributed the remaining 'missing' diamonds and copious amounts of beer, easily done in the circumstances.

That being done he would much, much later, turn his attention to Nathan and Esther, after Julien had called to give him what he hoped would be good news.

Back to Nathan and the present then.

CHAPTER 31

Things had once more settled down to a surprisingly and almost humdrum existence for which Nathan was secretly grateful, even though when he thought back to the whole thing he wanted to do Rich some serious bodily harm. If it wasn't for the Jewish Chronicle one would hardly believe that anything had happened at all. The whole affair had been allocated a small part in the nationals due to one of the Royals saying something blindingly funny but totally inappropriate about the Chinese, that and the mysterious death of Dr Atkins; supposedly from cancer due to his own diet.

However, The Jewish Chronicle was big news in the Jewish community, who owned and were influential in many financial and political areas. Mrs. G's threats of a law suit or a cancelled subscription had obviously worked. Rabbi H. and the Bikers pictures were all over the place. T.V. Services got more contracts, new staff were taken on, Alf, Nathan Dave and Eileen still kept to their old regular ways and got a pay-rise. Celine had crept away without too much trouble and the Dutchmen, who'd been paid up, said nothing about drugs or bonds and neither had the Asians.

That bunch of miscreants were being run by another large and much more sinister gang of Russians. They too had been sold out by one of their own and to this day they don't know who, but Akbar's Uncle is very quiet. They had been branded as racists, not true, just would be drug dealers. They were shunned by their own community for their apparently abhorrent anti-Semitic act, and were now doing time. However those particular bunches of, failed, drug dealers were far happier and better off in prison than at the mercy of the Russian drug lords.

Finally, the spin off from the synagogue fiasco meant that there were far more exchanges between the local Muslim and Jewish communities and Rabbi Hershaw was in 'inclusivity heaven', funded by donation from L.G.W. Solicitors, with Sheuli working closely with him every step of the way, pleasing her parents dutifully and finding her own path through life with Rabbi H. His mother not daring to say one word.

So it was business as usual, when, over a year later, our pals, now including Akbar and Rita, were having their usual Friday evening get together after a busy week on the roads. That is it was 'usual' until about 11.15 p.m. when Christian 'of all people' came by with a letter for Nathan.

Everyone stopped as Nathan opened it up dreading what could be the next hassle for them all.

"Oh no, now what's he done! He's shut up the office for a month the fucker. Is that how he repays us for all that trouble? Fucking Ri..."

Christian interrupted, he had come back from the loo as he'd got a nasty kidney infection somehow and when he had to go he really had to go.

"Oh, and this one too" he said and handed Nathan another much bigger and bulkier envelope.

"What now?" growled Nathan, "More fucking useless keys or... Wow! Open transferable plane tickets to Thailand.... for.... hang on.... for, Jesus, everyone, even Christian, for a month. Rich I take it all back."

Thinking to himself 'It had better be the Presidential Suite for himself and Esther.' The reality being that because of his Bastard Best Friend they had both been really scared.

Once everything had been cleared up the reality of how badly it could have gone for them and how their lives could have been completely wrecked really dawned on them.

He unreservedly felt they deserved the Presidential Suite in the best hotel, they all did really but he knew it would only be him that thought of it first and after all, he who hesitates loses. Having justified the whole situation in a split second, Nathan lost no time and handed everyone their own private envelope, everyone hoping that Christian and his brood would go at a completely different time, even to a completely different place, or at least not be close geographically or otherwise.

There was also a letter for Alex and Abigail who were dutifully remembered. The friends were too shocked to say much as inside their envelopes was a considerable amount of spending money, and a personal message to each of them. Akbar started crying silently with stunned joy and was patted gently by Rita, who was thinking of the shopping to be had before and after the operation as well as during their travels.

In Nathan's envelope was also a special little parcel with a covering letter telling Nathan to open it in private with Esther.

So we leave our friends partying the night away, not wanting to be anywhere else and with anyone else, but there, right where they were, ever so slightly off their tits but enough to know just how good life can be with the right people around you.

Much, much later within the following hours, you couldn't go by day or night as by this time it was irrelevant, when Nathan and Esther were safely at home, relatively straight and cuddling up in bed, Nathan opened the rest of the mysterious little packages, still left in the envelope.

The package contained two smaller separate packages, Nathan looked at Esther and sighed loudly. Esther gave him that look.

"Don't even think about how, what, where or anything, just open the fucking thing NOW!"

Nathan tried to protest.

"NOW" growled Esther as Nathan sheepishly opened up the little parcel very carefully, for he had a mind it would be something quite delicate. Parcel one contained a very carefully wrapped and old and familiar piece of paper of which Nathan knew would go straight to Julien to be invested or cashed in. In his mind's eye he saw a brand new motorbike or three and or a vintage bike and side car. Esther saw the same sort of thing but with a house and garage and dungeon involved.

The other parcel contained two very reasonable sized diamonds wrapped in a bit of newspaper, the day just kept getting better and better. The newspaper also caught Nathan's eye. He opened it out carefully and spread it on the table flattening out all the creases.

He stared at it for a while, his mind going back to all those years ago and grinning showed it to Esther.

It was an old newspaper clipping showing the frontage of Hatton Garden Jewellers with a guy wearing a pair of jeans and a very familiar leather jacket who was casually passing the shop.

The next book in the Strange Aid Trilogy is called
Costa del Chemical, The Mushroom King and Festival Freaks
Eshers Facebook page is here

<https://www.facebook.com/esterandnathan>

More information about J.B. Yanovskys' books is available here
<http://offthebookshelf.com/authors/4200-jacky-yanovsky>

As the author mentioned at the beginning food is a big part of the life of Nathan and Esther.

Her FREE to download recipe book will soon be available, like this book, in a multitude of formats from the offthebookshelf.com link above or any good ebook supplier.