

A PROFESSIONAL

VENDETTA

Terry Morgan

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About “VENDETTA”

Oxford University Biology Professor ‘Eddie’ Higgins is a veteran of student street demonstrations against environmental destruction and big business.

In his sixties and still an eccentric but passionate environmental activist well-known for his total disregard for personal appearance he finds himself acting as the ‘scientific adviser’ to a local company, Vital Cosmetics, run by its new and vivacious chief executive, Isobel Johnson. It doesn’t start well.

“Yours is an industry dogged by exaggerated claims, impossible claims and false claims,” he tells her.

The two are total opposites but ‘Eddie’ is convinced there is something wrong with the way the company is being run and so, belatedly, does Isobel Johnson.

So, starts an investigation led by Mark Dobson from the small but high-tech international fraud investigators, Asher & Asher, and its new, young recruit, Ritchie Nolan, straight out of a north London drama school.

Ritchie, acting undercover as a street-wise racketeer Micky Parker, is sent to Thailand to infiltrate a Pattaya-based Chinese and Russian gang involved in counterfeiting, money-laundering, narcotics and credit card fraud.

Eddie Higgins and Isobel Johnson join in, flying to Malaysia to investigate Vital Cosmetics' local agents and, by chance, meet up with an Italian, Pascale Perillo, whose own family business in Naples has also been targeted by the gang.

With the investigation moving between the UK, Thailand and Malaysia it is the relationship between the deeply passionate but unkempt Professor Higgins and the vivacious professional business woman Isobel Johnson, that forms a backdrop to the story. With "Eddie" strongly believing that vanity is a human weakness and to exploit it for profit is in itself a crime, can the two ever work together, accept each other's views and turn the company around?

Other novels in Terry Morgan's Asher & Asher series: "The Malthus Pandemic" & "An Honourable Fake."

About the author:

Terry Morgan has been writing stories and poetry for over twenty-five years, mostly while he "lived out of a suitcase", travelling with his own exporting business. Having visited around eighty countries during that time he now lives with his Thai wife, Yung, in Petchabun, Thailand with occasional visits back to friends and family in the Forest of Dean and the Cotswold Valleys around Stroud in the UK. He mostly writes novels with a strong international, business and political flavour and occasional satire.

"Vendetta" is his seventh major novel and the third in the 'Asher & Asher' series. Other books in the series are: "An Honourable Fake" and "The Malthus Pandemic."

VENDETTA

CHAPTER 1

Being a creature of unerring and predictable habit, Edward James Higgins, Professor of Tropical Plant Science at Oxford University did what he always did when it rained during his bike ride to work. He hung his socks and sandals next to his bicycle clips on the radiator to dry. Then, to the amusement of his PhD student,

he spent the rest of the Saturday morning tutorial padding around the laboratory in bare feet.

An hour later, alone once more, he sat quietly at his corner desk examining a computer print-out and glancing occasionally at the faded remains of an old newspaper cutting pinned to the cork board.

With the dark, shoulder-length hair and central parting, few would have recognised the accompanying photo as a forty-year old photo of himself - a short-lived celebrity, a student demonstrator and a fanatic, pale-faced environmental activist who the press had dubbed "Huggy". A few old friends still called him Huggy, but nowadays, he was mostly known, even by first year students, as Eddie.

Eddie, his bicycle, his sandals and his flapping old raincoat were well known around the streets of Oxford but at sixty-two years old, the one-time Ozzie Osborne look-alike now sported a central parting that had broadened to six inches. "Hope springs eternally, but there's nothing wrong internally," he'd say in response to cruel jibes about his hair that had receded to a ring of sparse grey threads and fluff. Eddie, an enthusiastic writer of satirical poetry in what little spare time he had, always felt inspired to scribble another whenever he looked at that old photo.

He'd just taken a sheet of notepaper to start one when the phone rang. "Your visitor's here, Eddie," said Charlie who combined janitorial duties with unlocking the front door on quiet, Saturday mornings.

"Send her over, Charlie."

He knew who it was although they'd not yet met. This was the chairman – or chairwoman – of a local, Oxford-based cosmetics company who had offered the University money in the form of a student bursary. Universities grabbed any cash on offer and Bill Hughes, the head of department, had done his best to quell Eddie's well-known opinions on industry and especially what Eddie called 'the vanity business' and accept.

Remembering his bare feet, Eddie sat on the floor to drag on his socks and thought back to how Bill Hughes had finally persuaded him.

"We could use the money, Eddie, so can you try putting aside your well known personal opinions, prejudices and suspicions about businesses for once?"

Eddie had been adamant. "No."

"Come on Eddie. Not all of them are so bad and you know as well as I do that your opinions are quickly seen for what they are – unfounded, private vendettas."

"No."

"Not even if, as part of the deal, you become their appointed scientific adviser, Eddie?" Bill had winked. "With all that that might offer? Influence? Powers of persuasion? Change for the better?"

"Well, if you put it like that."

That was almost a year ago. Now, wearing his damp socks, Eddie went to the door. He opened it to a wall of perfume.

Standing there was an unexpectedly tall, slim, black-haired woman in a dark suit who looked much younger than he'd imagined. This wasn't the squat, savage-looking, bespectacled and mousy-haired chairman and chief executive of his imagination but

a taller, more delicate creature with pure white skin, shiny red lips and deep brown eyes surrounded by thick, black paint. She smiled at him.

“Professor Higgins?”

“Call me Eddie.”

“May I come in?”

Baroness Isobel Johnson (she was one of those who had acquired a title for being well connected in circles that Eddie would deliberately avoid even if the opportunity arose) slipped passed him and he checked her from behind. She was wearing shiny, red, high-heeled shoes and black stockings. A flimsy red scarf was draped over a dark grey jacket and beneath that a matching grey skirt. A red handbag hung from her shoulder.

Eddie’s low interest in personal details meant he hadn’t learned much about her beforehand. Had he bothered he’d have discovered that Isobel Johnson was highly regarded in some circles. She was a regular contributor to magazines on fashion and such-like and was often called upon to speak on the radio or TV or at conferences in support of women in business. All Eddie knew was that not a drop of rain had touched her so she’d clearly arrived by car or taxi, certainly not by bicycle.

He was still holding the door open with his glasses hanging on the cord around his neck. “We banned those sorts of shoes some years ago,” he said. “They leave marks on the laboratory floor.”

Isobel turned and looked at him and Eddie saw a striking resemblance to a waxworks model of a Chinese concubine he’d once seen at Madame Tussaud’s. It was the glossy red lipstick that clinched it.

“Of course,” Isobel said. “How thoughtless of me. Shall I leave them outside?”

Eddie wondered about that because he’d also been at the forefront of a ban on high heels in corridors but at this rate she’d need to return to London for a complete change of clothing. “Outside is fine,” he said beckoning to the corridor.

He replaced his glasses to watch how she bent over in the tight skirt and removed the shoes. She placed them neatly against the wall, brushed the skirt down and then turned to look up at him from a slightly lower altitude. “Better?” she asked.

“Thank you,” Eddie said. “Please come in. Take the stool by the incubator.”

“Did you put the kettle on as you said you would, Professor Higgins?”

“Yes. It has already boiled. Twice. Tea?”

“Thank you.”

“Milk? Sugar?”

“Neither thank you. It’s a big laboratory, Professor Higgins.”

“Call me Eddie.”

“And you’re in charge?”

“Yes. Biscuit?”

“What sort do you have?”

“Osborne. Rich Tea, or whatever they’re now called.”

He busied himself with two mugs of tea, one with milk and two sugars, the other without. He squeezed the tea bags with the spoon, checked they were fully spent of colour and polyphenols and dropped them in the pedal bin. Then he grabbed four biscuits from the packet.

“This looks very complicated Professor Higgins.”

In looking to see what it was that was so complicated, the tea from one mug spilt on the floor so Eddie wiped the splashes with his foot hoping she hadn't seen. Hot wetness seeped into his still damp, grey socks. “Gas chromatography and mass spectrography. Some students' work. Results from a few tests on Krabok nut oil,” he said.

Eddie was a world expert on tropical hardwood trees such as Kraboks, their nuts and their fungal diseases but he tried hard not to bore anyone with too much science. He'd seen too many eyes glaze over in the past to even try.

“And what does it tell you?”

He slid the mug of tea towards her leaving a trail of wetness and put two Rich Teas alongside it. That's when he noticed her fingers, the shiny red nails and three rings – gold with clear little stones.

“My students were looking for therapeutic properties, particularly antifungal ones amongst the aldehydes and esters components in nut oils.” He was speaking somewhat distractedly because nail paint always intrigued him. Why did they do it? What was the purpose?

“I see,” Isobel replied.

“In your cosmetics business, you call them essential oils, Baroness Johnson.”

“Isobel, please.”

“In theory, when choosing an essential oil for human use you would want one with a high therapeutic value and low toxicity. There are many different compounds within each of the major categories – in fact there are several hundred individual chemical substances in these oils. That makes it difficult to evaluate them chemically. Even though a chromatograph may show only a few of the constituents of an oil, one still needs knowledge of many individual substances and their properties to read and understand a GC-MS report. Some components can be quite toxic in large quantities.” Eddie glanced at her from the corner of his eye. “But you know all that of course. You're in the cosmetics business.”

Isobel tried sipping her tea but Eddie knew it would be far too hot for her delicate red lips. She put the mug down.

Over his half-moons he watched her looking at the screen through two strands of straight black hair that had fallen forward. Her brown eyes peered through long black eyelashes that were either false or fluffed up with those little black brushes they use to improve the flutter effect. Her eyebrows were thick, black and neat mirror images of each another.

“This,” he said pressing a few keys, “is a comparison of two oils that you might think were identical – lavender oils. Lavender is useful for teaching students. If lavender is grown above 2,000 feet, the ester content increases. This, some say, makes high altitude lavender oil more useful in aromatherapy and therefore more profitable.

"We're talking serious biochemistry coupled with complex benefits and toxicity testing, Baroness. Claims, for instance, that lavenders have calming effects and antispasmodic properties are - what shall I say? - mostly hearsay. Most users and sellers of aromatherapy products don't have the slightest understanding of the chemistry behind the ludicrous claims they make."

Eddie was getting into the swing of things now. He pulled up another stool and sat down close enough to find her perfume quite overpowering. "And neither do perfume and cosmetics manufacturers," he added, wrinkling his nose.

She smiled. "But whoever heard of someone dying from an overdose of skin cream, Professor?"

"And whoever heard of someone taking an anti-ageing cream who finds the ageing process has been stopped in its tracks," he snapped back.

"But it's their choice." She said checking the heat of her tea again. "If they feel and look better then..."

Eddie erupted. "The word anti means against," he said. "Anti-ageing therefore means against ageing. It means something, in this case a mix of chemicals, that acts against ageing or at least delays the biological process of ageing. No such single chemical exists. Anti-ageing does not mean lessening the visual signs of ageing. The cosmetics industry uses expressions to distort scientific fact. It turns clearly understood words and changes their meanings. It distorts truth to get around advertising standards that are, in themselves, inadequate. The cosmetics industry lies, misrepresents and steals words to sell products that don't work."

"Really, Professor, I don't quite....." but there was no interrupting Eddie when he was on a roll.

"Take the word serum," he said. "Ask any woman these days what serum is and she'll tell you it's cosmetic. No. it's not. Serum is a highly complex body fluid in which blood cells circulate in blood vessels. Serology is a scientific subject in its own right. Serum is not, and never can be, a mix of a few synthetic chemicals in a drop of oil sold in pink tubes and little bottles. They stole the word, Baroness. "

Isobel looked appalled as if no-one had ever spoken to her like this but Eddie still hadn't finished.

"And you think that someone in a society like ours where good quality food of all types is cheap and available in indecent abundance needs to take food supplements and consume energy drinks as if they're vital for general health and performance?"

He was pleased how he'd slipped in that indirect reference to the new range of Vital Sports drinks. He made a noise that was meant to sound triumphant

"What on earth is meant by replacing lost electrolytes for example?" he went on. "Do they really mean the sodium chloride in sweat? If so, say so. Does anyone who drinks these concoctions properly understand words like hypotonic, hypertonic or isotonic? And, even if it was possible, would anyone really need to *improve* and *speed up* their metabolism?"

Baroness Johnson wriggled off her stool. "Professor Higgins. I thought I was here to listen to your views following a talk you gave to our staff a short while ago."

That was true. Talking to staff now and again was one of the jobs of the scientific adviser. So far, Eddie had only talked to them once, formally, but once was enough. He'd walked around their manufacturing area more than once but had found senior staff boring, disinterested, arrogant, flippant and, quite frankly, rude.

Eddie was still seated and Isobel was facing him at eye level so he stood because his mother had always told him to stand if a seated lady he was conversing with stood.

"Yes," he said, "Because according to your short email to Professor Bill Hughes you had concerns about the way your business was being run. You're in the cosmetics and health products business and you've appointed a scientific adviser. Well, here I am – asking questions and advising."

Isobel sniffed. "Professional advice is one thing. Personal views are quite another, Professor."

"Not so," Eddie said crossly. "For a scientist, different sets of views must be allowed to overlap until indisputable facts tilt opinion one way or another. And, anyway, the message I received was that you wanted opinions on staff motivation and commitment, not just their scientific knowledge. That is a pity because as none of your staff are properly qualified their ability to question technical data is very limited. But it was as if you were suspicious of goings on within the company. Am I right?"

She sniffed again so he knew he was right. He continued: "If so then as your scientific adviser and as I am not at all clear who I actually report to, I would like to say that Vital started giving me cause for concern several months ago. Those concerns have recently increased substantially."

"I see."

Eddie swallowed some tea and wiped his mouth. "So, do you want to hear my views?"

"Yes," she said. "That's why I'm here. And if you are in any doubt, Professor, you report to me."

Eddie was pleased she'd cleared up that long-standing question but it was the way she announced it that took him by surprise. It was surprisingly forceful.

At last she took a reasonable sip of her tea and nibbled on an Osborne. She was standing up and he'd always imagined well brought up ladies ate and drank sitting down, but he wasted no further time on that. "What qualifications does your chief buyer have?"

"Peter Lester?"

"That's him. What is his background?"

"Business, Professor. He was not my appointee. You must understand all the staff were in place before I became Chairman. The Chief Executive, Nick Carstairs and the Finance Director, Boris Hamilton, were also in place."

"Nick Carstairs?"

"He was in banking."

"Boris Hamilton?"

"Accountancy."

“The Quality Manager, Donald McVie?”

“I believe he worked for a local engineering company but why do you ask?”

“I think one or more of them broke into my home.”

That shook her. Her eyes widened and the thick black eyelashes didn't move at all for a full three seconds.

“Broke in? How? When?”

“I trod in a sticky blob of chewing gum outside my front door.”

“Chewing gum?”

“Lester and McVie both chew gum.”

“Do they? But it could have been the postman. A delivery driver.”

“Perhaps, but let's see what the finger prints tell us.”

“Finger prints? Did you call the police?”

“Finger prints found in dust in my home laboratory are being looked at by my private investigator.”

“Private investigator? Good gracious. But why on earth would anyone break in.”

“To steal my Krabok nuts, Baroness.”

“Nuts?” she repeated.

“And to steal my personal data and correspondence. Breaking into my home is far easier than breaking into this laboratory.”

“Your private correspondence? Why?”

“Let's begin with my nuts,” Eddie said. “Drums of Krabok nut oil are used in some of your cosmetics. What's more, during my jungle forays in South East Asia - which I conduct twice a year, by the way - I came across a type of Krabok tree that produced three times as much of a certain vital component as normal. Those trees could become very valuable if protected and genetic and other tests were performed. And that's not just because of their value in cosmetics. Far more interesting to me is that we've shown they produce an interesting oil that could be extremely valuable in medicine. However, Baroness, that is all now very unlikely as those trees were also stolen.”

Eddie stopped at that point and watched her fingers playing around her shiny red lips. Her cheeks, too, showed a slightly rosier tinge. “Stolen?” she said.

“Perhaps I should have said illegally felled – taken from a prized and protected national park and wild life sanctuary in northern Thailand.”

Isobel's cheeks were growing rosier by the second.

“All that aside,” Eddie said more quietly, “With regard to your concerns about the way your company is run, I'm not a businessman but it's all about standards. We should all live according to a set of standards. In Vitals' case staff should be suitably qualified, understand the products they make and sell and should not, whilst being remunerated by Vital, be tempted into doing things on the side that verge on illegality.”

He stopped then, wondering whether he'd gone too far. But it was Mark Dobson, his private investigator friend, who had sown many of Eddie's suspicions. He watched Isobel remount the stool, wriggle and pull her skirt down to almost cover her knees. She sipped her tea, pushed the rogue strand of hair from her face and took a deep breath. Then came the minor capitulation that Mark Dobson had forecast when he knew Eddie was meeting the top boss.

"We all have to make the best of whatever we inherit," she said.

Eddie had just dunked half an Osborne and lost it to the depths of his cup of tea. He decided to search for it later.

"I think, Baroness, that what you've inherited is a business philosophy of cutting corners, contempt for quality assurance and, or so it seems to me, total disregard for science, international law and the environment. And, personally, I would never have employed any of your senior management team. How does that make you feel?"

"Bad enough to seek your help, Professor Higgins. A public scandal would not be good for anyone. Despite your obvious passion, your views are, I admit, not too different from my own. The burglary is new though."

"And I didn't tell you about the United Nations and Interpol papers I'd been reading?"

"Interpol? Good gracious."

Eddie wiped tea wetness from his nose and mouth with the back of his hand, but knocked his glasses off in the process. "I was planning some direct action of my own," he said, hooking them back over his ears, "but I phoned an international commercial crime investigator instead."

"Interpol? A commercial crime investigator?"

Suddenly Eddie felt sorry for her and looked at her over the top of his glasses. He'd never seen a face with such evenly distributed features before and it wasn't just the eyebrows. One side of her face was a perfect mirror image of the other.

"Would you like lunch?" he said quietly. "If it's not too crowded I often eat at Greggs. They do a nice cheese and ham baguette."

CHAPTER 2

Colin Asher often ate his lunch with his feet on his office desk. For the eighteen hours or so he spent staring at his bank of computers each day, putting his feet up for ten minutes felt like home, but the arrival of the Pret a Manger takeaway next door to the office on Edgware Road had been a disaster for Asher's waistline.

On the morning Eddie had called, it had been an egg and cress sandwich. "Who am I speaking to, please?" he'd said with his mouth full.

"At this stage, it's an enquiry," the voice said.

"You're calling Asher and Asher. We're international commercial crime investigators and I'm Colin Asher. How may I help?"

"I'm calling from Oxford University."

“You’re a student?” To be fair, the caller hadn’t sounded like a student. “A mature student, perhaps?”

“I suppose you could say I was mature.”

“Nevertheless, a name would get us started.”

“Huggy. Will that do for now?”

“Huggy,” Asher repeated as if unsure if he’d heard correctly.

“Yes, but I’m a little unfamiliar with your type of business. It sounds so - so unusual. You understand.”

“The learning curve has to start somewhere, Mr Huggy. What’s the problem?”

Eddie had paused to reconsider his approach. It was such a long pause that Colin Asher wondered if he’d gone. Then: “I suppose I should be frank. Mr Asher. I’m not a student. My name is Edward Higgins, often referred to as Eddie, sometimes known as Huggy. More formally I’m Professor of Tropical Plant Science and Head of the Mycology Research Centre at Oxford.”

“Head of what, sir?”

“Mycology, Mr Asher. Fungi to you. The study of those millions of essential living things that inhabit the air you breathe, the water you drink and the soil beneath your feet and thrive on human detritus and other decaying matter to keep both you and the rest of the planet alive and in a relatively healthy state.”

“Ah, like the blue fluffy stuff on an old sandwich.”

“That would probably be a type of Penicillium, Mr Asher. Without which and the keen observations of Alexander Fleming, you probably would not have survived much beyond childhood let alone long enough to enjoy your sandwich. Be eternally grateful for blue moulds.”

“Righty ho,” Asher replied wondering how the caller knew he was eating a sandwich. He tossed the remains of it in the bin. “So how can I help you, Professor Higgins?”

“Cosmetics industry, Mr Asher. Health drinks industry. Scandalous businesses that rely on false promises and human weakness for their very existence. But I’ve been acting – after some arm-twisting I admit - as a scientific adviser to one such business. There are things that concern me.”

“What sort of things?”

“You operate over open phone lines, Mr Asher? I assumed you’d provide a certain amount of confidentiality.”

“We do, sir,” Colin Asher replied. He coughed and then removed his feet from the table. “We normally advise face to face discussions at all stages. I just wanted to get a feel for the problem before arranging one.”

Eddie decided he’d been a little frivolous calling himself Huggy but he’d never had to engage the services of a private investigator before, let alone one specialising in international commercial crime. “Well, that’s good to hear,” he said. “I’m not a businessman of course but I could list a few things, if you like.”

“Go ahead.” Asher said taking a deep breath.

“Insufficient and inaccurate labelling of cosmetics, use of uncontrolled substances in skin preparations, the ludicrous inclusion of unnatural and unhealthy ingredients in so-called health drinks. Dubious origins of imported raw materials and semi-finished product. The repackaging and re-labelling of same. Exaggerated claims, impossible claims and utterly false claims. I could go on. Is this the sort of thing you deal with?”

“Counterfeiting is a particular speciality of ours, Professor. What you describe is not dissimilar. Do you have evidence to back up your concerns?”

Despite the terrible south London accent he was hearing, Eddie’s confidence was slowly rising. Evidence was also what good science depended on.

“I’m a scientist with access to world class laboratory facilities, Mr Asher. I’m also capable of distinguishing between the well-researched, well-tested and properly approved pharmaceutical products you get with a prescription and products sold freely over the counter at extortionate prices that make claims to impossible miracles. I’ll give you an example. The claim to stop the ageing process in its tracks, remove all wrinkles and return you to a form of beauty you only dream about or see advertised in glossy magazines. Am I making my point?”

“Very clearly, Professor. But you say you are an adviser to one such company?”

“A local, Oxford-based company called Vital Cosmetics. Arm-twisted as I said and, fortunately, not required to waste too much time on it. I’m their token real scientist, Mr Asher, useful to mention now and then whenever it suits them. But I have to admit that I thought at the time of my appointment it might prove useful in getting to know how these businesses operate.”

“Because you have strong opinions about such business?”

“Which I could continue to expound on if you so wished.”

“Perhaps later. But we’d still need evidence, Professor.”

“South East Asia,” Eddie said without hesitation. “I’m a frequent visitor.”

“Can you explain that a little more?”

“Field trips, looking for naturally occurring, biologically active compounds that might have some use as fungicides, insecticides and so on.”

That may not have been enough but Colin Asher settled for patience. “Are you successful?”

“It takes time,” Eddie said. “The hunting, the finding, the sampling, the testing. Then someone comes along and undermines it all – hears about a scientific paper suggesting a possible active ingredient from, say the nuts and bark of a subspecies of a Krabok tree growing in a protected forest in northern Thailand and before you know it, another untested, unproved product is on the market as a miracle cure with little or no scientific evidence to support it.”

“That must be frustrating,” he commiserated.

“And Vital Cosmetics have some staff that I find are - what shall I say? - unprofessional, Mr Asher.”

“Evidence again?”

“Cutting of corners on quality control, deliberately overlooking sound evidence that ingredients don’t work.”

“It’s commercial pressure. Not unknown I’m afraid.”

“Directors with close links to Asian producers of similar products.”

“It happens.”

“One of the Asian businesses has links to Russian criminal gangs.”

“You sure of that?”

“I ran a few checks of my own, Mr Asher.”

“I see. Anything else?”

“There’s plenty more, but do you see why I’m calling you? Because I can tell you, Mr Asher, it’s not just the cosmetics industry that concerns me. The health foods and energy drinks firms are just the same, aided and abetted by the supermarkets and High Street chains of course.”

That last comment triggered something with Colin Asher. One of their current clients was a Taiwanese company struggling with counterfeit energy drinks. “You hold some strong opinions about these businesses I see, Professor.”

“Different viewpoints are essential if we are to evolve into better animals, Mr Asher.”

Colin Asher took a breath. “Perhaps a face to face might be useful. As it happens my partner has just left on a business trip to Taiwan and Malaysia. We’re extremely busy at present but I’ll ask Mark to call you when he returns. Mark Dobson’s the field man. I just sit in the office and twiddle the knobs of a bank of computers. Would that suit you, Professor?”

“I hope it won’t be too long.”

“About a week or so. Would that be acceptable?”

“I suppose I’ll have to wait. Meanwhile, thank you. Call me Eddie.”

CHAPTER 3

Mark Dobson had just returned from Taiwan and Malaysia and Colin Asher and he were having their routine post trip debrief in the Asher & Asher office on Edgware Road.

“Which brings me onto the good news,” Colin Asher said after twenty minutes. “The need to bring in some fresh blood.”

“I’m too young to retire,” Dobson responded.

“But much too stretched. I’ve got Ching and Else to help me in the office. You need someone. Anything could happen. You could die in a plane crash. How would I find time to attend the funeral?”

“I wouldn’t notice. If you felt any post mortem guilt, buy a headstone.”

In recent weeks, the two partners had mostly talked on the phone or by video link and only met for brief case reviews, progress reports and decision-making.

When Dobson was away he found he quickly forget what Asher looked like, but he was soon reminded. He looked at the familiar round face of the man he'd known for fifteen years and at the way he slumped in his chair. He was putting on weight. While he himself travelled and ate badly, irregularly and sometimes not at all, Asher sat in the office playing with the computers and sending out for Pret a Manger snacks every hour.

"Someone fresh coming on board would mean you might even finish a few outstanding jobs like the one for Kenny Tan in Taiwan who, don't forget, has already paid us a decent fee up front," Asher said.

"So, give me the good news?"

"I found someone, that's what."

"Without telling me?"

"You were away."

"Anyway, you're putting on weight. You could die long before me."

"No chance."

"So, who is it?"

They had been considering doubling the field staff from one to two for months. Ex police were easy enough to recruit for an international commercial crime investigation company like Asher & Asher but the problem with ex police was they never stopped looking and sounding like police. They couldn't seem to shake off their attitude, their mannerisms, the way they walked and talked. Dobson kept telling Asher they needed a complete fresher, a raw character they could train up. He was about to find out how fresh and raw the recruit would be.

"Richie Nolan," Colin Asher said. "Keith's boy."

"Keith?"

"Keith Nolan."

"Ah. That Keith." Keith Nolan was a friend of theirs, now doing something in the SIS that no-one talked about.

"Keith reckons Ritchie's wasting his talent so I interviewed him at Costa Coffee outside the drama school where he's a student."

"A drama student?"

"I thought we'd decided we needed someone who could blend in and fall easily into character when necessary. Someone adaptable and young."

"That's it, isn't it? You decided that at forty-five I'm too old and no longer blend in but stick out like a sore thumb amongst the latest generation with their tattoos, haircuts and ear-rings. How old is he?"

"Twenty-five or six," Asher said vaguely. "Right colour as well. We need to meet our commitment to ethnic diversity."

"But you've already got a Chinese and a Pole helping you on your computers and fetching your take-aways."

“Despite their origins, Ching and Else are white ladies, Mark. Ritchie’s a nutty brown guy with Jamaican blood or some other ancient African genes. He’s got an Afro cut and proper trainers. He’s just what we need. I’ve told him we offer practical, hands-on experience, excitement, training, salary and expenses all thrown in.”

“What did he say?”

“He asked what he’d be doing as if he feared he might be making coffee or fetching sandwiches on minimum wage. I told him he’d be working for Asher & Asher.”

Richie’s face had sagged at the thought of working for Asher & Asher because Colin Asher’s pale face bore all the downtrodden looks of a struggling family solicitor, an accountant or estate agent who rarely saw the sun and who’s only source of nourishment was Pret a Manger sandwiches. Asher quickly squashed those superficial impressions.

“It’s highly specialised detection work - international fraud, corruption, money laundering. That sort of thing. We often work with the SIS, MI6, the FBI and the CIA. Interested?”

Ritchie’s face had brightened. “My father works for one of those. But he never talks about it.”

“Quite right, too,” Asher had said sipping his Costa latte. “You can’t bring work home every night to discuss around the dinner table with the wife and kids. Good friend of ours is Keith. He recommended you. Said the chances of you finding any meaningful employment on TV or in Hollywood were limited to the point of unachievable. But he thought we might be able to use some of what you learned during your first week of drama classes.”

Richie’s black eyes set in his brown, part Jamaican face surrounded by long and tightly knitted black curls tied with brightly coloured strings, had shone briefly but clouded over again when Asher warned him that if he bragged, exaggerated or even dreamed of telling anyone what he was doing, his father would quickly find a way of dealing with him. And if his father didn’t, then one or more of Asher & Asher’s foreign clients certainly would. So, was he still interested?

“Might be. Well, yes. I suppose. Big company, is it?”

“Just me and my partner Mark Dobson with two part-time ladies nicked from the old Fraud Squad. We cover all corners of the globe, north, south, east and west of Edgware Road though nothing extra-terrestrial yet. Still interested?”

“Mmm. You travel a lot?” Ritchie asked checking his Converse trainers, then wetting his finger to remove a speck of north London street dirt from the toe of one of them.

“Me? No, not if I can help it. Mark does that with a few different names and passports. I just guard the office in Edgware Road. It’s a bit like a miniature GCHQ. You any good on IT?”

Ritchie livened up again. “Oh sure. I’ve got an iPhone.”

“Good man. Software? AshHack317, 318 and 319, for example?”

“Um, I’m not too familiar with those.”

“Not surprising really, I suppose,” Asher had told him. “I wrote them myself.”

“So, when will he start?” Mark Dobson asked.

“As soon as you’re ready. Meanwhile, you need to call Professor Huggy Higgins.”

CHAPTER 4

Eddie’s reputation for personal hygiene and untidiness was well known but there was no mistaking his commitment to routine.

On the first Saturday of every month Eddie caught the 3.36pm train from Oxford to Bristol to attend Bristol Poet’s Night - an evening of live poetry recitals at The Ship pub at which Eddie was a regular and popular performer going, unsurprisingly, by the stage name of Huggy.

Eddie’s performances were not quite in the style of Wordsworth, Yeats or Byron. You either enjoyed them for their sour humour or turned the other way in embarrassment but Eddie wasn’t bothered either way. He specialised in a sort of rhyming satire through which he channelled his many aversions to modern life. It made a satisfying diversion from science, research and teaching. “Taxing but relaxing,” he called it.

Mark Dobson had phoned him the day before and so, anxious to speed things up, Eddie had suggested meeting in Bristol at The Ship.

When he felt the tap on his shoulder he thought at first it was someone who’d found his glasses. They’d fallen off just as he’d mounted the stage although he hadn’t needed them for his performance. If he forgot a line he’d ad lib for a while until he remembered the next lines. That night he’d finished with a poem called “My Wife’s Cat”. He hadn’t had a wife or a cat for over thirty years but that wasn’t the point of the poem.

Mark Dobson and he sat outside on a wooden bench overlooking the waterfront and a view up to Brunel’s famous Clifton Suspension Bridge over the Avon Gorge and a sinking sun. Eddie drank his usual orange juice, Dobson a pint of lager with lime juice.

“I hear you’ve just returned from Malaysia,” Eddie said.

“And Bangkok and Taiwan. We have a Taiwanese client with a problem of counterfeiting. I understand you know Thailand.”

“Field trips, two or three times a year,” Eddie said. “I tramp through forests and jungles. The humidity is better than any medicine for ageing, creaking joints.”

“And you’re a part-time scientific adviser for Vital Cosmetics.”

Eddie nodded but didn’t want to jump ahead too quickly. If he was to seek the help of Asher & Asher he needed to understand how they operated so he asked.

“We’re busy,” Dobson replied. “Too busy. Cases start from nothing and grow. The Taiwanese client is a good example. Co-incidentally that case also involves an energy drink like Vitals’ health drinks.”

“Totally unnecessary given a properly balanced diet,” Eddie said. “There’s no excuse in Western society. They are marketing gimmicks sold to the gullible.”

Dobson smiled. “What else do you do besides your University work and the poetry? By the way I enjoyed hearing about the cat.”

“I write articles for organisations wanting trendy, controversial pieces on sustainability, human population growth or the environment,” Eddie replied. “I’m a lobbyist on behalf of non-human life.”

“So, what’s your view on humans?”

“Greedy, selfish parasites,” he said.

“And cats?”

“Cruel carnivores with a particularly nasty way of attracting affection.”

“Does your wife know?”

“I’ve not had a wife or a cat for thirty-five years. Melissa took the only cat I’ve ever had the misfortune to know when she left me. As soon as both had gone I turned the room she’d used as a litter tray for the cat and a weekend retreat for her mother into a laboratory. The result is five years of accumulation - books, journals, research papers and so on. It’s just as well Melissa’s not there to see it.”

“Had she tired of you?”

“Tired of my obsessions, my constant rants about the state of the world, my futile attempts to justify my past run-ins with the law and my other youthful antics that once helped fill inside pages of tabloid newspapers. Funny thing the divorce. It was a blur then and a blur now, but I’d been engrossed in more important things and failed to see what was going on domestically. Or understand the cause. Or anticipate the effect.”

“It happens,” Mark Dobson said noting the run-ins with the police. “Mine lasted two years. Working twenty-four seven for the Fraud Squad, as I then was, put paid to mine.”

Eddie nodded. Divorced men were common enough. He took a mouthful of orange juice. “I’ve often asked myself how I’d deal with domestic problems now, in a scientific manner, at aged sixty-two and a half. It’s always worth analysing the hypothetical. Melissa saw me as a predictable bore and likely to become an increasingly predictable bore by my sixties. She clearly had foresight.”

Dobson smiled. “Tell me about the break-in at the house.”

“Meticulous disorder is what I call my home.,” Eddie said. “It’s so meticulous I quickly detect the disturbing hand of someone else. Especially an intruder. They’d even disturbed my copy of a United Nations Environment Programme report and an INTERPOL report on organised crime and illegal logging in South East Asia.”

“And, of course, your nuts,” Dobson added kindly.

“Perhaps I should have discussed things with Bill Hughes – he’s head of Department - but I wasn’t ready. That’s why I’d been reading the INTERPOL report. I know nothing about international policing but I wanted to know what’s being done about illegal logging, counterfeit medicines, the food supplements business and the infernal cosmetics industry.”

“Why don’t you like the cosmetics industry?”

“It’s not just the cosmetics industry. It’s elements of modern society. The self-pampering that the cosmetics industry thrives on is just a barometer of what I’m talking about. It’s the overindulgence of the West, the over expectations, the taking out of more than we put in, the selfishness, the demanding of rights without responsibilities, the look-at.me culture, the worship of physical appearance instead of knowledge and understanding and respect for life. Obesity is largely the physical manifestation of overindulgence and excess. I dislike the unnecessary material possessions and selfishness, the dumping of elderly parents to live out their remaining years of frailty with complete strangers in nursing homes. It’s inhuman but all we hear are excuses wrapped up as explanations rather than outright condemnation.

“The vanity industry, the cosmetics industry, concerns me as an indicator of what is wrong and so I’ve been trying to understand why it’s successful and yet so unnecessary. For instance, I frequently write to companies that claim their anti-ageing creams work. I’m merely seeking their evidence but replies are far less frequent.”

Mark Dobson, realising they were at last getting to the point, nodded his encouragement. The issue for him was whether Eddie was just a crazy obsessive with a vendetta against capitalism and society or whether he had a definite case.

“Let me give you an example. There’s a cream called – and don’t laugh, Mark – ‘Forever Youthful’. One pink tub of this stuff sells in the US for \$100. I reckon that’s almost \$100 dollars profit less a few cents for the plastic tub and the label. And the label itself says, if you’ve got a strong enough lens to read it, that this concoction contains the ten most important anti-ageing ingredients known and that it promotes collagen production, boosts microcirculation and improves skin firmness.”

Dobson had been watching Eddie’s facial features change from amicable to concern to downright annoyance.

“That’s impossible,” Eddie went on. “It’s scientifically unproven. So, I wrote asking for the scientific evidence. They emailed me back a month later after I’d sent a reminder to say they ‘weren’t at liberty to share their proprietary data’” Eddie’s eyes widened. “The fact is Mark, with just a few rare exceptions, they’re all like that. No other industry would be allowed to get away with it. So, I threatened to write an article and mention ‘Forever Youthful’ as a case study in fraudulent marketing.”

“What happened?”

“I had a most extraordinary, threatening letter from an Italian lawyer.”

“Italian? I was imagining a US company.”

“So was I, but the letter came from Italy. From Trieste.”

“Did you write the article?”

“I drafted it but haven’t yet published it.”

“Where is the draft?”

“On my computer.”

“On your home computer? Is it password locked?”

Eddie's expression now changed to puzzlement. "I never thought of that. You think they....?"

"Could have copied everything off your PC during the break-in? Of course."

"I see. Oh, dear. All my personal documents. Everything. But what could they do with it?"

"It depends who they are," Dobson said. "But if it's someone you threatened then they'll threaten you. The usual, soft approach is to pay you off for keeping your opinions to yourself. Another approach is blackmail. The extreme approach is to make sure you are no longer around to be a problem."

"Death threats?"

"Not just threats, Eddie. Death itself. Is there anything on your PC you really don't want people to see?"

Eddie thought for a moment. "Tax, insurance, bank details, most is password protected. Technical facts and figures. Copied items from online research. Personal letters and articles I've written – and letters to big companies, multinationals, that sort of thing."

"Are there many of that latter sort?"

"Quite a lot." Eddie began to see the problem.

"Containing serious accusations?"

"Mostly requests for information."

"Provocative requests? Requests tinged with threats of exposure?"

"Not as such."

"Meaning?"

"Nothing libellous."

"Are you sure?"

"Well..."

"You know what my partner, Colin, says, Eddie? If the bear is sitting minding its own business don't start poking it with a sharp stick."

"Mm," Eddie replied. "There's a poem there somewhere."

"What puzzles me is why they took your nuts."

"Ah." They were back on more explicable ground. "As it happens, I am a world expert on Krabok trees – the life cycle, nuts, oils, biochemistry and diseases. Vital use some Krabok nut oil extracted somewhere in Malaysia. They import it and use it in cosmetics and claim it's good for complexion, as an anti-ageing cream and in suppositories for curing haemorrhoids. It's out and out pseudoscience but a year ago someone asked me for help in granting credence to their claims. I refused. Only surgery cures chronic haemorrhoids, Mark. Haemorrhoid cream containing Krabok oil is a mere lubricant and about as useful as a tub of butter. It was dropped. Nothing more was said."

"Are you suggesting Vital Cosmetics are responsible for the break in?"

“Who else? Krabok nuts have a high oil content - 42.97% to be precise. It helps form foam and gives hardness to soap. Krabok seeds are used in botanical soaps with the usual exaggerated claims. But the Krabok trees I recently found in northern Thailand had an even higher oil content than normal – 73% to be precise - and a unique element showing definite antifungal properties in my laboratory. It was an exciting discovery. Those trees looked similar to all the other trees but were a variant with a natural mutation that might have led to their survival over other Kraboks. That is unseen evolution leading to the survival of the fittest, the ones best able to withstand fungal disease. That was what excited me. I published a paper. Now the trees are gone. Illegally felled.”

Mark Dobson thought about that. Eddie’s suspicions and theories all seemed a little unlikely but cases often started like that. “If it wasn’t someone from Vital Cosmetics who broke in who else might it have been? Who makes this stuff called ‘Forever Youthful’?”

“The name on the pack says Bio-Kal but there is an American company also using the name Forever Youthful.”

With his other client in mind, Dobson wondered about counterfeiting. “Where are Bio-Kal based?”

“It says New York on the box but I don’t believe it. There was a post office box address in Milan and the lawyer was from Trieste.”

They were still sitting outside The Ship. Darkness had fallen, their drink glasses were empty and most people had gone. There was silence for a while until Mark Dobson spoke. “Listen, Eddie. I’m not sure what I can do for you right now. Normally we only work for commercial firms, businesses or private individuals with a vested commercial interest.”

Eddie recognised the bluntness of what he was saying. He removed his glasses, let them dangle on their cord and looked at him. “What you’re saying is you don’t work for individuals with what looks like a personal vendetta. Is that it?”

“Other than the break-in at home which would normally be dealt with by local police, where is your commercial interest?”

“There isn’t one.”

“Exactly. The part that interests me is a possible connection with our Taiwanese client – the counterfeit health drinks case but it’s vague.”

“Do you ever work with other private investigators?” Eddie asked.

“Not often but it has happened.”

“How much would you charge to help another private investigator?”

Dobson frowned. “To do what?”

“To investigate matters more deeply and see where it all leads.”

“Who have you got in mind?”

“Me,” Eddie had said.

Normally, Eddie cycled into the city if he wanted fresh air and lunch at Gregg's the bakers. He'd lock the bike to a cycle rack, pocket his cycle clips and either buy a takeaway cheese and ham baguette or an eat-in Coronation Chicken and lettuce baguette. He much preferred the Coronation Chicken but they dripped yellow curry and carrying it on the bike meant that only half was left by the time he returned to the laboratory.

That day, the rain of earlier having stopped, his lunch companion, Baroness Isobel Johnson, trotted beside him in her red high heels. They weren't talking because Eddie was feeling self-conscious and looking the other way hoping he wasn't being watched by someone he knew. When he occasionally glanced at Isobel he felt as if he was accompanied by some sort of alien, a creature from a different world but he was also calculating the speed of walking. Normally, by bicycle, it took two and a half minutes but today it would be fifteen and a half. By the time they arrived at Gregg's he'd already decided it had to be Coronation Chicken.

Isobel chose smoked salmon.

Fortunately, there was a spare table at the back next to a couple of old ladies with shopping bags on wheels so they scraped up two plastic chairs and settled with paper plates, serviettes and the baguettes.

"Good?" Eddie asked with his mouth full.

"Delicious," Isobel replied dabbing at her lips with the paper serviette.

Eddie bucked up courage. "So, what do you plan to do about the situation?" Such was the crusty texture of a fresh Gregg's baguette that, as he spoke, fragments of bread flew across the table.

"I think, perhaps, I should speak to your private investigator friend," Isobel said.

"Good idea," Eddie replied putting his baguette down and extracting his faithful old Nokia from his jacket pocket. "This is his phone number. Do you want to call him?"

"Perhaps later."

"No time like the present," Eddie said pressing buttons. Isobel wiped her lips and opened her mouth as if to delay matters but she was far too late. The phone was already ringing.

CHAPTER 5

For Mark Dobson it was the so-called 'training day' for the new Asher & Asher recruit, Ritchie Nolan

Their day had started outside the Istanbul Turkish restaurant on Queensway at 9am. When Dobson drew up in his ten-year-old Ford Mondeo, Ritchie was standing there as if looking for a flash BMW or Jaguar. He was dressed appropriately in a suit – a dark grey two-piece with a white handkerchief in the top pocket, a white shirt and a scarlet tie. He'd even done away with the coloured hair bands and created a sort of central parting. From a first impressions perspective, it had been a good try. Dobson took note. Meanwhile he, himself, was in his usual grey chinos and black sweater.

“Where are we going?” Ritchie asked once seated.

“Round trip - Oxford and back. It’s training on the go. No classroom, no charts, no diagrams, no power-points, just sit, listen, watch and ask questions. We’ll stop for lunch at around eleven as I can’t remember when I last ate.”

Instead, they stopped at 10am, a cheese and pickle sandwich at a motorway services outside Oxford. Richie waited in the car. They didn’t stop to eat it but drove on, right past Vital Cosmetics’ office with its lime-green V-shaped logo and, to Richie’s surprise, parked around the side.

“OK,” Dobson said pulling on the handbrake and switching off.

“Training Part One. Location of client. Vital Cosmetics is a possible new client but nothing’s signed yet. This is their main office, processing plant and factory. It’s not worth seeing. It’s just a pre-fabricated block made of corrugated tin and painted lime green. Inside it’s shiny, stainless steel machinery, bottles, drums, conveyor belts and cardboard boxes and smells like Harrod’s cosmetics counter or Holland & Barret on a Saturday afternoon.”

“When did you see inside?”

“I haven’t been inside. They have a video on their website promoting their good manufacturing practice, streamlined efficiency, their smartly dressed workers and of course their sustainability. For our purposes at this stage, seen one seen them all.”

“And the smell?”

“I’m guessing,” Dobson replied. He started on the cheese and pickle sandwich and, at the same time, fired up his laptop. “I repeat, this is a potential client, being used for training purposes only.”

“Is that why we’re not going inside?”

“Patience, Ritchie. Moving on. Training Part Two. Intelligence Gathering. Did Colin explain about my own special tasks man in Kuala Lumpur? No? Well, meet Jeffrey Lim.”

Jeffrey Lim was pictured standing in rolled-up sleeves in various uninspiring poses, next to an old blue Mitsubishi on a trading estate with coconut palms as backdrop.

“We’d just had a tropical thunderstorm when I took the photo so there were deep pools of water running across the concrete,” Dobson explained. “But Jeffrey did well. We already knew of a company in Malacca we suspected of counterfeiting Kenny Tan’s Red Power energy drinks.

“When I was there a few days ago, I asked Jeffrey to return for another looksee. It’s a big building. We think it may be a bottling plant and there may also be a sort of distillery inside, not for alcohol but oils for the cosmetics industry. We’re not sure. At any rate, something is going on there that doesn’t smell right. Hence the possible link with Vital Cosmetics. Eddie Higgins agrees. Co-incidentally, he’s also been there. Not inside the building but, apparently, he sat and watched it for an hour. If Eddie wasn’t a poet and Oxford Professor of Botany I reckon he’d make a good private investigator.”

“What evidence did Jeffrey get?”

“Photographs.”

“Does Jeffrey ever get inside these places?”

“Sometimes. He has several business cards. On one he’s a government factory inspector.”

“Will I get a business card?”

“You’ll certainly get a choice of passports. The one we’ve chosen for you on this particular case bears the name Michael Parker.”

“Is Michael a guy like me?”

“Micky Parker? Micky looks like you – right skin colour and hairstyle and so on - and he’s from north London, but you’ll need come to terms with his character.”

“I can do more educated accents if necessary.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Dobson said. “Micky is a small-time crook from Dagenham.”

Ritchie had grinned. Dobson put the car in gear and moved off and that’s when his phone rang. “Answer that will you, Ritchie? It’s probably Colin wondering where we are. He’s like an old woman whenever I’m in the country.”

“Hello?” said Ritchie.

“Mark. I’ve got someone who needs to speak to you.” said the voice. It was Eddie.

“Hello?” said Ritchie for the second time.

“Am I speaking to Mr Dobson?” said a crystal-clear woman’s voice.

“No, he’s driving. Can I help?”

“My name is Isobel Johnson. I’m with Professor Higgins. He’s suggested that....”

“Oh, right,” said Ritchie looking at Dobson. “We were just talking about you.”

“About me?”

“It’s Vital Cosmetics, yes?”

“Yes, but.....”

“Mark’s driving. My name’s Ritchie Nolan. I think you should speak to Mark.”

“Enough,” Mark Dobson told Ritchie from the driver’s seat. “Tell her I’ll call her back asap.”

CHAPTER 6

In Gregg’s, Eddie took his Nokia back and stuffed it back in his pocket.

“He’s calling back,” Isobel said.

“If you want to meet him you’ll need to be quick,” Eddie said. “He’s flying to Bangkok on Tuesday. I’ll be joining him later.”

“You’re joining him?”

“Coincidentally, I have meetings arranged with colleagues from Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok and with the director of one of the national parks.”

“And is this where the Krabok trees were illegally felled?”

Eddie nodded but was distracted by the way Isobel dabbed at her mouth with the serviette. The technique was so different from his own but, he concluded, a different procedure was probably essential if your face was covered in make-up. The distraction only lasted a second or two but by then he'd forgotten her question.

“I understand you have a patent pending on a method of oil extraction from Krabok wood,” he said.

“Uh yes,” she replied trying to keep up. “It's not something I fully understand but one of our directors, Nick Carstairs, has driven this with Peter Lester. They think it would help to maintain our competitiveness by increasing yields and so on.”

“Is that so? How interesting. Is the patent being applied for in the name of the company or an individual?” It was a trick question because Eddie already knew the answer.

“I'd need to check, Professor but I'm sure...”

Eddie interrupted her. “Krabok nut oil is extracted in at least one distillation plant near Malacca,” he said. “Oil from krabok tree bark has a much smaller percentage of oil but it's not unknown for it to be used to replace or dilute the purer nut oil.”

“Replace it? Dilute it?”

“The oil, suitably diluted and mixed with other oils, is shipped in cans or drums to processors like Vital.” He paused. “Would you like to know what I think?”

Isobel nodded.

“I think you're paying for top quality, pure oil.” He looked at her over his half-moons, frowned and the tufts of his grey eyebrows almost met in the middle of his forehead. “And then there are the other oils you use – coconut oil, palm oil, grapeseed oil and so on. I believe they have all been diluted with cheap vegetable oils by your suppliers. How many suppliers do you have? One? Two? More?”

“One, I understand,” Isobel replied vaguely. “They import our raw materials and handle a lot of our exports.”

“A dangerous practice would you not agree?”

She nodded.

“Especially as no-one at Vital properly analyses the imported oils or checks the quality,” Eddie added. “Instead you accept the analysis that comes with the shipment. These are easily forged. During a short tour of your processing plant I managed to take some samples. If we had more we might show it's mixed with cheap vegetable oils.”

The grey, unblinking eyes stared at her. “Some cosmetics companies claim that mixing essential oils with what they call carrier oils helps ‘carry’ the essential oil into the skin, that it improves absorption into dry skin and prevents adverse skin reactions. So-called ‘fractionated coconut oil’ is one. It's utter nonsense. It's pseudoscience to cover up a desire to reduce manufacturing costs and increase profits.”

Eddie looked at her knowing full well she knew virtually nothing about manufacturing or science. He pounced.

“Take Krabok oil for example. Tests in my laboratory showed hardly any resemblance to pure Krabok oil. And yet Vital Cosmetics claims that Krabok oil is a key ingredient with all sorts of magical properties. The same can probably be said for all the other ingredients you use. Your quality assurance is virtually non-existent.”

Isobel flushed enough for it to show through the make-up. Her black eyelashes fluttered. “But you say we are paying for top quality raw materials.”

“Oh yes. Someone somewhere is taking advantage and making a big profit. I assume your profits are also satisfactory at present but if someone checked your claims of purity and asked questions about how miracle cures and unimaginable improvements to beauty can be provided by using impure and inferior materials, might they not feel a little hard done by?”

“Good gracious.”

Eddie wiped a blob of yellow curry sauce with his finger and licked it off. “Yes,” he said. “If by ‘good gracious’ you are expressing surprise, alarm, dismay, annoyance and exasperation, then I think you’ve chosen very effective words, Baroness. The point is what are you going to do?”

That was when his phone rang again in his pocket. It was Mark Dobson. “Eddie? What’s up?”

“I’m taking luncheon with Baroness Isobel Johnson,” Eddie said, “She’d like a word.”

CHAPTER 7

Five minutes later Mark Dobson was turning the car around and heading back to Oxford. Meanwhile:

“So, what are you going to do, Baroness?” Eddie said stuffing the phone back once more. In the past few minutes, it had been used more than in the past month.

“Are other cosmetics companies affected by these – what shall we call them? – practices?” Isobel asked after a short pause.

“Very likely,” Eddie replied. Too many industries exploit vanity and the human obsession with physical appearance with blatantly untrue claims. In my opinion it’s criminal. But, of course, nothing will ever happen to curb the practice. For one thing the political will to do something is not there. To ban things could cost jobs etcetera. And of course, people have too much money so they spend it on utterly useless and non-essential consumer goods thinking they’ll improve their outward appearance or health. To hell with the effects on the environment. On the other hand, the growth in population is destroying the planet anyway. We’re probably amongst the last of the living before mass extinction, but they are very interesting times. It’s such a pity that there will be no-one left to learn from our mistakes.”

Isobel frowned but Eddie was on a roll.

“Nothing that is produced to satisfy the mostly female desire to stop the ageing process in its tracks actually works. Indeed, some products may well be the cause of obesity, infertility and depression, not to mention the environmental impact. Modern medical technology then keeps these sick and unhealthy beings alive until they are buried or cremated with their lipstick on to preserve their post mortem dignity. Human vanity and greed is destroying our understanding of life as well as destroying the planet, Baroness.”

“Yes,” Isobel replied and Eddie realised he had touched a nerve. He went in for the kill.

“Your company exploits human weakness for achieving body perfection whilst ignoring the fact that there is no such thing.” Without thinking, he took such a huge bite from his baguette that his cheeks extended like a hamster. Then he tried the nigh impossible: to chew it. “Do you hear me?” he added.

He wiped away the bread crumbs and yellow curry that had failed to go in with his hand, having forgotten the role of the tissue. Isobel watched and then saw him close his eyes as if remembering something else.

“Slim-line models, white teeth, red lips, bottle-browned bodies with slender hips. Fleeting smiles as cameras click. Strong on fashion, cool and hip. Weak on intellectual contribution but strong on visual stimulation.”

It was not spoken too clearly but when he’d finished his eyes opened and he partially swallowed the mouthful.

“Very poetic, Professor.”

Eddie wiped and swallowed again “It goes on much longer than that.” he said. Then he pointed a finger at her discarded lunch. “Have you finished?”

“Thank you.”

“Would you like one of those donuts like the two ladies?”

“A lemon yum yum?”

“Is that what they’re called? Or are you saying you’d like one?”.

“I need to watch my weight, Professor.”

“Ah yes. Quite right. You, too, are very conscious of your outward appearance, Baroness.”

“Perhaps,” she smiled. “It has become a modern necessity. But I can see it doesn’t bother you.”

She was quite correct with that observation but Eddie didn’t care. He felt comfortable in his old tweed jacket with the elbow patches and the ancient Bristol City FC jumper underneath. The jacket was still damp and he knew she’d watched him slip his feet into his damp sandals before they’d begun their walk. “Outward appearances will never match the far greater inner beauty,” he said.

“That sounds like a quotation, Professor. Is it?”

“It’s another of mine,” Eddie said stuffing his unused paper napkin into his jacket pocket alongside the Nokia. “I write poetry in my spare time. It’s part of a poem describing a tragic society where dutifulness is replaced by beautifulness. It took me a week to then find a suitable word that rhymed with disaster.

“How interesting.”

“Yes. Society collapses faster but a perfectly avoidable disaster. No-one cares about each other enough.”

Isobel paused, thinking. “Are you married, Professor?”

Eddie was still pondering on whether beautifulness had been a good enough word. It had bothered him the night he’d first recited the full poem in public. Then he caught up with Isobel’s question and pondered instead on why the conversation had become so personal and what on earth marriage had to do with outward appearances. “No,” he said, eventually.

“Do you never look at a beautiful woman?”

Eddie retrieved the tissue and wiped his nose, realising he’d found a use for it far sooner than expected. He didn’t want this discussion to get too private, but provocative questions demanded provocative answers. Once primed he couldn’t resist the temptation to fire back.

“What does beautiful mean?” he asked. “One person’s opinion of what constitutes beauty is not necessarily shared by another. In which case beauty is a word that is in need of either redefining or removing from the vocabulary altogether. If I see a woman mincing towards me in high heels, breasts to the forefront, pouting painted lips and flashing long eye lashes at everyone she passes, I usually just let her go by because for some the sight may not be beautiful but downright ugly. Beauty is part of aesthetics, of culture, of philosophy and sociology.”

Isobel raised her black eyebrows as if outraged so Eddie was encouraged to expound.

“I would not mentally undress her in a way she probably wants, Baroness. Instead, I would mentally dissect her, anatomically, layer by layer, organ by organ until all that remained was the framework – the bones, the skeleton. And what are we then left with? Nothing that makes her any different to anyone else.”

“How terribly depressing, Professor.”

“Not at all. It’s enlightening and it proves my point.”

“Which is?”

“That for all the facial make-up, the powders and the creams, the hair styling, the shiny white teeth, the bright red finger nails and the synthetic fabrics that cover the torso, we are all the same. We are flesh and blood and bones. We may have reached a pinnacle of evolution but, for all that, we get sick, we get old and we die. If beauty means anything at all then it should not be the beauty of the body’s exterior but the beauty of the human mind as it strives to make sense of life itself.”

“So speaks a biologist, I suppose,” she replied rather sadly.

“Cosmetics are like wallpaper, Baroness. It covers the cracks and conceals the truth. Just like members of your management team.”

CHAPTER 8

Their return to the University had become another silent walk, made more uncomfortable by more spots of rain falling from a grey, overcast sky. It was getting heavier by the minute with a fresh wind scattering rubbish lying in the doorway of an empty shop close to a McDonalds, a Pizza Hut and a KFC.

Eddie hated litter. If you traced litter back to its origins, which he had, it was almost always big business who created it but then passed responsibility for disposal down to the local council, who paid for its removal from tax. These companies had always ignored Eddie's suggestion to increase their prices by a fraction of one percent to help fund municipal waste collection.

That was why when he spotted the greasy, plastic carton sliding across the wet pavement he chased it, bent down, picked it up and dropped it in a trash bin. A plastic cup with a straw protruding through the lid rolled by. He picked that up, too. "There," he said wiping his hands on his jacket. "I would normally have handed it to a passing student."

"You always do that?"

"Every time I go I see the effects of human eating. Are these citizens of such an advanced nation so desperately hungry that they need to eat and drink walking along the street? Half of them are overweight already. Why do they need to drink Coca Cola in pint sized plastic bottles with plastic lids and a plastic straw? Why do people in suits who like to be seen as busy and sophisticated professionals scurry everywhere holding plastic cups of Costa coffee? Is it not more sophisticated to sit and enjoy well prepared coffee from a cup with a saucer and a metal spoon?"

"But we ourselves have just eaten a fast food lunch, Professor."

"No. We sat. We talked. We combined essential eating with serious discussions on a serious matter. Those two old ladies were model citizens. Did you hear them discussing how they used to make jam donuts when they were young? Does anyone discuss the quality of their cheese burger these days or are things so similar, so mass produced and so uninteresting like clones that there's no point in discussing or questioning anything?"

"It's the society we live in, Professor."

"But do you like the society we live in?"

The rain was becoming heavier and Isobel was walking a little faster this time. Eddie suspected it was the thought of her hair getting wet, but didn't want to mention it.

"It is the constant drive to stay in business whilst meeting the wishes of a demanding public, Professor Higgins" she said, sounding a little out of breath.

That statement truly upset Eddie. He stopped walking. "No, no," he said. "That is a totally wrong conclusion. Human demands are insatiable. They will never be satisfied. It is the constant drive to increase demand in order to sell more. The result is an erosion of standards, a decline in quality, a pressure that leads to the lowest common denominator and, although the politicians will never admit it, to a poorer and less fair society."

Isobel stopped a few yards away and covered her head with her hand but it was futile. The rain was getting harder by the second and Eddie realised that. He, too,

was getting wet but rain didn't worry him. If he got wet, like he had earlier that morning, he hung his jacket on the back of the chair, put his sandals on the radiator and dried his hair with a towel. He noticed she was standing outside a shop window that said "Everything a Pound" and, without saying anything, he disappeared inside.

When he emerged, she was sheltering in the doorway as the rain fell in torrents. Eddie had just purchased an umbrella. "For you," he said. "Only a pound. Made by some poor wretches in Bangladesh I suspect but a few pennies might flow down for their own dismal food and shelter."

"Thank you. Professor. Very kind."

"Well, we need to get back. Press the button there and the thing will expand like a canopy. I doubt the quality's up to much – it's the global economy again - but it might last twenty minutes or so."

"Would you like to share it, Professor?"

"No thanks. By the way, call me Eddie."

He strode off leaving her trying to raise the umbrella. When she finally caught up he was mumbling to himself – clearly the tail end of something longer. All she heard was: "... around our feet in styrene packs, open, discarded, left over snacks. A carton rolling by the door, a greasy kebab stuck to the floor. Burgers and buns, some chips and ketchup..." It was probably not meant for anyone's ears except his own, but she overheard Eddie finish with: "and someone's not unexpected retch up."

Realising there was quite another side to Eddie, Isobel grabbed the loose sleeve of his jacket and they walked off together under the umbrella.

"Would you like another cup of tea?" Eddie asked as they arrived at the main door to the University research building. He pressed the security buttons, pushed the door open and went inside as Isobel stood outside, shaking the umbrella.

"That's very kind of you, Professor Higgins, Eddie, but I'm due to meet Mr Dobson in half an hour. I also have the decorator's in at my apartment and a dinner engagement this evening."

"A family engagement?" Eddie asked though he had no idea why.

"Vital is, or was, a family business, Professor. The Directors have historically met on Saturday's."

"Are you married?" Eddie said and experienced a sudden irritation in his throat. He coughed though it sounded more like choking. "Only I didn't notice another Johnson on the list of Company Directors."

"I'm no longer married. Neither do I have any children. But I must get back. Thank you for....."

"There is something more I'd like to ask you," Eddie said.

"Yes?"

"It might take a while. Another cup of tea, perhaps?"

"I really must be going."

Eddie was struggling to remove his damp, tweed jacket. It always seemed to shrink when it got wet and expanded when dry but to his surprise Isobel stepped through the doorway and helped pull the sleeve down.

“Thank you. It’s damp. I’ll hang it up. My feet are also damp. Are yours?”

“A little cold and wet I must admit.”

“I wanted to learn about women in business,” Eddie said. “Would you say women in business are less likely to engage in criminality?”

She stared at Eddie for a few seconds “That’s a very leading question, Professor. I hope you’re not suggesting that I....”

“No, no, no. Of course not. Not necessarily.”

She had propped the dripping umbrella by the door and Eddie watched a trickle of water run across the polished floor. “Professor Higgins. I’m not sure I understand what you’re asking.”

“I’m asking if you could spare a few minutes for another cup of tea.”

The door had closed automatically behind them and they were standing alone in the corridor with signs pointing towards The Thompson Department of Cell Biology, the Department of Plant Genetics and Eddie’s own Oxford University Centre for Mycology.

“Well, never mind,” Eddie said. “Another time, perhaps. You must go and meet Mark. I’ll let you get on. Good bye.” And he walked off along the corridor, holding his wet jacket and with his wet sandals squeaking and squelching on the polished wood floor. When he turned, Isobel had gone.

CHAPTER 9

Being Saturday afternoon, the front door of Garland and McCready (Solicitors) of St Aldgate’s in Oxford was locked.

“Ring the bell, Ritchie. See if anyone’s up yet.” Mark Dobson instructed Ritchie.

Ritchie pressed the brass button and heard the door being unbolted from inside.

“Mr Dobson, is it? James Garland. We don’t normally open on Saturdays but please come in. It’s Mr Dobson and Mr.....?”

“Nolan,” Ritchie said holding out his hand.

“You are expected. Baroness Johnson called me earlier to arrange this. Rather last-minute but she should be here soon.” He led them along a short, stuffy corridor and opened the door to a typical English solicitor’s meetings room.

“You are the company lawyer?” Dobson asked.

“No, no,” Garland said. “I’m Baroness Johnson’s private solicitor. Can I get you a coffee?”

He closed the door and left them standing by a long, shiny oak table. A neat row of uncomfortable-looking high-backed chairs stood on either side - hard seats in green

leather concaved by the fidgeting backsides of a century of clients. Place mats with black and white prints of Oxford scenes had been evenly laid out across the table and along the wall stood a locked, glass-fronted bookcase filled with legal cases going back to Oliver Cromwell's time. Ritchie looked out of the window at the rain while Mark Dobson scanned the book case, wondering why it needed to be locked.

Garland returned with two plastic cups. He chose a place mat for each cup and then left. Dobson sat down but Ritchie carried his coffee to the window and continued looking out. "Mind your coffee doesn't drip on the nice floor, Ritchie."

Ritchie turned, checked for drips and looked worried. "What's the matter?" Dobson asked.

"I hate these places," he said. "They make me nervous like I've done something wrong."

"It's a guilty conscience, Ritchie. "

"And who reads all this stuff?" Ritchie was now peering into the bookcase at something dated 1903.

"It's to put your mind at ease so you understand your case already has a precedent."

"Unlikely," Ritchie said. "In 1903 my great, great, grandad was wearing feathers and war dancing in Sierra Leone."

"Does dancing run in the family, Ritchie?"

"No, but I could do a good Bing Crosby singing and dancing act in the rain outside."

"That wasn't Bing Crosby. It was Fred Astaire."

"Never heard of him."

The door opened again and Steven Garland almost bowed in presenting an elegant dark-haired woman in a light grey skirted suit and red high-heels. "May I introduce Baroness Johnson, Mr Dobson," he said and scuttled away.

Isobel Johnson held out a delicate white hand, the nails shiny and blood red and looked at Dobson with heavily mascaraed dark brown eyes and thick black eyebrows. Her high cheek-boned and well-proportioned face was framed by neatly trimmed black hair. She looked younger than Mark Dobson expected and he wondered what Eddie had thought of her. He could also smell flowers of a sort that Eddie had probably identified by their Latin name.

"Mr Dobson. Good afternoon. And this is...."

"Ritchie Nolan," said Ritchie. "We spoke earlier."

They sat at the table – Ritchie and Mark Dobson on one side, Isobel on the other.

"So," she said, "How was Taiwan?"

"Taiwan?"

"Professor Higgins said you'd just been to Taiwan and other places."

Mark Dobson had almost forgotten he'd spent a day in Taipei talking to Kenny Tan about his Red Power energy drinks. He'd then headed to Kuala Lumpur to meet Jeffrey. "Much the same," he said. "Fly in, do the business, fly out."

"Have you visited the Chiang Kai-Shek monument?"

"I never seem to find much time for tourism when I'm working."

"A shame. Liberty Square? Taiwan's long road to democracy?"

"But I read a lot."

"Reading is no substitute for seeing for yourself."

"Oh, I see it alright," Mark Dobson replied, "I just don't seem to find time to talk about it afterwards."

Ritchie's head moved as if he was watching tennis, but he needed to get used to it. It was to go on like that for over an hour although his eyes lingered far longer on Isobel Johnson's face than Dobson's.

Dobson thought he might have sounded rude but he didn't do tourism. With one minute gone though, he'd already decided Baroness Isobel Johnson was a confident member of the chattering classes, probably a feminist, a cocktail party sort, a wearer of expensive perfume and a networker in circles that he avoided like the plague unless essential. Places like the House of Lords which, in his opinion, should be disbanded for all the democratic good it did. Trouble makers, half of them retired, all hellbent on slowing up decision making processes, reminding the world they still existed. Christ, he thought to himself, he was sounding like Eddie.

His sensitive ear though detected a very slight mid Atlantic accent. "English with a US education?" He was trying to be nice and was spot on.

"The latter, Mr Dobson. Harvard."

"And now chairman or chairwoman of Vital Cosmetics."

"Chairman suits me fine."

"And we're here to discuss Vital Cosmetics with its headquarters in Oxford and agents, distributors, suppliers and one or two offices scattered across parts of Europe and most of the ASEAN area - except Laos, Burma, Vietnam and Cambodia I understand."

"I'm pleased to see you've already done some homework, Mr Dobson."

It was two hours before they were on the M40 again driving east back to London. And what had they discovered?

That Baroness Isobel Johnson had tried to stay above the day to day goings on in the business. That she was also a director of some other businesses: a women's fashion business, a small group of restaurants, a private nursing home. That she was a busy lady who only got involved if a big decision was needed, a casting vote required or she got wind of something that didn't look right. Even then she tried to delegate, but in the case of Vital Cosmetics, it had been, in her own words, "Time to engage on a more practical level."

They learned that the company had started fifteen years ago as 'Vitality Hand Creams'. It had imported and processed cosmetics' raw materials including palm oil, coconut oil and other so-called essential oils. Some six years ago it had changed its name to Vital Cosmetics when the business was bought by Isobel's sister, Kathrine with money from Kathrine's business.

"And what business is that?" Dobson had asked innocently.

“An investment management company. “

“Called?”

“KRJ Capital.”

Dobson knew all this, of course, but didn't bat an eyelid. His and Colin Asher's brief research had thrown up all sorts of interesting family connections within Vital which they'd agreed could help explain problems and embarrassments. “But you have shares in the business?” he asked.

“Yes, I put in some cash when Kathrine bought the business. Then, two years ago, Kathrine asked me to become company chairman. I already had experience in similar businesses.”

“Cosmetics?”

“Clothing and fashion.”

Dobson nodded and Isobel went on. “Kathrine's husband, Peter Lester, my brother in law, is a sizeable shareholder and runs the overseas side of Vital Cosmetics.” She had paused as if unsure whether to continue. “And then there is my uncle, Nicholas Carstairs. Nick is the younger brother of the Prime Minister, Mr Dobson.”

She looked slightly embarrassed by this interesting fact but Dobson feigned not to notice and she continued. “Nick acts as managing director.”

The phrase ‘acts as’ always aroused Dobson's suspicions but they continued to sit and listen as she reverted to describing more about the company and its brand name – skin care by Vital, hair care by Vital, that sort of thing. And that competition came from the big names – Proctor and Gamble, Avon, L'Oreal and so on. Vital was tiny in comparison but they were investing heavily in the energy and sports drinks market using natural products. Vital Nutrition was a new idea and destined for great things in the drinks sector with a drink called Vital Sport.

They learned that Baroness Johnson held shares with some other companies including a French cosmetics company that probably explained her make-up. That Vital Cosmetics' philosophy was to continue to build on high ethical standards evidenced by numerous certificates for everything from its quality control and good manufacturing practice to its excellent employment conditions.

“We believe in sustainability, Mr Dobson.”

She had banded the word sustainable around so much that Dobson stopped listening. He had also been getting increasingly bored as she went around in circles, avoiding the issues, whatever they were. She finally mentioned their South East Asian business. “In South East Asia, Vital employs locals because we believe it's good for the local economy.”

That was when his patience finally snapped because of the things that had cropped up during Malaysia and Thailand trips looking at counterfeiting for Kenny Tan. These were the companies he'd just shared photos of with Ritchie, companies with unseemly Russian and Chinese influences that had even involved past arrests for credit card fraud and other illegal activities. Was that what she meant by ‘employing locals’?

“And good for those engaged in illegal logging and the forging of credit cards, I understand,” Dobson had interrupted. “Are you sure it’s not someone working on the inside? Someone with a nice salary and a long-term employment contract?”

It was deliberately provocative but a practical lesson for Ritchie in how to wind up someone who was beating about the bush. It worked. Isobel started to bite her rosy lips and the pink hue of her facial make-up darkened a little. But he didn’t give her time to reply. Instead, he revealed something else – something he’d forgotten to mention to Ritchie earlier.

“I understand your Malaysian partner company, PJ Beauty Supplies was also mentioned in a scandal that involved a Malaysian MP who owned palm oil plantations in Thailand and Indonesia, including one that encroached onto a national park. A Chinese, I believe. Aren’t you paying the locals enough?”

Baroness Johnson had started sniffing and fidgeting and, maybe, even perspiring, so he knew they were getting somewhere. He’d ended it though with a forced but genuine-looking smile to confuse her. It had worked beautifully. She started to come clean.

First, she rummaged in her Dior handbag, retrieved a notepad and started reading out names - names of associates, local companies, agents and distributors many of which were familiar to Dobson although he didn’t tell her.

In Bangkok, it was a company called Far Eastern Inspire. In Malaysia, the well-known PJ Beauty Supplies and in Hong Kong, PL Cosmetics. She’d then started on rather less sophisticated information - rumours, suspicions, doubts and more and all the time her stress level was visibly increasing. Her eyes lost their sparkle and seemed to retreat inside her head.

“It’s quite dreadful Mr Dobson but a year ago Vital Cosmetics company credit cards were used to buy luxury goods in Beijing, Bangkok, London and Paris. And I suppose I must also mention the timber business.” She’d paused to wet her red lips with her tongue, to sniff and give a polite little cough. “Professor Higgins mentioned it but I would hate Vital Cosmetics to be linked to anything suspicious – environmentally speaking. If things got out it would not be at all good for reputations.”

By ‘reputations’, Dobson knew she also meant her own. “So how have you become involved in the timber trade?” he asked.

“Well, I recently learned that Vital has a patent on a method of extracting an essential oil from the Krabok tree.”

“A Krabok tree?” Dobson had repeated as if he’d never heard of one. The fact was he’d recently had a lecture on Krabok nut oil by the world’s foremost expert.

“It’s a hard wood tree,” she said.

“And what is an essential oil?” he pursued his feigned innocence.

“Essential oils are exactly that, Mr Dobson. They form an essential part of cosmetics, soaps and perfumes.”

“So why might they also be illegal?”

“Essential oils are not illegal, Mr Dobson but the theft of raw materials is and it would not be at all good for business if we discovered we were using inferior raw materials.”

Mark Dobson had then quickly seen the influence and handiwork of Eddie in those last few words. "Theft from sustainable and properly managed forests, perhaps?" he suggested.

"That would not be good, Mr Dobson, but we are in the hands of local management on that matter."

Mark Dobson liked to think he was a sensitive man, especially if it involved a mildly flushing lady who sniffed in a most unladylike manner and discreetly pulled a tissue from her sleeve. "Do I detect a few lingering doubts at this point?" he said with the sort of raised eyebrow that James Bond had perfected.

She was diplomatic. An essential characteristic for a member of the House of Lords he suspected. "It seems to be the local staff, Mr Dobson. And our - what shall I say? - our relationship with them."

"So, you harbour concerns about your local staff, about your sustainably-cultivated plants and trees from which you extract essential oils, about credit card fraud and about goods that have gone astray. Am I understanding correctly?"

"In a nutshell," she replied as if there might still be details as yet untold.

"In a nutshell, you're not happy with the way the company is being managed."

She'd nodded with pursed lips.

"If Vitals' local staff are involved in any of this, sack them," Dobson said. "Build a fresh team."

She'd shrugged. "Dismissing staff is very difficult under current employment law."

"Not in South East Asia it isn't. If they're a problem you open the door and kick them into the street."

"Yes, but over here," she replied. "You know how it is, Mr Dobson."

He'd nodded. Dismissing low paid workers was bad enough but getting rid of company directors was a minefield. Shareholders even more so. If cases like that ever came to lawyers like Garland and McCready they usually beat a hasty retreat. Vital Cosmetics had the look of an expensive and stressful liability rather than an easy legal fee.

"So, who is it?" he'd asked. "Who would you like to get rid of?"

"Peter Lester."

Ah, he'd thought. Here we go. "Your brother-in-law? What has he done?"

"Nothing I can put my finger on, Mr Dobson. He is generally in charge of day to day matters and seems content to leave things as they are." She raised both of her thick black eyebrows. It was enough to show she suspected Lester of complicity.

"Do the other directors and shareholders share your concerns?"

"It appears not. They do not want to cause any fuss and publicity."

"And you don't agree?"

"Would you, Mr Dobson?"

"Not even remotely," he admitted and watched the crumpled tissue appear once again over the edge of the table.

“It’s causing family problems, you see, especially with my sister. My sister and Peter are separated. Kathrine doesn’t get involved in the day to day running of Vital and I don’t interfere in her private life. It’s not my business. My sister is very independently minded and we’ve not always been very close but the main Board have recently suggested I resign if I’m not happy with the way it’s being run.”

“That would be a pity. What is your shareholding?”

“Thirty percent.”

They had only slowly reached the crux of the matter but Dobson still played the innocent fact finder. “So, who owns the other seventy percent?”

“Peter Lester has thirty three percent, Nick Carstairs twenty percent, and Boris Hamilton, the UK sales director has ten percent. Then there are some small, minority shareholders including Kathrine.”

“You’re on a very weak footing.”

She’d nodded. “And, I must be truthful Mr Dobson, I don’t really trust them. I really am at my wit’s end.”

And then both Ritchie and he had watched the wetness forming in her mascaraed eyes and, at last, the tissue found a job, delicately dabbing at moisture around the sides of her eyes. Being unsure what to do – after all, to lean over the table and comfort her seemed a little out of order – Dobson had said and done nothing. Another short silence followed before two big, mascaraed eyes looked across at him from between two strands of displaced hair. She pushed then back behind her ear where he now noticed the simple ear stud. It was probably a diamond he decided though he was no expert. Despite Ritchie fidgeting alongside, strange, manly feelings of protection and concern suddenly spread through Mark Dobson’s loins. He needed to go careful. He certainly didn’t want to add to her woes – or his own.

They’d waited for the eye dabbing to finish before he mentioned Eddie. “How did you get on with Eddie?”

She hesitated and managed a faint smile. “A very passionate and obsessive man, Mr Dobson. A simple man with no airs and graces. He has strong but very fixed opinions and does, perhaps, thrive on grudges and private vendettas. But, in all honesty. I have to agree with much of what he said. And he’s understood our internal problems. Very quickly. I’m glad I recommended his appointment as scientific adviser.”

“That was your decision?”

“Yes – in the face of a lot of opposition.”

Another silence descended. Ritchie coughed. Isobel checked her nails. Dobson played with his empty plastic coffee cup. It was time for a commitment of some sort. “Do you want Asher & Asher to do something in a more formal capacity?” he’d asked.

“In my name only, Mr Dobson. I’ll fund it. The company must know nothing.”

CHAPTER 10

Soon after Isobel had left to meet Mark Dobson, Eddie was at the station and waiting for the 3.36pm to Bristol. Another month had passed, another Bristol Poets Night had arrived and it was still raining.

Having bought his ticket, Eddie pulled out his phone. "It's Huggy," he said giving the phone its third task of the day.

"Huggs my dear fellow. Are you on your way?"

Professor Melvyn Jefferson, sixty-one and head of the Department of Chemistry at Bristol University was one of those who only ever called Eddie by his nickname, except that Mel had shortened it to Huggs.

"At the station. Can you put me up tonight?"

"No problem. Your space beneath the grand piano awaits."

"Good man. Only I'd appreciate your opinion on a few things."

"What are friends for? How about a glass of Ribena at The Ship before it all kicks off?"

Things organised, Eddie boarded the train and sat, staring out of the window, reflecting on the last few weeks and his meetings with Mark Dobson and Isobel Johnson and his forty-year friendship with Mel Jefferson.

Mel and he had gone on many student demos together during those years of anti-establishment, anti-big business and pro-environment sit-ins and placard waving. It was the mid-seventies. Eddie was Huggy and Mel was 'Sit-in Mel', otherwise known by students as S'mell.

Eddie then reflected on the thirty-six years he'd lived in that same red-brick Victorian house in Oxford. Thirty-five years ago, after Melissa left him to a lifetime of bachelorhood, he'd decided the small, upstairs room would make a perfect home office and laboratory. Thirty-four years later it had become a dusty and untidy museum of books, journals, magazines, boxes, plastic bags and memorabilia, but the familiar clutter always gave him a warm feeling that he put down to every human's need for a backbone of unchanging familiarity.

Despite that, he'd been meaning to tidy it for months. Even Eddie, with his unerring sense of knowing where things were, was beginning to scratch his head.

"I am fastidious towards untidiness," he'd tell students brave enough to mention the similar state of his office at the University. "This room offers a useful study of biological principles - an example of meticulous disorder, like a primeval soup from which evolution will ensure that organised life forms will, one day, rise to walk the earth."

CHAPTER 11

As Eddie sat, deep in thought on the train, Ritchie and Mark Dobson were on their way back to London for the second time that day. Pulling off the M40 motorway Dobson stopped at a McDonalds.

“Do we get lunch now?” Ritchie asked hopefully. He was already unbuckling his seat belt.

“No, this is just a convenient place to park up for half an hour for a recap on today’s events and take your training a stage further,” Dobson replied. “First of all, why don’t you take your unnecessary tie off? You make me feel inferior. I’m sure lawyer Garland thought you were the senior partner and I was the bag carrier.”

Ritchie grinned, pulled the red tie off and stuffed it in his pocket. Dobson pushed his seat back as far as it would go. Ritchie did the same.

“That’s better,” Mark Dobson said. “First of all, my gut feeling about a link between Isobel’s problems and the problems of Kenny Tan are growing. Are yours?”

“Yes,” said Ritchie although neither Dobson or Colin Asher had yet told him much about Kenny Tan. All Ritchie knew was that Kenny Tan was a Taiwanese client with a problem with counterfeit energy drinks appearing around South-East Asia. Thousands of bottles of fake Red Power, the drink Tan had spent years developing a market for, had even appeared in Taipei. Tan was finding it deeply upsetting and even more damaging to his profits.

“Kenny’s problem is counterfeiting,” Dobson went on, “but there are too many links and co-incidences with Vital for my liking.”

“Jesus Christ,” said Ritchie.

“The co-incidences do not suggest the involvement of Jesus Christ at present, Ritchie, but we must always keep an open mind. Meanwhile, listen. Concentrate. This gets complicated. What follows is the outcome of my two days in and around Bangkok last week and various discussions with Jeffrey in Kuala Lumpur and Sannan, our man in Bangkok.” He paused. “So, are you now ready for Parts Three, Four, Five and Six combined? Analysing Evidence, Drawing Conclusions, Speculation and Theories and Way Forward?”

Ritchie nodded.

“Right. Let’s look at Vital in Malaysia. It’s run through a distributor called PJ Beauty Supplies based in Kuala Lumpur. PJ Beauty Supplies sell other cosmetic products beside Vital. The man in charge of Vital’s business is a Chinese guy called Ho Chiang.”

Ritchie repeated “Ho Chiang” twice, trying to pronounce it like real Chinese and not like the menu of a north London Chinese take-away. Dobson continued:

“PJ Beauty Supplies seems very light-staffed to me for the importance Vital place on Malaysia as the source of most of their raw materials. Besides Ho there is an office manager, a lady, an old warehouseman and a Chinese Malay salesman who covers Malaysia from Johor Bahru near Singapore up to Penang near Thailand.

“Posing as a potential customer, Jeffrey checked with the office manager and was told there were many others involved - farmers, for instance, are part of the supply chain. Vital buys their produce - coconut oil, peanut oil and so on and ship here to Oxford for processing and turning into cosmetics

“Now then, this is vital and I don’t mean Vital. Jeffrey suspects Ho Chiang has interests outside Vital. He’s often in Bangkok. Your job will be in Bangkok but we’ll come to that.”

“Bangkok?” Ritchie said. “Do I actually get to go there?”

Dobson ignored the youthful innocence, opened his lap top, scrolled to a photo and turned it so Ritchie could see.

“This dismal-looking building with the palm trees rising behind is Sara Kosmetik, Vital’s Indonesian partner. I came across it a year ago on another case. My excuse for the poor photograph is that it was early evening when I crept up to have a shufti. It’s a similar set up to KL but run by an Indonesian, Fakry Husaini. I think, it’s another weak link, not properly controlled or managed. Frankly it could be doing anything and probably is.

“Now, one of Vital’s directors, Peter Lester, goes there three or four times a year. Colin did a hotel booking check on Lester and found he stays at the Double Tree by Hilton in Jakarta. I don’t know what his Vital expense account is like but to me with my innocent outlook, coconuts and palm oil farmers are on their farms in the jungle not in the red-light district. And if Asher & Asher ever sent you to Jakarta you can be sure you won’t be staying at the Hilton.”

“Crooks like Micky Parker might stay there, though,” Ritchie said with a smirk. “Maybe Lester’s doing deals with crooks at the Hilton.”

“That’s exactly what I’m suggesting but I don’t have an Indonesian guy on the books yet – I’m still looking. Become fluent in Indonesian or Malay and become a Moslem and you might qualify. Meanwhile, I might send Jeffrey down for another shufti or go myself. Any questions so far?”

“Will I be going to Bangkok?”

“Patience, Ritchie. Let’s now discuss the Russian link.”

“For three days this week, Jeffrey camped outside PJ Beauty Supplies in KL. During that time, he watched and photographed several unknowns coming and going. Jeffrey also heard Russian being spoken. One photo might match with a Russian guy wanted by Singapore police in relation to a naughty karaoke bar. The name he is wanted by is Maxim Novak but he probably uses others. We’re still checking. The photo is not good and looks different to the one on Singapore files.

“This next one is a Russian known to Interpol for past links to smuggling Africans into Italy. He’s not been seen for a while. His name is Sergei Mutko or Yuri Abisov, whichever you prefer. And this is a woman though it doesn’t look like it on Jeffrey’s photo. She’s tall but it matches one Olga Puchkov or Olga Mutko or even Margo Puhkov Olga’s been seen with Sergei and others in the past. She’s trying to look Moslem, or maybe she is Moslem. Nice headscarf, huh?”

Ritchie peered closely at the screen. “What’s that on the building behind?”

“Where?”

“There.”

“Ah yes. Well spotted. We’ve moved on.” Being caught out by a failed drama student from north London was upsetting. “Yes, we’ve moved on. We’re no longer looking at PJ Beauty Supplies in KL but at another place further south in Malacca. Are you

following me? If not, you really need to catch up. That is the sign on the front of the Malacca building. We think they never bothered to remove the old sign that belonged to the previous owners. That's always a good sign of underhand activities being carried on there. It says Min Hin Sdn Bhd. Sdn Bhd stands for Sendirian Berhad a Malaysian Limited Liability Company. Min Hin was in the furniture business but went bankrupt. For future reference we'll refer to this place as the Min Hin building, understand? The Min Hin building is another long story with links to Taiwan and Tan's case but let's not get distracted. But yes, that's Olga again - in her headscarf. Big woman, yes?"

"You sure it's a woman?"

"What Russian man, even one who'd lost his marbles, would wear a flowery headscarf, Ritchie? Anyway, the point is Olga was in Malacca recently and she was not alone. How do we know? Because this photo is of another Russia. Note the fair hair. We think this is Dimitri Medinski and Medinski is another man with an interesting life. He was wanted by South African police for money laundering. Last we heard – thanks to Sannan - he was living in Pattaya in Thailand and involved with a few other Russian rogues."

Richie was grinning again. Mark Dobson went on.

"Now a few group photos. Not a wedding reception but some unknown Chinese visitors. We're now back at PJ Beauty Supplies in KL Jeffrey was generally bored but busy in short bursts of activity. This is the business we're in. Hours of boredom followed by brief periods of high activity during which we either make rapid progress or don't.

"The only Chinese guy we know in this group is our old friend Ho Chiang who's doing all the meeting and greeting. See? Handshakes, kowtowing, bowing, scraping and trying to smile. No sign of enthusiastic friendship with Medinski who's the Russian standing there but they probably know each other too well and, anyway, you know what Russians are like. The cold back home freezes their faces into frowns."

Dobson sat back and stretched. Sitting, cramped, behind the steering wheel and leaning over with the laptop was hurting his back, but he didn't want to tell Ritchie.

"Question is," he went on, "Does Peter Lester know these people. Would a rare smile spread across Medinski's face if he saw Peter Lester? Maybe I'm jumping ahead and being unfair on Lester but, as you've heard, Isobel Johnson has serious concerns and Eddie dislikes him intensely which is half way to a conviction as far as I'm concerned."

"Mmm," Ritchie said. "So, what about Part 5, Speculation and Theories and Way Forward? Am I going to Bangkok?"

Dobson sighed. "I like your enthusiasm, Ritchie, but for God's sake listen or you'll suffer the consequences. And I don't mean just lose your job. This is dangerous work Believe me, these are people who don't like others interfering with their way of life. You might lose your own way of life. Putting it bluntly you could get killed. And there's something far worse than you getting killed. You know what that is?"

"No."

"It's me getting killed, OK? We are in a dangerous business and these are genuinely dangerous people. Got it?"

“Got it.”

“Good.”

Mark Dobson closed the laptop and returned it to the back seat. “Right. Way Forward. You’ve been to Bangkok before, yes? When was the last time?”

“Two years ago. I had a Thai girlfriend for a while.”

“What happened?”

“I discovered she was thirty-six, had three kids and was trying to fleece me.”

“It happens. Well, you’re going again. Stay single, no messing about or we terminate the contract.”

“I don’t have a contract.”

“It’s verbal. Colin probably recorded you agreeing to something.”

“He’s a bastard.”

“I know. But he means well. Meanwhile, I’m thinking of flying to Bangkok ahead of you. It looks like Eddie might also arrive sometime wearing his botanists’ hat. Right now, we need to return to London for Part Six with Colin at the office. Which means that that cheese and pickle sandwich we bought five hours ago is the most you’re likely to eat today.”

“But you were the one who ate it.”

“I was hungry. And I didn’t want you to mess up your suit. Enjoying the job so far?”

“So far so good.”

“Right, well when we get back take that funereal suit off and look like you usually do, will you? You’re not James Bond. You must blend in with other riff raff, Ritchie, not stand out like a City bond trader on his way to the wine bar.”

CHAPTER 12

A boatman from three hundred years ago riding the tidal swell up the Severn estuary and the River Avon into the heart of Bristol might still have recognised the centuries old pub, The Ship. That is if he turned a blind eye to the years of regeneration that had transformed the river and docks with expensive apartment blocks, restaurants, coffee shops, art galleries and museums.

It had stopped raining and in late afternoon watery sunshine Eddie decided to walk from Bristol Temple Meads Station and stop for a moment to enjoy the view. It had changed beyond recognition since he was a student there but there was still nowhere quite like Bristol. With the pastel coloured houses on the hillside of Clifton, the famous Brunel Suspension Bridge over the Avon Gorge and the new waterfront developments, he often felt as if he’d come home which, in a way, he had. He checked his watch. There was plenty of time.

Someone, presumably the developer, had ensured that The Ship’s red brick frontage, chimneys, leaded windows and double oak door still looked similar to the

grainy black and white photos taken a hundred years ago, but the tubs of petunias, pansies and fuchsia outside were fresh. So was the chalked message on the blackboard by the door that announced that the first Saturday of every month was Bristol Poet's Night.

Eddie wandered in, bought himself a glass of orange juice and carried it outside to sit at one of the wooden benches by the water's edge. He was wearing what he always wore for Poet's Night – his old Bristol City football club sweater, grey trousers and sandals with grey socks. It was warm so he pulled off his tweed jacket, slung it over the back of the seat and watched the seagulls.

He also watched the people though with less enthusiasm – adults, student types, kids, dogs. Eddie disliked dogs almost as much as cats. Cats had, of course, been the subject of his final poem at the April meeting when he'd met Mark Dobson. Tonight, because of his meeting with Isobel, he had planned a long poem on the uselessness of anti-ageing creams complete with a live demonstration using Polyfilla.

His plan was to mix the white, wall-crack filler in the gent's toilet before the performance, apply a coating to his face and hope it dried before his slot. The plan then was to crack it open at the end of the recital to demonstrate how ineffective these concoctions were. Meanwhile, he shut his eyes in the sunshine and rehearsed it.

When he opened them again he saw the bulky figure, white hair and navy-blue blazer of Mel limping through a crowd queueing for a river-trip boat. Mel had never fully recovered from a fall down a waterfall in Vietnam thirty years ago. In fact, Mel was lucky to be alive.

"Huggs," he called waving the stick he kept tucked in his armpit as an emergency prop in case his leg gave out. "Nice day for May, what do you say?"

Mel often began with a terrible short rhyme when they met at The Ship. Eddie thought it probably took him a month to think up the single line and then remember it. He flopped down on the seat opposite Eddie and laughed at his poetic genius. "What's the subject tonight?"

"Anti-ageing treatments. You want a drink? Orange? Blackcurrant? Lemon Barley or the usual?"

"Yes."

"Stay there and I'll get it."

When Eddie returned with Mel's pint of Guinness, he was sitting back with his eyes closed and his face to the evening sun just as Eddie had been doing. He opened his eyes and took the glass. "Your good health. What's up?"

"I've been burgled."

"You mean someone thought there was something worth stealing in that unkempt Victorian museum you call home?"

"That's extremely unkind, Mel."

"What did they steal?"

"My Krabok nuts. Seeds that I brought from Thailand. A bagful."

“Is this what you wanted to discuss tonight?”

“Just a friendly ear, Mel. Someone with a soft shoulder and a dry tissue.”

“Come now, Huggs. Be brave. It’s only nuts. Did you report it?”

“I spoke to a commercial crime investigator.”

“About a bag of bloody nuts?”

“Nuts are seeds, Mel. They were not cooked or roasted. Mature Krabok trees could be grown from them. They were individuals, living beings with all the right DNA and as many rights to a long and productive life as you and me. And my computer was tampered with. I think they copied files.”

“Have you started to upset people again, Eddie?”

“I never stopped.”

“Who is the target of your abuse this time?”

“The cosmetics industry – amongst others.”

“But I thought you were acting as scientific adviser for one.”

“I am. A local company, Vital Cosmetics. Bill Hughes twisted my arm. They’re paying enough to cover a bursary. And it’s hardly time consuming. In a year, I’ve given one talk to staff and a couple of so-called inspection tours, but I didn’t like what I saw.”

“And you suspect them?”

“They use Krabok nut oil in some products. But I was already suspicious before I contacted the investigators a month ago. I met their Mark Dobson. We sat right here. I’d just performed a poem about cats. It was a shame you missed it but you were away last month.”

“So sorry. What do you need my opinion on?”

Eddie’s reply was delayed as a group of poetry fans arrived and recognised him as a star performer. It took him a few minutes to get rid of them. Then: “I need you to listen, Mel but it might take an hour and right now I need to mix some Polyfilla for my performance.”

“Polyfilla? Are you repairing cracks in walls in there?”

“No. It’s my anti-ageing, age defying, deep wrinkle treatment.”

Three hours later, sweaty and smelling of beer they emerged from The Ship with a plan to walk and talk and catch a late-night bus to Clifton where Mel lived.

“Well? Did you like my anti-wrinkle cream demonstration?”

“Very entertaining, Huggs, but you’ve still got Polyfilla in your hair, what little there is. Do you have any views on hair restoration treatments?”

“If I had a cure for baldness, Mel, I’d need a decent brush. I’d brush my hair in the morning air and brush from dawn till dusk.”

“Mmm. That’s not one of your best, Huggs.”

Eddie made a face that exaggerated every wrinkle, line and crow’s foot. “You want a list of utterly ineffective chemicals they put in these products, Mel?”

Mel knew what was coming, but what are friends for? They walked a few more yards. "They make alpha-hydroxy acids sound like miracle chemicals.," Eddie said. "But there are hundreds of them from those in your pot of yoghurt to the apple in your lunchbox."

Mel nodded. The chemistry was well known to him.

"Peptides – thousands of them like those from digested milk and not one ever proved to reduce wrinkles."

Another yard. "Retinol. Vitamin A. Essential but don't for God's sake ingest too much if you're pregnant. Meanwhile, keep eating the carrots. Anti-oxidants. The panacea of the free radical cult, not that any of them would recognise a free radical if one came up behind them and bit them on the arse. Put a fresh tomato in your lunchbox instead."

Another few yards. "Elastin. If you've got worn tyres on your car, would you smear them with cream containing rubber and feel safer for it? And collagen. Everyone's heard of collagen these days. Use collagen they say to rebuild the structure of your ageing old skin. But the molecules they use are too big to pass through skin. There's no way they can reinforce your own collagen."

They were walking over the old swing bridge, water slopping on both sides and a small, boat with a light on its stern was moving upstream in the darkness. That was when, inadvertently, Eddie did his stage trick and tripped on an iron drain cover. He quickly recovered but it prompted another thought.

"Do you know where cosmetics go when they're finished with, Mel? Down the drain. Out to sea. Eaten by fish. Up the food chain. Swallowed by birds. Along with all the plastic packaging and other man-made junk." He spotted another raised drain cover and slowed down.

"Botanical essences," he went on.

"Ah yes," said Mel. As Eddie was to discover, Mel was anxious for a botanist's view on botanical essences because his wife, Cilla, swore by a shampoo from a plastic bottle with a picture of a tuft of grass on the front.

"Eucalyptus oil," Eddie yelled. Hazard-watching was holding him up although it was Mel who limped everywhere. "Recommend for treating herpes. Which herpes virus is that for God's sake? Genital herpes? Mouth sore, herpes? They never actually say. Whenever I ask they never reply because they don't know. And Eucalyptus prevents bacterial growth and pus formation, they say. Don't they know that pus consists of white blood cells doing the job they were designed for, for goodness sake? The body's natural reaction to deep infection. Without pus, we'd never have evolved past earthworms. Would Eucalyptus work on deep ulcers and gangrene?"

"Unlikely," Mel agreed waiting for Eddie to catch up.

"Lemon Grass."

"Ah yes," Mel replied. That was the one Cilla swore by.

"Claimed to be a good tonic. A tonic?"

The volume of Eddie's voice had, by then, increased exponentially but Mel limped on listening and taking it all in as a good friend should. They passed a group of giggling girls in miniskirts on their way somewhere for their own version of a tonic.

“Lemon grass allegedly aids recovery from illness by stimulating glandular secretions and the muscles of digestion. Oh, dear me, Mel, if my peristalsis suddenly speeded up after chewing on a stick of lemon grass I’d call an ambulance. But that’s not all. Lemon grass is good for colitis, indigestion and even gastro-enteritis. And it removes lactic acid and stimulates circulation and of course, like all the others, it’s a bloody insect repellent. I’ve seen swarms of mosquitoes hovering around tufts of lemon grass. But no mosquito will dare come close if you lunch on a few sticks of lemon grass. You believe that, Mel?”

“I agree it’s a little farfetched.”

Eddie caught up because Mel had stopped and was looking across the water to a line of floating restaurants. Much closer, on their side, was a late-night kiosk selling coffee, tea, hot dogs and bacon butties. He pointed with his stick. “Fancy a coffee, Huggs? My treat.”

“Good idea. A coronation chicken baguette was my last meal.”

Mel bought two crispy bacon sandwiches and, with two plastic cups of tea, they wandered to a seat overlooking the water and sat down beneath a street light. They were quiet for a while. Eddie had squirted too much ketchup and was licking it off his fingers.

“Your daily dose of free radicals, Huggs?” Mel said. “But I’m still waiting to know what advice you need, old chap.”

“I know,” Eddie said. “I haven’t forgotten. I was setting the scene, giving you the background.”

“Forgive me but it sounds like the birthing pains of another of your vendettas, Huggs.”

“It is,” Eddie admitted. “Together with the energy drinks and food supplements business.” He stood up and carried his plastic cup of tea and ketchup-smearred tissue to the quayside, stayed long enough to finish the tea and then crumpled the cup along with the tissue and stuffed it into his jacket pocket. Then he returned and sat down.

Mel was absent-mindedly drawing circles on the ground with his stick. “If you’re talking about destroying the cosmetics industry, Huggs, my friend, it’ll never happen. Too many people don’t care enough. You’re wasting your time. You can annoy them but it’ll be like water of a duck’s back. Plastering stuff over your body is human nature. We’ve been doing it since the Stone Age, probably before. It’s vanity.”

“Vanity,” Eddie said. “From lowly selfie-takers pouting at their phones and zapping their images out into the cold infinity of cyberspace, all the way to those occupying the highest offices in the land. It’s unseemly, this desperate campaign to control how we are seen by the world. You know who said that?”

Mel shook his head.

“Richard Lawson, Donald Trump’s official photographer. And I agree. I would also add that vanity is one of the worst human characteristics. It’s not just simple showing off but conceitedness, narcissism, smugness and self-worship. If people did less self-worshiping and more worshipping of others, even of a God of their own choosing, perhaps we’d all get on better. What is it the Bible says? ‘Oppose the proud and give grace to the humble’? Vanity and self-worship is like appointing

yourself as a deity to be looked up to with admiration and devotion. It's an abomination, but then to exploit narcissism, vanity and self-worship for profits and financial reward is even worse. It should be the eleventh commandment, Mel. Thou shalt not worship yourself over the Lord thy God."

"I agree," Mel replied, "but pandering to moral consciences won't work, Huggs. It's too widespread. And when was the last time you heard of a business bowing to moral conscience instead of bowing to its shareholders? You won't change it. Industry will shrug it off. So why even bother?"

"Because...." Eddie paused. "Because things need saying. they need pointing out, we need different viewpoints. In the case of the cosmetics industry, I find the business of promoting body perfection when there is no such thing as perfection is immoral. No human body is perfect. All have flaws. So-called flaws or, as I would call them, natural variations, should be celebrated not be the cause of outbreaks of depression, self-harm or anorexia amongst the young. Natural variations should never be dealt with by surgery. Accepting natural variation is vital for sanity and for a better understanding of the frailty of life. It's a morality issue that religious leaders are afraid to speak up about. If this world is leading to disaster then there is one reason – weak leadership and a total lack of moral guidance."

They were silent for a while. In a way, Mel agreed, but he also knew that what Eddie really wanted were some words that went against everything he'd just argued for.

"They're not just trying to cover up flaws, Huggs," Mel said. "They're trying to make themselves look more attractive. They're seeking attention like you and the Polyfilla."

Eddie looked at him and said, "Mmm." In fact, he was remembering telling Mel forty years ago that he found him useful as a sounding board. Back then he'd compared Mel's views to checking out a new pair of shoes. If they were too uncomfortable, Mel was not to be insulted if he stuck with his old pair.

"OK, maybe." Eddie said reluctantly but with an image of Isobel foremost in his mind. "Maybe. But, take women for instance. Is lipstick attractive, Mel? Can you explain the need for lipstick?"

"To bring attention to the lips," Mel replied. "For kissing purposes."

"Face creams and powders?"

"To conceal blemishes."

"Those stockings they wear?"

"Mmm. Well it can't possibly be for protection from the English weather so, smooth legs I suppose. And probably to give the impression of full-bloodied health to otherwise anaemic-looking limbs. Maybe you should consider wearing them with your shorts, Huggs."

"Finger nail paint?"

"There you have me. No idea."

"Toe nail paint?"

"Even less idea. What are you getting at Huggs?"

“Isobel Johnson, Mel. She possesses all the essential, intellectual requirements of a highly effective businesswoman and yet she resorts to unnecessary adornments, lipstick, face powders and nail paint.”

“I’ve not seen her, but what you’re describing is a professional woman who believes she needs to look like that to maintain her power and influence. It’s self-marketing. We live in a visual world in which there’s a need to create an image of yourself that enables others to slot you into a category so you can freely go about doing what you want to do.”

“I don’t,” I said.

“Stop fooling yourself, Huggs my old friend. You once set about doing what you wanted to do by adopting the image of a long haired, seventies rock star. Now, because you look and feel sixty-two you set about it by adopting this quaint old hippie image of rejecting consumerism and being anti-capitalism by not even wearing a decent suit. You’re a first-rate publicist who has, in fact, just used his image of a downtrodden, cynical old tramp riding a bicycle who can only afford a pair of sandals just to recite a few ridiculous poems.”

Eddie thought about that. Mel was right in some ways although Eddie didn’t think the image he’d created was consciously planned. He needed to dwell on it, though. When he was alone. Meanwhile, he decided to change the subject.

“So why break into my house?”

“Ah, so we’re back to that, are we? Just as I was warming to the subject of your own public image, flaws and imperfections. Have you got evidence they copied documents?”

“The CD port was left open.”

“Carelessness. You left it open,”

“I never do that.”

“They were a couple of local lads who found nothing worth taking except a bag of nuts.”

“They opened the front door with a key.”

“You forgot to lock it.”

“It’s self-locking.”

“So, who?”

“A criminal element.”

“Dear me, Huggs. What’s got into you?”

“Listen,” Eddie said. “I’m suspicious. Mark Dobson had a good word for it. He calls it fishing. Apparently, he spends half his time fishing – fishing for information, fishing for leads, fishing for links. During my last trip to Thailand I went fishing. I went down to Malaysia, to Malacca, and found the place where Vital source their raw materials, their oils, their perfumes. I crept around at night. Outside, I found bark from Krabok trees.”

“The illegally felled ones? How do you know they’re yours?”

“I brought some back and tested it. Forensic biochemistry, Mel. Over a year ago I found some Krabok trees that oozed a white sap. When I looked further their leaves were in a better state than other Kraboks. I suspected a natural fungicide or insecticide so I took samples, marked the trees with blue marker and told the park management and my friends at Chulalongkorn University.”

“So, you’re feeling mad about some trees.”

“Of course, but the Malacca place is run by Russians. I spoke to a few locals. Then on my way back at the airport in Bangkok I met my botanist friends from Chula. We were at the somewhat upmarket Novotel. That’s where I saw one of Vital’s directors, their buyer. Peter Lester talking to a Russian.”

“Did he see you?”

“I don’t think so. But then there was another co-incidence. The company in Malacca is the same one Mark Dobson’s looking into for counterfeiting. So, I’m off to Bangkok next week to help with the investigation.”

Mel took a deep breath and a long look at Eddie’s old jacket with the elbow patches, the trash hanging from the pocket, the red sweater and the sandals.

Once, a long time ago, he’d told Eddie he needed to sometimes wear a suit. They’d laughed about it but, on one occasion at least, Eddie agreed he’d made an error. They’d been at an evening reception at the University. Teaching staff and researchers were in suits, white shirts and dickie bows. “Standing around like stuffed penguins” Eddie had said. Wine and champagne was being handed around on silver trays by students wanting to earn a few extra pennies but Eddie had not changed from his daywear that included sandals, alleging he’d been too busy to go home.

Now, Mel looked at his old friend as they sat under the street light staring in silence across the harbour. Then he put his arm around Eddie’s shoulder. “Let’s find a bus home, Huggs, old friend.”

CHAPTER 13

Ritchie Nolan left his suit behind in London.

For his flight to Bangkok, he wore Converse trainers, black jeans, white tee shirt and a black, nylon jacket ‘accessorised’ with dark glasses and a Star Wars baseball cap back to front. “Look the part, Ritchie,” Dobson had advised.

The old and dilapidated ‘Sabaidee Mansion’ in a side street off Lat Krabang in the eastern suburbs of Bangkok and close to the airport was not Richie’s choice of hotel but it had been checked by Colin Asher for suitability. Booking was not necessary. It was almost empty.

Once up the cracked and crumbling steps, Ritchie’s first impressions were that its facilities were limited. The entrance area was provided with three red plastic chairs, a table and a drinks and snacks machine. To the left of the front door was a window into a small, dark office. Ritchie bent down and peered through it. Unable to see anything with his dark glasses on, he took them off and dropped them into the top pocket of his jacket.

In the improved light he could see a Chinese waving cat, a bunch of plastic orchids and the Sabaidee's receptionist spoon-feeding herself something from a plastic dish. Ritchie coughed. She didn't get up but pushed her dish aside, continued chewing and looked at him. Ritchie handed his passport through the window. She took it, opened it, sprayed soggy rice grains over it, brushed them off with her hand and tried to read the name. "How long you stay Mr.. .ah, Pakka?"

Richard 'Ritchie' Nolan, aka Michael 'Micky' Parker had, of course, no idea. "I don't know," he said.

"Must pay deposit."

"And how much is the deposit."

"One thousand baht."

Ritchie handed over a thousand baht note.

"Room 20. First floor. Have a nice stay, Mr...ah, Pakka."

Ritchie nodded, took the length of dirty string that the key hung from, picked up his bag and headed for the concrete stairs next to the vending machine. He inserted some coins, pressed a button that said Fanta and a can rattled heavily into the box. He retrieved it, pulled the ring, swallowed some and wiped his mouth with his hand. That was when he spotted someone sitting behind the machine reading a newspaper.

"Good evening," Mark Dobson said.

Ritchie nodded but, as instructed, ignored him and took the stairs.

Micky Parker. Aged twenty-six. British passport, third generation West Indian, skin paled from its original chocolate brown by various mixed liaisons over those three generations. Course black hair, the vestiges of African curls, cut short at the back and sides but longer on the top where four inches of ginger rinse had recently added three extra inches to his height. He almost made six feet three. The coloured strings had gone. This more recent and modern hair styling was by Scissors of Tottenham, the gel from a tub by Gillette and the rimless Jaguar shades from John Lewis of Brent Cross.

Ritchie replaced the Jaguars, mounted the stairs and, because things had turned dark again, took the wrong direction at the top of the stairs. First, he turned left - odd door numbers to the left, even ones to the right, but then retraced his steps to try again - odd numbers to the right, even ones to the left.

Micky Parker's destination was, of course, door number 20 and when he arrived he finished the last drops of orange Fanta and, because he needed both hands, he put the can by the door, pushed it against the wall with his foot, found his key and entered his room. Then he retrieved his empty can, closed the door behind him, leaned on it and looked around.

"Fuck me."

It was a good start. The expression was undoubtedly what Micky Parker would have said. Richie Nolan was acting, feeling his way, dipping his toe in the character and mannerisms of Micky Parker.

The character had been Mark Dobson's idea because a middle-aged man who sat watching others and tried mixing with certain types of perhaps a younger generation

was too easily picked out for what he really was however much he tried. And Dobson really did not look good in trainers, sunglasses, ear studs and a baseball cap. Bangkok had enough suspicious-looking middle-aged, male foreigners without him adding to the numbers.

Right then, though, Richie Nolan only had a vague idea about what he was to become involved with. Whatever it was, and he was to find out sooner rather than later he suspected he'd already failed as Micky Parker because Micky Parker would have kicked that empty Fanta can right down the corridor just to see how far it travelled without bouncing. Richie Nolan, on the other hand, had retrieved it and looked for the nearest trash bin. On the plus side, however, Micky Parker would definitely have said, "Fuck me," at the sight of his room because the room was clearly not in the price bracket of the suave Sheraton or the Hilton hotel which Richie imagined he could expect in his new job as an international commercial crime investigator. His room at the Sabaidee Mansion offered little more than a single bed and a window with flimsy curtains that would never meet in the middle.

It was also swelteringly hot but there was an air conditioner, which he switched on, and a wet room of sorts with tiling done by someone learning the trade. It had a toilet with no paper but what was known in those parts as a bum gun that, depending on the variable water pressure either dribbled out or shot such a force of water up your backside that it almost came out of your ears. It had a sink with a single tap, a small, thin rectangle of wrapped soap and a blue plastic pipe that emerged through the concrete wall terminating in a shower head. And there was a faint odour of mould mixed with air that had passed through the air-conditioner. The single bed was covered with a white duvet so Richie flung it back to check beneath. No stains, no hair, no undue wrinkles. OK. It was sleep-able.

He parked his bag by the bed, removed his jacket and tee shirt and checked his phone. Nothing. So, he pulled back the curtain and looked out.

The view was what Micky Parker would probably have called 'a fucking donkey's asshole of a mess' but Richie knew this was not unusual for a cheap, urban hotel in back-street Thailand. This might be a modern suburb close to the international airport but there were still large areas undergoing modernisation and Thais still liked their long-legged chickens. And their dirty, scratching dogs.

There were clumps of weeds in corners shaded by dark, rough wood, a ubiquitous 7 Eleven plastic bag lying flattened in a pool of blackish water from a dripping air conditioner. And everything of course was covered in dust, pigeon shit, lumps of waste construction material and other crap.

Micky Parker's personal habits were unlikely to surpass this so Richie practiced the donkey's arse comparison aloud in his best north London. "Jesus, what a fucking donkey's asshole." He'd forgotten to add 'of a mess' but he was, after all, still rehearsing the part. That's when Richie's phone rang. It did so with a blast of electronically generated noise that no sane human could have composed. But Richie was particularly pleased with this ring tone. It had taken him an hour at Heathrow Airport to find. Richie didn't like it but Micky Parker would have done. He swiped it.

"Yo."

"Are you in?"

"Just arrived, mate. Saw you downstairs lurking like a fucking peasant."

Mark Dobson wasn't sure he liked being addressed like that by a new recruit but he rose above it.

"Right. Instructions. Head east along Lat Krabang road towards the airport turn off around nine o'clock. Look for the Peacock, a big, brash place. Unmissable. Snooker and bar on the street front, another bar up the stairs. Loud music everywhere. You'll love it. Go to the upstairs bar. It's recently become popular with drinkers of the type we're interested in. Russians. Pattaya-types. Mingle. Sniff around. Get cosy. Casual chatting. You're in business, wheeling and dealing, looking for opportunities. You know the score, just like we discussed. Drink Tiger beer with plenty of ice to keep a clear head. Sit and play with your phone. If it looks good I'll phone you to perform the way we rehearsed."

"Where will you be?"

"Close by. You beginning to feel like Micky Parker yet, Richie?"

"Just don't fucking mess with me, bruv, OK? Shut the fuck up."

"Not bad but try making it a bit more Dagenham, Essex."

"So where are you staying, Mark?"

"Room 42 above."

"What here? In this same bleedin' dump?"

"Dump Richie? You're on generous Asher & Asher expenses. Be grateful for the nice room with views over the bright city lights."

"Yeh. One fucking cockerel that looks like Roadrunner and a rabid dog with a skin condition. You think I should try rubbing some Vital Cosmetics moisturiser around his balls?"

"Not his balls, Richie. They're far too sensitive. You don't want to catch rabies on your first day at work. It won't look good on your CV. But it must be the same cockerel and dog I'm looking at from up here. But if you see me, don't even nod, OK? We don't know each other. We pass like strangers in the night until I tell you otherwise. Understand?"

"So how long are we staying, Mark?"

"As long as it takes, Ritchie. Stay cool. And, by the way, our dear friend Professor Eddie Higgins is flying here in a couple of days though I've not yet decided how to use his own unique set of skills."

"What's good enough for the staff is good enough for the management," Colin Asher had told Ritchie during his interview.

Mark Dobson, lying on the bed in his room on the floor above Richie's, decided that was easy for Colin to say, after all he never travelled far from the office.

He thought about Isobel Johnson - Baroness Johnson of Amberley, to give her the full title. She'd called him twice since their meeting in Oxford and again at the airport to wish him luck. Not many clients did that so Dobson decided that either she realised his nasty side was well meant or she just liked mean men. He'd called Eddie again after the meeting at her lawyer's. After finishing the factual parts, it had been

Eddie who started on her looks and personality. "She's too hung up on physical appearance," he'd said.

"Did you know she was once a fashion model, Eddie?"

"A what?"

"She modelled for about two years in her twenties."

"I find boardwalks extremely distasteful," Eddie said.

"Do you mean catwalks?"

"Probably. Posers, attention seekers, all of them. And no-one ever wears the stuff they strut about in. It's outrageous publicity."

"But she's right to worry about the state of the company," he'd replied. "If true and if it got out, she might have to resort to her maiden name of plain Ms Johnson."

"You can buy titles," Eddie had replied. "I once came across a firm that types up all the right certificates and attaches free red ribbons. Baron Dobson of Edgware Road would make it sound like you knew a thing or two, Mark."

"And how about Lord Huggy?"

Dobson sat up and switched on his laptop, logged onto the encrypted area of the A & A website and found that Colin Asher had uploaded a short video starring himself. When he hit 'play', Asher's face appeared – white, full frontal, eyes wide, hair on end like he'd just seen his ex-wife.

"Remember Q?" Asher said.

Q was a contact with whom they occasionally shared mutually useful bits of information. Hassan El Kufra was a Libyan who had seen the writing on the wall long before Muammar Gaddafi was found hiding in a drain pipe and killed, some say sodomised, with a bayonet. He was now in his late fifties, a dapper little guy who lived in Milan and tended a small black moustache and a mop of curly hair. He spoke good Italian, Arabic and English and was a wheeler dealer and commission agent of the sort that sailed close to the wind, but he had done well and knew people

"I suddenly remembered something," Asher said on the video. "Remember when we last met him at Heathrow? I recorded it. Q was talking like he had verbal diarrhoea thinking we had connections and you were giving him your usual top-quality bullshit. I just played it back. You were very convincing, though not enough that he's felt the need to contact us since. But you know what, buddy? There was a Chinese man on Q's list called Ho Lee Chiang. Remember? Who's the manager of Vitals' Malaysian set-up? Food for thinking about. I'll leave it with you."

The mention of Ho Chiang again had been enough to set Mark Dobson's mind in motion doing extrapolations and flying off at tangents. "What brings you to London?" he'd asked Q.

"An Italian company," Hassan said. "Cosmetics and food supplements. They're looking for distributors and takeovers. You know anyone?"

"What's the company's name?" They hadn't expected Hassan to reveal that. For commission agents, supplier's names were kept secret until everyone signed an agreement or flashed some money, but Hassan had dropped a hint.

"Russian business. Russian everywhere these days, man. No good."

“You have a problem with Russians, Hassan?”

“Ingannati e manipolati,” was the reply. Hassan, the street-wise wheeler-dealer who knew a Chinese called Ho Lee Chiang had felt he was being duped. By Russians, in the cosmetics business, in Italy.

CHAPTER 14

The night before Eddie was due to fly to Bangkok coincided with his weekly bath.

It was as he was soaking himself and waiting for the water to grow too cold for comfort that he heard the noise downstairs. He stopped splashing to listen but decided it was a leaflet being pushed through the letterbox. Hearing nothing more, he gave his back one final scrubbing with his loofa. Eddie often spent more time inspecting the fibrous structure of his loofa, the dried tropical cucumber he'd bought in Vietnam, than actually washing with it. This time, though, he was distracted by the smell of smoke.

He hauled himself from the bath and sniffed the air again to make sure he wasn't imagining it, then ran down the stairs stark naked to find a pile of smouldering newspaper lying on the mat just inside the door. He stamped on it with his bare feet but the paper ignited sending up a plume of smoke and a flicker of flame that, if he'd not been dripping water might have singed the hairs on his legs if he had any. He stamped again, then again and eventually the smoking stopped. What was left was a pile of black, ashy newspaper and a burnt patch on the Welcome mat.

He sat on the bottom step of the stairs and wiped his wet face. Water was still dropping down his back. Then he stood up and opened the door. Whoever had stuffed that through the letter box and dropped a match into it would surely have gone by now but he opened it in case it was a couple of local lads who might be standing at the gate, laughing. There was no-one except a young woman waiting while her dog cocked its leg against the tyre of a car parked outside. Normally he would have said something about a dog-fouling offence but on this occasion, he withdrew quickly and shut the door. Then he sat on the stairs again and phoned Colin Asher. Asher sent a text to Mark Dobson.

CHAPTER 15

As Eddie boarded the flight to Bangkok in London Ritchie was changing from his travel wear into clothes more suitable for Micky Parker's evening out.

He still wore the Converse trainers but he'd put on a pair of tight black jeans and a grey tee-shirt with 'Chang' printed across the front. His hair was freshly spiked and gelled and the red colouring glistened in the light from the Sabaidee's vending machine.

Mark Dobson's evening attire hadn't changed. He was reading a week-old copy of the Bangkok Post when, at eight-thirty, Ritchie trotted down the stairs with the small bag slung over his shoulder. After having just spent a good hour watching himself in the bathroom mirror and further developing the Micky Parker character, Ritchie was convinced he looked awesome.

Along the short, rubble-strewn track from the Sabaidee was the hectically busy Lat Krabang road, a noisy and brightly lit dual carriageway, an east-west artery into and out of Bangkok that passed close by Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi International Airport.

It was busy night and day. At night, bright, coloured lights dazzled from cars, motorcycles, shops, 7 Elevens, bars and cafes. Charcoal smoke from food stalls curled past bare light bulbs hung on wires, plastic bag fly deflectors whirled above meat and sausage stalls and the nearer you got to the night-market, the walkway became a dark, crowded and greasy obstacle course of broken concrete where no-one looked where they were going because they were all on mobile phones. Cars, taxis, buses and motorcycles roared past, stopping only when the lights at the main turn off to the airport turned red. Away from the main road Lat Krabang was a modern suburb with gated residential areas and high apartment blocks. It was cosmopolitan and a certain type of foreigner loved it.

Richie heard the Peacock long before he saw the lights. Brightly lit peacocks in pink, red, green, purple and blue stood or perched everywhere as western music blared from loudspeakers. It was definitely a Micky Parker type of place so Richie took a quick stroll past to get the feel.

The front of the establishment was separated from the walkway by a thin line of gold coloured chain-link fencing. Behind that were the LED peacocks and tables and chairs occupied by girls in short skirts sitting with their legs crossed, eyeing passers-by over drinks that they sipped slowly through plastic straws. The eyes watched Ritchie pass by and he wondered what they thought. Was Micky their sort. Probably. They'd do anything for five hundred baht – or less.

As he sauntered by, Ritchie thought about Eddie and wondered if he had ever visited a place like the Peacock. Even if he had, it would be easy to forget such places existed when cycling along Oxford High Street and Rose Lane towards the Oxford Botanic Garden.

What was it Mark Dobson had told him? "For a crime investigator like you, Ritchie, places like the Peacock are good fishing grounds, not just for the sport but for the netting and landing of big fish."

If you fancied a quiet evening drink after a hard day then the Peacock was not for you but this was definitely the place Mark had described so Ritchie, with his bag slung across his shoulder, strolled back. He raised his John Lewis shades to wink at the front line of girls, lowered them again and walked in. As expected, one of the girls sprang to her feet, pulled her skirt down an inch and followed him to the bar. When he arrived, she was right there, alongside him, looking up with dark brown eyes topped by a neatly cut fringe of jet black hair. Ritchie raised his glasses once more and looked down.

She was about five feet two because instead of high heels like the others she was wearing a pair of fancy flip-flops covered in sequins that sparkled in the flashing lights. "How're you, sweetie?" Ritchie said in excellent east London. "You drinking cheap cheap or peng peng?"

"It depend," said his new friend with the short flowery skirt and tiny cleavage. "You rich rich or poor poor?"

That was quite clever, Richie thought, and he liked her already, but duty called. "Anyone upstairs?" He nodded towards the spiral staircase

"Maybe."

"You work upstairs or downstairs?"

"Up up and down down."

"Nicer up up, eh? Better than down down or out out, I always say. Air tamashad, too. Good view. Can watch Thai Airways taking off and crashing. What are you drinking, darling?"

"Sply."

Richie gave her five hundred baht. "OK, order a Tiger and a Spry and bring both upstairs, OK? Don't run away."

He smiled an evil-looking Micky Parker smile, stuck a spearmint gum in his mouth, adjusted the backpack on his shoulder, pushed his shades over his head to watch her flip flop away and went upstairs to find a table.

Ten minutes later Richie was making good headway with the girl whose name was On, but he was also looking around. Mark was right. This was definitely a meeting place of big men. Foreigners with beer bellies, pink skin, well-filled shirts, blonde hair, grey hair, dark hair, little hair or no hair at all. There was one big, brunette woman in a scarlet tee shirt and tight white shorts with her hair done in neat, beaded plaits probably by a hairdresser on a beach somewhere.

They were split into three groups with the biggest, in the corner. There were five men with one Thai girl at the corner table. It was covered in bottles of Singha beer and Russian and other English accents floated across and mixed with the din from below and outside. The Thai girl was sat with her arms around a big man with a mop of thick fair hair, the front pushed into a low wave that could only be staying in place with a touch of gel.

Ritchie looked away because On was returning with another tray. She sat down, close to him, crossed her legs and pulled her tiny skirt down a fraction. "Who's the girl?" Ritchie asked her, nodding towards the table in the corner.

"You like her?"

"No. Just asking. She needs longer arms if she wants her hands to meet around the back."

On didn't get the joke. "Her name Om."

"Same as you, huh?"

"No, I'm On, she Om."

"Ah, got it. Who's her boyfriend?"

On shrugged. She didn't know. "What your name?" she asked.

"Micky."

"Like Micky Mouse."

“That’s it. You wanna be Minnie?”

The humour was lost.

“Where you come from? Africa?”

“Nah, London.”

“You know the Queen?”

“Only the band.”

“I like Africa hair. Nice colour, how you make?”

“Stood on my head and dipped it in a bowl of Heinz tomato soup. You like?”

She ruffled the top, wiry strands and it moved as much as the twigs on a garden broom in a hurricane. “Nice.”

“Mind you don’t cut your fingers, darling.”

They sat for a while. Conversation was limited but On seemed comfortable enough and Ritchie thought they were getting on famously. She seemed to like the music, jiggled about and smiled a lot. Then she patted his knee. “You want another beer? I get.”

“OK. And bring more ice.”

“You wait, huh? Not go away.”

“No chance. You’ve still got the change from my five hundred baht.”

As she flip-flopped her way back down the spiral stairway, Richie took another look at the group in the corner.

“Christ,” he thought, “First bar I try and there he is. Mark was right and he looks just like the photo. It’s the Donald Trump look-alike.”

Ritchie drained his bottle and summoned the courage to do what they’d agreed in London. He didn’t normally smoke but he’d been practicing for a full week in front of the mirror. In one day, he’d got through six packs because Colin had said he could put them on expenses. Afterwards, he’d felt more ill than his trip on the ferry across the Irish sea in November, but his smoking technique had improved no end. He now felt like he’d been smoking since he was six.

He flipped a cigarette out, slipped it between his lips, flicked a plastic lighter, blew a plume of blue smoke into the air and then lay back as far as the seat would allow without toppling. Then he glanced over his shoulder at the fair-haired Russian and their eyes met briefly.

At the same time, the short-armed girl called Om, got up. “I get more beer, OK, dalling?” he heard her say. And, with that, she wriggled away from the Russian’s left hand that Richie hadn’t seen because it had been lodged in the back of her tight denim shorts. Om was a big girl with big thighs that filled her shorts. It looked uncomfortable if not painful. Ritchie definitely preferred On.

She passed Richie’s table, gave him a scarlet-lipped smile and, at the top of the stairs, dragged the denim fabric of her shorts from the crevice of her bum. It was just the cue Ritchie needed. He leaned over to the gang behind him and pointed. “That’s the nicest bloody wedgie I’ve seen in a long while,” he said in his best east London. Then he raised his empty bottle.

The Russians may not have understood 'wedgie' but the two English or whatever nationality they were, seemed amused enough. They nodded. The others were too busy downing their beers. If, on the other hand, the blonde Russian was upset by impertinent comments about his girlfriend's arse, then so be it. Richie would just have to face the consequence.

Ritchie turned back, took a drag on his third foul tasting cigarette and gave one last thought to what Mark had told him about the local Russians.

"They stick together," he'd told him. "Wives, girlfriends, they're all there. There are thousands of them. They're difficult to track as they mix with the thousands of Russian tourists and all the other beach and bar types. There's a hardcore living permanently around Pattaya and the other resorts, many of them in businesses of some sort – seedy stuff, often illegal - spending money and mixing it with ill-gotten gains from back home or elsewhere. Amongst them are some big-time international crooks with rings of protection spun around them. Pattaya is ideal. Sun, sex, money and beaches far from the dark and the snow and the ice. They're organised."

"But we're organised too," Mark had told him. "Jeffrey got some addresses. I then got our Thai man, Sannan, to ask around. There were comings and goings at one particular address, a big villa to the east of Pattaya. The place was owned by a Thai but rented out to foreigners, mostly Russian. Big cars came and went but locals didn't know anything. Typical Thai. If you don't know anything you can't be accused of anything. But Sannan recently stuck a tracker on a white Toyota Camry parked outside the villa and tracked it to the Novotel at the airport. We then got a good sighting of the driver and Sannan got a photo.

"At the time, we only had suspicions about who he was. He stayed at the Novo for several nights but we're thin on the ground and Sannan only has one set of eyes. But one night he followed him to the Peacock. A few questions of the staff with some incentives and we learned he was a regular and met upstairs with friends. That's why you'll be taking a closer look."

"So, who is he?" Richie had asked.

"We're ninety percent sure it's Dimitri Medinski."

"And we think Medinski's involved with the Vital business?"

"Maybe. And maybe Kenny Tan's Red Power business as well. If not then we've got other leads we can follow. But if Medinski's involved at all then it won't be just a small part. Medinski would want to run things, at least locally. "

For Richie, it was time to go to work. For Mark Dobson, as soon as he watched Ritchie walk off into the night it was time to phone Sannan.

While Jeffrey in Malaysia was a man of infinite patience, Sannan, was a master of blending in, of going unnoticed and of strenuous ingenuity. If access to a third-floor downtown Bangkok window was necessary, Sannan would become a Thai electrician for an hour and walk across the spider's web of electrical cables that stretched past the third-floor window. It was dangerous work but, being Bangkok, no-one ever reported a man in black tight-rope across power lines with a set of professional-looking tools hanging from his belt.

Dobson had described Sannan to Ritchie.

“He’s like a forty-year old Jackie Chan,” he’d said, “though I’ve never seen him climb vertical walls, do multiple somersaults whilst wielding a Samurai sword or jump from a skyscraper and land on his feet. He lives in Pattaya which is one of the most dangerous places in the world to operate as a private investigator. Most local investigators will only touch low level jobs like bar activities and extramarital affairs. Few are willing to help with the sort of thing Asher & Asher does but Sannan is not so choosy. He’ll do anything - political intrigue, bank accounts, intellectual property or inside surveillance and phone tapping that Colin then supports from the London office. That way, he can hide his work from anyone, including the Thai police who get seriously upset if someone is seen to be treading on their toes. In return, he helps me and he actually prefers the dangerous world of organised crime. He’s learned a bit of Russian over the years and will drop everything to follow a link with a Russian gang.”

Sannan had recently been working as a part-time barman in a hotel bar in Pattaya frequented by Russians whilst running a parallel job for a wealthy Russian woman from Moscow who suspected her husband was spending more time with Thai women than on the construction project he was supposed to be managing.

“it’s a good deal,” Sannan had told Dobson “I get ten thousand baht for every photo I take of him with a woman. So far I’ve sent her thirteen photos.”

When Mark Dobson called Sannan from outside the Sabaidee Mansion all he could hear was the sound of glasses clinking and a bedlam of loud voices overriding thumping background music but, between it all, Dobson heard Sannan’s voice. “Any news?”

“Micky’s in place. We need to meet.”

“Poonee,” Sannan replied, “Bang Pakong. 10am”

That was it. Fixed for 10am the next day at a hotel in Bang Pakong just off the Bang-Na - Chonburi Expressway and half way to Pattaya.

With that fixed Mark Dobson returned inside and on his way up the stairs his phone buzzed. It was Colin Asher in London.

“KRJ Capital,” Asher said. KRJ Capital was the investment management company Isobel had said her sister ran. “Chief Executive is Kathrine Elizabeth Johnson, Baroness Isobel’s sister. We already know that. There are three other main directors – her husband, Peter James Lester, Michael Steven Connor Jefferson and Maria Stephanie Benelli. They lend money - commercial mortgages and such like. They have strong Italian connections. Maria Benelli is Italian. But...”

“Go on.”

“There are tenuous links with all sorts of overseas businesses. It took us so long because it got complicated. I’m talking offshore stuff - Singapore, Gibraltar, Caymans, Bermuda and so on. You know what it’s like. We ran into brick walls of mundane-sounding offshore company names. How far do we go with this one?”

Dobson was now sitting on his bed. “Could all be perfectly legal, of course.”

“It’s nearly always legal.”

“But?”

“But often a smoke screen. So, I ask again. How far do we go?”

“That’ll do for now, Colin. Let’s see what crops up.”

“Righty ho. How’s the recruit?”

“I’m about to find out.”

CHAPTER 16

Back at the Peacock and before Ritchie could make his move, he heard On flip-flopping back up the spiral stairs with her tray. “Innovate on the go” had been Mark Dobson’s message during his indoctrination. Never be caught without a Plan B and a Plan C.

“Cold cold,” On said setting the tray down and pouring the drinks. “You like?”

“I like,” Ritchie said. “Cold beer, hot lady.”

She smiled sweetly. “Where you stay, Micky?”

It was always an early question if things were looking good but Ritchie needed to innovate on the go. Ritchie’s Plan B was just a simple modification of Plan A and so he leaned over and sniffed her neck. Perhaps she thought he was getting intimate because she giggled and wriggled and moved her chair closer. “Nice perfume,” Ritchie said. “Don’t tell me. I’m an expert. It’s called....” He sniffed her again, innovating. “Pansy. Am I right?”

On giggled from six inches away. “I not know Pansy.”

Ritchie didn’t either. He only knew the names of three flowers. Pansies were one, daffodils didn’t sound right and neither did dandelions. It didn’t matter. “Peng, peng,” he said, “Rich girl. huh?”

On looked shy for the first time. “Ooh, not so rich.”

“It’s my business,” Ritchie said proudly, lowering the dark glasses over his eyes to present an even cooler vision. “I give you present.” And he bent down to the backpack and withdrew a small pink box. He laid it on the table next to his beer and opened it. “My perfume,” he announced proudly.

And there it sat for a moment, a fancy shaped bottle filled with a golden liquid Mark Dobson had bought in a shop on Edgware Road and fitted with a new and fancy label created by Colin Asher on one of his printing machines. It was called ‘Eau de Toilette by Ritchie of London.’

On seemed to like the look of it so Ritchie unscrewed the lid, dabbed some on the back of his hand, rubbed it in with a finger and held it to On’s nose. “Nice, huh?”

“Ooh. Velly nice. Hom hom.”

Ritchie decided that a couple of bottles of that could secure his short-term future but, he reminded himself again, he was on duty. “For you,” he said like a man offering a long-term girl-friend an engagement ring. And he smeared a little on her neck as she waited, head raised like a purring cat having its throat stroked.

“Hom hom.”

“You think Om would buy a bottle?” he said pointing with his thumb over his shoulder.

“Maybe,” On said giggling as if she thought he might share the profits with her.

“Let’s try, shall we?”

Ritchie picked up his bag and went over to the corner table where Denim Wedgie had just returned with more beers. “Evenin’ gents,” he said. “I’m just testing out my new perfume. Free samples. Care for a sniff?” He offered the back of his hand to Om’s nose.

“Ooh. Velly nice. Hom hom. How much?”

He showed the bottle to the big, fair haired Russian and unscrewed the lid. “You sir, you look like a man who knows a good perfume, if I may so. Care to check this out?” He undid the lid and tried putting it to the nose of the Russian but the man was not amused. “Ty che blyad!” he grunted and raised a big hand to ward off the unwelcome intrusion.

But one of the others sitting next to him, a shorter, slimmer man who Ritchie thought was English seemed more interested. “Where the fuck did this come from?” And Ritchie, who had an actor’s ear for accents, recognised not an Englishman but a Dutchman. As well as his boat trip to Dublin, Ritchie had also been to Amsterdam, once.

“My very own, mate. ‘Eau de Toilette by Ritchie of London’. Original flavours and smells to suit your every need. Give the girlfriend a drop. Unscrew the lid and end up getting screwed yourself. Ha Ha.”

That seemed to break the ice and so Ritchie beckoned On to come over and join them because she looked lonely sat on her own. She held onto his arm in case he ran away whilst everyone took their turn to sniff the bottle until it ended up with the big, fair-haired Russian again.

“You sir, waddya fink? Nice huh? You in business? Could get a container load shipped to Moscow end of this week if you want? You are Russian ain’t you mate? Thought so. I got a good mate called Yuri back in Tottenham. Bloody Watford supporter would you believe it?”

“Sit down.” It was a command, made more forceful by a thick, pointed finger. “Who’s this guy, Ritchie?”

Ritchie was already prepared for that. “You think ‘Eau de Toilette by Mick’ sounds like it might sell a million bottles? Give me credit for an ounce of commercial know-how, mate. I’m Micky but Ritchie sounds real cool.”

As that put an immediate stop to that line of questioning, Ritchie pulled up two chairs, one for himself and one for On who was now hanging around his neck, and they started talking, drinking, laughing and dabbing the perfume on each other. Everything was going brilliantly and even more beers were being offered.

It was twenty minutes later that Ritchie’s phone rang. It made him jump, after all this was only the second time it had rung since he’d uploaded the ring tone. He untangled himself from On.

“Yeh?”

Mark Dobson was sitting downstairs in the open bar near the snooker tables drinking Tiger beer with a lot of ice while watching two Spanish teams kick a football around on a wide screen. "That you Micky?" he said.

"Nick, my old mate. How's it hanging?"

"Good thanks. How's it going?"

"Magic my son. You?"

"Watching the football downstairs, Micky."

"You don't say. What the fuck's going on?"

Dobson, downstairs, heard Ritchie stand up, perhaps push his chair back and probably go walk-about but within easy listening distance of the table he'd just deserted.

They'd rehearsed the next part back in London. Ritchie was to perform solo as Dobson relaxed and listened with the phone held away from his ear and watched Barcelona score the winning goal.

"Fuck," Ritchie said. "But I've got customers, mate. What the fuck you playing at? Why? Bloody hell. Did he say that? Jesus. Just as we're, you know. Bloody hell, Nick. You're kidding me. I can't believe you're telling me this."

He went on like that for a whole minute until Mark butted in. "Well done, Ritchie. I'm leaving now. Good luck."

"Fucking hell, Nick. What a sod. I still cannot believe you're telling me this."

Mark Dobson then switched the phone off and returned to the Sabaidee Mansion for an early night. For the first time in his professional career he was about to enjoy the pleasures of delegating to a junior.

It was 4am when Ritchie reported in.

"Where are you?" Dobson asked.

"In my room, below yours. I can hear you snoring. Want a report?"

"Go ahead."

Ritchie was on a high through excitement and dilute Tiger beer. After the faked phone call Ritchie had turned into a sober, angry and depressed young businessman totally let down by his supplier and best mate Nick from somewhere in East London.

The bastard Nick, Micky told his new friends, was probably right then, right that minute in time, screwing Micky's Nigerian girlfriend who'd just got a swimwear modelling contract. You couldn't trust anyone since the last election. Bring back hanging, the stocks, the bloody rack that was standing underused in the dungeons at the Tower of London because after years of meticulous preparation Micky's perfumes business was in tatters and plans to introduce 'Soft & Smooth' hand cream and 'Cuticle Care' by Ritchie of London were back on the drawing board and lacking the key element - a supplier.

Micky had made himself so popular with his distress that the Russian with the frontal blow wave had suggested he might like to look into some other business opportunities instead and not restrict himself to cosmetics. Micky had style. Micky

had undeniable commercial talent and the big Russian was proud to admit in more hushed terms, that though he might not look important, he was, in fact, the head of a worldwide group of companies with headquarters in Moscow and always quick to recognise a talented salesman when he met one.

Humoured by something, they'd all laughed – the two other Russians, the Dutchman from Sydney, the Englishman from Phuket and the Frenchman who didn't want to say where he came from because he didn't want either of his wives to know. Even Denim Wedgie had joined in the hilarity although little On had quickly fallen behind and couldn't catch up with such fast-moving events.

"Call me Igor," the blow-waved Russian had said.

So-called Igor had started drinking Smirnoff because there was no other brand behind the bar, but, oh yes, Igor could see plenty of opportunities for an entrepreneur of Mick's ethnic background and his many customers of a similar colour. And if, as Micky claimed, he knew many immigrants from the Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia and Bangladesh in a place called Tower Hamlets then global markets were clearly at his fingertips.

At 1am, they'd moved to a room at the Novotel near the airport.

"Two more women turned up, Mark," Ritchie said. "Big Russian types with loud voices and big assets. More vodka and other stuff arrived and the Dutchman produced a box of little white pills to try."

"But you didn't, did you, Ritchie?" Dobson butted in. "It's a sack-able offence according to Asher & Asher's employment guidelines."

"No, but I collected a pocketful if you want to try."

"Flush them down the john, Ritchie. Now. Do as I say."

"Yes, boss."

"What else?"

"I've been invited to visit somewhere tomorrow – no, later today."

"You get the name and address, Ritchie?"

"I asked. Igor said it was confidential."

"And you're convinced Igor is our friend Dimitri Medinski?"

"If he's not then your description is way off."

"Is that it, Ritchie?"

"Jesus, Mark, isn't that enough for one night?"

"Not bad," Dobson said although, in all honesty, he thought he'd done brilliantly. "What happened to On?" he asked.

"Sad, Mark, sad. I feel really bad. It was all coming along so nicely. I left her at the Peacock."

"Shame. Did you give her anything?"

"I left her my bag of Eau de Toilette by Ritchie of London."

CHAPTER 17

Eddie had known Buss for fifteen years and knew he'd be the one to meet him off the plane in Bangkok. Buss was Professor of Botany and he and Eddie had spent many happy but sweaty hours tramping through humid and muddy forests with walking boots and trousers tucked inside their socks. Leeches and other blood suckers were a distraction to studying trees, fungi and collecting samples.

Eddie arrived very early in the morning and Buss whisked him off to a guest house off the Petchaburi Road next to the canal, a cheap place that Eddie usually stayed in for the first night or two. Kip's bed and breakfast suited him fine.

They were sitting in the gale force wind of a big fan inside Kip's doorway. Eddie had already told Buss by email that this trip would be different. "What's going on, Eddie?" Buss asked. "You've got a look in your eyes I've not seen for years."

"I'm heading to Kuala Lumpur tomorrow," Eddie told him. "After that I hope to return here and then we can head to the forests."

Eddie did his best to explain, but as he talked on, self-doubt began to arise. Did he even remotely understand what complicated dealings might be going on behind Vitals' public façade. Isobel had seemed as uncertain as himself and Mark Dobson had warned that the few small pieces of evidence he'd added into the mix were probably insignificant or irrelevant in the scale of things.

The seven-hour time difference hit Eddie after Buss left and he was fast asleep when Mark Dobson called him to welcome him to Bangkok. "And I'm sorry to hear about the fire," he said.

"Bored kids, the police said," Eddie replied. "Half term. But they took it seriously. If I hadn't been here the whole house could have gone up."

"So, it was kids?"

"Who knows? But I'm very suspicious," Eddie said. "Have you checked the copies of documents from my computer?"

"No time. Why?"

"You'll find a letter from me to the Patent Office objecting to Vital's patent application on the Krabok oil extraction process. I objected on the basis the process isn't new. I piloted it with Boss at Chulalongkorn University ten years ago but we didn't bother applying for a patent."

"So, one or more of Vitals' directors see you as a pain in the ass for interfering in whatever it is they're up to. They think you have a vendetta against them, so they're running one of their own. Is that what you think?"

In truth, Mark Dobson was still not convinced by Eddie's suspicions.

"After my visit to the Malacca plant I'm probably a marked man," Eddie added as if to enhance his suspicions.

"Why? Did someone see you?"

“Maybe” he admitted. “I don’t drive very often but I rented a car and accidentally reversed it into a white van parked outside. I drove off quickly before anyone came out and then nearly hit a wall.”

Dobson, unseen by Eddie, smacked his forehead with the palm of his hand. Ho Chiang was known to drive a white van. “And have you booked your flight to KL to meet Jeffrey?”

“I’m flying tomorrow,” Eddie confirmed.

After talking to Eddie, Mark Dobson walked the short distance to the Lat Krabang Road to find a taxi for the ride half way to Pattaya to meet Sannan. Unexpectedly, Ritchie was also there, waiting by the roadside, tapping something into his phone. They didn’t speak or even glance at one another but Dobson felt his phone buzz in his pocket.

“Novotel,” Ritchie’s text said.

Dobson glanced at him and noticed the laces of one of his trainers hanging loose. “Again?” he replied.

“Told 2 B there @ 8.”

“Have a nice day,” Dobson replied. “Now delete all calls and all messages.”

Ritchie took the first taxi. Another came along a minute later.

The Bangwua Garden Resort, where Dobson often met Sannan, was an uninspiring concrete box of a place that Sannan often used to catch up on lost sleep. They usually sat in a corner on an uncomfortable but highly polished bench carved from the trunk of a single tree and drank canned coffee or green Fanta.

When Dobson arrived Sannan was already there with his head back and his eyes closed. No-one, Dobson thought, could surely sleep in that position on such a sharp-edged piece of rock hard mahogany. He tapped him on the shoulder and Sannan opened his eyes. He was asleep and judging by the time it took for his eyes to focus he must have been like that for a while. Nevertheless, he sprang up in his bare feet, pulled down the tee shirt that had risen up across his navel and looked around for his flip flops that were lying some yards away. His jeans looked as if he’d been wearing them for weeks. “Mark, how are you?”

“Good. Sorry to disturb you.”

“Just my eyes closed. Coffee? Fanta?”

“Coffee,” Dobson said and Sannan walked to the dispenser machine, retrieved his shoes on the way, pushed in some coins and came back with two cans of chilled Birdy. Then they wandered outside into the shade of a mango tree and chatted. It was a general update and a pooling of ideas on how to move things forward mostly on Kenny Tan.

Dobson mentioned credit card fraud, one of Sannan’s favourite subjects. He had recently been at the forefront of exposing a credit card scam being run not so far from where they were sitting. When he eventually, and anonymously, tipped off the police they’d arrested two Chinese running a credit card factory from a flat off

Sukhumvit Road. The police search yielded hundreds of stolen and plain, unprinted cards, thermal printers and holograms as well as cash, gold ingots and jewellery.

But Sannan was still convinced these two were only part of a much wider scam. One of the Chinese, Cheng Chee, had close links with Malaysia and mixed with Russians living in Pattaya. It was another reason why Dobson had decided to check on the movements of Ho Chiang who Jeffrey had also been watching for days. The Vital Cosmetics-Red Power link also lurked in his suspicions.

“Chinese and Russians again,” Sannan said. “I talked to Jeffrey about it recently and told him what to look out for. He’s waiting for a chance to break in to the Min Hin Malacca place but he needs to go careful.”

Dobson agreed. “I’ve told him to wait until one of us is with him.”

As Mark Dobson and Sannan talked beneath the mango tree Ritchie was waiting in the lobby at the Novotel.

Ritchie had barely noticed the hotel lobby the night before. Now, he looked around. It was like a well-tended forest with a glass roof instead of a sky and surrounded by apartments. As instructed by Mark Dobson, he’d deleted all past texts and calls, so he pushed an ear plug into his phone and relaxed in the plush fabric of a sofa with his baseball hat on, tapping the Converse in time to an old Bob Marley track.

He was so taken by the old reggae song he’d not heard for so long that he didn’t see the big, sandy-haired woman in the pure white, calf length shorts and frilly, scarlet-shirt looking down at him. When he did, he pulled the ear plug out and sprang up. She was almost as tall as he was and certainly heavier.

“You. Micky.” she said. They’d met the previous night so it was no surprise she recognised him. It was just her manner.

“That’s me.”

“I think so. You only African here.”

Ritchie looked around. “I’m sure I saw a few real ones pass by just now.”

“We go.”

“I’m ready. Where’re we going?”

She walked off carrying a small, white bag on her shoulder. Ritchie stuffed his phone away and followed her out into the hot morning sun. The shiny white Toyota Camry he’d ridden in the night before was parked close by. She opened the rear door, beckoned Ritchie to get in and then clambered in beside him. Cool, refrigerated air wafted around but the engine was so quiet he could barely hear it. In the driver’s seat, adjusting the AC control, sat a man with straight black hair and a skin colour that Ritchie decided was too pale for a Thai. Chinese was the most likely alternative. The car moved off but stopped again just out of view of the hotel.

“I check some things.” said the woman. “What’s in the bag?”

“That’s private,” Ritchie said. “Why?”

“You wanna talk business or go home?”

“Persuade me. I don’t even know your name.”

“Olga. Please to empty the bag.”

“Nice to meet you, Olga. You live around here?”

“Please to empty.”

Ritchie thought about trying his Vladimir Putin accent but decided it might not go down well. Instead: “OK, OK. Don’t rush me. I’m on holiday, OK? But I’ve come this far, so I suppose....”

He emptied his bag onto the seat. There wasn’t much. His Jaguar sun glasses came first. Then his phone and ear plugs. Then an old and worn wallet with some English money, a few thousand Thai baht and a Visa card in the name M J Parker. Then came the driving licence and British passport in the name Michael John Parker that Colin had prepared in London. His Sabaidee room key fell out last.

“That is all?”

“Well, it should be full of Eau de Toilette by Ritchie of London’ but I left that at the Peacock.”

Olga picked up his phone and seemed to check the contacts and call log. Now he understood why Mark had advised deleting logs. As for his contacts list. “Just add in a few fictitious mates to show you’re not completely devoid of friends in the world” had been the instruction.

“Who these people?”

Ritchie leaned over her, probably closer than he should but he had the despicable habits of a far less well brought up character to perpetuate. Olga smelled of powerful deodorant and the closer he got the easier it was to estimate the thickness of the layer of face powder. He also glimpsed what he estimated to be a triple D cup black bra down between the frills of her red shirt. Appropriately, she was scrolling through the D list of his contacts list. Ritchie peered up at her from the frills and grinned. Olga sniffed. “Who?”

“Dabbler and Dazzler? Mates,” he said. “So is Dimples.”

Olga now fingered the room key with the dirty length of string attached. “What this?”

Ritchie’s brain worked flat out for a second. ‘Don’t reveal where you are staying unless necessary’ had cropped up in the do’s and don’ts section of training. He decided it was necessary but could be made vague. “My hotel. Cheap place off Lat Krabang.”

“What name?”

“Uh,” he paused and tilted the baseball cap a fraction to scratch his head. “Do you know? I forget. Now ain’t that weird? Only slept there one night. What the hell is it? Umm. I know exactly where it is, I could take you there right now but you know how it is sometimes? It’ll come to me later.”

“This your driving licence?”

“Yup. Fully accredited for driving everything except army tanks. No penalty points. You want me to drive?”

Olga picked everything up with fingers tipped with long nails painted in sparkly sky-blue varnish and handed everything back. Then she delved into her own handbag. “You still want to talk business?”

“Sure, that’s why I’m here.”

“Please wear these,” and she produced a pair of extra-large lensed but cool looking dark glasses with big frames. “Put them on.” Ritchie did as he was told and the sky, the sun, the view and even big Olga disappeared. “Do not take off.”

And with that the Toyota moved off as silently and smoothly as a Bentley. Ritchie tried looking around but could see nothing except his own nose.

They drove in utter silence for maybe half an hour, the car only slowing when outside noise increased in traffic jams. Meanwhile, whilst shrouded in darkness, Ritchie tried to recall a photo Mark Dobson had shown him. The big woman in the headscarf: Olga Puchkov. Could the Olga sitting next to him in frilly blouse and white shorts be the same Olga whose head had been wrapped in a headscarf like a Moslem?

He still hadn’t fully made up his mind when the car took what felt like several sharp turns and what little light appearing beneath Ritchie’s nose disappeared altogether. He sensed they were driving down a ramp, perhaps into an underground carpark. The car stopped and reversed, the driver got out and shut the door. Olga removed the dark glasses from his face and clambered out. “Come.”

It was a stiflingly hot, dark and dismal underground car park with rectangular shafts of daylight from high on the surrounding wall. They headed for a faint sign that said Lift, the Chinese driver pressed a button, the lift door opened and they stood inside staring at faintly lit floor numbers. At Floor 2, the lift stopped. The Chinese driver stepped out and Ritchie started to follow but Olga pulled him back by his collar. They got out on Floor 3.

Facing them was the plain wall of a corridor that might once have been white. Now it was grimy with grease marks and blankets of blackened spider’s webs. “Come.”

At the end of the corridor was a door with a security lock. Olga pressed four buttons that, because of the useful tips section of Mark’s training, Ritchie committed to memory. Behind the door was another short corridor that felt decidedly cooler. “Come.”

And then Ritchie saw exactly why he’d been invited. They had arrived in the corner of a vast airconditioned warehouse, lit by strip lights with rows of metal racks and pallets from floor to ceiling. Every pallet held clear, plastic-wrapped bottles of red liquid or stacks of brown, unmarked cardboard boxes. A fork lift truck driven by a Thai wearing a surgical face mask rolled up and down between the racks, picking up pallets.

“Come,” Olga said.

To the left was another door and this time Olga knocked, listened, opened it, then stood aside for Ritchie to enter. Through the fog of foul smelling cigarette smoke Ritchie saw a man behind a metal desk, leaning back in his chair with half a cigarette hanging from his mouth. The man looked at him but continued talking in Russian into a phone clamped to his right ear. Stretched over the dome of his belly was a brown, chequered shirt. On the desk was a dirty looking laptop and in front of the desk a red, moulded-plastic chair.

Ritchie stood inside the entrance smiling, nodding and fighting back a desire to cough as the man beckoned him to sit with a flick of a middle finger. “Da, da…… net, net.”

As Ritchie sat, smiled and looked around at the walls, bare except for a Russian calendar with a picture of the Russian White House – the Dom pravitelstva Rossiiskoi Federatsii - and another of Mark Dobson's photos came to him:

"This next one is a Russian known to Interpol for past links to smuggling Africans into Italy. He's not been seen for a while. His name is Sergei Mutko or Yuri Abisov, whichever you prefer. And that is a woman though it doesn't look like it on Jeffrey's photo. It matches one Olga Puchkov, who's been seen with Sergei in the past. She's trying to look Moslem or maybe she is Moslem. Nice headscarf, huh?"

Ritchie still needed to cough. He wrinkled his nose, stifled the cough and smiled again as the Russian continued shaking and nodding his head in time with: "Net, net, da, da."

With a final "da," he dropped the phone into the top pocket of his XXL shirt, leaned forward, arms on the desk, hands together, the cigarette still burning between his lips and stared at Ritchie.

After several seconds of nothing, Ritchie broke the silence. "Doobrayeh Ootrah," he said in his best Vladimir Putin. The man grunted an unrecognisable reply. "Ya ploha gavaru pa Ruski," Ritchie said "I only know Russian for good morning."

The Russian shrugged. He didn't seem to care. He stubbed his cigarette out in the overfull ashtray. "So," he said in a deep baritone voice, "Mr Micky is it?"

"Micky Parker, sir. Pleased to meet you."

"From London, is it?"

"Dagenham and Tottenham. Up the Spurs! You follow football?"

"Mmm." He didn't seem to like football. "You met my friends last night."

"Yes, sir. Very entertaining."

"And you are in the business."

"Not at the moment, sir. Since last night at around nine thirty."

"Shame. What happened?"

"My supplier chickened out, sir. No ambition."

"Pity. What business?"

"Cosmetics business, sir. Just about to launch my own brand and my supplier gets cold feet."

"Chickens? Cold feet? What is cold feet? You in business long time?"

"Only since I was twelve. DVDs, jewellery, watches, TVs, perfumes – a few other things to help the cash flow. Know what I mean?"

"Mmm. You got contacts in your community?"

Ritchie didn't answer immediately. He looked and stared, bravely. Then he leaned forward and stared at the Russian. "Community, sir? Community? Can I know who I'm talking to? Only my community runs to around seventy million right now. Until last night I had big plans."

The Russian sat back and a different look spread across his face that Ritchie decided was a smile. He had a head as big as a football and a mop of brown hair on

top that did not look like real hair. It reminded Ritchie of a wig they'd thrown around the pub after drinks one night after drama school. Ritchie had been the one who finally caught it and fastened it to his belt claiming his family background was not Jamaican but pure Scottish and this was an original Nolan sporran made of red squirrel. On the head of the Russian, Ritchie fought a desperate urge to pull it to check.

"Mmm. Big guy, huh?"

"I never deal with people I don't know. Company policy. Got a name, mate?"

The sudden outburst of assertion did the trick. The Russian nodded and stood up to reveal he was wearing blue jeans that hung from a belt tied lower than where his waist should have been. "Come."

Was 'come' a cool word for Russians recently or was it a word he and Olga had grown accustomed to sharing? He came around the table, opened the door and beckoned Ritchie with a flap of his hand. He swung a hairy arm around the warehouse. "You want something? Your own label? How many you want?"

"All this?" said Ritchie as if overawed.

"You want health drink? Sport drink? Energy drink? Anything in bottle? Vodka? Whisky? Medicine? You want cosmetic? Perfume? Something for make happy? For make eyes shine? We got it all. We just need partners we can trust."

CHAPTER 18

It was the Italian connection that still intrigued Mark Dobson. Aware that it might just be false intuition, he called Colin Asher. By return Colin sent a copy of Eddie's correspondence on the product called 'Forever Youthful'.

The only reply Eddie received had come from a law company called Studio Legale Marco Senini, Trieste. "*Any further malicious accusations about our client's products will be dealt with directly by our clients through the Italian courts,*" the somewhat threatening reply said.

"I just checked a list of Trieste lawyers," Asher said. "There isn't one called Studio Legale Marco Senini."

Dobson's put his intuition on hold and at 7pm, with no contact from Ritchie, he walked east up the long Lat Krabang road to the night market to find something to eat.

To any outsider Ritchie and he did not know one another. Any phone calls between them were made and then deleted, but if either of them was detained or had a problem the procedure was to find a way to phone or text Colin Asher on a special number.

He had finished eating and had started checking his watch every few minutes. It was not a good sign. Sitting alone, eating rice, boiled chicken and soup in sticky heat and surrounded by the hubbub of the market, Mark Dobson's concern was that they'd

thrown this young and untested character from drama school straight into a serious international crime investigation with just a few days of training. Could he cope?

He'd been doing the sort of thing Ritchie was doing today far longer than he cared to remember and had survived - just. He'd been threatened, beaten up, followed, detained against his will and even shot at over the years, but he still wasn't sure he'd convinced Ritchie how dangerous the job could be.

To Ritchie the job looked glamorous and exciting and, of course, Colin and he had given him the run-around from his initial interview in Costa Coffee to the so-called training course. Despite leg-pulling bullshit, though, Ritchie would be well paid and taken care of if something happened, but nothing ever prepared you for the real thing.

Dobson needn't have worried. Around 8pm his phone buzzed with a text from Colin to say it was safe to call Ritchie.

"Where are you?" he asked.

"Sabaidee. Taking a shower. I stink of cigarette smoke."

"I'm at the night market. Come and join me. Just make sure no-one's following you. Keep to the training methods. Any doubts, return to the hotel."

Ritchie arrived half an hour later looking fresh and alert. He sat down and pointed over his shoulder. "What's with the six-year-old girl and her brother doing cabaret on the corner?"

It was true. A tiny girl of about six in a flowing pink dress, rouged cheeks and lipstick sang songs to backing tracks from a portable machine operated by her slightly older brother on the corner nearly every night. "I reckon she earns more than me," Ritchie said.

"You'd struggle on the cuteness factor," Dobson replied. "Have you eaten?"

"At the Novotel. A room service club sandwich that came with a Russian flag on a cocktail stick."

"Sabaidee Mansion dispensing machine not good enough for you?"

"I just had an audience with Blow Wave again and discussed my first deal, but there are hitches."

"He wants payment up front?"

"How did you guess?"

"It was expected. What are the other hitches?"

"The rules and regulations. Five of them."

"Tell me."

Ritchie counted them off on his fingers. "One: Do what I'm told. Two: Trust no-one but the supplier - that's Blow Wave. Three: Keep my mouth shut. Four: keep my eyes and ears open. Five: Never snitch. What's snitch?"

"I'm surprised a Russian knew the word but it means don't ever, ever think of running away or running to the police. I warned you about this business, Ritchie. Are you sure you're dealing with Dimitri Medinski?"

“Ninety percent.”

“Why not a hundred?”

“Your photos aren’t good enough but Olga called him Dimi, probably by mistake.”

“Olga?”

“Olga in the scarf. She’s definitely a woman and definitely not a Moslem. Then I met the guy with two names - Sergei Mutko or could be Yuri Abisov.”

“You sure about all this?”

Ritchie nodded. “There’s a Thai fork lift driver in a surgical mask who called him Yuri but he never introduced himself properly. I asked several times. ‘Who am I dealing with, what’s your name?’ But he ignored me saying Igor had sent me so I was dealing with Igor and only needed to know Igor.”

“OK. Start again from the beginning. You want a drink?”

“That green fizzy stuff – Fanta, Est or whatever. I’ve got a taste for it.”

Dobson ordered two bottles and Ritchie described his day.

“The warehouse was full of cosmetics, sports drinks, energy drinks, bottles and boxes that look like the sort of thing you see in Holland and Barret. You know: health foods, vitamins, pills for this, capsules for that. Fancy Chinese labels, English labels, Italian labels, Arabic labels. Plastic bottles, cans, boxes of tea and coffee.”

“Tea and coffee? Did you see Red Power?” Dobson asked.

“Oh sure. Pallets and pallets of it with Chinese labels. They say I could get anything I wanted.”

“And the deal you were offered?”

“Not so fast, Mark,” Ritchie grimaced. “My stomach hurts.”

“It’s the drink. It’s too gassy. Don’t drink so fast, but what about the deal?”

Ritchie held his stomach and gave a long burp. “That’s better, but there might be another in a minute.”

“It’s tension and excitement, Ritchie. James Bond suffered from it but never on camera. Loud belching was a turn on for Pussy Galore.”

“Is that right? I never knew that.”

“What about the deal?”

“After the warehouse tour, Yuri made me wait outside his office. I heard him on the phone but I was glad of the fresh air. Then he called me in. ‘Black Magic,’ he shouted. ‘Mister Black Magic. Where the fuck are you?’ Can you believe that, Mark? If someone called me that back home I’d gather a few mates around to deal with it.”

“Ignore it, Ritchie. Feel proud to be British.”

“Anyway: ‘What’s your main interest, Black Magic?’ he asked me. ‘Cosmetics or…….’ Now I didn’t want to complicate things, Mark. The only health foods I know are Kellogg’s Bran Flakes so I jumped in and said cosmetics. ‘Face and hand lotions,’ I said, ‘And anti-wrinkle creams for decrepit old gits over forty.’”

“Did he think it was your turn to be insulting?”

“Did I care? ‘What I’m really hot on is perfumes,’ I said. ‘You got anything like my Eau de Toilette by Ritchie, nice underarm deodorants or air fresheners that’ll kill stale ciggie smoke?’ Yuri said anything was possible. It all depended on the quantity.”

“And you said?”

“I’d take 100,000 bottles of Eau de Toilette if the price was right and if they looked and smelled like Eau de Toilette by Ritchie of London because I’d already started free sampling around my customers. And I’d really like my own label, I said. I was desperate, I said. I had people lined up and ready to bite my hand off.”

“And then?”

“No problem,’ Yuri said. ‘I’ll speak to Igor.’”

“And then?”

“Olga came back and told me to go outside to sit and wait. I then sat in that bloody warehouse from midday to three o’clock. The Thai fork lift driver brought me a bottle of water.”

“With all that stock of Red Power you only got water?”

“Terrible customer care, Mark. Then I was taken back to the Novotel in the Toyota.”

“In the dark glasses, again?”

“I couldn’t see a damned thing except when I knocked them off as the car came up the ramp into the street and had to pick them up off the floor. Olga panicked.”

“See anything?”

“Kodak Express, 7 Eleven and a sign that said On Nut Market.”

“On Nut? You sure?”

“On Nut Market. I thought of Eddie with his nuts. And I saw Soi 85.”

“Magic, Ritchie. Then what?”

“Back to the Novotel, up to the suite again and more waiting. Blow Wave wasn’t there so Olga made coffee and ordered the club sandwich with the flag sticking out. Bacon, tomato, lettuce and salad cream. Very nice but my nerves were starting up. How the hell could I afford to buy 100,000 bottles of Eau de Toilette? He’d probably demand cash.”

“But it didn’t work out like that?”

“No. Igor turned up.”

“Was he nice and friendly?”

“Neither. He invited me to sit around a big table. That top floor suite has two bathrooms. It’s like a penthouse apartment. One end is like an office that looks down on the top of indoor trees.”

“Just get on with it.”

“He offered to supply 100,000 bottles labelled Eau de Toilette by Ritchie of London smelling of Frangipani.”

“Go on.”

“But if I ditched by own Ritchie brand he could do Calvin Klein, Christian Dior, Issey Miyake or a lovely Paco Rabanne.”

“What did you say?”

“It depended on the price.”

“And?”

“All were about \$5 a bottle that I could sell direct for ten times that much in UK. On the other hand, if I took a smaller cut like a wholesaler I could sell a lot more.”

“What did you say?”

“That I’d think about it. But then he got a bit unpleasant. His face went puce. Told me there was no time for thinking. Olga brought him a vodka. He started talking about trust and if the deal wasn’t right then if anyone got to hear about the offers he’d made he’d be very upset and there would be implications such as implementing one or more of the conditions. So, I said I thought it all looked very positive and that just looking around his warehouse had sparked new ideas. Then he started smiling again. Then came another proposal. “

“Go on.”

Ritchie swallowed the remaining half of his green Fanta and waited a moment to burp before continuing. “‘How about becoming a proper partner in our business?’ Yuri suggested. They were looking for partners. They’d recently done the same thing in France and Holland with the friends I’d met last night but the star performer was an Italian business that was expanding into many other products besides cosmetics.”

Dobson nodded. There it was again – an Italian link.

“And there were other opportunities, Blow Wave said. Partners were using the cosmetics and supplements business for other opportunities. I asked him what sort of opportunities and he got up and walked about. The room was big enough to hold Olympic sports, Mark – like javelin throwing. Then he came back.”

“What other opportunities did he have in mind?”

“Invoicing opportunities, Mark. Help with getting stuff through customs, commissions, bonuses.”

“Money laundering?”

“He didn’t say that. He mentioned financial opportunities, but he has this frightening grin that appears when he thinks he’s got a good idea. When he mentioned financial opportunities, he grinned from ear to ear.” Ritchie burped one last time. “Did I do OK?”

Mark Dobson looked at the new Asher & Asher recruit with his wiry black hair topped with red dye and the single ear stud. He’d put the Star Wars baseball cap on the table by his empty bottle of Fanta. “Brilliant, Ritchie. I couldn’t have done it better myself.”

“You couldn’t have done it at all, Mark,” Ritchie grinned. “You’re too old.”

“Hah. Maybe.”

“Definitely,” he said with such certainty that Dobson changed the subject.

“Was anything said about product quality, certification, guarantees?”

“I’d asked Yuri and he’d shrugged so I asked Blow Wave. He told me to ask Yuri but that if things sold then they must be good. Then he laughed and Olga joined in. It was the first time I’d seen her laugh.”

“Any idea where everything is made?”

“I also asked that and Blow Wave waved his hands around. Here and there, he said. No need to know. That was their job. Then I told him that the one product that looked really interesting to me was Red Power. I saw it on the shelves, I said. Looks like Red Bull. I reckon it would be an easy sale, even to pound shops in UK. He hadn’t heard of pound or dollar shops so I explained and he listened without talking for the first time.”

Finally, they both sat back.

“So, tell me Mark, how am I going to pay for 100,000 bottles of stuff I don’t want?”

“How does he want paying?”

“Cash.”

“Half a million dollars?”

“Fifty percent deposit, fifty percent before shipping. That’s what he said. See what I mean?”

“In notes? Or paid into a bank account?”

“I thought I’d ask later. I’ve never handled more than about a hundred quid before.”

“Never throw away an opportunity, Ritchie. We’ll come up with a strategy. Why does he think you can afford half a million dollars?”

“I told him I’d just made half a million on some Samsung Smart TVs.”

“So, it’s all your fault, Ritchie. A trifle too bold, perhaps? What guarantee did he give that he wouldn’t just take your money and forget to send the goods?”

“None.”

They were quiet for a few minutes, watching a fly crawling around the remains of Mark Dobson’s chicken and rice. It landed on Ritchie’s baseball cap. Ritchie flicked it away.

“OK,” Dobson said, “I’ll talk to Colin. I’ve got an idea. I also need to borrow your baseball cap.”

Ritchie looked at him. “Why? You planning to go to the Peacock tonight because, believe me, it won’t suit you. Better you wear a shabby raincoat and a trilby with a feather.”

“Don’t be so possessive. Everything you’re wearing was bought on an Asher & Asher credit card. It’s a company asset and I need to borrow it, OK? You’ll get it back tomorrow. Right now, I suggest you return to the Sabaidee and meet me here at 8am tomorrow morning after following the procedure for spotting and losing unwelcome followers. Better safe than sorry, Ritchie. Pleasant dreams.”

With Richie gone, Mark Dobson bought a bottle of water and sat, pondering on what to do. It was 9pm when he phoned Colin Asher again. "How many Limited company names do we own that have never traded?"

"About six from memory," he said.

"What names?"

"From memory? Butterwell Limited, Framelock Limited, Cashley Green, Smart Finance, Pollitop....."

"That's it," Dobson interrupted. "Pollitop. Off the shelf company?"

"Yes, what's up?"

"Activate it. Three directors. You, me and Ritchie but use his Michael John Parker pseudonym and any of the pseudonyms we use. Then open a genuine bank account with around one thousand pounds sterling Then I need a Pollitop bank statement showing four hundred thousand pounds on deposit."

"Yikes! What sort of bank statement is that?"

"One created in the office, Colin. You know the sort."

"And I'll need signatures "

"What the hell's wrong with you, Colin?"

"OK. How soon?"

"By 10am Thai time tomorrow. That means you've got three hours before the bank closes and twelve in total."

"What's going on?"

"Don't waste time with silly questions, Colin. Ask Ching to run down to Pret a Manger for your sandwich and start work immediately."

Mark Dobson picked up Ritchie's Star Wars baseball cap and returned to the Sabaidee.

CHAPTER 19

At 8am next morning Mark Dobson was standing on the corner where, just twelve hours before, the six-year-old girl had been in the middle of her evening cabaret performance. It was busy with buses, cars, trucks, motorcycles and streams of Thais, eyes focused on their mobile phones going to work. Ritchie was on the other side of the dual carriageway, looking up and down, judging the right time to sprint across six lanes of traffic.

As he passed the corner Dobson emerged. "Spare some change for my singing, sir?". It was the highest pitched voice he could manage at that time of day.

"You haven't sung a single note. You're a fraud. Someone should call the police."

"Here's your hat," Dobson said. "Thanks for the loan."

"Did it work for you last night?"

Dobson ignored him. "There's a coffee place up there." he pointed towards an open-air cafe in a side street that led to a row of contemporary-looking apartment blocks. "They claim to serve English breakfast as well, but we don't have time for luxuries." They settled for black coffee in the far corner.

"What's your schedule?" Mark Dobson asked.

"To call Olga with a plan."

"Have you got one?"

"Nope."

Dobson sipped his coffee and leaned back with his arms over the back of his chair "Medinski's other suggestion was to become a partner in their racket, wasn't it?"

Ritchie nodded.

"Right. Here's the plan. When you see him, or Olga, say you've had a sleepless night pondering on the wonderful opportunities you see coming from a full-scale partnership. Get excited. Tell him you really liked his story about the successful Italian because he sounded just like the cool sort of guy you want to be. Rub in your past experience and professional skills – the Smart TVs, the DVDs, mention a bit of small scale money lending here and there to demonstrate your financial qualifications. Getting the picture? You're young and eager and ready to expand."

Ritchie looked doubtful.

"Tell him you'd already been planning something big like a full-scale partnership but hadn't like to say anything yesterday. Now you've slept on it you're raring to go. You want to be up front, frank and honest because that's the sort of guy you are. So, what are the details and the conditions? How does it all work? What exactly does he do besides the cosmetics and the stuff in the warehouse? What would he need from you? You could be his foothold into the UK market. Blah blah."

Ritchie still looked doubtful. "But even if I performed like Matt Damon or Will Smith this guy's a bastard, Mark. He'll still expect something up front like a financial commitment."

"You're squeezing him to talk, Ritchie. It's an art. You are evidence gathering. It's vital and it's the part of the training I couldn't think how to do back in London because it required a real-life scenario. This is it. A genuine, real life situation. Anyway, listen on. There's more. When do you need to call big Olga?"

"When I'm good and ready and I sure ain't ready just yet."

Dobson took out his phone and scrolled to the downloads section. "Here," he said. "Take a look. Colin's worked all night on this. It's just arrived. This is your new business. It's called Pollitop Limited. Nice logo huh?"

"Pollitop? Jesus, Mark, it sounds like a bloody ice cream. And the logo looks like a phallus."

"I have to agree about the phallus but Colin was pushed for time. And, anyway, it won't need to exist for long."

"Do I get a business card?"

"Only if you print your own. It's a question of priorities. Micky Parker is registered as a director along with two others, Simon Smith and Lucas Collins."

“I don’t know those guys.”

“Yes, you do, Ritchie. They’re well known to you. Stop being so negative. Now: Here are the latest Pollitop company bank statements. Your current account shows slow trading this month because you’ve been travelling overseas on business, but it’s still in healthy credit to the tune of £2.450.

Ritchie looked. “Haven’t I done well?”

“And here’s the statement for your deposit account.”

Ritchie took two looks and then grabbed Mark’s phone to hold it up before his eyes. “Bloody hell, Mark. £467,980? How the hell...?”

“It’s the profit from your Samsung Smart TVs and some other business you don’t want to discuss because it’s embarrassing.”

“But how?”

Dobson pointed at his own head. “Secrets of an old man,” he said. “When the time comes to prove to Medinski that you’re not short of money and serious, tell him you need to phone your accountant. For the sake of today that’s a guy called Mr Thomas. By coincidence Mr Thomas’s phone number is the same as Colin’s green phone. Understand? Ask Mr Thomas if he would be so kind as to send you copies of the last two bank statements for Pollitop Limited and a copy of the incorporation certificate direct to your phone as you are currently engaged in high level business discussions in Bangkok. If that doesn’t work, we’ll need to rethink. But, even if he’s still not convinced that you’re a worthwhile partner for his many rackets it should convince him you’ve at least got some cash. Agreed?”

Ritchie nodded and, at last, grinned.

“Good. One more thing. Put your cap on.”

“I don’t need it right now.”

“Put the bloody thing on, will you? Tell me if it feels normal.”

Ritchie put it on, adjusted it, then sat back with his arms folded. “Seems OK. It still fits. Surprising, because I thought your head was bigger than mine.”

“I didn’t wear it, Ritchie. I spent half the night sewing something into it. Keep it with you at all times and, if you wear it, wear it back to front so the voice recorder points forward.”

“Really? You don’t say! You mean I’m a genuine spy?” Ritchie pulled the cap off again to check. “Where is it?”

“Behind the Velcro. Switch it on and off by pressing the Velcro. It’ll look like you’re adjusting it. Neat huh? It’ll record for thirty-six hours on a single charge because it’s a top-quality device. Nothing but the best with Asher & Asher. We use an adapter and plug it into a USB port.” He paused. “Using a needle and thread is another skill I don’t suppose you ever thought necessary to learn while at school, Ritchie.”

Ritchie returned the cap to his head, sat back and grinned.

It was going to be another hot and humid day. Sweat was already trickling down Ritchie’s back and oozing droplets on his forehead. He wiped his forehead and looked at Mark Dobson in his white, short-sleeved shirt and grey trousers with his sun-tanned, hairy arms draped across the chair back. He looked as mean and cool

as if he'd just climbed out of a fridge. There was not a sweat stain to be seen. "Now call Olga," he said.

CHAPTER 20

"Professor Higgins? I'm Jeffrey Lim. Mark asked me to meet you."

"Call me Eddie," Eddie replied holding his hand out to be shaken. "How did you recognise me?"

Jeffrey glanced at the grey haired old man in the grey shorts, walking boots and socks who had just emerged into the arrivals hall at Kuala Lumpur airport. "Mark gave me a description," he said. "Do you have any luggage?"

"Only a few things in this bag."

"Mark said you wanted to go to Malacca, so we'll drive. It's about two hours, but you know that of course, you've been there before."

Eddie, having left a dull, grey Oxford in wind and rain was glad of the change of scenery. Here it was bright, hot, humid, lush and green. There were flocks of white egrets in the fields, rows of fan palms along the highway, hibiscus, flame trees and frangipani. In Blake Street in Oxford he felt lucky if he passed a box hedge or saw a robin although the hedge sometimes sprouted a polystyrene carton on a Sunday morning.

"You don't look like a Malaysian private investigator," Eddie said.

"What is one supposed to look like?"

"I'm not sure though I assume you are quite rare. Tell me what you've been doing on this case."

That started Jeffrey on a description of a year spent trying to understand counterfeiting, in particular Kenny Tan's Red Power energy drink."

"Do you drink such things, Jeffrey?"

"Strong coffee for breakfast and water during the day."

"Sensible man," Eddie said. Jeffrey looked healthy enough. He was slightly shorter than Eddie but a good deal younger. About forty-five Eddie thought. Smartly dressed. Long, grey trousers and a white open necked shirt with sun glasses and sensible black shoes on his feet. He drove well. "Hospitals now report overdosing on energy drinks, did you know that?" Eddie continued. "They're mixed with alcohol and users then experience palpitations, seizures, chest pains and high blood pressure. What do they expect? Why would anyone do that?"

Jeffrey shrugged. "The kicks, I suppose."

"Kicks? I get kicks by day dreaming about the fungicidal properties of Krabok seed oil. No, it's human weakness, Jeffrey. It's just not necessary. Just look at the ingredients of these canned and bottled drinks – taurine, sodium benzoate, phenylalanine and guaranine. All are poisons in quantities. The best solution is a

sensible, balanced and nutritious diet and a good night's sleep. A cup of hot, milky Ovaltine at night is all I ever need for seven hours of refreshing sleep."

As Jeffrey drove, Eddie moved on to cosmetics, anti-ageing treatments and food supplements. He was working towards discussing population growth and environmental destruction when they reached the outskirts of Malacca and Jeffrey interrupted him.

"First we're going to the old Min Hin warehouse where we think they bottle counterfeit Red Power. It's run by Russians with Chinese Malays."

"I've already been there," Eddie said. "There's another warehouse close by, yes?"

"A small one, Eddie, but the biggest is in Johor Bahru just across from Singapore. That's where the Indonesian raw materials, palm oil and coconut oil, arrive."

"Remind me about the Chinese man called Ho Chiang," Eddie said.

"Top man along with the Russian ringleaders. He might well be there today. He drives a white van. Ho is also involved with PJ Beauty Supplies in KL, the Vital Cosmetics agent and distributor. It's complicated, Eddie. I'd like to get inside the Min Hin building and the others but they all have twenty-four-hour security. I daren't even risk my manufacturing standards inspector's badge and business card."

Jeffrey laughed. Eddie looked at him in astonishment, amazed at the tricks private investigators get up to.

Approaching the area of the Min Hin building, Eddie began to recognise landmarks. His last visit had been after a tip off from a senior National Parks manager involved in tracking illegal logging. He remembered wondering what he'd do if he found something. He never came to a conclusion of course because, after putting a dent in the white van, he'd left the scene fairly rapidly. It had been long enough though to find piles of Krabok wood bark in an open air shed and grab a few samples. "Don't they see you watching them?" he asked.

"Not from where I park the car."

Close to the Min Hin building was a place that dealt in old tyres. Jeffrey manoeuvred the car into a gap between a high pile of them, stopped and then reached for binoculars on the back seat.

"There you go, Eddie. As good a view as if you were parked right outside and I can already see Ho Chiang's white van. Alongside are motorcycles belonging to staff and three cars belonging to the Russians. I'm so used to this it's monotonous. I've told Mark it's now pointless. I've photographed people coming and going and we think we know who they are. I've photographed deliveries and collections and followed Ho Chiang all the way back to KL to PJ Beauty Supplies. I've followed the Russians to houses where they stay in Malacca and to the airport when they fly to Bangkok or Singapore or Jakarta. In Bangkok Sannan takes over and he follows them. We need a break."

He handed the binoculars to Eddie but Eddie was distracted by a pair of mynah birds squabbling on the roof of the white van. "Mmm," he said after a while, "Nothing much to see."

Jeffrey took the binoculars back and focused on the building once more. "The side door's opening," he said. "And there's Ho, followed by a fork lift truck loaded with boxes." He handed the glasses back to Eddie.

A Chinese in shorts and tee shirt, presumably Ho Chiang, was leading the fork lift truck to the back of the white van. He opened the rear doors and a pallet was pushed inside but it stuck. The fork lift pulled back and the top boxes then fell to the floor, broke open and bottles fell and smashed on the concrete. A big, bare-chested man, red and sunburned, came out, waved his arms and angrily pushed the fork lift driver who had jumped down to clear the mess.

"Trouble," Eddie said to Jeffrey. "Who's the big man?"

Jeffrey took the glasses. "Interesting. I've not seen him for a while. We think that's Sergei Mironov another Russian with other names. If it's him he's also wanted by Singapore police."

"Have you told the police he's here?"

"And ruin our own investigation? Mark is firmly against it at present."

"Don't the Malay police take an interest in Russians working here?"

"That depends," Jeffrey said. "Show them passports, some immigration papers, give them a nod, a wink and an occasional tip for keeping an eye on the place and no problem. No-one ever goes inside the building to check and even if they did they'd probably see nothing unusual. Here they'd probably see a bottling plant, packing, labelling and boxing."

"How exciting," Eddie said taking the binoculars back but he was also scanning the skies and surrounding area looking for wildlife and anything else that grabbed his interest. "Why is a taxi parked there?" he asked.

"A taxi? Where?"

Eddie handed the glasses back. "Beneath the coconut palms."

Jeffrey frowned. "I don't know. There are two men inside doing exactly the same as us. Watching."

"Police?" Eddie asked excitedly.

"In a registered KL taxi?"

Eddie took the glasses back.

The loading finished. Ho Chiang said something to the Russian then got into the van and slammed the door. The fork lift driver produced a brush and started to pick up the smashed boxes and bottles. Then the one Jeffrey had called Sergei looked up, saw the taxi beneath the trees and pointed.

The white van with Ho inside drove off. Mironov, though, walked towards the taxi as if to check who it was, but the taxi drove away before he reached it.

"Ho is probably returning to PJ Beauty Supplies in KL," Jeffrey said, "But I've never seen a taxi here before."

"Let's follow," Eddie said.

It was a good decision. It turned out to be the break Jeffrey and Mark had needed.

CHAPTER 21

At 5pm, Colin Asher's text to Mark Dobson said: "Ritchie called earlier wanting to speak to his accountant. I sent what he needed. He's now free to talk."

Dobson called Ritchie. "Still alive?"

"How and where do you want me to deliver my report?"

Dobson had checked out of the Sabaidee that morning. He never like staying in one place too long for security reasons. "Take a taxi to Soi 6," he told Ritchie. "Look for RT Apartments, a grey, concrete block on the left. Take the lift to room 28 on the second floor. I'll be waiting. Just make sure you're not followed."

Ritchie repeated the directions.

"Now delete this call."

Thirty minutes later Dobson heard a knock on the door of room 28

"What's this place?" Ritchie said. "It's worse than the Sabaidee. And, Jesus, it's so hot in here."

"It's a place Sannan rents," Dobson explained. "That's one of his flip flops. The pile of clothing is his dirty washing. The mattress is badly stained – I suspect with coffee but I can't guarantee it. Also, the AC's not working which is why the fan is on full and the balcony door's open. Oh, and the toilet's blocked. But the WiFi's good. And the 'fridge has a few bottles of water left. Help yourself. Then take a seat on the mattress. This end is the cleanest."

Ritchie fetched himself a bottle of water and placed his back side on the corner of the mattress. Then he pulled off his tee shirt and flapped it at himself.

"You look stressed, Ritchie. Did they give you a hard time?"

"I'm hot, OK? And I just want to listen to the voice recorder," Ritchie said. "If it didn't work then I'll have to go back tomorrow and ask them to repeat everything."

"Where is it?"

"Still in my cap, I hope." He tossed the baseball cap towards Dobson who had chosen to sit cross-legged on the floor in bare feet, shorts and tee shirt. He opened his laptop bag and took a pair of scissors from a side pocket. "Always have a sewing kit with you, Ritchie. Did I already tell you that?"

He cut through a section of Velcro and pulled out what looked like a memory stick with two short wires attached. "There it is – a VX39. Now we plug in the VX39's USB connector, plug that into my laptop and away we go. When did you switch it on?"

"Olga met me in the lobby of the Novotel. I then got taken for another ride in the Toyota Camry with the glasses on so don't ask me where we went. I was allowed out on what looked like a housing estate."

"How long a drive?"

“Half an hour. I was allowed to take the gasses off outside the gate. Olga hit a security button and the gate slid open. It was a tiny front garden with kid’s toys lying around but no sign of kids. I was taken into a sitting room and sat in a big leather sofa, sagging in the middle with my knees around my bloody ears. Olga sat in another chair and switched the TV on - some crazy Thai quiz show, flashing lights and joking that I couldn’t understand. Neither could I see out the window so don’t ask me where I was. She then switched the TV off and Blow Wave came in followed by Yuri from the warehouse. I think they’d been upstairs.”

“You’re still sure Yuri is Yuri Abisov from the photos, Ritchie?”

“Yes, but I told you not to interrupt. It’s so hot in here.”

“Sorry. Carry on.”

“I stood up and switched my cap on as I took it off.”

“Then?”

“That’s it, Mark. Switch on your laptop and you’ll hear something, or maybe you won’t.”

Dobson touched a few keys on the laptop, moved the cursor, clicked and sat back. There was a low hissing sound that lasted just a few seconds so he adjusted the sound volume. Then: “Ah, Black Magic.” the Russian accent said. There were some Russian words directed at others in the room and the sound of Olga and Medinski laughing.

“Yuri’s a racist,” Ritchie said. “I got up and shook hands feeling like the loser in a boxing match.”

“You’ve got to take the rough with the smooth, Ritchie,”

Now it was the other Russian: Dimitri Medinski: “*You sleep good? Good thinking? Make decision? Have headache this morning?*”

“*Only my usual hangover.*” It was the louder voice of Ritchie, aka Micky Parker, given with a reluctant laugh at the end.

Medinski: “*So, you want to buy or you want full partnership?*”

Ritchie: “*I like the partnership idea. I like your plans. They appeal to my sense of scale and ambition. As far as I can see there’s scope for different things and I’m an entrepreneur. Where do we take this?*”

“I sat down at that point,” Ritchie said. “They were walking about trying to look big and important, talking Russian. Yuri was smoking. Olga went out, came back with three bottles of Tiger beer and put them on the table. Now they’re inviting me to join them at the table. I put the cap on the next chair.

Medinski: “*So, big boy - you have assets?*”

Ritchie: “*Sure. I told you already.*”

Medinski: “*How much?*”

Ritchie: “*That’s private.*”

Medinski: “*I like this guy. What currency?*”

Ritchie: “*Pounds sterling.*”

Yuri Abisov (with the sound like blowing cigarette smoke): *“Your assets In UK or offshore, Magic?”*

Ritchie: *“UK.”*

Abisov: *“Pity.”*

Ricky: *“Why a pity?”*

Abisov: *“We expect investment.”*

Ritchie: *“I can still invest but only in something that’ll make a good return. What would I invest in?”*

Abisov: *“Our company. Listen, Magic. You gotta lot to learn.”*

From that point on Mark Dobson listened intently to the recording. Ritchie, stripped to the waist, lay on the floor next to the fan. The recording had worked far better than even Dobson had hoped but the proposal being made by the Russians was complicated. They claimed they had offshore companies, lots of them. They were especially well set up in South East Asia – China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand. They also claimed to have unnamed trading companies in France, Holland, Russia, Romania, Greece, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia. Then came the first revelation. Dobson had specifically encouraged Ritchie to ask one particular question.

Ritchie: *“What about Italy?”*

Abisov: *“You like Italy, Magic?”*

Ritchie: *“I like Italy. I’ve got invitations to Rome any time I’m passing and you told me your star performer was Italian.”*

Medinski: *“Enzo. You saw the warehouse, huh? Enzo is a clever man. Enzo has his own label. Bio-Kal. You can do the same sort of business with an investment.”*

Dobson paused the recording, leaned over and punched Ritchie’s shoulder. “You hear that, Ritchie?”

“Of course,” Ritchie said. “I was there, remember?”

“That has to be Eddie’s Bio-Kal and the ‘Forever Youthful’ brand he gets so worked up about.”

Ricky gave a self-satisfied smile. “Of course. You think Micky Parker’s just a pretty face? If you want breakthroughs on this stalled investigation of yours all you got to do is ask Micky. There’s more. Keep going. Won’t this fan go any faster?”

Dobson pressed play again.

Medinski: *“You put in your investment and we give you product to match. You put in fifty thousand, you get fifty thousand of product.”*

Ritchie: *“That’s not investment. That’s me buying from you. No guarantees I’ll get anything.”*

Mark Dobson nodded at the sweating Ritchie. That was exactly what he should have said at that point. He felt a strange sense of pride. Asher & Asher’s own investment in a failed drama student was already looking like a good one.

On the recording there was a shuffling sound and Russian being spoken, one minute loud and close, the next minute faint. Olga's voice was in the background.

"I think they were testing me, Mark. They thought I was stupid. They then left the room and I sat with the beer. The tapping noise is me, checking the recorder is still switched on. Fast forward it, Mark? About ten minutes." He got up and fetched another bottle of water.

"So, Mr Magic," came Yuri Abisov's: voice, eventually. *"You like Italy? You like the idea of Bio-Kal? Well, Mr Magic, here's our proposal. You can buy shares in our Bio-Kal business, but we need to see - what you say? – the colour of your money."*

Ritchie reply took a while. *"You have a Bio-Kal company in UK?"*

Medinski: *"It is not yet trading. Is that how you say it?"*

Ritchie: *"Yes. What is it called?"*

Medinski: *"Bio-Kal of course, it is what you call a sister of Bio-Kal in Italy, or maybe a brother. So, you would have close friends with Enzo. I have just spoken to Enzo. He is happy."*

Ritchie: *"Would I buy from Italy or from you in Bangkok?"*

Abisov: *"Neither, Magic. From Malaysia."*

Ritchie, still lying on the floor, sat up. "I was getting out of my depth, Mark. I've not dealt with Russian mafia before."

Dobson paused the recording. "It's another of those steep learning curves we spoke about, Ritchie. What happened next?"

"I decided I needed to understand more about the Bio-Kal UK business."

"Good man. What happened?"

"I asked about shareholding."

Dobson pressed play again.

Abisov: *"Shares, Magic? Shares depend on your investment."*

Ritchie: *"If I'm running it I can expect a majority, yes?"*

Abisov: *"I really like this boy. He really is Mr Magic. You want share certificates and all that shit?"*

Ritchie: *"Of course."*

Abisov: *"How much you want to invest?"*

Ritchie: *"A thousand pounds."*

There was more laughter, louder this time, more Russian joking and an obvious request to Olga to bring more beer. The laughter receded but it was Ritchie's voice next. "And you told me there were other opportunities besides selling cosmetics "

Abisov: *"How old are you Magic?"*

Ritchie: *"Twenty-six. What 's that got to do with it?"*

Abisov: *"You're too young, Magic. A thousand pounds? That's only a thousand dollars. I've got more than that in my pocket. How much you got in your handbag, Olga?"*

Olga laughed. *“But he’s a handsome boy. You just gotta do better than a thousand pounds Micky. It’s - what you say? – peanuts.”*

“You think I don’t know how to make money?” Ricky’s voice sounded annoyed, angry. *“You think I don’t know the sort of business you’re in – counterfeiting and copying and stealing brand names and over invoicing and all the other tricks. I’ve been in that fucking business for years. Bio-Kal sounds interesting but just because my supplier let me down two nights ago, you think I can’t find a replacement? I started in business age twelve. When did you start, Yuri?”*

“OK, OK, stay cool,” Medinski interrupted. *“How much cash you got then, Micky?”*

“Why should I tell you? Anyway, I’ve got six companies, but if you want proof then all I gotta do is phone my accountant and he’ll confirm. Is that what you want? But if I can do it why can’t you do the same? I show you mine, you show me yours so I know what I’m getting involved in. If that’s too complicated then show me Enzo’s figures.”

Ritchie leaned over and pressed the pause on the recording. *“That’s when I phoned Mr Thomas on his green phone,”* he said. *“It rang too long but just as I was thinking Asher & Asher was a crap, bullshit company and what a lousy unreliable conman Colin Asher was, he picked up and acted the part very well for someone without proper acting training. I asked him to send me a copy of the Pollitop deposit account and it came on my phone within two minutes. My faith was restored.”*

Mark Dobson smiled. *“I’m so relieved to hear that.”*

Ritchie pressed play again and what followed was Ritchie’s call to Jim Thomas, aka Colin Asher. Then: *“Give me two minutes. Meanwhile, where are Enzo’s Bio-Kal accounts or are they hidden and not so easy to access.”*

“Cool it, cool it,” Medinski’s voice repeated. *“Sit down, sit down. Take it easy, OK? Don’t get crazy. Drink your beer. Cheers. Prost. Zivieli. Sit down. Relax. We’ll wait, OK?”*

There was a clinking of bottles, small talk in Russian. Olga saying something. Then:

“This is it.” It was Ritchie’s voice followed by a pause as he checked his phone message. *“Yes. OK. This shows the credit balance of one of my companies, Pollitip. Feel free. Take a look.”*

He’d first handed the phone to Olga.

Olga: *“Yah, OK.”*

She’d passed the phone back and made a point of touching Ritchie’s hand as she did so. Ritchie passed it to Medinski.

Medinski said, *“467,980. Is that pounds or Euros?”*

“Why do you need to ask? It’s written at the bottom. It’s pounds.”

Medinski passed it to Yuri Abisov: *“OK, OK.”*

Abisov: *“How you earn this?”*

“Mind your own damned business, Yuri. How much did you have in the bank at age twenty-six?”

Medinski again: *“OK. Cool, cool.”*

Ritchie: *“Then tell that guy to stop making it sound like I know nothing OK. I thought he was just the warehouse manager.”*

Olga had laughed. Abisov had scowled. Medinski had smiled: *“OK, OK enough.”*

Ritchie leaned over Dobson and paused the recording again.

“After that there isn’t much,” he said. “They refused to give anything on Bio-Kal so I asked what next. Medinski stood up and said he’d be in touch. He asked how long I’d be in Bangkok. I said I had no plans to leave just yet. I thought maybe I’d messed up and I’d not hear again but then I got invited to join them at the Peacock, tomorrow night. So, what do you think, boss?”

“I think you’re still involved. Well done. You think Medinski likes you?”

“Maybe. Yuri probably wants to kill me but won’t because of Medinski.”

“And Olga?”

“I think Olga fancies me.”

CHAPTER 22

It was past midnight in Kuala Lumpur when Jeffrey called Mark Dobson in Bangkok. Ritchie had returned to the Sabaidee Mansion. Dobson had settled on the floor of the swelteringly hot flat.

“Want a long story?” Jeffrey asked.

“Go ahead. Where are you?”

“KL. With Eddie.”

Jeffrey described the visit to the Min Hin building in Malacca, seeing Ho Chiang’s white van being loaded and then the mysterious taxi parked in the shade. “Ho drove off,” Jeffrey said. “The taxi then started up and followed Ho’s van at a distance. Eddie suggested we follow the taxi. Two hours later we’d followed both Ho’s van and the taxi all the way back to PJ Beauty Supplies in KL. The taxi parked around the corner out of sight and the passenger, a smart-looking guy, went inside. He didn’t stay long but came out, got back in the taxi and was dropped off at the Orange Premier Hotel in Cheras.”

“What time was this?” Dobson asked.

“About nine o’clock. Eddie and I then went into the hotel and talked to him. He turned out to be an Italian with a problem. I’ll let Eddie explain.” He handed Eddie the phone.

“We’ve made a breakthrough in the investigation,” Eddie said excitedly. “The smart man in the taxi turned out to be an Italian called Pascale Perillo. He comes from Naples. Pascale Perillo’s father, Giuseppe ran an old, well-established food business in Naples that had started out in tomato canning. I agree with canning, Mark, Canned foods are long lasting and the cans are recyclable. A while back, Giuseppe bought a local cosmetics and food supplements business from an old school friend, a pharmacist. The school friend subsequently had a stroke. The company was called

Bio-Cal." Eddie paused. "Bio-Cal, Mark. Got that? But Bio-Cal spelled with a C not a K."

"Got it," Dobson replied, rapidly warming to the news.

"The Bio-Cal business was being managed by a guy called Enzo....."

"Say that name again, Eddie."

"Enzo, Enzo Grassi."

"Go on."

"Giuseppe Perillo didn't like the business or Enzo but he'd bought Bio-Cal so what could he do? He knew he'd made a mistake. Then, one day, Enzo asked Giuseppe if he'd meet three visitors from Malaysia who were in the cosmetics business - two Russians and a Chinese." Eddie paused again. "You listening Mark?"

"All ears. Keep going."

"Giuseppe agreed. He picked them up from their hotel and took them for lunch at his usual restaurant near Mount Vesuvius. He didn't like them but they were guests and being kind, patient and polite was all Giuseppe knew. Afterwards, he drove them to Naples airport to catch a flight back to KL and said goodbye. Giuseppe then returned to his Mercedes in the car park to find someone sitting in the back of his car pointing a gun at his head. Giuseppe is lucky to be still alive. He was found lying in a disused industrial site with his Mercedes on fire. He'd been shot and was bleeding to death when someone stopped to investigate black smoke"

Eddie paused once more, sounding and feeling out of breath. Dobson waited.

"But he survived, Mark. According to Pascale, the police get nowhere. The two Russians and Chinese had left the country so they couldn't have shot him. Pascale returned home from New York where he worked in a bank and started his own investigation. That investigation eventually led to him sitting in a taxi outside the Min Hin building that Jeffrey has watched for weeks, that you've watched and even I visited in the past. You still listening, Mark?"

"Keep going, Eddie. "

"Now, it gets even more interesting. Pascale has found another company called Bio-Kal spelled with a K. Bio-Kal with the K is run from Trieste in north-east Italy on the border with Croatia and Slovenia. I, of course, have had correspondence with a Trieste lawyer."

"A lawyer we don't think exists, Eddie."

There was a short silence. "An imposter?" Eddie exclaimed as if all his suspicions were already proven

"Something like that," Dobson replied. "And of course, Trieste has a Free Port with all sorts of import, export, tax and duty advantages," he added.

Eddie said. "Pascale went to Trieste, tracked down Bio-Kal on a trading estate and discovered that the man called Enzo is involved with Russians doing re-packaging and labelling of many different products. Is it a breakthrough, Mark?"

"It's significant," Dobson said "And today we've heard more about Enzo from another source. Where is Pascale now?"

Jeffrey took the phone for a moment. "At the Orange Premier."

"How much did you tell him about our side?"

"Enough for him to feel relieved he's not alone and he wants to help."

"Give me his phone number, tell him I'll phone him tomorrow and ask him if he can fly up to Bangkok to meet me."

At 2am Mark Dobson called Eddie.

"You asleep Eddie?"

"No, I've been thinking about the food canning business. How do they put those ring pulls on that do away with the need for a can opener?"

"Ask Pascale," Dobson said. "He'll know. The reason I'm calling is that Isobel has just called me."

"Couldn't she sleep either?"

"She'd just chaired a Vital board meeting of the Vital board and one of the agenda items caused problems, which you were probably responsible for."

"Me? How?"

"It was an item to review quality control procedures on imported raw materials - a perfectly legitimate topic for a company that claimed top notch quality, sustainability, effectiveness and reliability one might think, but the Chief Executive, Nick Carstairs and the Director of International Operations, Peter Lester apparently thought otherwise. When Isobel's questions got too difficult for Lester to answer, the Quality Assurance Manager, Donald McVie was summoned in to help."

"Ah, Mr McVie," Eddie said. "The gum-chewing Glaswegian with a style of comedy that makes me shudder. When I met him, I felt he'd start blowing gum bubbles at me at any moment. Together with smokers and fast food firms, gum chewers are the main cause of street litter."

Dobson ignored Eddie's own style of comedy and explained that at the Board meeting Isobel had asked McVie if they still used Easy Trading as import agents. McVie had nodded.

"Are we satisfied with Easy Trading?" she'd pursued.

"Yes.

"Do we check the imported raw materials against the quality certificates that accompany the goods, Donald?"

McVie had hesitated and looked at Peter Lester across the table but Lester had kept his head down. With ambiguities and uncertainties increasing, Isobel had made a decision: "With immediate effect, the Quality Assurance Department will repeat tests on all incoming raw materials until further notice. If we do not have the expertise in house then get it or seek the help of the University. Agreed?"

Nick Carstairs, the chief executive, had blustered about the unnecessary expense. Lester had totally objected. The other six directors agreed but an unseemly argument had started across the table between Lester and McVie which Isobel had had to quell. She'd then turned to Nick Carstairs himself. "Nick, you've just

expressed concern about unnecessary costs, so why does Vital Cosmetics need a patent on an extraction method for krabok seed oil?"

It was Carstairs turn to look unprepared and unhappy. "Uh, we agreed to do it to ensure we could maximise our production."

"Who is we?"

"Ah, Peter and I."

"I'm no expert, Nick, so where do 'we' do this extracting?"

"Uh, it's contracted out. To a Malay company. I forget the name. Pete, you know them?" It was as if Carstairs was relying on Lester to provide a convincing reply.

Lester had sniffed and said, unconvincingly, "The Malacca branch of PJ Beauty Supplies."

"And how are they doing?"

"Fine."

"Fine? What about all our other South East Asian agents?"

"I'm due to visit them all soon. Why do you ask?"

"It's a Chairman's right to ask questions and get answers. Peter," Isobel had said. "When is 'soon'?"

"Uh, Three weeks."

"Right. I'd like overseas matters to be put on the agenda for the Board meeting. after you return."

It was quite obvious that Isobel had been applying serious pressure. Something was going to crack.

"So, I've decided to see things for myself, Mark," she'd told Dobson at 2am. "I've decided to fly to Kuala Lumpur. No-one on the Board knows."

Dobson told Eddie.

"Then I'd better delay my plans for a jungle trek with Buss," Eddie said.

For Mark Dobson it was getting crowded. He'd never had so much help on a case in his life. At 6am he called Pascale Perillo in KL to find he'd already booked himself on the first flight to Bangkok and was arriving at 11am. He phoned Colin Asher with an update and then, having decided Sannan's flat was not a good place to stay unless in a dire emergency, headed for the airconditioned comfort of the airport

CHAPTER 23

Pascale Perillo was tall with well-groomed dark hair and wearing a neat navy-blue suit and white shirt. When he emerged into the arrivals hall he was pulling a bag on wheels and carrying a brown brief case. Mark Dobson asked if he'd booked somewhere to stay. He hadn't so they took a taxi to the Suvarnabhumi Suite, a new, medium priced hotel in Lat Krabang, not far from the Peacock. Once Pascale had

checked in they took the lift to the top floor coffee shop and Pascale began on his story.

“My home is in Naples,” he began. “I was born and brought up there but went to the USA to pursue my career in banking. We had a very successful family business but my father admits to a mistake after my mother died, a mistake made during grief. He bought the business called Bio-Cal from an old school friend, a pharmacist called Gabriele. Gabriele subsequently had a stroke. No-one blames Gabriele for what happened, least of all Papa.”

“How old is the family business?”

“It was started by my grandfather. Canned tomatoes and pasta sauces. My father set up Perillo Internazionale to trade in other local foods – fruits, wine, coffee and even espresso machines. It was a success story until Bio-Cal.

“A guy called Enzo Grassi came with the business. Gabriele had left all the day to day running in Enzo’s hands and told Papa to do the same because Enzo was experienced in the business. But my father didn’t like Enzo from day one. He didn’t even like the name Bio-Cal. Enzo liked football, supported Napoli and seemed to spend most of his spare time in the company of those who liked to bet on football results. My father is good at business but he’s a quiet, nature loving man. They were different people.

“And Enzo was always away. The three staff at Bio-Cal always said they did not know where he was. ‘Try again, tomorrow,’ they would say.

“Then Gabriele had his stroke. Wheelchair bound and barely able to speak, Gabriele was no longer the man he used to be and unable to give advice, encouragement or even offer his apologies and regrets that things weren’t working out so well. For the first time in his life, my father was having sleepless nights.

“Papa was still trying to decide what to do the morning Enzo phoned to ask if he would meet two Russians and a Chinese man from Kuala Lumpur and take them for lunch. Enzo said they supplied raw materials for the cosmetics industry and were looking for an Italian partner.”

“What were their names?” Dobson interrupted.

“According to Enzo they were called Vlad, Mikael and Mr Yap. Papa took them to lunch at his favourite restaurant in Somme Vesuviano but they were very – what is the expression? - hard going.

“My father describes them very well. The Russian called Vlad looked like a retired boxer. Mikael was older, thinner and wore a grey suit flecked with silver threads. Both smoked incessantly despite the ‘vietato fumare’ sign on the dashboard of my father’s Mercedes. The Chinese man had untidy black hair and did not smoke but seemed not to understand a word of English. Instead, he sweated, scratched and blew his nose in his hand. I saw someone very similar in Malacca yesterday.”

Dobson pulled out his phone and flicked through photos. “Is this him?”

“Yes,” Pascale said.

“We know him as Ho Chiang,” Dobson said. “What about any of these?”

He flicked through other photos. There was only one that Pascale thought he identified. It was the one Colin Asher had identified as Valeri Pavlyuchenko but he’d

not been seen often and certainly not in Malaysia. The photo had been taken by Sannan in Pattaya. Dobson logged the information and Pascale moved on.

“My father handed out his business card but all he got in return was a piece of card with nothing on except the name of a company called Sara Enterprises and an address in Bangkok. Finally, my father drove them to the airport to catch a flight to Kuala Lumpur. That’s when he was shot.”

Dobson interrupted. “He was lucky to survive, yes?”

Pascale nodded. “His precious Mercedes was found on a rundown industrial estate, a junkie’s hang out, on the outskirts of Naples. Papa was found just a short distance away in a pool of blood with serious bullet wounds. He was in a coma for a month. My brother and I returned to Naples. I came from New York. Adriano was in London.”

“Who did you work for?”

“Capital One but I’ve since resigned.”

“And the police?”

“The police got nowhere. Enzo was interviewed at length but the interesting thing was that he gave the police different names for the three visitors. He said they were called Andre Arshavin and Roman Kolodin and the Chinese was called Lee. That was not what he’d told my father. He also told the police they were from a Thai company called SCAZ.

“The Polizia di Stato carried out all the usual checks and found they’d caught the Malaysian Airlines flight to Kuala Lumpur before my father was shot. So, no-one could accuse the SCAZ men of anything. And Enzo had been in his office in Naples in the morning, had flown to Rome in the afternoon and hadn’t returned to Naples until the next day. The police concluded it was unconnected.”

“How is your father now?”

“Better but he finds it difficult to concentrate. Adriano needed to return to London but I stayed on to look after Papa and the business.”

“And that’s when you went to talk to Enzo?”

Pascale took a deep breath. “Enzo was annoyed when I started asking questions. ‘What position do you hold?’ he asked me. I am here as my father’s representative, I replied. My father is still too weak to deal with matters. Enzo was aggressive but I asked him the names of the two Russians and Chinese and he wanted to know why I needed to know. I said it was because my father couldn’t remember. He seemed pleased he couldn’t remember so I asked again. What were their names? And he said the Russians were Andre Arshavin, Roman Kolodin and Mr Lee from SCAZ – the same as he’d told the police.

“When I told my father, he was very angry. He was adamant the name on the card he was given was Sara Enterprises. Papa then found the card and I still have it.”

“Can I see it?” Dobson asked. Pascale pulled it from his case. It was Sara Enterprises, Sukhumvit, Soi 85, Bangkok – the area of the warehouse that Ritchie had been taken to.

“You know the company?” Pascale asked.

"We might do," Dobson said. "We'll check." As soon as he'd said it though an idea came. "SCAZ," he said. "That name is new to us. I can't place it. Tell me again. It was Enzo who said that the three visitors he called Andre Arshavin, Roman Kolodin and Lee were from a company called SCAZ in Bangkok. Correct?"

Pascale nodded. "I asked Enzo. He was still mad with me. 'SCAZ is SCAZ,' he said as if that was all there was. I checked. It doesn't exist.

"A few weeks ago, when we were talking about the future, Papa told me he wanted to sell Bio-Cal. He was depressed by it. 'Never mind if we lose money, Patsie,' he told me. He calls me Patsie. 'Help me sell it.' So, I asked him about the shares in the business. He held eighty percent, Enzo had twenty percent. I asked him what would have happened if he'd died. He told me his shares would automatically go to next of kin - Antonio and me."

Pascale then took a deep breath.

"I'd got hold of a key to the Bio-Cal building," he said. "One night I went in. Bare in mind that my father had not been inside for almost a year. The store area was empty and dirty but in a filing cabinet in Enzo's office I found a copy of the papers from the time Papa bought the business from Gabriele. There were two documents inside an envelope. One document said that on my father's death Enzo Grassi could buy his share-holding for five thousand Euros.

"I told my father. 'Not true, not true,' he said. He denied it, totally so I phoned our family lawyer. The lawyer told me he had received no instructions on what would happen in the case of my father's death, but the document in the envelope in Enzo's office was prepared by a lawyer in Trieste and bore my father's signature - or something similar."

"Trieste again," Dobson said aloud for his own benefit. "What was the lawyer's name?"

"Studio Legale Marco Senini," Pascale said.

"It doesn't exist," Dobson said.

Pascale was visibly shaken. "I'll need to talk to our family lawyer but this business smells, Mark. "

"Definitely," Dobson agreed.

"Our family lawyer then discovered that Enzo owned at least three other companies with names like Bio-Cal - in Rome, Milan and Trieste. These businesses were called Bio-Kal spelled with a K not with a C. They imported cosmetics labelled Bio-Kal and sold energy drinks, canned green tea and coffee."

"You then flew to Trieste and haven't stopped since," Dobson said and Pascale smiled for the first time.

"Believe me I was so very pleased to meet Jeffrey and the English Professor yesterday. Do you know what's going on yet?"

"We're building a picture and it's bigger than even I imagined. Would you like to eat? Talk some more over lunch?"

"Good idea, I've not eaten since yesterday."

"Nor me. It happens in this business," Mark Dobson replied.

“One thing puzzles me,” Dobson said as they ordered lunch “If Enzo also has a thriving business in Trieste why keep a small, badly run business in Naples with nothing in its warehouse but dust? Why not just resign?”

“The biggest customer base for Bio-Cal was in the south of Italy and Sicily. It would be easy to replace it with Bio-Kal. If my father had found out there might have been a problem. I think the quick and easy solution was to remove my father so that Enzo got the shares and the business. Ruthless but perhaps easier, but it shows the sorts we are dealing with.”

Dobson nodded.

“It’s obvious, they’ll stop at nothing, Mark. Had my father died they’d have got away with it. But why is selling a few little-known, low-cost cosmetics so important?”

“I’m not sure it is that important,” Dobson replied. “I think it’s a front for something else.”

Pascale nodded but neither of them said anything for a while until Mark Dobson pulled up another photo on his phone. “When you were in Malacca,” he said. “Did you see the boxes falling off the pallet?”

“Yes,” Pascale said. “A red liquid.”

“We believe they are bottling a counterfeit energy drink called Red Power inside the building. By co-incidence, the official Taiwanese producer of Red power is another of our clients.” He showed him a photo of a Red Power bottle.

“I saw it in Milan,” Pascale said. “And I’ve also got photos.” He took his own phone and scrolled through. And there it was: Red Power. Rows of bottles sat in a refrigerator in a small supermarket amongst Red Bull and Caribou.

“So, Italy is another country to add to Kenny Tan’s list of places where counterfeit Red Power is sold,” Dobson said. “Would you forward that to me?”

Within seconds it was on Dobson’s phone and in less than a minute in Taiwan.

“I saw other things in Enzo’s office,” Pascal said. “I found a gun wrapped in a cloth, a Beretta 92G and an email from a Russian who signed himself Dimitri “

Pascale pulled a copy from his case. It was written in poor English and used well known words like ‘fucked’, but it was, quite clearly, a threat to Enzo that unless he sorted the Naples company out ‘fucking now’, then Enzo would be ‘fucked 100%’ and ‘removed’ and they’d move packaging and labelling of Bio-Kal to Croatia. Enzo, it seemed, was also under some pressure. The date of the email was a month before the two Russians and Chinese had arrived and Giuseppe was shot.

“Enzo was panicking,” Dobson said.

“That’s why I went to Trieste. I first phoned the Trieste Chamber of Commerce and Industry. Did they know of Bio-Kal? They didn’t so I phoned the Free Port of Trieste office saying I was looking for a packaging company operating in the free zone. I was sent a long list and began working my way through it eliminating ones as I went. I then phoned all those on my short list. I was about to give up when I phoned one called Scatolifici Santo. By then I’d started putting on a foreign accent to sound vague.

"When I phoned Scatolifici Santo I said, 'Buongiorno, I have an order for you,' That's when I hit lucky. I got, 'Pronto', then: 'Ciao, Bio-Kal Treste' then 'Dimitri. Come vanno le cose?' How are you my friend?"

"Nice one," said Dobson.

"I said no more but phoned the Chamber of Commerce again and told them I'd now found the company - Scatolifici Santo."

Dobson interrupted hm. "How do you pronounce Scatolifici Santo?"

Pascale gave it a good Italian pronunciation.

"Could you shorten it to SCATS?"

"Perhaps," Pascale replied thoughtfully.

"So, SCATS could be SCAZ. Do you think Russians might call it SCAZ because they can't say Scatolifici Santo?"

"Maybe."

So, could SCAZ in Bangkok be Sara Enterprises? Dobson parked the idea to return to it as Pascale was still talking.

"To cut a long story, short, Mark," he said, "My taxi driver got lost in the docks area off Riva Alvisè Cadamosto, an industrial estate littered with shipping containers and warehouses with trucks, cans and fork-lifts moving everywhere. We eventually found it hidden amongst trees in Via di Zaule, a rundown area of mostly demolished industrial buildings off Strada Provinciale. By then it was nearly dark but around the back of the building were three containers There was a Mini Market close by and I asked if anyone knew Scatolifici Santo. The old lady behind the till did. "Sì, certamente." A Russian man came into the shop every day for vodka, bread and sausages.

"I went back and that's when I found the rubbish inside a 200-litre drum in one of the containers. I've got some of it here." He lay a small pile of crumpled papers on the table and then produced a plastic bag of small bottles.

They cleared the table and sorted it. It was box labels, shipping labels: 'Palm Oil - Product of Indonesia', plastic bottles, probably rejects, in different shapes with flip lids of the sort used for shampoos and small, pink and white plastic tubs with screw caps and labels which had been put on lopsided or even upside down, labels that said: 'Bio-Kal Natural Moisturiser' and 'Bio-Kal: Hands and Nails. There were shipping documents, technical data sheets for Palm Oil, Coconut Oil and Krabok nut oil for 'customs purposes' and invoices from a company called SCS.

"The number of drums of Palm Oil and Krabok Oil shown on one invoice are huge," Pascale said. "It would be several containers – too big for the warehouse. I was in banking security, Mark. I know false invoicing when I see it. And false invoicing often means only one thing - money laundering."

"And the supplier of the Palm oil and Krabok oil?" Dobson asked, still sifting through the pile.

"SCS (South China Sea) Health, Hong Kong. But in smaller print at the bottom it showed two associate companies: SCS Bangkok, Thailand and SCS, Malaysia."

Dobson shook his head. It was confusing but, in commercial fraud cases, sowing confusion was deliberate.

“And then,” Pascale said. “I found a copy of a fax on SCS Malaysia letter head.”

‘Oreshkin. 835,000 USD. Use SCS Bangkok Bank Singapore A/C.’ It was signed ‘D Medinski’.

“That’s when I decided to fly to Kuala Lumpur,” Pascale said. “Another lead took me to Malacca and then I found myself outside the building where Jeffrey and Eddie saw me. But I was getting confused with names. I started to think some names were the same person. I still do. There were the Russians Enzo called Vlad and Mikael to my father, but were probably Andre Arshavin and Roman Kolodin I was more inclined to believe the latter because Arshavin and Kolodin were the names airport officials checked on passenger lists, but they could be false passports.

“The Russians, Enzo said, were from a company called SCAZ in Bangkok but the card they gave Papa showed Sara Enterprises. The only evidence of SCS were the invoices to Bio-Kal Trieste. Enzo had not mentioned SCS. And then there was the Chinese man my father thought was Mr Yap but Enzo called Mr Lee and I wondered if this was a man called Ho Chiang because, by sheer chance, I met a salesman, Jim Keong, in KL who was trying to see someone from SCS Kuala Lumpur. He said SCS was run by Ho Chiang but he also mentioned another Russian name - Igor. You see why I was losing track?”

Dobson nodded. He fully understood.

“And I still don’t understand about the English professor and Vital Cosmetics,” Pascale concluded.

No, Dobson thought to himself. Let’s not forget Isobel Johnson and Eddie Higgins but he was more and more convinced it was all, somehow, linked to Vital Cosmetics.

CHAPTER 24

He’d only slept for around three hours but when Eddie woke that morning he didn’t immediately know where he was. It took him a moment to realise he was not in his bed in Oxford with his dry, empty cup of Ovaltine next to the alarm clock but in a guest house in Kuala Lumpur.

Mark had joked that he sometimes suffered from it. “It’s a symptom of too much jet travel. It depends how deeply you sleep. The brain sometimes needs a reboot.”

Eddie found this explanation reasonably explicable but for him it hadn’t been just temporary confusion about where he was and why he was there but a feeling that an entire set of long held beliefs and opinions had been reset to original settings while he slept. At 6am nothing felt normal and the most disturbing fact was that he’d been dreaming about Isobel.

They’d been eating coronation chicken sandwiches somewhere and whilst he was eating his as if he’d not eaten for a month and using his hand to wipe away curry spread across his face, Isobel was eating hers demurely with her little finger raised and not a smear of curry to be seen. Next minute they’d been running - hand in

hand, that was the embarrassing part - in pouring rain frantically searching for the door of the Vital Cosmetics factory, a huge edifice that stretched for miles and miles as Isobel kept repeating over and over again. "How terribly depressing, Professor."

Suddenly they'd found the door and he'd pushed in ahead of her in such a discourteous manner that he'd then heard the voice of his mother coming from somewhere saying, "You wait till I get you home, Edward, my son."

Eddie's nocturnal confidence was already at a low ebb and it disappeared completely when he shook his sandals off and hurled them across Isobel's plush office. She picked them up and hurled them back at him. "We've banned sandals. They leave marks on the floor." Then she'd said: "Whoever heard of someone dying from an overdose of skin cream, Professor? It's their choice. If they feel and look better then who are you to tell them they are wrong. You really are the most depressing man I've ever met. How you sleep at night I can't imagine."

That's when he'd woken up in a cold sweat, feeling overwhelmed by guilt.

He sat up, perched on the edge of the bed in his underwear, drank some water from a bottle and looked around. It was a small room – just a bed, a clothes cupboard and a separate toilet and shower. He scratched his head and began to analyse why he felt so guilty. He desperately wanted to apologise to Isobel for his rudeness over her high-heeled shoes, but why the dream and why did he now feel so abnormal?

Was it merely the change of scenery? Was it being away from the daily routine, the university and the laboratory? Was it because he'd been watching the teeming millions through the side window of Bangkok taxis and Jeffrey's car instead of watching the far more explicable things going on under his microscope?

Should he get out more to mix with this grossly overpopulated world? To try to understand why billions of humans with life spans that might stretch beyond eighty years if they were lucky tried to change their appearance with lipsticks, powders, nail varnish and eye paint in pointless attempts to look more appealing and gain affection? To try to understand why, before the grey hair took over and the aches and pains of the ageing process made life so uncomfortable, they dyed their hair and smeared useless creams on their faces in the futile belief that the wrinkles would disappear? He still believed it was wrong that companies called things anti-ageing creams and used false science but it was not entirely their fault if they exploited human weaknesses.

It was the weakness itself that suddenly became clear to him. Believing the unbelievable was like religion. In the case of cosmetics, it was a need to be convinced of the usefulness of the utterly useless.

"I suppose that's true," Eddie said sadly to himself as he walked to the window in his Y-fronts and watched early morning Kuala Lumpur coming to life. "To worship the utterly useless is senseless and utterly worthless, but for some it's utterly priceless."

It was just getting light and he could see motor cycles and buses below. Oxford wasn't like that. At 6am in Blake Street it was usually pitch-black unless it was the middle of June. At 6am on Tuesday mornings the only sound to be heard was the Oxford City Council refuse collection truck edging its way down the middle of the road between parked cars.

So why was he, a Professor of Botany, in a hot and stuffy Malaysian guest house, involved in a complicated investigation involving Russian and Chinese mafia that he

did not remotely understand and with a feeling of guilt weighing heavily on his mind? Why did he suddenly feel homesick for the familiarity of his laboratory?

“Because you phoned Asher & Asher,” a voice in his head said. “You phoned them in a state of mind where you attributed everything unusual to the evil actions of a cosmetics company. In your anger you blamed them for everything - the theft of a bag of Krabok nuts, the copying of computer files and even trying to set fire to the house. Do you really think Vital Cosmetics were so desperate for what you’ve got that they’d break into your house? You’ve still not grown up, Huggy. You’re still behaving like that long-haired idiot of forty-five years ago who got angry about everyone and everything and pointed accusing fingers to everywhere except himself.”

He thought about Mel. “So, what’s the problem with losing a few nuts?” Mel had said in his kindly way.

“I needed a friendly ear, Mel. Someone with a soft shoulder and a dry tissue.”

“Come now, Huggs. Be brave. It’s only nuts. Did you report it?”

“I spoke to a commercial crime investigator.”

“About a bag of bloody nuts?” Mel had yelled.

Mel was right to yell of course. Why get upset over a lost bag of nuts?

And then, to compound his guilt, he remembered telling Mark about his talk to the Vital management team. “I used Krabok nuts as the discussion opener,” he’d said.

“I thought you’d lost your nuts,” Mark had replied.

“Not all of them,” he’d said. “I had a bag in the downstairs loo.”

Now Eddie remembered. That was the bag he’d thought was stolen. He’d planned to take it to the laboratory but stopped off in the loo on his way out of the door and left it there. There had only ever been one bag of nuts.

And Isobel had almost yelled at him when he’d told her he’d trodden in a blob of chewing gum.

“Chewing gum? Outside your front door? It was probably the postman.” And she was probably right because, afterwards, Eddie saw him spitting a blob of gum at next door’s dog that always snarled at him. Guilt compounded Eddie’s guilt. Should he tell Mark? Should he apologise to Isobel not just for the high-heels but the nuts? For everything?

Then there was the small fire on the Welcome mat when he’d been in the bath. The police had said it was probably children. “We’ve had a spate recently,” the policeman had said and yet he’d imagined Peter Lester creeping around with a box of matches.

“There you are,” said the voice in Eddie’s head. “You’re a classic example of a mad professor who’s getting old and forgetful and losing his marbles. You’re too willing to blame others, too focussed on day to day routine and you’ve lived on your own for far too long. You have no-one to share things with and you’ve still not grown out of that teenage obsession of cooking up private vendettas as a way to challenge the way the world actually is. Like it or not you jump to wrong conclusions, convincing yourself you’re the only one who sees the truth and then you shout it from the treetops. That’s extremely unscientific if I may say so.”

Eddie nodded to himself. That was it. No wonder he'd had a nightmare and felt so guilty. At age sixty-two and a half he needed to grow up.

He flung a towel over his shoulder and headed for the shower to try washing away the guilt before bucking up the courage to tell everyone.

But, he didn't get far. He'd not even switched the tap on. It wasn't all his imagination. The illegal logging was fact. It was also a fact that there were problems within Vital Cosmetics. Isobel had admitted that and Mark had been convinced enough to take up the case. Mark also saw links with his Taiwanese case. And then there was the Bio-Kal connection and Italy and Pascale and Peter Lester who was panicking for some reason. And Isobel was also arriving sometime soon. Yes, private vendetta or not, he was not entirely devoid of common sense. Because of him, things were happening so he decided to delay his apologies for a while.

Then Jeffrey called to ask if he wanted an early breakfast.

CHAPTER 25

Pascale and Mark Dobson were continuing their discussion over coffee when Jeffrey called.

"Ho Chiang, boss," he said. "He left PJ Beauty Supplies and Eddie and I followed him. He's just checked in for a flight to Bangkok. Thai Air Asia flight arriving at 15.45."

"That'll fly into Don Mueang, yes?" said Dobson checking his watch.

"Yes. But something else. At around 8am after leaving PJ Beauty Supplies he passed by the Sama Sama Hotel near the airport and met someone. I couldn't get close but I'm sure it was Peter Lester. I've got a photo. Not good but I'm sending it now."

It was undoubtedly the back of Ho Chiang's head - the straggly black hair falling from the small, white bald patch, the grey crumpled trousers and the white tee shirt. He was standing, facing the hotel reception desk and partly concealing another man standing behind. Was it Lester? Mark Dobson wasn't sure but if Jeffrey thought it was, then that was good enough. But, according to Isobel, Lester had been at the Vital Board meeting in Oxford not much more than twenty-four hours before. If it was Lester he must have gone straight to the airport from the Board meeting. Dobson checked his watch, worked things backwards and recalled flights from London to KL. Yes, he concluded, he could have made it, just. So why the urgency? Was Lester panicking? He looked at Pascale. "It looks like our friend Ho Chiang is heading to Bangkok."

He phoned Jeffrey back to ask him to keep tabs on Lester.

"He's gone," Jeffrey said. "He checked in but when Eddie and I arrived back after following Ho to the airport he'd gone."

For a moment, Mark Dobson had forgotten Eddie was there. Eddie knew Lester and vice versa. "Did Eddie see Lester?" he asked Jeffrey.

"No, I made him stay in the car."

“Keep it that way, Jeffrey. Don’t let Eddie get anywhere near Lester.” He then phoned Sannan to meet the Thai Air Asia flight from KL and follow Ho Chiang. Then he turned back to Pascale

“We’ve got action,” he said.

Eddie’s guilt of earlier had gone. It had evaporated like the morning mist mainly because he’d enjoyed his breakfast. He never bothered with breakfast at home in Oxford but today when Jeffrey phoned he’d wanted to get away, forget the nightmare and eat roti canai with dal and curry sauce at one of the Indian roadside stalls. He wanted to mix with the teeming thousands enjoying one of life’s simple pleasures – eating. Their lives, like his, were too short for the depressing opinions of others to spoil fleeting pleasures of the flesh. What’s more, Isobel was on her way and Eddie was actually looking forward to seeing her.

After breakfast they’d driven to PJ Beauty Supplies on a hunch that Ho Chiang would be there. He was. They’d then followed him first to the Sama Sama hotel and then to the airport. They’d phoned Mark in Bangkok and were now back at the hotel, As Eddie waited in the car Jeffrey went to the reception desk.

“Mr Peter Lester,” he said. “I believe he’s staying here.”

“One moment sir, I’ll check. Yes sir, he checked in this morning but his key is here so I think he must be out right now.”

“No problem. Can I leave a message for when he returns?”

“Of course, sir, but weren’t you here earlier? And haven’t I seen you before?”

It was very likely. It wasn’t the first time Jeffrey had followed people and ended up at the Sama. Malaysians had become very security conscious and hotels were under strict instructions to report suspicious activity. Jeffrey needed to be careful but he was prepared. From his wallet, he pulled a glossy, plastic card with an impressive logo and held it up before the desk clerks’ eyes. The man peered at it over his glasses and nodded.

There was no name on the card but, being ex police, Jeffrey had joined the Malaysian Chapter of the Pan Asian Private Security Association. It was usually enough to stop further questions. “I see, sir. No problem. What is the message?”

“I’ve changed my mind. Please call me on this number as soon as Mr Lester returns. I’ll deal with it.” He scribbled a mobile number on the clerk’s pad and left.

“Who shall I ask for, sir?”

“Charlie,” said Jeffrey and left to join Eddie in the car.

“We’ll go to my office,” he told Eddie. His office was less than five minutes away - a room with a desk, a computer and a filing cabinet in a three-storey block that specialised in short term rentals for small businesses and start-ups. He parked, they went inside, took the lift and as soon as he unlocked the office door his phone rang.

“Mr Charlie?”

“Yes.”

“It’s Felix at the Sama Sama. Mr Lester has just returned, sir.”

“Is he in his room?”

“He’s checking out sir,”

“But he only just checked in.”

“Yes, Mr Charlie. He arrived early this morning but is already checking out. It seemed suspicious.”

“Thank you, Felix. We’re concerned about credit card fraud. If he pays by card be sure to check everything.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you for the security advice. I hope to see you again, Mr Charlie, sir.”

They quickly returned to the hotel in time to see Lester climbing into a taxi. Within a few minutes Jeffrey knew exactly where Lester was going. He was heading for Malacca. “Do we follow?” Jeffrey asked Eddie but his phone rang again. It was Mark Dobson to say Isobel had phoned from Dubai and was due in KL that afternoon.

“Decision made,” Jeffrey said. “We’ll stay here and meet her at the airport.”

CHAPTER 26

Ritchie, with time to spare while he waited for his next meeting with Medinski and Co at the Peacock spent the morning at the Sabaidee and then went out for lunch. When Mark Dobson phoned him, he was in a 7-Eleven eating microwaved dim sum and a packet of seaweed and prawn flavoured crisps. He was bored and wanted to talk.

“I forgot to mention the boredom aspect of the job during your training,” Dobson said. “Make the most of it. Tonight, it might be the complete opposite and you’ll need all your wits about you. Now delete this call.”

Ho Chiang arrived sweating and pulling a simple cabin bag on wheels. He looked around the arrivals hall, checked his watch and made for the taxi rank. Sannan followed him out and took an earlier green and yellow taxi, telling the driver to drive away but then stop and wait. He then turned in his seat to watch Ho climb into a two-tone pink taxi. They followed it down the expressway, through heavy, slow-going traffic until it pulled off Sukhumvit Road into a side street. It stopped outside what looked like a hotel.

“Drive past and stop around the corner,” Sannan told the taxi driver. He paid, got out and walked back. This was not an area of Bangkok he knew and what he’d thought was a small hotel was a modern block of apartments for short term rent called Hi-Life Two. He walked past the glass entrance and heard the door lock click shut. Inside, it was like a smart hotel lobby with a screened-off area instead of a reception desk. He was waiting for the lift. The lift arrived, he got in, the door closed and Sannan saw the lights stop on the second floor. Then he phoned Mark Dobson.

“He’s on Sukhumvit Soi 81,” Sannan said. “Second floor of a private apartment block. What now?”

“Just watch it for a while,” Dobson replied.

CHAPTER 27

Little On saw Ritchie before he'd set foot in the Peacock.

“Micky! You come see me?” She was wearing a pink tee shirt over black shorts and ran, smiling to him as if he'd been away at sea for six months. She grabbed his arm and dragged him inside. “You want beer, Micky?”

“Why not?” Ritchie said. “Anyone upstairs?”

“I not see your friends. Om not here, also.”

Ritchie was in jeans, tee shirt, his lightweight nylon jacket and the Converse trainers but, on Dobson's advice, had left the cap behind. “Once lucky, twice risky,” he told him. In all honesty, Dobson knew he'd been adding to the risk factor with that voice recorder. All it needed was a touch of suspicion from one of the Russians and things could have become very nasty, but they'd needed the break and it had worked.

Ritchie looked around. The snooker tables were busy, a football match was on the big screen and just a few drinkers in the downstairs bar talking to girls. He went up the spiral stairs. On was right. It was empty, so he came back down to where On was waiting with a cold bottle of Singha beer and a frosted glass on a tray. “You see? No-one come tonight. Just you and me.”

“We'll wait,” Ritchie said making his way to the long, front bar overlooking the road where the Peacock girls gazed at phones, painted their nails and waved at passers-by. He edged up onto a stool, On wriggled up alongside him and started to pour his beer. Then his phone buzzed. “Micky?” It was Olga's voice.

“Olga, my sweetie. How're you doing?”

“Yah. Where are you?”

“Where you told me to be. The Peacock.”

“Yuri says take a taxi to On Nut sky train station. Go to Tesco Lotus supermarket. Wait by entrance next to station. You understand?”

“On Nut, huh? And Tesco. Perhaps I can do my grocery shipping while I'm there.”

It was that place name again. He'd checked On Nut on a road map. It was on the east side, not too far. “I gotta go,” he said to On.

She looked utterly heartbroken and Ritchie felt like a crack had appeared in his own heart. He put an arm around her shoulders. “Business,” he said, “I'll be back later.”

“Can I come with you?”

The crack grew wider. “Here's a thousand baht. Pay for the beer and keep the change for when I come back.” Then he got up and walked away.

At 8.50pm when Ritchie arrived at On Nut BTS Station, directly linked to a Tesco hypermarket, it was still busy in the usual bustling Bangkok style of eating and shopping. Surrounding the station was a dense residential area of high rise condos,

housing projects and an above average number of expats. Ritchie decided where he thought he should wait and stood, playing with his phone. At just after 9pm, he felt a tap on his elbow. Standing beside him was the Thai forklift truck driver from the warehouse in his grubby tee shirt, baggy trousers and flip flops. The dark brown face looked up at him. "Mr Micky."

"Ah, it's my friend," Ritchie said smiling. He held out his hand but the Thai just walked away. "Come," he said, using the only word he'd learned from Olga and Yuri.

Ritchie was led through the brightly lit Tesco supermarket past shelves of vegetables and groceries then downstairs and out into the semi darkness to a disorganised mass of hundreds of parked motorcycles. Despite that, the man seemed to recognise his own bike. "Please." Ritchie was given a crash helmet, helped to put it on and then the front shield was pulled down and clipped into place. It was as blacked out as the sun glasses Olga had given him. Not only that but within three minutes Ritchie had completed a tour of side streets, weaving between traffic and finally going down a ramp with a concrete hump in the middle that Ritchie distinctly remembered from the last time he was there. The motorcycle stopped, Ritchie got off and the crash helmet was removed. "Come."

They didn't go to the lift but to the white Toyota Camry that was parked just a short distance away. The rear door opened as Ritchie approached and Olga's hand with its blue finger nails emerged. "Come. Sit."

Ritchie found himself in the back seat with Olga as the Toyota's engine purred and the air conditioning wafted cool air. In the front passenger seat was Yuri Abisov. Behind the wheel sat Dimitri Medinski. An interior light was on over the driver's mirror and another in the felt lining above Ritchie's head.

Yuri turned and gave a toothy, twisted smile. "Mr Magic. Good evening."

Medinski touched Abisov's arm as if to warn him. Olga, wearing a tight brown skirt showing six inches of leg above her knees, slid along the leather upholstery towards Ritchie as if she wanted to watch reflections in the mirror but, in doing so, their thighs touched. She patted Ritchie's knee.

"For full partnership we need a letter of credit," Medinski said without any preliminary pleasantries. He was looking at Ritchie in the mirror.

"How much?"

"Three hundred and fifty thousand US dollars."

"What am I buying?"

There was a short pause and Ritchie saw Abisov grin at Medinski as if he had already decided this was a non-starter and a waste of time. "Enough to earn you three million dollars a month." Medinski said quietly.

Ritchie stayed calm. "Calvin Klein don't even make that amount in a month from Euphoria or Eternity. You think I don't know the cosmetics industry, Dimitri?"

Yuri Abisov's shoulders shook as if he was in the front seats at a good comedy show.

"You in business or no, Micky?" Medinski said.

"Sure, I'm in business but don't start underestimating me again, understand? I know my business." Olga patted Ritchie's knee again but further up his leg this time.

“Calm it, OK? We’re not just talking cosmetics,” Medinski said. “We’re talking chemicals that can earn you big, big money.”

“Chemicals? What’re you talking about?”

“Precursors, Micky. Ingredients that go into a recipe to make something that’s in big demand. You starting to understand?”

Ritchie sniffed. Jesus, he thought, what was this? At Mark’s request, he’d researched cosmetics, he’d read up on energy drinks, food supplements and vitamin pills, but what the hell were precursors? What would Mark do or say right now?

“You need to spell it out clearer than that, Dimitri. If I came to you with a proposal you’d want a hell of a lot more. Am I right?”

“Sure, sure. Stay cool, OK? I’m just feeling my way. We got to be careful.”

Medinski patted the top of the steering wheel with a big hairy hand as if listening to some sort of silent music. Olga patted Ritchie’s thigh and Ritchie looked at her. She was smiling with big red lips. The problem was that the white interior light that cast a shadow from above did nothing for her wrinkles or the impenetrable darkness of her cleavage. Ritchie took the opportunity to re-assess her age. In this light she looked sixty and Eddie would have had a field day proving his theories about anti-ageing and wrinkle creams.

Ritchie sniffed again. “Well,” he said, “How long do we sit here while you feel your way, Dimitri? I prefer to be prepared, don’t you Olga?” He gently removed the hand that was working its way up his thigh. Olga didn’t mind. She sniggered just like Yuri had.

“I like this guy,” Yuri said grinning at Medinski. “He’s bratva. He’s got style, like an actor.”

“You said that before,” Medinski replied gruffly but then he slapped the steering wheel one last time. “OK, we’ll go for a short ride.” He slipped the automatic into reverse and the big car moved silently backwards but then stopped. “Get out, Micky. First, we need to protect our business until things are settled. I’m sure you do the same in your business. We need to do some checks.”

Ritchie opened the door and got out. Olga slid out the same door. “Hold arms up.” She frisked him with both hands, around his back beneath his jacket, under his armpits, down his sides, over his thighs and buttocks, down his legs and back up the inside of his leg to his crotch. She lingered at his crotch and looked at him. Then she ran her blue nails down all the seams of his jacket, his tee shirt and jeans as if feeling for hard objects. Then she stood back and looked at him still standing with his legs apart and his hands above his head. Ritchie winked at her. “Satisfied?” he said.

“Where nice hat today?”

“No sun at night,” Ritchie replied.

Medinski’s voice came from inside the car. “Give him the glasses.” Olga bent inside the car to grab her bag and emerged with the glasses. In the process, her skirt rose another six inches so she pulled it down and handed him the dark glasses. “Yah. Very cool, Micky.”

Sannan had been watching the block of apartment suites for over three hours. During that time several people had come and gone. He now knew it took seven seconds for the door to close automatically. He could slip inside if necessary. At 9.45 he phoned Mark Dobson to check if he should stay on watch or go inside "Ho's on the second floor," he reminded Dobson.

"To do what?" Dobson asked but there was no reply. He repeated his question "You there? What would you do if you went inside?" There was still no reply. "Are you there?" The answer came.

"I've just seen a white Toyota Camry go by, Mark.....hold on." Dobson held on.

"The car stopped further along the road. Medinski's got out with a big woman and there's a tall, black guy with them. Would that be Ritchie?"

Sannan and Ritchie had not yet met but the description of the scene fitted perfectly.

"Yes," Dobson confirmed

"They're walking back and going inside."

"Stay where you are," Dobson said. "I'm on my way."

At around the same time in Kuala Lumpur, Isobel emerged from the baggage hall pulling a big case on wheels.

"Eddie," she said when he greeted her. "What a lovely surprise."

"May I take your bag?"

"That's very kind. You're looking very - what shall I say? – tropical."

In khaki shorts, thick grey socks and walking boots set off by uncombed grey hair Eddie looked as if he'd just emerged from the Malaysian jungle. Isobel, on the other hand was wearing a red jacket with gold buttons that reminded Eddie of the uniform worn by guards outside Buckingham Palace. Her lipstick matched the jacket. He introduced her to Jeffrey who was in the same grey trousers and sweaty white shirt he'd been wearing since breakfast. "Our man in Malaysia," Eddie said as if he was the British Ambassador.

Isobel was booked at the Istana Hotel, a concrete and glass skyscraper in the middle of KL Eddie said nothing about her choice but said, "Did you know Peter Lester's here?"

She stopped walking. "Peter? Here? But he was at the board meeting less than forty-eight hours ago."

CHAPTER 28

Mark Dobson caught up with Sannan around 11pm. He'd been perched on a block of concrete in a dark recess beneath the sky-train flyover and alongside an Indian tailor's shop. Beside him were plastic bags, cups and straws from the melted ice and Fanta that had been his only nourishment for more than five hours

“Any movement?” Mark Dobson asked.

“A light on the second floor when Ritchie arrived with the others.”

“And you think that’s Ho’s room?”

Sannan nodded.

“If you want to go, I’ll take over,” Dobson said.

“I like it here. You want a drink?”

By 1am, the number of plastic cups strewn around had doubled. They’d also stopped a sausage and meat balls seller on his way home so there were the remains of their dinner – a plastic bag of wooden barbecue sticks, chili sauce and raw cabbage. There wasn’t room for two on the concrete so they’d taken it in turns. When it was Sannan’s turn to sit Dobson would take a stroll up Sukhumvit Road and back again. He was on his third stroll when his phone rang. “Action,” Sannan said.

Dobson returned in time to see Olga and Ritchie standing inside the brightly lit lobby. Olga was carrying a bag and wearing a skirt that was too short for her build. Ritchie was waving his arms around in the way he did when bullshitting.

“He’s like a boxer who’s losing the match. He’s been walking backwards since they came out of the lift,” Sannan said with a rare touch of Thai humour.

Olga took something from her bag and handed it to Ritchie. He had his back to them but when he turned he was wearing a huge pair of dark glasses like a pop star who wants to be noticed but pretends otherwise. He walked to the door. Olga followed and Dobson was sure she patted his backside. They came out and Olga looked up and down the road holding onto Ritchie’s arm. The white Toyota appeared, stopped and the rear door opened.

“We need to follow them,” Dobson said and without saying anything Sannan disappeared down the dark alleyway. There was a sound of a motorcycle starting and within seconds he weaved his way back along the alley, passed Dobson and drove out into the road. The Toyota was only just moving away. He followed it east along Sukhumvit Road until it pulled up near On Nut station.

Ritchie got out without the dark glasses. The Toyota moved away and he stood watching its red lights disappearing. Skytrain services stopped at midnight but whether Ritchie knew that or not, he was immediately approached by a man on a dirty old Honda motorcycle. “Ritchie?” said the man. “I’m Sannan. Get on.”

Within fifteen minutes Sannan was back with Ritchie clinging on behind him. He drove passed Dobson, went down the alleyway to return the motorcycle to where he’d found it and, a minute later they were all standing around the concrete block seat. “Good evening,” Mark Dobson said to Ritchie.

“Good evening, boss. Sorry to keep you waiting.” He looked normal, a little hot and flushed perhaps, and he gave off a strong smell of stale cigarette smoke and beer. “Have you been spying on me?”

“Only for around six hours but any sign of serious sexual assault and Sannan would have moved in. We nearly moved ten minutes ago.”

“Thanks. She’s a crotch grabber. What now?”

"I'm desperate to know what happened but there's a greater priority," Dobson said. "We've got work to do and the night is young. Take a pew." Ritchie sat. "The warehouse must be close by. You agree?"

Ritchie nodded. "On Nut seems to be the general area."

"Describe to Sannan what you saw when you dropped the dark glasses and had a peek."

"An old building at least three storeys high, an underground car park approached down a winding ramp with a hump in the middle. There's a Kodak Express, a 7 Eleven and a sign that says On Nut Market."

They waited while Sannan played with his phone.

"Too many 7 Elevens but only one with a Kodak Express and On Nut Market close by. I reckon it's around there. He showed them the screen of his phone. Mark Dobson's eyesight was getting worse in the dark but he didn't want Ritchie to know. Nevertheless, the conclusion was an area of older industrial type buildings and low-cost apartment blocks a kilometre or so to the north east of where they were.

"We need two motorcycles," Dobson said. "Can you fix that?"

Sannan nodded towards the alleyway. "There's a good choice down there and no need for keys if you give me a minute or so."

By 3am, after cruising the area, they agreed on a likely building. It was poorly lit and, to the casual observer, deserted but at the rear were signs of activity. There was a wide, metal sliding gate with a slope leading up to a big, metal up-and-over door – a loading bay. Outside the door was a small hut with a light on inside. They cut the lights from the two motorcycles and gathered for another conference by the gates. "How much cash do we have?" Sannan asked. Dobson had ten thousand baht, Ritchie six thousand and Sannan manged three. "OK, it's enough. Wait."

Sannan climbed over the gate and ran to the hut. Whatever happened next took five minutes. He returned to the gate followed by the night watchman who first unlocked the gate and then disappeared into the night.

"How did you do that?" Ritchie asked.

"I showed him a card and told him we were undercover police investigating Russian mafia and if he didn't want to be arrested he should go home and never come back to work here. He was scared. I asked him if there was security inside. He said there are two cameras inside the warehouse but with a switch in the hut. He switched it off. I then gave him fifteen thousand baht. That's more than he earns in two months. He said there's no-one else but him here at night but two Thais work in the warehouse during the day. I've got both their names and phone numbers. Leave then to me. They won't be turning up for work tomorrow."

Security solved they returned to the front, left the motorcycles in the underground car park and took the lift to the third floor. Using the light from Dobson's phone they made their way along the corridor, hit the cooler air and then the door at the end with the security lock. Ritchie pressed the right buttons from memory and pushed the door open to a strong smell of stale cigarettes. "That's Yuri's office," he said turning on a bank of light switches. Everything lit up.

Sannan checked Yuri's office while Ritchie and Dobson moved into the warehouse. They photographed as much as they could - entire rows of bottles of Red Power, unlabelled plastic bottles of green, red and yellow shampoos, unlabelled hand creams, body lotions and thousands of small, unmarked bottles of red, black and white capsules.

Sannan joined them. "I've got the laptop's IP address but do you want to take the machine itself?"

"Leave it. If they detect a break-in Ritchie could be the first suspect."

They continued the warehouse search - small, pink and white plastic tubs with screw caps and labels that said: 'Bio-Kal Natural Moisturiser' and 'Bio-Kal: Hands and Nails, pallets piled high with boxes that simply said: 'Malaysian Tea', 'Green Tea', and 'Super Blend Coffee'. They pulled samples out and stuffed them in their shirts and at 4.30am shared a taxi back to Lat Krabang.

"I've got a lot to tell you," Ritchie said enthusiastically for the umpteenth time.

"So, you want to tell me everything tonight or wait till the morning?"

"It's morning now. But I reckon the warehouse is Sara Enterprises," he said.

"Was the name SCAZ mentioned?" Dobson asked

"SCAZ? No, but they want me to raise a letter of credit in the name of Scatto something."

"Scatolifici Santo?"

"That's it. How did you know?"

"Feedback from Pascale Perillo," Mark Dobson said. "You've got a lot to tell me but I've got a lot to tell you."

"And there's me thinking you'd taken the day off."

CHAPTER 29

"It'll be a fact-finding mission," Isobel had told Eddie and Jeffrey the night before. "I need to see for myself what is going on at PJ Beauty Supplies. Eddie, you will join me as technical adviser. Meet me at 9am."

Eddie wasn't sure that he liked being told what to do but next morning he found her sitting in the lobby of the Istana Hotel talking on her phone. She was wearing a black trouser suit, a white shirt and a red silk scarf around her neck and sat very upright with her legs crossed, unconsciously twitching her feet. Her shoes, today, were shiny black ones with a slightly lower heel than before. A slim, black document case stood on the carpet at her side. But if she'd expected her technical adviser to be wearing a suit for her fact-finding mission she was, of course, disappointed. Eddie didn't own a suit. He had, however, given the subject of dress some consideration and donned the pair of long, grey trousers he'd worn on the flight and matched it with his grey shirt and walking boots.

Eddie watched her as she finally snapped her phone shut and glanced towards a small group of Malaysian businessmen in suits who had been watching her. They looked away when she spotted Eddie, got up and walked over. "Good morning, Eddie. I've just fixed our meeting with PJ Beauty Supplies." She glanced at his boots but held out her hand for him to shake.

It was small and soft and when Eddie checked his own hand he could smell perfume. "Peter Lester has just visited them, of course," he reminded her.

"And headed to Malacca on yet more unknown business I understand. Shall we take a taxi?"

"Do we not need to discuss tactics? A strategy?" Eddie asked.

"No, no. Leave it to me. You'll soon know when it's time for you to say something."

"And Mr Ho is in Bangkok of course," Eddie reminded her wondering who she was planning to see. He was still feeling like a bag carrier.

"Yes, we're very fortunate. We couldn't have timed it better."

"And you've not been there before, of course."

"No, never."

"And there might be the odd Russian there."

It was supposed to be a warning of the order of preparing for a gun fight, but it didn't seem to faze her. "Let's just see how things turn out, shall we?"

The PJ Beauty Supplies building was in a side street off one of the industrial parks, a two-storey structure with square, barred windows at the front and a long, single storey warehouse tagged on behind. Visitors were directed by a sign pointing to a door on the left side. Eddie followed Isobel and they found themselves in a small, bare room with a cheap wooden table and a telephone. 'Press 0 for attention'.it said, so Isobel pressed. A female voice came through a small speaker hanging on the wall. "Yes?"

Eddie's day then took an unexpected turn.

"Hello," Isobel said in her clear, spring-like English voice. "It's Josephine from My Beau Cosmetics, London. I phoned earlier. I understand Mr Ho is away but I'm hoping to speak to your office manager Bella Tong."

Eddie looked at Isobel but all she did was put a red-tipped finger to her bright red lips and pouted. The reply came through the speaker, a pleasant Chinese-Malay-Singaporean type accent. "Ah yes, lah, it's Bella speaking. One moment please."

Bella appeared - a small middle-aged Chinese lady with short black hair, a simple smile, a white shirt and a faded blue suit that was not a patch on Isobel's. There were female type greetings, weak handshakes, smiles and nods and then it was Eddie's turn.

"And this is our technical adviser, Mr Higginbottom," Isobel said.

"Pleased to meet you." Bella whispered shyly while checking Eddie out from his bald head to his walking boots.

Bella's small office was filled by three of them. There was nowhere to sit. A fan supplemented the air conditioning by blowing air at stacks of files. There was a shelf

filled to capacity, a metal filing cabinet, two mobile phones, a computer, a printer and cables lying around. Eddie felt homesick for his own office.

Isobel began. "As I mentioned, Bella – may I call you Bella? – we're looking for a new source of raw materials for our range of cosmetics – essential oils, creams, that sort of thing. PJ Beauty Supplies was recommended by friends of ours."

"Ah," Bella shuffled papers as if trying to make space on her desk for one of them to sit. "You really need to speak to Mr Ho but he is away."

"Yes, you told me, but all we need is a quick summary of what it is you do and perhaps a list of products you could sell us. Nothing too complicated. The sort of things you supply to our friends Vital Cosmetics."

Bella brightened up. "Ah, yes. We know Vital. They are from Oxford, England. Their buyer Mr Lester was here yesterday. He left with Mr Ho, but you really must talk to Mr Ho."

To Eddie the message was clear. They should have made the arrangement to visit PJ Cosmetics weeks ago but Isobel was not deterred. "What a pity. And we came all this way. Is there no-one else we could talk to?"

"I am not sure. Perhaps. Maybe I can contact Mr Ho or maybe Mrs Olga. Mrs Olga is responsible for the exports, but she is also in Bangkok. We do a lot of business with Russia and Bangkok. I will try. Please wait."

Eddie and Isobel listened and tried smiling at one another as Bella went on a twenty-minute run around trying to speak to someone in Bangkok. Eventually, someone, somewhere, and Eddie suspected it was Olga, gave Bella permission but there had been a lot of questions about who My Beau Cosmetics were, the names of the visitors and where they had come from. Bella looked flustered throughout but finally she put the phone down. "Yes, it is OK. I can give you some information."

"And while you and I discuss products, could Mr Higginbottom take a quick look around your warehouse?" Isobel asked. That threw Bella once more. "Just a quick look," Isobel added with a broad smile. Bella succumbed.

Eddie was led through the other door and found himself in a stiflingly hot warehouse with racks of boxes, cartons, cans and drums identical to ones he'd seen in Vital's warehouse a year ago. An elderly Chinese man with beads of sweat dripping from his forehead emerged and shuffled towards him. "This is Jimmy, our warehouse manager." Bella said and quickly returned to her office.

Eddie shook Jimmy's sweaty hand and was greeted with a smile and a mouth of missing teeth and then given a slow, conducted tour of the warehouse. "Do you have any Vital Cosmetics products here, Jimmy?"

Jimmy scratched his head as if Vital was not something he thought about too often. "Ah, yes, lah," and he led the way to a rack of "Vital Hand Lotion with Aloe Vera."

"Is that it?" Eddie asked. "No more?"

"Ah, no, lah. This old stock. New stock mostly there." He pointed to the corner, shuffled over in his flip flops and Eddie followed.

"Where do these come from?" Eddie asked.

"Malacca, lah. Everything come from Malacca."

“And these?” Eddie pointed to rows of metal cans with screw caps of the sort used for solvents, varnishes and paint strippers. They were unmarked but he picked one up. It was liquid inside.

“Ah, yes, lah. Same. Fresh every day.”

Jimmy seemed unconcerned so Eddie unscrewed a lid, sniffed, dipped his finger in and tasted it. He knew exactly what it was so he screwed the lid back on. “Why no labels, Jimmy?”

Jimmy shrugged. “Mr Ho say no need,” he said.

“And the bigger drums are oils, yes?”

“Yes, lah. Palm oil, coconut oil, krabok oil. You know krabok tree, Mr Higgyblossom? Famous Malaysian tree. My old mama uses oil from krabok nut. Good for many thing.”

“The krabok oil is for Vital Cosmetics, Jimmy?”

“Ah yes, lah. Mr Lester checked those ones yesterday. He gone Malacca now.”

“Very interesting, Jimmy. I must congratulate you on a very well organised warehouse.”

“Thank you, Mr Higgyblossom, sah. My pleasure sah.” He bowed.

“Just one question. When the drums are collected from here do you also supply paperwork, such as certificates?”

“Sustifficates, sah? Bella do paper, lah.”

“I see. Well, thank you, Jimmy,” Eddie said readying himself to depart. “Mr Ho must be very happy with your conscientiousness, commitment and concerns for cleanliness.”

Jimmy gave a toothy smile. “Mr Ho. My conscious. Always away.”

Yes, Eddie thought. Ho was also playing on his conscience. “A busy man,” he said.

They walked slowly back through the warehouse. “Everyone busybody, Mr Higgy. And Mr Sergei and Mrs Olga top busybodies.”

“The Russians?”

“Oh yes, sah. Russian boss supply and buy everything, Mr Higgy. Velly strong, lah.”

Eddie liked Jimmy. He was Eddie’s age. He was mostly bald, did what he was told, had no idea what was going on, wasn’t bothered by the heat despite the thermometer saying 42C when Eddie tapped it and wore shorts and flip flops with socks. When he returned to the office, Isobel was sitting on the edge of Bella’s desk. They were smiling at each other. They even smiled at Eddie. “Useful meeting, Mr Higginbottom?” Isobel asked.

“Very. Just one question. Jimmy said you deal with paperwork that accompanies export shipments,” Eddie said to Bella.

“We’ve already discussed documentation,” Isobel said. “I’ll tell you later.”

“And quality certificates?”

Isobel looked at Bella. “Yes, lah, I keep quality certificates here,” Bella said pointing to her filing cabinet. “I attach one to each of the invoices.”

"They are identical? Pre-prepared?" Eddie asked trying to conceal his astonishment.

"Oh yes. Would you like to see one?"

Bella ordered a taxi for their return to the Istana. Isobel and Eddie didn't speak but she sat with her legs crossed and smiled. Once they arrived back she said, "Let's talk over lunch, Eddie," and led the way to the restaurant.

"I'm not sure they do anything with coronation chicken," she said as they settled into a corner table. "I see they do a nice soft-shell crab cooked in butter, ginger, curry leaves, chopped chillies, garlic, desiccated coconut and eggs. How do you fancy that?"

"Might be worth a try," Eddie said. "Should I take my boots off in here?"

Isobel smiled. "I think you can relax. I don't see any notices regarding footwear." She put the menu down. "So, tell me, what do you think? What did you find in the warehouse?"

"Almost no finished products for Vital Cosmetics," Eddie said. "But plenty of cans and drums."

"That figures," she said. "We import raw materials through Easy Trading, of course, but when I checked our export figures I found they are not broken down by country. When I demanded a breakdown, it was clear that our German and French sales made things look healthy but Far East sales, where Lester spends half his time, were negligible."

The waiter came to take their order and she ordered the crab. "Do you drink wine?" she asked.

"Only Robinson's Barley water or Ribena," Eddie said.

She smiled again and asked, but the waiter look puzzled and shook his head. "Still water for two," she said and turned to Eddie again. "It's an interesting invoicing system. Almost everything is invoiced through a company called SCS, South China Sea Health, Hong Kong. In smaller print at the bottom it shows two other companies: SCS Bangkok and SCS, Kuala Lumpur."

Eddie nodded.

"And only two staff?" Isobel said. "It's impossible."

"Mark calls it a front," Eddie said. "A front for other business."

Isobel nodded resignedly. "That seems increasingly likely. But what? How was your visit to the warehouse?"

"Jimmy has no idea what's going on," Eddie said. He leaned towards her across the table. Her hands were lying together between the cutlery and she was slowly rotating her gold ring. "He's ideally qualified to manage the warehouse of a company in the narcotics business," he added.

Isobel's expression changed, her mouth opened slightly and she stopped twirling the ring. She leaned forward, her red lips forming a perfectly round hole. "You found something?"

“Around a hundred cans of something that smells like ephedrine and tastes like ephedrine. It’s a vital ingredient of methamphetamine.”

Isobel sat back and blew a little puff of air through her red lips. “Oh my.”

“And then there was this,” Eddie handed a small glass bottle containing a white powder across the table

“What is it?” she said.

“I found it lying on the floor between some metal cans. Unseen by Jimmy, I stuck it in my pocket. It’s probably something we shouldn’t pass over the lunch table. Please don’t open it.”

“Oh, my goodness.”

Eddie nodded. “I’m a biologist, Isobel, not a pharmacologist. We need to get it tested somehow but I don’t want to wander into any pharmacology lab in KL. Quite rightly, they would want to know where we got it and the police would be notified. Mark is against that at present because it would blow the whole investigation.

“The question is where does it all come from and where is it all going? Drugs are nearly always hidden for shipment. Boxes of cosmetics or drums marked ‘coconut oil’ or ‘krabok nut oil’ would be good and, as Mark keeps saying, once you have the organisation set up so it’s difficult to unwind you can ship anything anywhere and get away with it. If anyone ever gets caught it’ll be innocent fellows like Jimmy.”

CHAPTER 30

It had been after 5am when Mark Dobson arrived back at the hotel.

They’d returned the two motorcycles to where Sannan had taken them, found a taxi, dropped Sannan off at the Lat Krabang flat, Ritchie at the Sabaidee and Mark Dobson at the Survanabhumi.

He emailed Colin Asher with the ISP address of the warehouse computer, then called Pascale in his room upstairs to say they’d found Bio-Kal products in the warehouse. Pascale wanted to know what more he could do to help. “Hang around for a while,” Dobson said.

Colin Asher then texted ‘Ritchie’s available’ so he called Ritchie and they arranged to meet at the usual coffee shop at eleven. “If Olga turns up here at the Sabaidee what shall I do?” Ritchie asked.

“Does she know where you’re staying?”

“I had to tell her.”

“Then I suppose it depends what she wants,” Dobson said. “Use your initiative. If you think you’re about to lose your honour tell her the air conditioning in your room is broken and it’s too hot for energetic sports”

“I wish I was old and experienced like you, Mark.”

Dobson called Asher again to tell him to contact Kenneth Tan in Taipei. "Tell him we've cracked the source of his problem, that it's Russian mafia and wrapped up in money laundering and other rackets and we need to tread carefully. Tell him I'll be in touch soon."

That was the best way to deal with Tan for the time being. Otherwise he'd be flying down to Bangkok, running to the Taiwanese Embassy and involving the Thai police. They weren't ready for that yet.

He then left for the coffee shop. Ritchie was already there. Olga hadn't called. If she had his ready-made excuse was that he was out shopping for his London girlfriend, a six-foot Kenyan model and Olympic marathon runner. Dobson called the excuse 'pathetic'. Then: "So, it's counterfeiting, drug dealing and other crimes mixed with high end money-laundering, Ritchie," he said, "You're seen as a useful addition to the team - an enabler. Now, tell me what happened last night."

Ritchie started with his arrival at the apartment and being left sitting on a sofa.

"All they did was wander between the kitchen and the living room drinking beer, smoking and talking in Russian. If there's one thing I hate, it's people discussing me in foreign lingo. I was left in the living room, offered beer every ten minutes and given a KFC Zinger burger. He never left the kitchen because he only speaks to them in English and they didn't want me to overhear. At one point I got up, went to the kitchen and told them I'd had enough and was leaving. 'Fucking enough was fucking enough,' I said. But the door was locked and I was told to sit down. Cool it. Big things were being discussed. Stay calm. Big investments and big money required big decisions Olga tried stroking my arse as if I needed that sort of distraction. If she led on me I'd die of asphyxiation. And Yuri was drunk and even the KFC stank of his cigarettes."

Mark Dobson put Ritchie's angry outburst down to lack of sleep. Kung, the young waiter seemed to enjoy watching Ritchie's animated anger but his English was only about as good as his menu so Dobson let him spit it out for a while until he took a breath and started on detail.

"They say they want me to set up Bio-Kal Ltd, UK, listing Bio-Kal Italy as a partner to trade in cosmetics and energy drinks. That's the cover but I'm not sure. They argue too much in Russian. They said they'll issue a pro-forma invoice in the name of the SCATTO company...."

"Which we suspect is Scatolifici Santo," Dobson butted in. Ritchie nodded.

"The pro-forma will show very low prices for a container load which I pay for with a letter of credit. I sell some of the stuff with real invoices to keep the books looking legit and sell the rest of the stuff for cash. They said they've already got contacts looking to buy. Cash will be split and somehow paid into offshore trading accounts which they say they'll add my name to." He paused. "You understand how all this operates?"

"Yes", Dobson said which was a lot easier than trying to list the ways it could be done and the pitfalls.

"And it's not just buying and selling counterfeit cosmetics but other business. Inter-trading Medinski called it. I think it means we invoice each other for nothing, receive cash and generally move the cash around. Understand, Mark?"

“Yes.”

“Good. Then perhaps you can also explain about Maxim Novak, because that’s the guy I’m to liaise with in London.”

“Maxim Novak?” Dobson repeated “They actually spoke his name?”

Ritchie nodded. “Apparently I’m to work with a man wanted by Interpol? Why?”

“Because they trust you. Are you seeing them again? “

“I think they expect me to return to London to start work, but Olga’s phoning me or maybe visiting me. I’m more worried about her turning up than meeting Maxim Novak.”

“You’re a big boy.”

“But not as big as Olga.”

“Yeh, right. I saw her. Where’s Ho?”

“Going back to KL today. He came here just to see me. That makes me feel so important.”

Dobson called Jeffrey in KL to tell him. “But what about Peter Lester?” Jeffrey asked. “What do we do about him?”

“Keep on his heels. Pascale will fly back and join you.”

Dobson then stuffed his phone away and the café’s young waiter, Kung, sensed an opportunity to ask if they’d like to order lunch but Dobson ordered iced tea instead and Kung shuffled away disappointed. “Don’t tell, Kung,” he said, “but I’ve brought some iced tea with me. It’s interesting.”

The bottle had come from one of the warehouse boxes that said, ‘Bio-Kal Iced Green Tea’. It contained a clear, yellowish liquid. He unscrewed the lid. “Tell me if that smells like green tea?”

Ritchie put it to his nose and shook his head. “It’s not green tea. What is it?”

“I’m not sure but I know someone who could tell us where to get it checked.”

“Eddie?”

Dobson nodded and then his phone rang again. It was Isobel in the Istana in KL with a longer tale of more drugs – ephedrine, according to Eddie.

“Where can we get tests done that won’t involve the police?” Dobson asked Eddie.

“My friend, Buss, “Eddie replied. “And I found a bottle with some white powder,” he added before ringing off.

Ritchie’s phone then rang. He checked the number. “It’s bloody Olga. What shall I say?”

Dobson beckoned him to decide for himself.

“Hey, Olga sweetie. Where you been?” He looked at Mark Dobson and drew a line with his finger from his eye to the corner of his mouth as if about to burst into tears. “I’m not there, sweetie. I waited and waited and then decided to do some shopping before I go back.....Yeh. I could be back by then, I suppose.” He drew a finger down from the other eye and looked distraught. “Peacock? Yeh, why not? See you later my.....” She was gone. “Bloody hell.”

“Duty calls, Ritchie. The Peacock again? What about little On?”

“Yeah, that’s what I was thinking. Perhaps I should really do some shopping.”

CHAPTER 31

The crab lunch had made a pleasant change but Eddie wasn’t so struck on it that he’d try it again. “Shall we take tea in the lounge?” Isobel said. “I must first pop to the ladies. Why don’t you find a quiet corner?”

She grabbed her bag, stood up and walked out watched by the waiter and guests at other tables but Eddie forgot to stand because his mind was elsewhere. He watched her go and only then stood up and followed her out. He found a quiet corner with a sofa and a low table, crossed his legs and looked at the ceiling. It was that dream, the nightmare, that was still disturbing him. Even when trying to crack the crab’s obstinate exoskeleton he had been reminded of it because the curry had looked like coronation chicken.

He desperately wanted to apologise for his outspoken rudeness to Isobel but earlier had decided to delay until they’d finished the investigation. But how long would that take? He took a deep breath. As soon as the Isobel returned he’d summon the courage and apologise.

He watched her walking back across the foyer, smart, upright, fresh, clean-looking as if she might have spent the last ten minutes repairing invisible flaws in her already pristine appearance. He remembered to stand up and pull out her chair, but it was wasted. “No need, Eddie. Please sit down. Did you order tea?”

Eddie had forgotten. “Sorry.”

“No problem. I’ll organise it. Earl Grey?”

And then Eddie also forgot his decision to apologise for his rudeness. It was the mention of Earl Grey that did it. Charles Grey, the second Earl Grey. Whig politician. A Lord. Reform Bill, that was it. Family man. Eddie had read the book.

“Ah, yes. Early Grey,” he said much to Isobel’s surprise. “We have a Zoology Professor at Oxford who drinks nothing less. He swears by it and we once discussed it at great length. Chinese tea scented with bergamot oil and lemon peel. I argued it’s just an unnecessary luxury, marketed for its superiority. Even the link to Earl Grey himself is doubtful. The story goes he saved the son of a Chinese tea blender from drowning and in gratitude for this great deed, the blender passed on this special recipe. In reality, of course, it’s highly unlikely that Earl Grey ever visited China, much less saved a drowning boy. It’s not too dissimilar to cosmetics marketing come to think of it.”

He watched the lounge waiter lay out a tray with two cups, two saucers and a teapot with tea bags hanging on stings. It should surely have been loose leaves and a tea strainer, Eddie thought, but Isobel thanked the man and turned to Eddie.

“I do believe you take great delight in being provocative, Eddie. Is there nothing in this world that you find positive or pleasing?”

“Many things,” Eddie replied. He was sitting with his legs crossed swinging a walking boot dangerously close to the tea tray. Isobel moved the tray. “Advances in medical science, materials science, molecular genetics, bio-engineering.....”

“All of which, one would think, have negative impacts of one sort or another,” Isobel posed.

“Indeed,” Eddie replied, “Most of the advances are initiated by a need to meet the demands of an over indulged population and then immediately negated by the effects of unsustainable population growth - destruction of the environment, civil conflict, underemployment, increasing shortages of basic commodities, energy, food, water.....”

“Shall I pour?”

“They forgot the milk.”

“Earl Grey is better without milk Eddie. Try it. You might actually enjoy it.”

Eddie grabbed his cup, sipped and swallowed. “I see what you mean,” he said “The flavour is enhanced somewhat. The fat content of the milk must override the taste buds.” He tried another mouthful but didn’t see Isobel smiling.

Eddie sat back, now with his booted left foot resting on his right knee. “So, what will you do about Peter Lester?” he said. “Are any of the other directors involved in this obvious criminality? Questions are mounting, Isobel.”

“I intend to gather evidence and then decide. That was Mark’s suggestion and I’m sure you’d approve

“Yes. And the problems of the effectiveness of the products you sell? Evidence of non-testing on animals? The EU may have banned testing on animals in the EU but they do nothing to stop imported ingredients.”

“You pose too many tricky questions, Eddie. In a way, I’m sorry to have met you.” She smiled awkwardly. “But you are right, of course. I’m relatively new to this business and I’m in a moral dilemma.”

“Then make things easier on yourself,” Eddie replied. “Continue to meet the insatiable demand but gradually introduce simpler, safer products and ingredients that you fully understand the chemistry and toxicology of and don’t exaggerate claims. Be positive but don’t pull the wool over people’s eyes. Stop trying to be scientifically clever. Try a new strategy. Create and market products that, in a subtle way, denounce the unethical competition and change perceptions. You are in the so-called beauty business so redefine beauty.

“Your business encourages and exploits vanity and the human obsession with physical appearance, Isobel, so re-define your corporate image, your destiny, your products. Create a new vision of what it means to be noticed and to be attractive to others and then market it as something unique to Vital.”

Isobel sipped her tea and nodded. “An interesting idea but a huge challenge and I’m not sure it’s possible.”

“Then start from the basics. Be more scientific. Do what the others don’t do. Ask yourself whether looking attractive, beautiful or younger is only achievable by applying layers of expensive cosmetics?”

“Another interesting notion, Eddie, but cosmetics are the quick and easy solution.”

“Like using Polyfilla to fill cracks in worn brickwork? Like a fresh coat of paint on the living room wall? Like covering it with wallpaper? The marks, the cracks and the flaws still exist but they’re hidden.”

“That’s the way humans are, Eddie.”

“It’s deceit. Women use make-up during the day to deceive others and then live in dread of being seen next morning without it.”

“True, Eddie. You can include me in that.”

“And just in case, they’ll even use something at night because the advertising says it’s night firming moisturiser. What on earth is night firming?”

“I use one like that.”

“I bet it’s expensive but don’t tell me the name because I’m an expert. However, it’s likely to be one sold by the manufacturer that claims it won’t cause an allergic reaction or dermatitis so you feel relaxed enough about spreading on as much as you can every night and buy another bottle every week. The manufacturer making such claims is the one that has shaved the fur off dozens of white mice and fluffy rabbits, rubbed it into their skin and checked for inflammation. The only thing they can legitimately claim is that it won’t cause an allergic reaction in white mice and rabbits. But they won’t say that will they because half their vanity obsessed buyers will stop buying it.”

“That could well be the one I use, Eddie.”

“And does your night-firming moisturiser carry out its firming work only when the moon and stars are out?”

“I don’t know but that’s what we like to think”

Eddie shook his head. “I couldn’t live like that,” he said. “What you look like should be what you really are. Anything else is dishonesty and self-deception. But deception is the name of the game you’re in, isn’t it, Isobel? Do you want more examples of blatant deception by your industry?”

Isobel sighed and sipped her tea. “Tell me” she said. “No time like the present.”

Eddie thought for a moment about letters and emails he’d written, many that still awaited replies because he’d asked too many difficult questions.

“So-called Matrikines are a good example,” he said. “Are you familiar with those? Products like Matrikal 5000. Promoted as if it was a breakthrough in medical science, a magical pharmaceutical discovery and the key to anti-ageing?”

Isobel nodded. “Go on.”

“There have been no studies of possible side effects of using Matrikal 5000 in topical cosmetic products. If it was classed as a pharmaceutical such tests would be mandatory. Due to the functional similarities between Matrikal 5000 and other compounds that so say promote collagen production and reduce wrinkles there is a distinct possibility that Matrikal 5000 has similar side effects to other high-risk collagen-growth ingredients. Shall I go on?”

“Even worse in my opinion is that all studies concerning Matrikal 5000 were funded by and conducted in-house by the manufacturer. If it was a pharmaceutical company supplying a national health service and the product was found not to work there

would be a public outcry. Matrikal 5000 is touted as having been subjected to thorough clinical testing and yet none of those studies were conducted by third-party research teams. Again, this would not be allowed if it was a pharmaceutical.”

“It’s too easy to be convinced,” Isobel nodded.

“Users are deliberately seduced by pseudoscience because the profits are huge,” Eddie said.

Isobel was silent for a while. “I myself use a cream said to contain Matrikal,” she admitted.

Eddie lifted his half-moon spectacles onto his nose and looked at her as if she was some sort of biological specimen. Whatever it was she was using, her face looked smooth, healthy and blemish free so he did what he often did and tried to imagine her without the covering. For some reason, he couldn’t imagine it being any less attractive. He couldn’t tell her that, of course, but he sensed Isobel was waiting for his reaction and at last he found some words. “You don’t need to use make-up, Isobel,” he said before adding, “All it does is conceal your natural beauty.”

There was a pause. “That’s very nice of you, Eddie, but I thought you never used the word beauty. According to you, the word needs redefining or completely removing from the vocabulary.”

“True,” Eddie admitted, pleased she had remembered. “Perhaps I should have said it conceals the real person lying beneath. For me make-up acts like an opaque film. In most cases I know I’m looking at something that is not real. In your case, however, I am convinced that beneath the covering lies a far more interesting woman than first meets the eye.”

Isobel smiled and touched Eddie’s hand. “I suppose I should feel flattered, Eddie, but why do I fear there’s a but coming.”

Eddie nodded and smiled. “But why the lipstick? It’s so.....so unnaturally red.”

“I’m just like other women,” she said. “I feel undressed and can’t face the world without it. It’s expected of me.”

She took a deep breath and stood up and Eddie did likewise. “I must make some phone calls,” she said. “Would you and Jeffrey care to join me for dinner this evening?”

Eddie breathed easier but knew he’d now start worrying about dinner. The crab was still weighing heavily and he’d eaten more than in a whole day back in Oxford. “Very kind,” he said. “I’ll call Jeffrey.”

He was facing Isobel and wondering whether it was a shaking of hands type of departure or something else. Again, the decision was made for him. Isobel retrieved her case from her chair, smiled and looked at him with her big black eyes. “Eddie,” she said. “You are a most remarkable man. Depressing but, nevertheless, I’m so pleased to have met you. See you later.”

Eddie nodded, sniffed and fled. He took a taxi back to the boarding house and, on the way, called Jeffrey to warn him of the dinner invitation.

“That’s very kind of her,” Jeffrey said, “But Pascale is returning this evening. I’m to meet him at the airport and then we’re driving to Malacca to try to find Peter Lester.”

For Eddie that meant another meal alone with Isobel. Lunch had been unexpected, spontaneous and unplanned and their talk had been related to the events of the morning. Dinner, on the other hand, was pre-arranged. It was four hours away but he needed a mental list of topics for discussion in case conversation dwindled. None of the topics should be too controversial but, whatever they were, he needed to set out his opinions and be better informed on a few topics. Methamphetamine was one.

Downstairs at the B&B was a computer with internet for use by guests. Ismail, the manager showed him how to log on but Eddie waited for him to go away before Googling 'Ephedrine' and 'Conversion of ephedrine to methamphetamine'.

After he'd finished he deleted the search trail, closed down, thanked Ismail and returned to his room with his mind still buzzing about the chemistry of narcotics. He wondered what the white powder in the small bottle was. It was still in his jacket pocket so he took it out, held it up to the light, shook it a little, unscrewed it and, wondering what it smelled like, sniffed it.

Perhaps he sniffed too long and too hard. It was a surprisingly light powder and he felt it irritate his nasal passages like snuff is meant to do. But then his sinuses began to itch and the inside of his nose began to smart.

In less than a minute Eddie couldn't feel his nose. It was, to all intents and purposes, anaesthetised. He had been standing by the window but suddenly felt very dizzy, his eyes felt sore and he decided it was best to sit down, but he didn't sit. He fell, half on the bed, half on the floor.

"Oh, my goodness." He tried to copy Isobel's earlier expression but it came out more like 'Ur may god.'

Eddie didn't feel at all well. The ceiling fan had been going around on speed number two but it stopped and the room went around instead. He closed his eyes and felt as if he was flying somewhere, flapping his arms as if he was soaring like an eagle between the central KL skyscrapers. He waved at people walking hundreds of feet below. Maybe he even laughed aloud but he didn't know. Eddie didn't know anything - who he was or where he was.

How long it lasted was only obvious when he could eventually focus sufficiently on his watch. It was eight fifteen, dark outside and his dinner engagement with Isobel had been fixed for 7pm. He staggered to his feet, groped for the light switch and threw water on his face, drank a glassful and sniffed. His nose still felt numb but his mind had cleared somewhat.

He made it downstairs and out into the humidity of the night. He flagged down a taxi and arrived at the Istana at 8.45. He asked reception to call her room and when they handed him the phone and he heard her voice he felt he'd re-joined the world. "It's Eddie," he said, "I'm very sorry."

"Eddie. Where have you been?"

"On a trip," Eddie said.

CHAPTER 32

"Where's my little On?" Ritchie asked one of the girls at the Peacock.

"I don't know. Maybe she work in 7 Eleven tonight." That was new. Ritchie hadn't known she had two jobs. "Or maybe she work in Shell garage or maybe," the girl giggled, "Maybe she broken heart. You want me tonight, Micky? For two day On she say Micky this, Micky that. She like perfume. We all like perfume."

"Perhaps I'll transfer my affections to you, sweetie. What's your name?"

"Fon," she said and disappeared to fetch him a Tiger beer.

Fon looked OK, Ritchie thought, as she walked away, but she wasn't a patch on On. It was On's flip flops covered with sequins, her flowery skirt and tiny cleavage he liked. And then he thought of Olga in her tight white shorts and cleavage that resembled a giant, speckled peach. He checked his watch. Would others from Medinski's team turn up tonight? Or would it just be him and Olga?

Ritchie was on his second Tiger and was struggling to engage with Fon. It wasn't Fon's fault. She was trying hard to win him over but his mind was on what he was involved in. Did Mark have a plan to disengage from this charade? If so, when? How? Nevertheless, he couldn't help smiling because he was actually enjoying the job. Fon saw him smile. "You like me now? Better than On?"

Ritchie smiled at her for the first time. "I'm going back to London tomorrow," he said. "Can you do something for me? Give this to On. This is even better than Eau de Toilette by Ritchie," he said pulling out a box of Chanel perfume from his jacket pocket.

"Oooh, very nice. This real?"

"Of course, it's real."

"Why not go see On and give her? Tonight, she work at Big C supermarket."

Ritchie never got to reply. The white Toyota Camry stopped on the roadside. The rear door swung open and Olga stepped out holding her bag. She said something to the driver and the car moved a short distance away. Ritchie stood up. "Olga, sweetie. You're late."

"Too many problems," she said in her Russian way. "You have beer already?"

"Tiger. You want one?"

"Yah, but quick. I must go."

Ritchie asked Fon to fetch another beer and edged Olga towards a table overlooking the road. "What's the problem, Olga. Is it me? Do I give you a headache?"

"No." She smoothed his thigh but didn't smile. "It is another. I do not have long. We fly to KL tonight for solve problem but Maxim wants to speak. I call him now." She pulled her phone from her bag, pressed a few numbers and put it to her ear. "Da, da," she said and handed it to Ritchie.

"Hello?"

"Mr Micky Parker?"

"Da," Ritchie said trying to impress his new boss.

"You go to London now, huh?"

“Probably tomorrow, sir.”

“Da. I need to hear your voice. OK?”

That stumped Ritchie for a moment? “This is me, sir. My voice.”

“Da. Give Olga your phone numbers in London and your address.”

“My address sir?”

“Your address.”

“Home address or business address?”

There was a pause and a sound of a deep breath being taken. “An address to send an invoice.”

“Of course. I will give to Olga.” The phone went dead.

“You speak weak,” Olga said. “With boss, must be strong.” And she lifted her arm and waved a red finger-nailed fist.

“He wants my address.”

“Yah. You write it here and name of company.” She slid a damp triangle of tissue paper towards him and then a cheap ball pen. “Write.”

Ritchie stalled. “I have many addresses.”

“You must decide. Be strong.”

Ritchie wrote down an address in Finchley, north London – a flat where he’d once attended a party. “And your company name.” Ritchie wrote Pollitop Ltd.

“That is good. Now I must go.” Olga stood up and drained the bottle of Tiger as if it was a teaspoonful. “It is not good to show affection in public in this country Micky but I will see you in London. We have a house in Wimbledon and one in Shepherds Bush. Yes?”

“Yes, I look forward to it. What’s the problem today? We don’t want problems at such an early stage of our relationship.”

“We will sort. Thai staff not come to work.”

“Is that all?”

“And some people visit our company in KL We will check.” After a slight wave she wandered away into the night and Ritchie returned to Fon.

“She not stay so long,” Fon said. “Not like you too much I think.”

“Such a pity. Now I must go to the Big C supermarket.”

CHAPTER 33

“A trip, Eddie? Where did you go?”

“To hell and back,” Eddie said turning his back on the reception staff so they couldn’t hear his slurred speech, see his unfocussed eyes or watch his struggle to stand upright. Two minutes later, Eddie staggered into Isobel’s room.

He collapsed onto a sofa by the window with a panoramic view of night-time, high rise Kuala Lumpur. A curious confidence flooded over him that if he jumped out he could fly around for a while before returning through the window like Superman.

“Do you have a glass of water?” he asked realising that Superman would never have said that on arriving in a lady’s bedroom. He watched her open a small fridge beneath the TV, take a bottle out, pour water into a tumbler and hand it to him. He missed her hand the first time. The second time he almost spilt it so she steadied his hand and forced his fingers to hold the tumbler as if he was a recent stroke victim.

“Did you enjoy your dinner?” he slurred. “Jeffrey’s meeting Pascale from the airport. They’re going to Majorca. No, Mecca. No, Malacca. I’ve organised for Professor Buss to test Mark’s samples. Thank you. I decided on items for our discussion over this evening but I apologise that in the end, I didn’t make it. Did you enjoy your lunch? Dinner?”

Eddie was vaguely aware he was rambling and repeating himself.

“It was lonelier than expected,” Isobel said. She may have spoken softly but to Eddie it sounded like a church bell heard from where the pigeons sat in the rafters in the belfry. He lay his woozy head back and closed his eyes but could still feel the room going around.

“Why did you sniff it after telling me not to open it?”

“Why?”

“How long ago?”

“Curiosity.”

“Are you feeling better now?”

“About four hours ago.

“Just lie there, a while. Let it wear off.”

“A little better but my head is.....”

Eddie felt movement as she sat on the sofa next to him. Then he felt something cold and wet being pressed to his forehead.

He was not sure how long he lay there. It may have been a minute or it may have been an hour but when he opened his eyes Isobel was leaning over him still holding a wet towel to his head. He tried to sit up.

“You look better. Can you see me?”

Eddie could certainly see her. She was just inches away. Her big brown eyes with the neat black eyebrows, long eyelashes and dark circles reminded him of a patient Jersey cow he’d once tried to milk by hand on a farm in Dorset but he didn’t say that. The rest of her seemed more elegant. “I took the liberty of removing your boots, Eddie.”

Alarmed, he struggled to sit up. He’d been wearing the same socks since the flight out. He couldn’t remember when they were last washed but instantly remembered a

terrible poem. 'Those dirty socks that mattered not, smelled of cheese and morbid rot.'

When he'd finished, he wasn't sure if he'd spoken it aloud or merely thought it? "Perhaps I'd better go," he said struggling to stand. "Get a good night's sleep. Perhaps it's jet lag. Or heat stroke. Or maybe the crab."

"You've taken a hallucinogenic drug, Eddie. You're not in a fit state. Relax."

Isobel was right, of course. It was another hour before he began to feel normal. By then he had been manoeuvred into a horizontal position on the sofa with his head on a cushion and his bare feet hanging over the arm. The wet towel was on the floor. Slowly coming to, he heard a phone ring and realised it wasn't Isobel's silver one with the folding cover one but his old, black Nokia.

"Shall I answer it for you?"

"Yes please."

Eddie didn't know it possessed a speaker device but Isobel did. He heard Mark Dobson's voice. "Isobel? Where's Eddie?"

"He's with me, lying down. He's had an unusual experience."

There was an unnaturally long pause. "Did you see a CCTV camera when you were at PJ Cosmetics?"

"No."

"There's a chance there was one."

"But no-one knows us."

"Peter Lester does."

There was some more but Eddie's brain was still unravelling itself and Isobel then switched off. "Can you sit up, Eddie?" She helped him into a sitting position. Blood that had concentrated in his head flowed into his limbs and his brain cleared. "That was Mark. Did you see CCTV at PJ Supplies?"

Eddie shook his head. "I looked but didn't see anything - unless it was hidden."

Isobel was in the chair next to the coffee table with the 'Things to do and see in Malaysia' brochure she'd been reading while Eddie was semi-conscious. "Coffee, Eddie? Tea? The kettle's boiled twice."

Eddie sensed a sly reference to their first meeting. "Tea," he said. "Any biscuits?"

"None I'm afraid." She poured hot water onto the Tetley's tea bags. "Did you decide on a list of items you wanted to discuss this evening?"

Eddie looked at her from the corner of his eye and caught her doing the same. "Yes," he said.

She squeezed the tea bags and handed him a cup. "So, what are your questions?"

"I'd value more of your opinions on the cosmetics business," he said wondering if he still had enough powers of concentration to analyse her opinions or even remember his own.

Isobel sipped her tea for a moment and put her cup and saucer down so gently it hardly made a sound. "I have given this a lot of thought, since we first met, Eddie.

Once we sort out the problems I would like to change the way Vital operates. I can do very little about the rest of the industry. Next question?”

Eddie wracked his brain. “Ah yes. Are women more susceptible to emotional persuasion?”

“Yes. Women concern themselves with personal relationships more than men. They are easily taken in by adverts that identify emotion. They don’t always see the subtlety of adverts, after all it is not just the written or spoken words in an advert but its tone. Women are affected by adverts that promote feelings of guilt and inadequacy. They compare themselves to other women far more than men compare themselves to other men. Does that answer your question?”

“Generally speaking,” Eddie said. In truth, he had hoped his questions would stimulate a far more rousing discussion not a capitulation. He moved on.

“What is your opinion on adverts that fabricate evidence and make untrue statements? Statements like ‘our award-winning product’ when there is no evidence of any award ever being made. Statements such as ‘the best lotion in the world’ when not a single test has been made on any other product. How about ‘Inspired by ground-breaking DNA research’ when they can’t even tell me what DNA is? And one of my favourites: ‘Dermatologists recommend Radical X for treating breakouts’ when no-one in their so-called customer service department can tell me what Radical X is or define a breakout.”

“Absolute nonsense,” Isobel said before Eddie could add to his list, “We should combine innovative marketing with evidence-based facts and higher ethical standards.”

To Eddie it sounded like the sort of comment made at a marketing symposium but at least it seemed Isobel was planning for the future. “The problem is proving benefits that apply to every individual user not just one or two isolated cases,” he said. “Double blind trials and such like – tests that would take for ever with such subjective measurements as are used in cosmetics, anti-ageing products and so on.”

“Yes, I agree.”

Well, that’s progress. Eddie thought. In truth he’d still been expecting a far more robust fight back, not a submission. He tried another tack. “What is to be done about the environmental impact of cosmetics ingredients?”

This time Isobel’s tea cup landed more audibly in the saucer. “We must use more natural ingredients, Eddie,” she said more as a suggestion than a proposal.

That was better. The sky above opened up and a raft of arguments floated past Eddie. “But it’s been tried, Isobel. Companies actually cash in on using the word natural. They think that by putting a few natural ingredients in their product makes their product safe and ecologically friendly – even though it is laden with other synthetic chemicals and toxic ingredients. They seek out natural products just so they can put the word ‘natural’ on their bottles. Another problem is that if you want more natural ingredients then you’ll also want cheap, mass production of those ingredients. You’ll need different farming methods and land-use changes when the world is already running out of space for food-farming. What is more important? Food or eye make-up?”

Isobel nodded despondently but Eddie's confidence was growing now. He sat up straight. "And then there's packaging – bottles and tubes have to be strong but what happens when they're empty? Many of them float out to sea and take years to degrade and, in the meantime, release all sorts of toxic particles and chemicals that work their way back up the food chain. Did you know that plastic microbeads contribute to the eight million tonnes of plastic that enters the ocean each year?"

Isobel was staring at him in a way that reminded him of that increasingly rare sight – an over-eager student.

"There's an opportunity, Isobel," he said. "There are plans to ban microbeads used in so-called rinse off cosmetics and cleaning products but cosmetic companies complain there aren't enough alternatives. Tough luck., I say. They should never have been allowed to start with. It's their fault. They should have seen bans coming and been ready."

As he talked Eddie's thinking became so clear that he wondered whether it might be a positive side effect of his accident. His eyes, too, seemed to have improved as if he no longer needed spectacles. He looked at Isobel with her jet-black hair, long eyelashes, the shiny red lips and her perfectly proportioned features and, yet again, wondered what she'd look like without the makeup. Meanwhile, the big brown eyes stared at him with an unexpectedly sad look as if she might cry at any moment. He wondered whether he should say what he next wanted to say in case it upset her further, but it needed saying.

"Take a look at some chemicals as examples," he said. "P-phenylenediamine is commonly used in dark hair colouring and lipsticks." He deliberately looked at her hair and glossy red lips "It's a dangerous chemical derived from coal tar with long-term toxic effects on aquatic ecosystems. It diminishes the animal plankton population, alters fish behaviour and causes death in many aquatic species.

"Dioxane is another. It is a carcinogenic, endocrine disruptive chemical that contaminates many cosmetic ingredients. Companies could, if they wished, remove dioxane contaminants but it's costly and time consuming so they don't bother. Dioxane is in cream based cosmetics, shampoos, moisturizers, soaps and bubble baths. It's present in Vital products. I know because I tested it. When washed down the drain and into aquatic ecosystems it can, in quantity, alter fish growth and behaviour and reduces their life expectancy. Dioxane can kill insects and plankton and plankton is at the very bottom of the food chain. "

Isobel was, he now noticed, nervously fingering her cheeks with her red, well-manicured nails but it only served to remind him of another chemical.

"Dibutyl phthalate – DBP - is added to nail polish to keep it from becoming brittle. DBP is a plasticizer used to make PVC pipe. It's not a natural chemical but highly toxic to the ecosystem."

Isobel's eyes were blinking more than usual and because she then looked away from him Eddie stopped talking. He heard her sniff and thought he may have gone too far, but he never learned. Unlike Eddie's disappearing head of hair, the environmental activist in him had never disappeared. If he was twenty something he'd be out there right now demonstrating, but the majority of modern students were, he thought, utterly apathetic. Every day, he tried to stimulate anger, dissatisfaction and alternative thinking but it was useless. It started in schools, Eddie had concluded. They had been brain washed by petty political correctness. They believed that failure

was impossible and had become depoliticised by their closeness to comfort, luxury, wealth and material excess.

Isobel had pulled a tissue from a box next to the tea tray and was dabbing her nose. Eddie stood up, put his empty cup on the tray and then realised he'd left the saucer on the floor. He picked it up and retrieved his glasses that were also lying close by.

Isobel stood up. "I have to say, Eddie," she said, "You certainly know how to make a woman feel uncomfortable."

"Perhaps it equates with the feeling I experienced when I realised you'd removed my socks?" Eddie replied.

She smiled at last. "Your short poem was very accurate."

Eddie felt a cringing despair at realising he must have spoken it aloud. "Where are they now? My socks I mean."

"I washed them. They're hanging in the bathroom. Your boots are in the corner.

"That's way beyond the call of duty if I may say so."

"My pleasure, Eddie. it's refreshing to be with someone so genuinely honest, who sees and says things as they really are." She sat on the edge of the sofa he'd just vacated. Eddie took the chair by the tea tray. "I've been lucky I suppose," she continued. "A good education because my parents could afford it, money to invest in a few businesses, no need to worry when one of them folded, family connections that led to public roles and unearned publicity. But, you know what, Eddie? For years, I've always found life a bit of a sham. It seems artificial, unreal. It's as if we've lost sight of our destination, our purpose. I agree with you. We expect too much and we're given too much but we don't really earn any of it. We give back very little because we respect very little."

Eddie nodded. "Greed is an unsavoury character of all men – and women. We should only take what we need not what we want."

"That's it, Eddie. Most people want too much. But you don't, do you? You take out so little. You put in far more than you take out. How many times have you mended those socks?"

"I forget," Eddie said, amused but impressed by how she'd brought the subject of human excess down to a pair of socks. "I'm a dab hand with a needle and thread or, in the case of woollen socks, a needle and a short length of wool left over from an old grey jumper. But you see, Isobel, by darning my socks and patching the elbows of my jacket instead of buying new ones I'm destroying jobs. By eating cheaply and living frugally I'm not circulating what I earn. I am paid far too much for my needs. And what do I do? I teach. I am paid to transfer what I already know and what I discover to students. "He paused. "Socrates said that he couldn't teach anyone anything. All he could do was make them think. That's what I try to do. I try to make them think, to criticise, to think laterally if you like. Those I teach are selected because they are the best at passing exams. They are the children of a have it all, expect it all, generation. Why should they bother? Why should they want to see things in a different way or change anything?"

He paused again, looking at Isobel. "Socrates is still remembered. As for the somewhat less famous Professor Eddie Higgins he was once heard to mutter that knowledge is one thing, doing something with it is quite another."

Isobel looked at him and smiled. "I was quite right when I said you were the most depressing man I've ever met. You told me once you weren't married. Have you ever been married, Eddie?"

To Eddie it was as if being married would have changed him from a natural pessimist to an eternal optimist. Normally he would have ignored it. "Once," he said. "It lasted a year. Melissa couldn't stand me. Perhaps it was my socks."

Isobel laughed.

"I still live in the same house," he added. "It took me years to buy her out."

"Mark told me your old nickname was 'Huggy'."

"True. My student days were spent on demonstrations, shouting myself hoarse and tying myself to trees. Forty years ago, my concern was environmental destruction by big corporations and unsustainable population growth. Looking back my only achievement was a police record."

CHAPTER 34

Pascale was in KL, Ritchie was at the Peacock and Mark Dobson was alone.

He'd spoken with Colin Asher but they were getting nowhere trying to hack the Russian's warehouse computer.

"Forget it for a while," Dobson said. "Try to find Peter Lester. He's probably in one of the better hotels in Malacca. Pascale and Jeffrey are heading there tomorrow."

"Yes," Asher said. "Peter Asher. Tell me why I don't like him. I think I'll try another angle with him."

Mark Dobson then took a stroll up Lat Krabang road knowing that Ritchie would be close by. He'd watched the Peacock from a dark corner on the other side of the dual carriageway and saw the white Toyota Camry arrive and then leave again. A minute later his phone buzzed with a 'Ritchie's free' text.

They sat at an open-air restaurant near the night market. A heavy thunderstorm had earlier washed the road and walkway but it was now back to normal – hot, humid and not a breath of wind. By 10pm Ritchie was describing his short meeting with Olga and the even shorter phone conversation with Maxim Novak.

"But what now, Mark?"

"Step by step," Dobson said.

"And you still want me to make friends with that bastard, Novak?"

"Micky Parker is our bait to hook Maxim Novak and maybe collapse the entire organisation. Next step is you hop on the next plane home. Job done here."

They parted shortly after that. They shook hands and Mark Dobson gave him a bit of a hug. He didn't normally do that sort of thing but Ritchie had performed brilliantly and he told him so. He watched him walk away, then stop and come back. "What now?"

“When can I come back here, boss?”

“Why?”

“I think I’m in love.”

“Olga’s too old for you,” Dobson said and gave him a kick.

CHAPTER 35

At 4am Sannan called Mark Dobson.

“I’m in Pattaya,” he said. “Just as I was leaving the bar tonight I saw the white Toyota so I followed it on the bike. It went to the villa in Nong Prue near the Country Club. The big gates were opened by the Thai woman and Olga, Medinski and Yuri Abisov went in. The gates closed. The Toyota driver was the Thai I’ve seen before. He drove away so I followed him to the other villa, the one with the swimming pool on Pratamnak hill. He left the car on the road outside but didn’t go in. He knew I was following him and when I approached him he started to run, but I soon caught up with him.”

“What time was this?” Dobson asked.

“An hour ago. I showed my police card – the one Colin printed – and told him to come with me or I’d arrest him. Cut long story short, boss, his name is Chu and he likes driving the Toyota and BMW but doesn’t like working for Russians. Just like the guy at the warehouse I warned him they were being watched and paid him enough money for a train ticket to Chiang Mai and live on for a few months. Then he gave me a bunch of keys – for the Toyota, the BMW and the villa with the swimming pool. I also got the code for the security alarm. I asked him if there was anyone there right now. He said no, so I put him in a taxi to Bangkok and copied his ID card for security. He’s scared but I think right now is a good time for a look around the villa before the tenants find out. What do you think?”

If Mark Dobson had said no, Sannan, himself, might also have walked off the job even before his expenses were reimbursed so he agreed. Then he went back to sleep.

CHAPTER 36

It was past midnight when Eddie left the Istana. He took a taxi back to his bed and breakfast place, but his mind was too occupied with his conversation with Isobel to sleep. She’d quizzed him about his Huggy student days.

“Do you still believe in what you were doing forty years ago,” she’d asked.

“Of course,” he’d replied. “I just use different methods now, one of which is being a constant nuisance to big business and politicians. It is, of course, futile. Companies won’t change because they need to remain in business. Politicians won’t change

because they are too weak and won't make big, difficult decisions in case they're not re-elected. The world is overpopulated. The UN is powerless. What one country decides to do for the good of the environment is useless if the other two hundred don't and people don't live long enough for it to bother them sufficiently. The day of reckoning gets closer, though. It's future generations that will suffer. Meanwhile, the selfish pursuit of making money drives us further towards self-destruction. Yes, planetary exploration is useful but how are we going to move all eight billion? Anything that can be done to pinpoint problems and arrive at viable solutions must be worthwhile."

"Are you an angry man, Eddie?"

"I am a patient man frustrated by lack of progress."

"Were you angry with me when we first met?"

"That's a typical female question if I may say so. No man would dare ask that."

She'd laughed. "What I mean is you seemed to have a preconceived opinion of Vital and therefore me."

"I assumed you were in charge and were responsible."

"You saw problems very quickly, Eddie."

"I saw weaknesses that were being ignored, weaknesses that only compounded my strong opinions about what I call the vanity business. And you, the company chairman, seemed too busy on other things to care. That question still remains. Why do you need so many other distractions?"

"It's true," Isobel had agreed rather sadly. "But that is what is expected these days, particularly of women. Rumour has it that women can do a lot of things at the same time."

"I've heard that too, but are all those things done well? Quality not quantity? Surely one job done well is better than many jobs done badly."

"At least I'd spotted signs of problems."

"But it seemed to me you had decided to do something in case reputations were brought into disrepute. That public perceptions of Vital and its directors might not look good. Might that be another classic female response? To cover the cracks for the sake of appearance again? Why didn't you do something because you felt the company was being run incompetently and possibly being used for criminal purposes?"

Isobel hadn't answered.

"Did you not confront Nicholas Carstairs, your Chief Executive - the Prime Minister's young brother - about your concerns? And what about your sister, whose husband was the one you suspected?"

"I did all that and that's when things started to get difficult."

"So how long did you wait before seeing me?"

"Too long, Eddie."

At some point late in the evening Isobel had ordered a plate of room service sandwiches. Eddie had objected but was overruled. While they waited, he'd asked if

he could use the bathroom and, on his way, passed the wardrobe. This was another revelation. Whereas his clothes were still stuffed in his bag, Isobel had arranged a vast range of suits, shirts, trousers and skirts on a rail with proper hangers. It was enough for a world tour.

The bathroom was a sparkling, white-tiled room with so many mirrors he'd felt disorientated. He saw his socks draped over a towel rail and the shelf over the sink resembled the cosmetics counter at Boots. Plastic bottles of shampoo and conditioner, pink cartons of powders, creams and lotions, a strangely shaped comb, little circular mirrors and a little black brush sticking out of a tiny black pot. There was a bottle of something called 'gleam cream' and another of 'light-diffusing enhancer'. Dear Lord, Eddie had thought, no wonder Isobel was a shareholder in the industry. And yet, across the world well over a billion humans lived in absolute poverty.

He was still thinking about world poverty and starvation when room service arrived - a tray with white napkins and a plate of neat, triangles of white bread containing cheese and ham with the crusts removed and all held together with toothpicks. Eddie's interest, though, was taken by the fresh sprig of *Coriandrum sativum* which he knew could suffer from damping off caused by *Rhizoctonia solani*. This specimen, however, looked unaffected.

"Is this dinner?" he'd asked.

"Supper," said Isobel. "A snack. And now you've inspected it, you really must eat it, Eddie. You're hardly overweight. Look at you."

He'd picked up a sandwich. "I prefer not to look at myself," he admitted as he chewed and now thought about the mirrors in the bathroom. "If I feel OK, then I assume I must be OK. If there's an invisible, internal fault then I assume it'll eventually show itself as pain or discomfort. I have one mirror in the house that belonged to my mother. Sometimes I glimpse myself in the men's toilet at the University but it's not an image I linger over. Mirrors cause dissatisfaction, discontent and depression. They encourage the spread of that terrible human sickness called vanity."

"But they can be useful in detecting dribbles of mayonnaise, Eddie. Wipe your chin."

He'd wiped it with his hand and continued. "Reflecting glass was a useful invention but no-one considered, let alone documented, the side effects. The still water of a pond or a lake is bad enough. The calm waters of the legend of Narcissus who contemplated his own beauty in the reflections and then, of course, became so fascinated by himself that he toppled in and drowned. Isn't that where much of humanity is heading - drowning in its own self-admiration?"

"Nowadays narcissism is the taking of selfies, the carrying of mirrors in handbags and hanging them on bathroom walls and the thriving cosmetics industry. But it is, nevertheless, pure narcissism. And what do we now see, especially amongst the over-pampered, have-it-all, peace loving young who live surrounded by calm waters? Not drowning but addiction, mental illness and even suicide

"In the absence of violent, stormy waters, rippling water would be better. Rippling water distorts. It challenges you to consider what is real. The invention of mirrors led to pride, ostentation, arrogance, tyranny and vanity. What you see in a mirror is what is now, not yesterday nor tomorrow. And that's the problem with modern society isn't it? We live only for today."

Eddie's words had been slightly tongue-in-the-cheek but not too far from his opinion. Mirrors were good for technology but not for checking your appearance

"Vanity is like a flower that never bears fruit," he'd concluded with just a faint smile.

Isobel had sighed. "Perhaps you're right, Eddie, but might a mirror be useful to check your hair?"

He knew she was now mocking him but it no longer mattered.

"The hairs on my head demand respect. They are survivors," he said.

"And very independently minded. Since you lay on the sofa they are heading in many different directions."

"Leave them alone. And if the grey colour bothers you, let me tell you it's wisdom highlights."

"Very poetic, Eddie, but still depressing."

He'd grabbed another sandwich. "You even find the description of my home-grown seedlings depressing?"

"You are extremely depressing, Eddie, but in an enlightening and entertaining way."

"Good," he'd replied. "It's constructive argument. It's alternative thinking and I can't change, so don't even try. Young twigs might bend but not old trees."

Around midnight, he'd asked her more about herself. "As Baroness Isobel Johnson what exactly do you do in the House of Lords?"

She'd laughed. "It's a good question, Eddie. Did I want the honour? Do I want it now? Did I feel I'd done enough to warrant it? Was it the equality agenda? That I was a young woman? Was it family connections? Was it merely for speaking at a few conferences to encourage a few young women into business? Was it merely because my face was in a few magazines? These things are discussed in dark corners over champagne and canapes and then you get a tap on the shoulder. It's utter hypocrisy. There are far more worthy people out there who go unnoticed. I'm looking to resign."

That had surprised him. "Why?" he asked her.

"To change things."

Eddie hadn't pursued that statement. He was pleased but he left it hanging there. After all, change meant putting your own small house in order first.

CHAPTER 37

Sannan called Mark Dobson again at 6am.

"Five bedrooms, five bathrooms and a swimming pool big enough for sharks," he said.

"Can you see any sharks?"

“It’s empty. Only one bedroom has a bed and looks like it’s used by a Thai – you know, no shower just a tank of water and a baler. I reckon it’s where Chu’s been sleeping. But there is a second sitting room like an office. It was locked but I managed to open it. It’s full - a desk, computer and boxes stuffed with paper, a drawer with hundreds of passport sized photographs, another full of mobile phones and a safe. I didn’t touch anything. I came out because it was getting light.”

“You leave it clean?”

“Gloves, overshoes – I had everything in the bike.”

“Reset the alarm? Lock up again?”

“Done. No-one would know. But what now?”

“Maybe I’ll join you later. Go get some sleep.”

“OK,” he said. “I’ve got the keys to the shiny Toyota but I’ll use my bike.”

At 7am, Colin Asher called to say Peter Lester had checked in at the Ramada Plaza in Malacca for two nights. Also, at 7am, Jeffrey picked up Pascale at the Orange Premier Hotel in Cheras and they headed south. By nine they were in Malacca.

During the drive down, they’d agreed a plan of action. Jeffrey booked to stay at a cheap hotel in downtown Malacca. Pascale chose the Ramada Plaza but was unable to check in until later. Jeffrey waited outside while Pascale asked reception if Mr Peter Lester was booked in. “Yes,” they said.

Pascale then phoned Lester in his room.

“Mr Lester?”

“Who is it?”

“My name is Aldo Adani. I am from Roma, Italy. Is it Vital Cosmetics I speak to?”

There was a hesitant “Yes.”

“Ah, it’s good,” Pascale said in deliberately poor English. “My friend in England tell me about your cosmetics. I am interested for my business in Italy.”

“Who is your friend?”

“She is a customer, I think. She uses Vital hand cream. Yes? So, I phone your office, it is in Oxford, and they tell me that I must speak to Mr Lester. That is you?”

“Yes.”

“Then I say I am in Singapore. They say you are in Malaysia. I say very good so I can visit him. Where is Mr Lester, I ask. They say try PJ Beauty Supplies in KL so I call this company and they say you go to Malacca and maybe stay in Ramada. So here I am.”

“But I am very busy, Mr...”

“Adani. Do you have some samples, Mr Lester? Some prices?”

“I am leaving in half an hour. “

“No problem. We can meet for five minutes?”

There was another pause. “Where are you Mr, uh....”

“Adani.”

“Did you already visit PJ Beauty Supplies with a lady?”

“A lady? No sir. I am alone.”

Five minutes later, Pascale dressed in his best Italian suit and white open-necked shirt was shaking the hand of Peter Lester. Their short conversation would have done nothing to convince Aldo Adani that Vital Cosmetics was a serious business partner. For Lester, the visit by an unknown man and woman to PJ seemed to matter most but fifteen minutes was enough for Pascale to ask for Lester’s phone number, appear to put it into his own contacts list but send it in a pre-prepared text to Colin Asher in London. Within an hour, using a neat piece of Israeli software Asher would strip out most of what was on Lester’s phone and listen in to his calls.

Lester checked his watch and stood up. He’d had enough. “I must go, Mr, uh...”

“Adani. Will you return later to continue our discussion?”

“I am not sure. “

Pascale left and re-joined Jeffrey outside. “He’s leaving,” he said.

The last time he came, he rented a car,” Jeffrey replied. Ten minutes later a silver Toyota Vios car with an Avis sticker passed them. “There,” Jeffrey said. “A few signatures, a copy of his driving licence and the car belongs to Lester for a while.”

The car stopped by the main entrance, the driver got out, disappeared inside and Jeffrey pulled something from his pocket. “Wait here.” In less than five minutes he was back having fixed a miniature tracking device beneath the Toyota.

“Did anyone see?” Pascale asked.

“If they did they saw me bend down to pick up my car keys. We can track the car on my phone but I don’t think he’s going far. Probably the Min Hin place. After that, well, we’ll see.”

As Jeffrey anticipated the Avis rental went straight to the Min Hin building. Lester went inside. Jeffrey parked amongst the car tyres next door. No-one came out, but there were pallets of boxes outside, waiting to be collected. “We still need to see inside,” Jeffrey said, not for the first time. “At least twelve local Malays work there.”

“What can I do?”

“Nothing while Lester’s there. He’s just met you.” He fell quiet for a moment. “On the other hand, we could always try something different.” He called Mark Dobson.

Dobson called Colin Asher. “Anything on Lester’s phone yet?”

“Plenty,” said Asher. “What do you want?”

“Can you text someone from Lester’s phone?”

“Sure. Who?”

“Someone inside the Min Hin building.”

“Name?”

“Good question,” Dobson replied. “What calls were made to and by Lester in the last twenty-four hours?”

Colin was silent for a few seconds, then: "He received six calls from Bangkok mobiles, two from KL, one of which matches PJ Beauty Supplies, and three from Malacca. He made one call to Bangkok, one to KL and three to Malacca. I can match some to address book names."

"Any names to the Malacca calls?"

A pause. "Avis Car Rental., call out and call in. One other call to Malacca made at 0739 this morning to.....the address book says Roman."

"Any others?"

"No."

"Right. Stay tuned. We might need a text sent from Lester's phone."

Dobson called Jeffrey. Jeffrey told Pascale and Pascale remembered something. "Roman Kolodin," he said "One of the names Enzo mentioned."

"Worth a try?" Jeffrey asked Dobson. "When Lester leaves Min Hin we send a text from his phone to Roman Kolodin saying Mr Aldo Adani from Italy is visiting and wants to look around the factory. Please co-operate."

Mark Dobson thought about that. It was high risk. They weren't even sure that Roman was the one inside the factory. "Is Pascale up for it?"

Pascale came on the line. "Yes, Mark. For my father."

The risk was if Roman Kolodin then phoned Lester back to double check. Dobson called Asher. "Can you block incoming calls to Lester's phone for a while?"

"Easy," Asher said. "I could also insert an 'unable to take your call right now' message if you like."

They decided to go ahead. After all, they'd been trying to get inside that factory for months. They could also video it. Both Jeffrey and Sannan carried an Asher & Asher modified 16GB spy camera watch that could switch to infrared for night vision if required. To all intents and purposes, they looked like the sort of cheap, chunky watch that kids wore, but they'd made good use of them in the past. Using them to get useful images, though, was an acquired skill if you didn't want to be spotted. There was no time for that.

CHAPTER 38

At around 5am, worn out by thinking, Eddie fell into a deep sleep. At 9.30 he was woken by his phone. It was Isobel.

"Eddie. I've been calling you for hours. Mark has also tried calling you."

"My apologies," he replied in a croak of a voice that needed a good cough and a gargle

"Are you sick, Eddie? You've not taken another sniff of....?"

"No, no, I've just woken up. It's jet lag and I'm not used to my phone ringing. It never rings in Oxford and..."

“Eddie, it’s 9.30. Mark thinks we should return to Bangkok. If there are CCTV images of us at PJ Beauty Supplies he’s concerned Lester may see them. It could jeopardise everything. The flight leaves at eleven. Meet me at the Istana. Hurry.”

Eddie dressed quickly, stuffed his belongings into his bag, checked out and took a taxi. Half way to the Istana, though, he realised he’d left the bottle of what he’d decided to call ‘Angel Dust’ behind. Was it on the bedside table? The bathroom? He couldn’t remember. Panic overtook him and he asked the taxi driver to go back. When he got there, the cleaner had already been in the room, the bed was stripped and the black trash bag hanging from her trolley looked full.

“Did you find a small bottle?” he asked.

“Ah, yes sir, I thought it was medicine. “

“Where is it now?”

“Black bag, sir.”

Eddie found the bottle lying amongst unidentifiable detritus. He stuffed it in his pocket and ran back to the waiting taxi. Then Isobel called again. “Go straight to the airport, Eddie.”

It was only at the airport that he realised the bottle was still in his pocket. Isobel had gone through check-in unhindered, one bulging case of clothes and her handbag and brief case as hand luggage. When it came to Eddie’s turn his small bag of clothes, journals, maps and his old Nokia was not worth checking in. It passed through the security X Ray unscathed. Then it was Eddie’s turn to be patted down for the body check.

“What is this, sir?” The security man held up the bottle.

“That?”

Eddie needed time to think. After all, he was an honest man, perhaps a little disorganised at times but well intentioned and with only a minor conviction for obstructing the highway forty years ago. Since then he’d lived a busy but law-abiding life. He didn’t smoke and didn’t drink anything stronger than Ribena, Robinson’s Barley Water and Tetley’s tea with a biscuit. He certainly didn’t swallow, inject or inhale narcotics. “That is a powder I am taking for analysis,” he said.

“Yes, sir. What is it?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “If I knew I wouldn’t need it tested, but I’m hoping a friend in Bangkok will help.”

“It’s a white powder, sir,” the security man said examining it closely.

“That is very perceptive,” Eddie said lifting his half-moons onto his nose and joining in the close examination.

The man went away, consulted with a colleague and Eddie was separated from the queue forming behind him. He saw Isobel standing in the safe zone looking at him. Their flight had already been called. They were late which was also Eddie’s fault. Another security man arrived holding the bottle as if it might be poison. “What is it, sir?”

"I don't know," Eddie repeated but as he said it he wondered, with a horrible churning in his stomach, whether capital punishment was still the penalty for trafficking drugs in Malaysia. Was it hanging? The guillotine? Lethal injection?

"Come with me sir."

"Will it take long? Our flight has been called."

"Are you travelling with someone?" It sounded as if Eddie's fellow traveller might also now be investigated.

"She's waiting there." he pointed at Isobel who was pointing at her watch. She was right to do so. The final call was being broadcast.

"The lady with dark hair, blue suit and....?"

"That's her."

"Your wife, sir?" He looked at Eddie in his khaki shorts, socks and walking boots, then back at Isobel as if that couldn't possibly be right.

"A business colleague," Eddie clarified.

"What business is that?"

"Cosmetics. "

He looked at Eddie again, his eyes wandering from head to feet. "Wait one moment, sir."

Next minute Eddie saw another from the security team approach Isobel. She objected, looked cross, waved her arms and pointed at Eddie but followed. Eddie was then marched away to join her. They were ushered into a small, cluttered office where a man in uniform and badges sat talking on a mobile phone. He beckoned them to wait and continued with his call in Malaysian.

"We'll miss our flight," Isobel whispered. "What's the problem?"

"The bottle with the white powder was in my pocket," Eddie whispered.

"You mean...oh, Eddie."

"Yes. I'm sorry but it was so much of a rush this morning I should have given it some proper thought and decided what to do with it."

"Right, what have we here?" Eddie heard the uniform say.

"Suspected narcotics sir," said the first man as if looking forward to a public hanging.

"Perhaps I can save you some time," Eddie said, but the boss held up his hand as if he was in no rush.

"Where is it?"

He was handed the bottle and shook it. From where Eddie was standing it looked like talcum powder. Isobel watched and Eddie felt her clinging onto his arm as if he might be foolish enough to try to escape. The boss man eyed Eddie's bag, Isobel's brief case and her handbag and nodded at his assistant. "Check the bags." The contents of Eddie's were emptied onto a table by the door. The bulk of it was dirty washing.

"What is it?" the man was referring to the bottle again.

"I don't know," Eddie said for the third time.

Isobel's possessions were tipped next to Eddie's, picked up one by one and replaced. The boss produced a pair of thick-rimmed spectacles and put them on. Eddie, fearing he was going to unscrew the bottle and sniff it, put on his own glasses again to watch. He didn't open it but placed it on his desk where he watched it as if it might change colour, vaporise or self-ignite before his eyes. "Passport?"

Eddie handed it over. "And yours, madam". Isobel did likewise and checked her watch.

"Isobel Jane Johnson. British. Boarding pass?" Isobel handed it over and he turned to the first man. "Take this person's baggage off the flight. If the flight is delayed, never mind."

"Yes, sir." He disappeared.

"Professor Edward James Higgins. British. Professor of what?"

"Tropical Plant Science at Oxford University." Eddie said.

The chair squeaked. "What's a sixty-two-year-old University Professor doing carrying drugs?"

"Drugs? Who says it's drugs?" Eddie replied bravely.

"Then what is it?"

Fourth time. "I don't know."

"You madam? Do you know?"

"All I know is we've missed our flight."

Eddie shrugged. "There'll be another along in a minute."

"Would you like to explain, Professor?"

"Of course," Eddie said. "How long have you got?"

CHAPTER 39

It was an hour before Peter Lester re-emerged from the Min Hin factory. Jeffrey and Pascale watched as he was followed out by a Russian. They stood talking by Lester's rented car and then he drove away. The Russian returned inside. Was it Roman Kolodin?

Jeffrey called Mark Dobson in Bangkok. Dobson called Colin Asher to track Lester and listen in to calls. They decided to give him twenty minutes and then Colin would block calls and leave an 'unavailable at this time' message. Meanwhile, Pascale swapped his own Omega for the spy camera watch.

With both Jeffrey and Colin Asher tracking him, Lester made his way onto the main highway south heading for Johor Bahru.

JB, as it was usually called, was on the Malay side of the short stretch of water that separated Malaysia from Singapore. It was a vast trading area where Asher & Asher

suspected raw materials like palm oil, coconut oil and even timber were being imported and probably processed by the Russian-Chinese group. Jeffrey had watched sea containers being delivered and despatched but, again, they'd never yet been able to get inside the warehouse to see what was going on. Neither had Jeffrey's contacts at Customs control ever felt suspicious enough to intervene, but they knew one container load of counterfeit Red Power had been taken from the Min Hin site in Malacca down to JB and then shipped to China in the last three months. Red Power had been flagged as a possible counterfeit but that had not stopped Customs from passing it for export. Bribes were the likely explanation.

Ten minutes after leaving Malacca, Lester made a short call to a mobile number in JB. Colin recorded it. *"Andre. I'll be there in an hour. We got problems."*

The answer was in a Russian accent. *"Ya, I know. Olga phoned. Don't worry. Enzo's arrived."*

The only Russian they knew called Andre was Andre Arshavin and that name had come from Enzo. Things were heating up. And Enzo was in JB.

Five minutes later, Colin Asher blocked all calls to Lester's phone and left a message, *"Sorry, I am unable to take your call at present. Please leave your name and number and I'll get back to you as soon as possible."*

Pascale got out of Jeffrey's car, made his way around the piles of old tyres, walked towards the Min Hin building and stood outside the front entrance. It was quiet except for the faint sound of machinery inside. Those inside always used the side entrance but Pascale first tried the front door. It was locked. He strolled around the side and tried that door. That was also locked but from inside came the classic rattling sound of a bottling plant, of glass against glass on a conveyor belt.

He took out his phone and called the Roman Kolodin number.

"Yah. Who is it?"

"Mr Kolodin?"

"Who is it?"

"It is Aldo Adani from Roma, Italy."

"Who is that?" The tone was annoyed, impatient.

"Aldo Adani. From Italy. I speak to Mr Lester this morning in his hotel. He say to meet him here."

There was a thoughtful pause. "He left already."

"Yes, he just phoned me to say you would help. I say it's OK. All I need is a few samples and Mr Lester said you would show me around your factory. It is very important for my business in the Middle East. I have just come from Dubai. It is a big market I think." Pascale frowned at his deliberately poor English. "You can phone Mr Lester to check if OK. I am outside. It is very hot here."

"Outside? Here?"

"Yes, outside the door, but it is locked. Mr Lester said to call you if it is locked."

There was a sound that began with F and the phone went dead. Seconds later the door opened. Standing there was a thin, lightly-built, man with short cut blonde hair

wearing shorts and no shirt. A smell of sweat wafted out along with increased machinery noise.

“Ah,” said Pascale. “Mr Kolodin?”

“Yah. Why you come here?”

Pascale tried looking confused. “Why? Because Mr Lester say come.”

“What you want?”

It took a minute more on the threshold before Kolodin agreed to phone Lester to check. “Is OK now?” said Pascale when he finished.

“Not OK. He cannot take call. Maybe driving. Maybe busy. OK. You come in.”

Jeffrey watched from behind the tyres.

Thirty minutes later, Pascale re-emerged but Kolodin was still suspicious. He waved his arms round. “How you come here?”

“My car is parked by the road.” Pascale pointed. “No worry. Thank you for seeing me. Very useful. I will call Mr Lester to thank him. Arrivederci.”

Back in Jeffrey’s car Pascale described what he’d seen – around ten Malay staff, a bottling plant for Red Power and a storage area for cans of essential oils – coconut oil, palm oil, krabok oil and ‘sunflower cooking oil’.

They plugged the spy camera watch into the laptop. Sound quality was good, video quality less so, but it was enough.

“That is a member of staff mixing coconut oil with vegetable oil and pouring it into empty cans marked ‘Fractionated Coconut Oil,” Pascale said. “And that’s the address label on a can - Vital Cosmetics, UK. I asked Kolodin about the vegetable oil and he said ‘To make it last longer’.

“Eddie will understand that,” Jeffrey said.

They uploaded the video and sent it to Mark Dobson and Colin Asher. Asher was still tracking Lester. He was nearing JB. “You want me to unblock his phone?” Asher asked. Dobson agreed. “But continue to listen in to calls,” he added.

Jeffrey and Pascale had driven off but they knew that as soon as Lester got wind of the visit by an Italian called Aldo Adani from Rome, nerves would kick in. Anything could happen.

Mark Dobson, meanwhile, had been waiting at the airport for Eddie and Isobel off the KL flight. Their flight had arrived but no Eddie or Isobel. Dobson asked Asher to check the Malaysian Airlines passenger list. “Checked in but not boarded,” the data said. Dobson called both Eddie’s and Isobel’s phones but they were switched off.

CHAPTER 40

At midday Isobel and Eddie were taken to another room manned by the Polis Diraja Malaysia, the airport police. There had been two officers present to start with, a quietly spoken grey-haired and bespectacled man in a dark blue uniform, epaulets,

ribbons and badges and a Moslem female officer in a headscarf. Isobel was moved to another room with the woman.

Eddie's grey-haired interviewer introduced himself as Mohamad Bin Salleh. On a separate table sat a nameless officer taking notes and recording their discussion. The small bottle of white powder sat between them as if waiting to be sprinkled on a shared bag of French fries.

"Are you aware that drug smuggling is a very serious offence in Malaysia Mr Higgins?"

"Professor Higgins," Eddie corrected, hoping that his academic status might carry some weight and show that someone with intelligence would never consider such blatant criminality. "But yes, of course," he added. "And quite right too. I wish UK politicians weren't so reticent about dishing out capital punishment."

He was asked what he was Professor of. "Tropical plant science and I'm head of the mycology research centre," Eddie replied and, for a minute or so, he was left alone with the notetaker.

Mohamad Bin Salleh then returned. "We are checking with Oxford University," he said. "So, what is it?"

"You mean that?" Eddie pointed at the bottle. "I don't know, but my intention was to get it analysed."

"Who gave it to you?"

"No-one. I found it."

"Where?"

That was difficult. He didn't want to be the one to blow the entire Vital Cosmetics investigation apart by mentioning PJ Beauty Supplies. Eddie decided to take the long route by starting at the beginning. "My travel companion is the chairman of a UK cosmetics company. We are here to investigate possible criminal activity by her Malaysian suppliers," he said by way of introduction. Then he tried clouding the issue by mentioning poor quality raw materials, connections with counterfeiting and so on.

"What are the names of the Malaysian companies?"

Eddie stalled again. "It's linked to criminal activity in Thailand but until we both know what's in that bottle I don't see what right you've got to detain me. It could be talcum powder." He tried smiling but couldn't make the creases in his cheeks work properly.

Mohamad Bin Salleh picked up the bottle and shook the contents. "You will wait here," he said.

"What about my partner? And could I make a phone call?" He didn't get an answer.

It was another half hour before Bin Salleh returned. Isobel followed him in. "I was allowed a phone call," she told Eddie. "I called Jeffrey."

Jeffrey had been driving south on the highway to JB when he got the call from Isobel. He stopped the car and called Mark Dobson which was enough for alarm bells to start ringing. "Has he given any details of the investigation?" Dobson asked. Jeffrey didn't know. "If he says anything, it could jeopardise everything."

Jeffrey understood that. "Listen," he said. "I've got a few friends in the police. You want me to try?"

Mark Dobson agreed and left him to it. Then Colin Asher phoned.

"The computer in the Bangkok warehouse," he said. "I left Ching to try accessing it all night. At three this morning she got in. Since then we've been non-stop."

"What have you got?"

"A lot and it's led us to other computers - in Bangkok, Pattaya, KL, Malacca, Johor and we're currently trying a PC in Trieste Italy. We've got companies in Hong Kong, Beijing and a PC in Oxford - Peter Lester's. Then there's some Russian links. We've got email addresses, the emails themselves, names, addresses and bank account details. It'll take us a while to analyse it all but it's Peter Lester's life as seen from inside his PC that's proving interesting," he went on. "I'm even thinking of taking a few hours off, go back to my roots and do some old-fashioned sleuth work and footslogging."

It was only 6am in London but Mark Dobson could sense his partner was on one of his highs. It was pointless asking questions. "OK," he said, "The exercise won't do you any harm." Then he added: "But don't forget Ritchie's landing at Heathrow later. It would be a good time to show him the pickings from hacking."

CHAPTER 41

Police officer, Mohamad Bin Salleh returned to his desk, sat down and pointed at Eddie. "Professor Higgins. Please," he said and beckoned to Eddie to move from where he was sitting with Isobel to the seat opposite him. As he adjusted his spectacles and looked over them at Eddie, Eddie's bare knees began jiggling up and down uncontrollably.

"It's..." he checked a note he'd brought with him. "It's phenyl...phenylcyclidine. Sometimes called Angel Dust. It's a prohibited hallucinogenic drug."

Eddie nodded. He was not entirely surprised and it explained everything, not least his own psychotic episode. He was grateful he'd not taken an even bigger sniff of the powder. Eddie looked behind at Isobel. She was sat upright, straight-backed with her legs crossed, her bags on the floor as if ready to go. She shrugged.

"What is this investigation you are involved in?" Mohamad Bin Salleh asked somewhat crossly.

Eddie put his glasses on. "For me, it started with evidence of tampering with raw materials being exported to Vital Cosmetics." He paused, took a deep breath and leaned back. It was obvious the man needed more. "I am worried that if I say more it will impede our investigations here in Malaysia and in Thailand," he added.

Mohamad Bin Salleh leaned forward. "How would it - what you say? - impede?"

"It would impede the gathering of evidence. It is a critical time. If I mention where I found that bottle you might find it necessary to search the premises and that could cause the whole illegal operation to be dismantled, the criminals to disperse and never be caught." He then thought of another clever thing to say. "Someone will have to take the blame for ruining an international criminal investigation."

Eddie still doubted this was enough. The officer stared at him. He clearly wasn't happy but kept his impatience in check by flipping a pencil between his fingers. Then he looked at Isobel. "Miss Johnson. What have you to say?"

That was a mistake. Isobel leaned forward, then stood up.

The notetaker, hearing her chair move, turned and took a long look at her from her neat, black hair and shiny red lips right down to her high-heeled shoes. Then he worked his way back up to her face. When his boss glanced at him, he returned to his computer. He hadn't given Eddie such a prolonged look but perhaps he thought Eddie was just one of those quaint old English safari types who sometimes arrived in socks, boots and khaki shorts.

"Sir," Isobel said. "Professor Higgins is a highly respected Oxford University scientist, a biologist, who visits Malaysia and Thailand regularly for research purposes. He is also my company's scientific adviser and has unwittingly found himself investigating serious criminal activity. When he joined us, he uncovered many problems and has since become involved in a private investigation that neither the police in the UK or Malaysia or Thailand will do anything about until we provide more evidence. There are, right now, two others in our team in Malaysia who are helping us with the investigation. There are others working in Bangkok and an office co-ordinating matters in London. It is quite likely we have uncovered evidence not just of serious drug smuggling but money laundering, counterfeiting and probably other things that are going on undetected right under the noses of the Royal Malaysian Police. Do you understand?"

Whether it was the forceful manner of her explanation or the appearance of the tough, no nonsense professional woman in the immaculate suit, white shirt and shiny black high heels that stood before him and then walked menacingly in his direction, but Assistant Superintendent Mohamad Bin Salleh sat back. Isobel, unblinking, stared at him and went on:

"So, let us not waste any more time. What do you intend to do with Professor Higgins? Arrest him or co-operate with us?"

"I see," Mohamad Bin Salleh said rather defeatedly. "One moment."

He left the room once again. The shoulders of his notetaker moved up and down as if he was finding it funny, but his eyes never left the screen until his boss departed. Then he stood, went outside, returned with two bottles of chilled water, handed them to Eddie and Isobel and then continued to tap away on his keyboard without saying a word.

On the road to JB, Jeffrey had stopped the car and, while Pascale listened in, called a contact in the Malaysian Police and, without giving details, briefly outlined the Asher & Asher investigation. He was assured something would be passed upwards. Now with nothing more to be done, he continued the drive south with Pascale following in the path of Peter Lester.

It was another hour before Mohamad Bin Salleh returned. He first repeated his routine. He went behind his desk, swung his seat around, sat down and put on his spectacles but, this time, didn't point at Eddie. Instead he invited both Eddie and

Isobel to slide their chairs forward to his desk. Then he leaned forward with his hands together on the desk.

"The matter has been taken out of my hands," he said. "The Deputy Commissioner has asked the Director of the Commercial Crimes Investigation Department, Datuk Abdul Rahim bin Hassan to intervene. Your passports will be retained and you will remain in KI until the matter is resolved. I have been asked to organise hotel accommodation close by."

Isobel leaned forward. "Does that apply to both of us? Had I not remained behind with Professor Higgins I could have been in Bangkok by now. Am I allowed to speak to a lawyer? Or the British Embassy, perhaps? And where is my luggage?"

"I will check."

At four in the afternoon, Colin Asher called Mark Dobson. "Lester's phone is still blocked but I don't think we should leave it too long. Any thoughts?"

"Unblock it," Dobson said. "He must be nearing JB by now. But listen in for any calls to and from Malacca – namely, Roman Kolodin."

Twenty minutes later Asher called again. "You were right. Kolodin just phoned Lester. Here's the recording:

Kolodin: *'Yah. Peter. It's Roman. Why no phone?'*

Lester: *"What? I'm driving. Near JB."*

Kolodin: *"This guy Aldo Adani called. You know?"*

Lester: *"Called you?"*

Kolodin: *"Yah. He came here after you left."*

There was a short silence. *"Came there? What the fuck.....?"*

Kolodin: *"Yah, he says you saw him this morning, so he called here."*

There was a pause with indecipherable words that sounded like panic as if Lester had stopped the car. Then: *"I didn't tell him where I was going. I only spoke to him for ten minutes. He called at the hotel before I left. An Italian guy."*

Kolodin: *"Yah, Italian. He says he want samples, see factory."*

Lester: *"Bloody hell. Did he go in?"*

Kolodin: *"Sure, sure. He says you said OK. He not stay so long. Now gone. Two hour ago. Your phone not work."*

Lester: *"Of course, it bloody well works. I used it just after I left you to call Andre in JB. He told me Enzo had arrived. "*

Kolodin: *"But I hear message you not able to take call."*

Colin Asher stopped the recording. "There's not much after that. Lester doesn't seem to know his phone is being tapped but they know something's going on. Meanwhile, he's on the move again on the outskirts of JB. We need to go careful. We don't want Pascale coming face to face with Lester or, indeed, Enzo."

CHAPTER 42

At 5pm Mark Dobson left the hotel to find a taxi to take him to Pattaya.

At the same time, Pascale was still tracking Lester's rented Toyota Vios as Jeffrey drove. With Jeffrey driving faster than Lester, they calculated they were now within a mile of him but still on the main Highway.

"He's come off the Highway," Pascale said. "A road called Jalan Pandan."

"That fits," Jeffrey said from behind the wheel. "There's an industrial area nearby that we've watched before."

"He's turned off, going back under the road, heading north. Jalan Padi Ria Utama. He's slowing."

With Pascale giving directions, Jeffrey almost caught up with the Toyota. On the left, near a muddy-looking football pitch, he stopped. The Toyota had turned into the industrial estate.

"Mark and I have been here before," Jeffrey said. "But there's nothing much we can do except sit, watch and wait." He texted a quick update that arrived on Mark Dobson's phone just as he settled into the taxi for Pattaya and Dobson stared at it for a while, pondering. They still weren't sure what went on in that factory unit and had no way of finding out yet. The other question was whether Enzo Grassi was also there and why. Only Pascale knew what Enzo looked like. He replied to Jeffrey: "Wait and watch". Then he called Colin Asher.

It was Ching who answered. "Colin is listening into a phone call, Mark," she said in her Hong Kong accent. "Mr Lester. I'll ask him to call you back."

Five minutes later with his taxi racing along the Bangkok to Chonburi Expressway towards Pattaya, Asher returned the call. "Lester has just finished a call to Enzo. Here's the recording:

Lester: *"Enzo? Where are you? I thought we were meeting. at 5pm."*

Enzo: *"Si dispiace, sorry. Molto dispiaciuto. I try many time to call you but your phone not work and I have problem in Singapore. My flight was late and then taxi from Chiangi airport have problem. I am now in JB but it is too late I think."*

Lester: *"OK, OK. I had a problem with my phone. You want to meet in JB?"*

Enzo: *"Si. It is better I think."*

Lester: *"The hotel?"*

Enzo: *"Si, the usual one, the Mutiara, no?"*

Lester: *"OK. You speak to Valeri?"*

Enzo: *"Si, si. Valeri is not happy. We talk later, OK? Ciao."*

Dobson phoned Jeffrey, briefly described the conversation between Lester and Enzo and ended the call with: "Does the name Valeri mean anything?"

"Mm," Jeffrey replied. "Could that be Valeri Pavlyuchenko who Sannan photographed in Pattaya a year ago?"

“That was exactly my thinking.”

“But, you know what?” Jeffrey went on. “I’m getting confused about how this all fits together.”

“You know what Salvador Dali once said?” Dobson replied. “What is important is to spread confusion not eliminate it.”

Mark Dobson spent the rest of the taxi ride on his phone writing names and connecting them with arrows. Then he deleted it.

Jeffrey, meanwhile, ignored the earlier instruction to wait and watch and sped off to the Mutiara Hotel. “Their marketing manager owes me a favour,” he told Pascale.

CHAPTER 43

When Assistant Superintendent Mohamad Bin Salleh asked Eddie to suggest a hotel the Orange Premier was the only one he could think of. They were taken there in a police car and were checked in without their passports. “The Director of the Commercial Crimes Investigation Department will call you later this evening,” said the police officer who checked them in. “His name is Datuk Abdu Rahim bin Hassan You are not to leave the hotel. Understand?” Then he left.

Isobel had suggested to Eddie that they “freshen up” and meet again in half an hour but Eddie was ready and waiting when Isobel stepped out of the lift in a fresh grey suit. She took one look at him. “Have you not changed, Eddie? Did you shower? Shave?”

Eddie rarely felt embarrassed but, in the last two days, Isobel had been finding some very sensitive areas in his conscience. “There wasn’t time,” he said. “And I need to organise some laundry,”

“So, have you done so?”

“I thought it was a bit late. I’ll do it in the morning.”

“And what will you wear tomorrow morning?” she spat. “Here, let me deal with it. Goodness me, Eddie, whatever next. And you are the one who constantly talks about setting standards. Where are your dirty things?”

“Other than what I’m wearing, on the floor in my room.”

She tutted and sighed, went to reception and then returned. “Right, go to your room, Eddie, place all the dirty clothes in the white laundry bag that you’ll find in the wardrobe and leave the bag outside your door.”

Eddie complied with the instructions and returned to find Isobel sitting near the reception desk. “I changed my shirt,” he said. “The other one was a little crumpled.”

She looked at him. “But so is that one, Eddie. You are an utter disgrace. If we are to renew your role as scientific adviser to Vital Cosmetics I think we will need to review the dress standards we set.”

Eddie sniffed like an admonished school boy.

They were eating pasta and tomato sauce in the restaurant when the Director of the Commercial Crimes Investigation Department, Datuk Abdul Rahim bin Hassan arrived in smart uniform, ribbons and badges. He was accompanied by another officer in equally pristine condition. Once introductions were complete, Isobel looked at Eddie as if to repeat her allegation that he was inappropriately dressed for such a meeting. Perhaps he was but when Eddie packed his bag he'd only been thinking about Krabok trees, Krabok nuts, forest trekking with Buss and perhaps a day or two with Mark Dobson's team.

They retired to a corner of the lobby, ordered coffee and Isobel described Vital Cosmetics. She explained Eddie's role as scientific adviser and his Professorship at Oxford. Being the guilty party, Eddie listened without interruption even when Isobel held up her hand to silence him.

Did the police Director know Jeffrey Lim, Isobel asked? Yes. Not well but yes. He knew Jeffrey was a private investigator who specialised in commercial crime and 'spied on businesses' for a UK company. He knew that Interpol had once got involved in a fraud case Jeffrey had worked on and they'd last met six months ago. Jeffrey had been investigating the source of counterfeit drinks for a Taiwanese company. He had no idea how it had ended.

"It hasn't ended," Eddie said jumping at the opportunity. "One thing leads to another."

"True," Isobel said but then took over again. "The counterfeiting appears to be part of a much wider fraud that includes shipping poor quality or contaminated raw materials to my company in UK. It was Professor Higgins who first made me aware of this."

Eddie nodded. "And we've since found evidence of credit card fraud, illegal logging of hardwoods, money laundering and other unpleasantness."

"And narcotics?" the Director asked as if this particular unpleasantness was only linked to Eddie.

"Which we've only just discovered," Eddie said.

"And then you were caught in possession of those narcotics at the airport," he replied as if he might now ask his assistant for a set of handcuffs

"In possession of an unidentified white powder," Eddie clarified.

"Which turned out to be a significant amount of an illegal hallucinogenic drug."

"Found in my jacket pocket," Eddie reminded him. "If I'd known what it was do you think I'd have handed it over to airport security along with my wallet, thirty pence in small change, a used train ticket, an old tissue and a bunch of keys?"

"Who gave you this drug?"

"I found it." Eddie looked pleadingly at Isobel but found she was staring at him with her big black eyes as if to say, over to you, my friend. "On the floor of a warehouse," he said.

"A warehouse?"

"Yes."

"And how many warehouses do you think we have in KL?"

Eddie decided that was a good question. It was also time to either assist with their enquiries or risk public arrest in the lobby of the Orange Premier, trial by whatever system they used in Malaysia and subsequently the rope or the firing squad. Not only that but the UK press might have a field day resurrecting Huggy and his previous conviction for obstruction.

“On the floor of the warehouse of Vital Cosmetic’s Malaysian distributor,” Eddie admitted.

Isobel nodded and looked at the Director. Perhaps she, too, had visions of unwelcome notoriety without first trying a modicum of honesty.

“And who is that?” he pressed. His assistant, was draining his coffee cup and nodding in admiration of the clever interrogation methods of his boss.

Eddie glanced at Isobel, took a deep breath and said: “A company called PJ Beauty Supplies, but it would, in my humble opinion, be a serious mistake for a hundred police to turn up with sirens blaring and red lights flashing to search the premises and arrest innocent Jimmy, the warehouse manager and delicate Bella the office manager while those responsible close the shop and fly to Moscow. “

At last the Director of the Commercial Crimes Investigation Department, Datuk Abdul Rahim bin Hassan nodded. He clearly felt he needed to delay action until he fully understood what was going on. Nevertheless, he also had to be seen to be doing something. “Do either of you have Jeffrey’s phone number?” he asked.

Isobel sighed and looked at him as if he was utterly incompetent. She checked her phone. “Here,” she said and Senior Malaysian Police Officer Datuk Abdul Rahim stood up, excused himself, went outside and called Jeffrey.

CHAPTER 44

The call to Jeffrey couldn’t have happened at a better time.

With Pascale waiting in a coffee shop in the city centre, Jeffrey was relaxing on a sofa in the office of the Mutiara Hotel’s Events and Marketing manager. He’d known Roger Tsui since providing a name of someone looking to hold a lavish wedding ceremony. That they’d chosen the Mutiara had been good for Roger and a commission would come Jeffrey’s way if he wished. Jeffrey had declined but the debt was still outstanding.

“You know my business, Roger,” he said. “It’s sensitive. It’s confidential. I don’t need money but you offered some help if ever I needed it.”

Roger had looked a little concerned at first. Sweaty private investigators who walked in off the street looking as if they hadn’t washed or shaved for a day or two but expecting favours were disconcerting however useful they’d been in the past.

“I need a room bugged,” Jeffrey went on. “I’ll sort it. I just need access to the room.”

“Ah. I see, lah. Bugged? You mean...? No, we can’t, lah. It’s not allowed. What room? Why?”

That's when The Director of the Commercial Crimes Investigation Department phoned.

Jeffrey stood up, phone clamped to his ear. "Yes, sir. It was me who called your office this morning when I heard what had happened at the airport...Yes sir, Baroness Isobel Johnson and Professor Eddie Higgins are clients of Asher & Asher. Yes, Baroness, sir. It's an honorary title sir ...yes, sir. Very high. Baroness is like 'Tun' sir, a title given to most-deserving persons who have made significant contributions to the nation, sir. She's a very important lady in UK political circles and related to the British Prime Minister I understand...Yes, sir. That is correct."

There was a long pause as the officer tried to understand a title awarded to a young woman. Malaysian titles were complicated enough but he'd never had to concern himself with English ones. He asked another question.

"That is correct, sir," Jeffrey replied, "I am responsible for the Malaysian side of the investigation. It is a highly complex one...Correct, sir. Naturally we plan to involve the Malay and Thai police and Interpol as soon as possible but do not want to jeopardise the investigation too early...Thank you for your understanding, sir."

Roger Tsiu stood up and beckoned to Jeffrey to ask if he wanted the room to himself for a while but Jeffrey waved at him to sit. It was much more useful for the Events and Marketing manager to listen in.

"Yes, sir. I am currently at the Mutiara Hotel in JB seeking their assistance...I will keep you closely informed. It is very likely we'll need your help in due course...the case is very large, sir, international - involving Interpol... yes, it is best if we can continue undercover at present... I'm sure you understand. Thank you, sir."

Jeffrey switched off. "That was the Director of the Commercial Crimes Investigation Department, Datuk Abdul Rahim bin Hassan," he said. "Now, can I rely on your co-operation?"

Roger nodded. "What is the name of the guest, Jeffrey?"

"Peter Lester. British. There may also be an Italian called Enzo Grassi."

"Ah yes, Mr Grassi. He is often here. He has work in Singapore I think. And Mr Lester?" He checked names on the computer. "Ah yes, My Lester was a guest here a month ago. They both checked in today. Mr Lester checked in fifteen minutes ago. One night only."

"I need each of them out of their rooms for twenty minutes or so."

"Ah. I see. How do...?"

"Phone Lester's room. Say something. Ask if the TV is working. Anything."

Roger phoned Lester's room. "Good evening sir. I'm just checking if everything is OK. The TV was fixed earlier. Is it now....?" The reply was an impatient grunt. Tsiu switched off and turned to Jeffrey. "He's in his room."

"Try Mr Grassi."

Enzo Grassi didn't answer. "I'll try the Polo Lounge. I think I saw him there earlier." He called the barman. "Yes, he's there."

"What are their room numbers?"

"Let me see. Yes. 321 and 429."

“Do you have master keys?”

It was nine thirty. To Jeffery it seemed unlikely the two would sit and talk in an open area. Most likely they'd go to one of the rooms. He returned to his car outside and grabbed two Colin Asher modified GSM listening devices with a built-in recorder that could be plugged into mains sockets. Dial the SIM card inside and listen directly or download what was on the recorder and the sound quality was usually excellent. He returned to Tsiu's office.

Enzo Grassi was still in the bar. This was the first time Jeffrey had seen him but he fitted Pascale's general description perfectly – longish grey hair, jeans, tee shirt and drinking beer. Jeffrey took the lift to floor four, found room 429, used the master key and found a suitcase on the floor but nothing inside worth checking. He looked for the best mains plug, one nearest the TV cable, plugged the device in and left.

Now for the tricky one. Lester. But he needn't have worried. From Roger Tsiu's office he saw Lester emerge from the lift and head for the Polo Lounge. If they were planning to sit and talk in there it ruined his plan. Nevertheless, he took the lift to the third floor, fitted the second device in room 321 and returned to his car. From there he called Pascale to join him.

They checked into a cheaper back street hotel near the Mutiara, ate in the street outside and waited.

CHAPTER 45

Sannan, working his usual Russian bar in Pattaya, brought Mark Dobson a bill for his bottle of green Fanta at 11pm, said he was finishing for the night and would wait outside.

Half an hour later they were standing within sight of the villa on Pratamnak Hill, where Sannan had been less than twenty for hours before. The white Toyota Camry had gone so someone now knew its driver had absconded with a complete set of keys. Was anyone already inside, waiting? They needed to know.

The ornate metal gate to the villa was typical of the area – a sliding one with a call button next to a post box. Sannan made the move. Dobson, sitting astride the motorbike on the street corner, watched him approach the gate and press the call button. Then he returned.

“There's a Thai woman inside. She was asleep. I think she's alone. I told her I'd made a mistake. Wrong villa. What now?”

“We go in anyway.”

They went around the back and found the usual pile of concrete rubble that Thai builders always left behind as a parting gift. Sannan used it to skim the six-foot-high wall. Dobson followed. A dim light shone behind vertical blinds in one of the back rooms. They moved to the front and, using the driver's bunch of keys, quietly opened the front door. There was no noise, no deathly scream, but the alarm was flashing. Sannan pressed the security numbers and the flashing stopped. The faint light shone beneath a door to the rear.

Sannan pointed, opened the door and shone his torch. There was a faint squeal as the woman resigned herself to rape or death and then it went quiet. Dobson looked in the door. Sannan had stuffed a pillow over her mouth and was tying her to a bar on the window with his belt. "Right," he said. "I need to talk to her."

"Go ahead."

He knelt down before her, shone the torch on his fake Thai Police card and started talking in Thai. Her wide, frightened eyes slowly grew less wide and she started to nod her head. Then he slowly undid the belt, removed the pillow case and she stared at Mark Dobson.

Dobson knew that the sudden appearance of a farang in suspicious circumstances had one of two effects on Thais – either they were utterly respectful and courteous or so scared they shot you. Whatever it was Sannan said – and Dobson suspected it was threat of arrest - this one was courteous. She stood, put her hands together before her face and bowed her head respectfully. She still looked nervous but they had full co-operation. Sannan translated.

"Her name is Noi. Chu, the Toyota driver is her part-time boyfriend. Olga and a Russian man were here this afternoon. They took the Toyota. Olga was angry. She wanted to know where Chu was but Noi didn't know. Officially, Noi is housekeeper. Russians come most days but never stay long. They only use the room that is locked. Noi doesn't have a key for that room. She's now nervous because she thinks she'll be arrested for not having the key. I told her it's no problem. I was in there last night. Now she's smiling. See? Thais smile a lot. She likes you."

"Good. Ask her which of the Russians come here."

"Olga, Yuri and Dimi."

Dobson assumed Dimi was Medinski. "Any others?"

"She has seen several other Russians and other farangs, not Russian. She doesn't know their names or where they came from."

Dobson produced some photos on his phone and she picked out Enzo and Peter Lester. "Ok, let's get started," he said. "And Noi is a witness. We need to protect her."

It was past 4am when they'd finished. Noi sat and watched. They cleaned up, locked the room, reset the alarm and locked the front door and gate. Sannan gave Noi enough cash to join Chu in Chiang Mai if she wanted to. Then he photographed her ID card, put her on the back of the motor bike and took her to the bus station. Mark Dobson took a taxi back towards Bangkok.

It was 5.30am when he woke the manager of the Bangwua Garden Resort at Bang Pakong to check in and wait for Sannan to join him. On the bed beside him in the dismal little room were three, full 7 Eleven plastic bags. It would take a while to sort them out but he already knew they'd hit the jackpot. Add that to Colin's hacking of the warehouse computer and whatever Jeffrey found out they would need to move fast. As he'd warned Ritchie, Eddie and Isobel, tipped off and scared, the key players would just disappear into the ether.

There was one unexpected and big advantage, though: Eddie's detention at the airport and what already looked like co-operation with the Malay police. To get the Thai police involved would only take a call from Sannan. Dobson called Colin Asher.

“What have you got?” Asher asked.

“Evidence of a credit card factory - a few blank and stolen credit cards, photos of a thermal printer and holograms. We couldn’t carry the safe away but I photographed the contents: gold ingots and jewellery. We’ve got a ring binder with information inside on numbered bank accounts in nearly every offshore island you can name together with access codes. I suppose such things can’t be entirely left to one person’s memory so why not keep them in kid’s writing in a Winnie the Pooh folder in a barely used villa with swimming pool in Pattaya?”

“Nice. But they’ll soon know it’s gone. Anything else?”

“Russian passports in several different names including two with photos inside that I swear look like Olga.”

“Anything else?”

“Invoices to Vital Cosmetics, Oxford from PJ Beauty Supplies in KL Invoices to Bio-Kal in Naples from Sara Enterprise, Bangkok. Invoices to Scatolifici Santo - which we think is SCAZ - in Trieste. And Invoices to fifty or more other unknown businesses from Hong Kong and Taiwan to France, Holland and everywhere in the Middle East. It’s probably false invoicing linked to money laundering, but we need help on what genuine prices should look like. And I’m still puzzling over the narcotics side.”

Asher paused, thinking. “Where’s Eddie?”

“He and Isobel are now friends with the Director of the Commercial Crimes Investigation Department.”

“Good move. And Jeffrey?”

“About to play back the contents of two bugs.” Dobson said. “And you, Colin? The last time we spoke you were going out for some overdue exercise.”

“Ah,” Colin Asher said, “I’m glad you asked. Your stuff is OK and no more than I’d expect from someone on your salary. Mine, on the other hand, is earth shattering.”

Despite the hour, Dobson couldn’t help smiling. “Do you want to share it?”

“You remember we decided to abandon investigating KRJ Capital as it was looking complicated and perhaps irrelevant? Well, looking inside Peter Lester’s home computer has made it a damned sight more relevant. Lester the Jester has other business in as many offshore places as your Russian friends. His wife’s KRJ Capital use one of them for their own purposes but Mr Lester has been branching out on his own. He has a company called Parklands Capital which has only one other co-director we can identify. Guess who? It’s one of the KRJ directors, the Italian, Maria Benelli. And when we explore that one, guess what? Maria Benelli is a director of Scatolifici Santo – which you think is SCAZ. And, wait for it, Maria Benelli is Enzo’s cousin. And Maria Benelli has another offshore company with a Russian called Maxim Novak and another with Valeri Pavlyuchenko. It’s incestuous. And who is Ritchie calling as soon as he turns up for work following his holiday in Bangkok? Maxim Novak.”

“Has Ritchie arrived?” Dobson asked, having lost track of time.

“Some hours ago,” Asher went on, “I told him to take a nap and be here at seven in the morning. It’s now nearly midnight.” He paused, “But I haven’t finished telling you about Lester the Jester yet.”

“Go ahead,” Dobson said, “What else?”

“He’s on medication. Depression. Anxiety. Stress.”

“It’s probably irrelevant.”

“Wasn’t KRJ once irrelevant?”

“True.”

“And then there are letters I found on Lester’s PC that come and go from your solicitor friend Garland and McCready of St Aldgate’s in Oxford. They appear to be acting on behalf of Isobel’s sister, Kathrine Elizabeth Johnson and concern divorce proceedings against Peter Lester. Would that not make you feel a bit stressed?”

“It would certainly add to things,” Dobson admitted. “I’m always so surprised how complicated other people’s lives are.”

“I know what you mean,” Asher replied. “I saw my ex by accident yesterday. She’s put on a hell of a lot of weight.”

Dobson said nothing, which was a pity considering Asher’s next comment. “And I’m meeting Keith later for a sandwich.”

“Keith? Keith Nolan? SIS Keith? Ritchie’s dad? For a sandwich? How did Keith get approval to take lunch with someone from the private sector? Are we paying?”

“Don’t be petty,” Colin Asher replied. “The important thing to ask is why.”

“Why?”

“Keith’s seconded to the NCA – the National Crime Agency.”

That surprised Dobson. “How convenient,” he said. “Our own Ritchie, cool and dark as the night on the front line with his talent-spotter father, his mentor in the back office.”

“Not so much back office, Mark. He’s out and about, suave and debonair. with a team of hero-worshipping, white bag-carriers. We live in seriously enlightened times. The first black James Bonds are not just around the corner but here already. What good movies that would make.”

“And serious competition, Colin. Should we change our name? James Bond and Son is a lot more eye-catching than Asher & Asher.”

CHAPTER 46

Jeffrey’s hidden sound recording bug triggered with a door being opened and shut, then a voice. “*Take a seat. You want a drink?*” Lester asked.

“*Any beer?*”

As Jeffrey and Pascale listened a few blocks away, there was a sound of the mini fridge being opened and a hiss as a can was opened just a metre or so from the bug.

“*Just the can,*” Enzo’s voice said as if Lester had offered him a glass. “*Chin chin.*”

There was more rattling, rustling and someone coughed. *"So, who the hell was it?"* Lester was talking as if continuing a discussion that had started in the Polo lounge. *"He was Italian I tell you."*

"I cannot believe that. But you forget his name?"

"I was in a hurry, I told you. But it was the same man, believe me. Roman described him. How did he know where I was? What's he doing? It's making me nervous, Enzo."

"It is nothing. Forget it. Maybe you told him where you were going. You forgot. Too stressed."

"I forget nothing Enzo. Jesus Christ. He even persuaded Roman to let him in the factory. To look around. Something is wrong."

"Mmm. I cannot believe."

"You better believe, Enzo. I'm nervous. And then two people came to the PJ office in KL. After I left. A man and woman. Old man and a well-dressed woman. I told Ho many times to get CCTV. Something's going on."

"No, no. You're too stressed. Calm it. And slow down on those pills."

There was silence for a few second. Then:

Enzo: *"So, when is the next shipment?"*

Lester: *"You need to ask Ho."*

Enzo: *"I don't trust Ho."*

Lester: *"And I don't trust Valeri."*

Enzo: *"Nor me."* A long pause. *"I think they'll close Trieste. That is my problem. They will move packaging to Croatia."*

Lester: *"But we still keep the trading. We can't lose that."*

Enzo: *"Ha."* It was as if he didn't believe it. *"How can you be sure? Mean bastards."* There was another silence broken by the sound of a can being put down on a hard surface. *"I told you, before, go slow on those pills. Just 'cause they're free."*

Lester: *"Fuck it. You get paid for France?"*

Enzo: *"No, they say wait. I don't trust Marcel. He's another bastard. A drunk French bastard."*

The sound changed as if Lester had moved further away. *"So, who the hell do you trust Enzo?"* It sounded mocking.

"Myself. Only myself." Perhaps Enzo also got up because the sound of his voice increased. *"This is a fucking Russian and Chinese business, Peter. We do the shipping the selling, the invoicing and then we pay them. If we don't pay them we get nothing. If we do pay them we still risk getting nothing. We take the risks. They take the money. They are bastards. You know how much I got for the last load of Go-Go Juice, Hot Ice and Dust? Less than half I expected. Why? You know how much it cost me to persuade the fucking customs at Trieste to let it through because that crazy Chinese Ho, the stupid bastard, forgot to send the analysis certificates for the coconut oil it was packed in? Twenty thousand Euros. I can't pass it on so I lose it."*

Enzo paused. *“And did you know I lost thirty thousand Euros of Ampicillin and Floxacillin from India because some bloody Thai in Bangkok made a mistake and customs confiscated it? I paid them but it cost them nothing. For them it was free. Why? Because Yuri’s gang got it free for threatening to expose the Thai gang importing the fake medicine.”*

Jeffrey looked at Pascale. *“So, that’s it. Amphetamines, drugs, narcotics and counterfeit medicines. And they’re packing it inside drums of oil for the cosmetics industry? And the oil is contaminated, low grade but priced like it was pure, top quality?”*

Pascale nodded but didn’t reply. The recording was still running and Enzo was talking.

“And fucking Red Power is another one. They sell direct to China which is the big one, but for Italy I have to buy from them, reserve them a commission and pay that into one of their banks.”

Lester spoke but he was starting to repeat himself and the words sounded slurred as if he was drunk. *“Believe me, I know how they work. Work. I set, set, up most of their Middle East business for the Indian mm....medicine. It was good business for a while but now the, they, they go direct. And I got big trouble with Vital. I’ve been thinking a lot. Maybe it’s time to jump. Jump. Make a break. You know? I’ve got the contacts now. Net, networks. So, have you. Maybe I don’t need Vital and you don’t need Bio-Kal. Close it. Go s-s-s solo. Work together.”*

There was a long pause punctuated by the sound of a glass bottle on a hard surface as if Enzo was thinking, considering things. Then: *“And how does my rich cousin Maria fit into that?”* he asked.

It was Lester’s turn to pause and Enzo seemed to lose patience. *“Well?”*

“Maria?” Lester asked.

“Yeh, you heard? You and Maria. You still got it together? Only I’ve not heard either of you mention anything for a while. Where the hell is she, Peter? Oxford? Trieste? Singapore?”

Listening-in a block way, Jeffrey nudged Pascale. *“Who’s Maria? Italian?”* Pascale shrugged, but then neither of them yet knew what Colin Asher had found on Lester’s home computer.

“Maria?” Lester repeated yet again as if stalling and unsure what to say next. *“A few problems. Personal ones, you know.”*

“Che cazzo, Fuck. So why don’t I know?” Enzo said crossly. *“I warned you. I warned her. Business and private should be separate. Manache! Hell and fuck! Don’t you realise? Jesus, what a fucking mess. Maria and Maxim Novak and Medinski and Olga are in it together. Upset Maria and you upset Maxim and that upsets me. Have you forgotten? Maria runs SCAZ. SCAZ is my source and your source. No SCAZ means no business. Santo Cazzo Madre di Cristo.”*

Noises in the background suggested Enzo was walking around. One minute it was loud, next minute soft. What Lester was doing was difficult to imagine. But then Enzo struck something hard like a table. Then he shouted. *“Fuck. That’s it. The Italian. Tall. Black hair? Fancy gold watch?”*

Lester: *"The g - g guy I met? The g – g - guy Roman met?"*

Enzo: *"Si., si. That's old man Perillo's son. I thought he was back in USA."*

Lester: *"But that's not who called at Pee, pee J Beauty Supplies. That man was old and grey haired and the woman was smart, B – B - Bella said. Very smart. Her name was Josephine from - what was it? - Beau Cosmetics in London. I've never, uh, heard of them. The old man was the, uh, tech - technical adviser."*

Enzo: *"What was his name?"*

Lester: *"Uh, Higgin something."*

It was Lester's turn to shout from Lester and it far exceeded Enzo's effort.

"Oh, my Christ. That's Lady bloody Isobel and the old dog, Higgins. When I ph - phoned Don McVie at Vital this morning no-one knew where she was."

There was a noise of scrabbling as if Lester was packing a case, rushing around, panicking. *"We gotta move, Enzo."* He shouted.

Enzo: *"Where, man? Calm down. Think. Che cazzo dici? Maybe it wasn't Perillo's son. Maybe it wasn't the people you know."*

Lester: *"Something's going on, I don't like it. And you're telling me Valeri's not happy. Why is he not happy?"*

Enzo: *"Problems in Bangkok and Pattaya. Thai staff run away like they're scared or know something. It makes the Russians nervous. It's nothing. Ignorarlo!"*

They were quiet for a while until Enzo spoke again, *"Any more beer in there?"*

"Help your - self. I'm ch - checking out."

"Checking out? What now? It's midnight."

"In the morning. I'm f – f- finished here. And, anyway, Maxim wants to see me in London. They've found a guy with money to put into the business. Maybe I can offload some of the s - stress."

Another silence followed until Enzo spoke again, softer this time. *"So, you want to go alone? Fuck the Russians? Keep the profits rolling in the right direction?"*

There was no reply from Lester. Maybe he was pondering on how utterly complicated the whole business had become and, making his life even more depressing, was the divorce. The recording went quiet. Voices were lower as if they'd moved away. A door then closed. Enzo, it seemed, had gone and Jeffrey pulled the USB plug on the bug he'd placed in Lester's room. *"Let's try Enzo's,"* he said.

The bug in Enzo's room was triggered by the door closing, then the flushing of the toilet. There was shuffling, the sound of walking around, then the TV was switched on: Malaysian TV, a change of channels to Singaporean, BBC, Chinese, CNN. Then there was a noise like a chair being dragged and Enzo spoke for the first time. *"Merda!"*

There was a loud noise from the bug. It was battery charged so still worked even when pulled from the mains plug, but that was clearly what Enzo had just done. *"Cazzo! Merda! Dispositivo di ascolto."*

"He's found the bug," Pascale said.

Jeffrey nodded. "Pity. Colin will need to make another."

"What can Enzo do with it?"

"Nothing without the software and, anyway, we've recorded everything."

If Enzo thought that by unplugging it from the mains, it wouldn't work he was mistaken. There was a short delay before he spoke on his phone. "Peter. Check the fucking plug under your TV. My room's been bugged." There was a short silence. "Si, si. Looks like a - what you call it? - that's it. A fucking listening device. Someone's bugged our rooms."

Less than a few blocks away Jeffrey looked at Pascale. "Ah well," he said resignedly "They won't know who fixed them and might even blame the Russians, but we've got our evidence. Lester sounds like a man on the edge of a nervous breakdown."

Mark Dobson had just finished talking to Colin Asher when Jeffrey phoned. He told him to upload the recordings so Colin could decide if it was enough to start formal action in the UK. Keith Nolan was the ideal starting point.

"So, what now, boss?" Jeffrey asked.

"Keep a check on Lester and Enzo and talk to your friend, Datuk Abdul Rahim. Play him the recordings but don't give any names. See how he takes it. We still don't want things compromised by clumsy police action. If in doubt, ask him to call me."

It was 6.30am when Sannan arrived at the Bangwua Garden Resort in Bang Pakong. A low, red sun was making its way up into a clear, pale blue sky streaked with high, pink clouds. Mark Dobson had just finished discussing Ritchie's father with Colin Asher.

"Have you eaten?" Sannan asked perching on the end of Dobson's bed.

"Not recently. You?"

"Not recently. Are we staying here or moving to Bangkok?"

Dobson wasn't sure. In reality he needed an hour or so of quiet reflection but his stomach was demanding priority. They left and walked into the town following an aroma of barbecued chicken. The source turned out to be a motorcycle and side car fitted with a charcoal fire throwing clouds of smoke into the morning air. The owner of this early morning eatery also served drinks so they chose green Fanta and ate breakfast sitting on the kerbside alongside the vendor.

During mouthfuls Dobson gave Sannan a summary of Jeffrey's overnight discoveries. "So, it's drugs hidden inside raw materials for the cosmetics industry," Sannan suggested.

"That's part of it," he said just as his phone rang. He pulled it from his pocket with greasy fingers. "Eddie."

"Good morning, Mark. I hope you slept well. A lovely morning here in Kuala Lumpur. How's the weather in Bangkok?"

"Looking good so far," Dobson said pulling on a chicken bone with his teeth.

"You'll be pleased to hear that I have been released from detention and am raring to go again."

“Good news. And the after effects of your experiment with narcotics?”

“Fully recovered, thank you, and my thinking as clear as a bell and benefitting from a good night’s sleep. I’d recommend a sniff of Angel Dust for anyone with blocked sinuses but not for the hallucinations. At one point I was convinced I could fly back to England just by flapping my arms.”

“Where’s Isobel?”

“Probably preparing herself to face the world. That could take until this afternoon. She has a suitcase with enough clothing for a world cruise and enough cosmetics to fill the shelves of Selfridges. Did you know she uses a pot of something called Regenerist 3-point Treatment Cream Fragrance Free which is available for a mere £29.99 a pot. Alternatively, you might prefer to donate £29.99 to provide a Kenyan family with enough food for a month or put one of their children through secondary school pending a University place. By the way, the word ‘regenerist’ doesn’t exist so how can a company sell something that doesn’t actually exist?”

“You sound in excellent form, Eddie. A day spent talking yourself out of the death penalty has done you a power of good.”

“I agree. What should I do next?”

“Make sure Isobel is with you, then ask Jeffrey to play the recording of Peter Lester and Enzo sharing private thoughts in Johor last night. Then return to Bangkok. We’re making progress but things are not over yet.”

CHAPTER 47

“Two hours on the office floor,” Colin Asher replied when Mark Dobson asked if he’d managed to get any sleep. “It’s enough. Just because you’re swanning around in Asia nothing stops in the Asher & Asher office. But I’ve postponed my meeting with Keith Nolan until we’re both free – it’s dinner instead of lunch.”

“I thought Pret a Manger closed at 8pm.”

“It does but the pubs are open. The point is, buddy, I’ve been waiting for an excuse to meet Isobel’s sister, Kathrine at KRJ Capital. She’s been in Florida but is due back soon. Before I venture out to see her, do you want my current thoughts pieced together over the last few days?”

“Go ahead.”

“KRJ began ten years ago offering offshore investment and banking for wealthy overseas individuals. Kathrine Johnson, Peter Lester, Michael Jefferson and Maria Benelli joined forces each bringing with them customers, contacts and experience. Eight staff run it in London so it’s not big and everything seems above board, properly registered, fully regulated, above suspicion etcetera. Only Kathrine Johnson spends any time on it. Michael Jefferson is semi-retired from banking and Peter Lester does what he does. Maria Benelli, though, has property and hotels in Italy and, coincidentally, Croatia. Kathrine and Peter Lester separated a few years ago but divorce proceedings are long winded – it’s probably a financial mess. Neither seems in a hurry. Next up, we’d not seen any mention of Maria Benelli being

involved with Lester until Jeffrey's recordings last night and there's nothing on Lester's PC to suggest it, which makes me think Lester has been covering his tracks and Kathrine isn't aware.

"We've since looked into Maria Benelli and, yes, she's a distant cousin of Enzo but so distant I wonder if Enzo even knew about her until it became important for him to know. My conclusion is that Enzo is being manipulated by others. He's a nothing, for God's sake, a football fan from a low-cost housing area of Naples whose job was to run the old Bio-Cal warehouse, but I think he was plucked out of obscurity and seduced by money because someone was looking for a small, innocent looking business linked to the cosmetics industry to act as a front for money-laundering, narcotics, counterfeiting and other frauds. Still with me?"

"Yes."

"Now then – not many people know this, but Maria Benelli is the daughter of Franco Benelli a disgraced Italian lawyer with past links to Italian Mafia who married a much younger Russian woman ten year ago and now lives a quiet life sunning himself beside swimming pools in Dubai. His Russian wife was or maybe still is, Olga Puchkov or Olga Mutko or even Margo Puhkov. Getting the messy picture?"

"That Olga?"

"It looks like it, but let's now go back to Vital Cosmetics. Did you know Vital Cosmetics Ltd actually imports its raw materials using a shipping company, a freight forwarder, registered as Vital Trading Ltd? Has Isobel mentioned that?"

"No," Dobson admitted, "And Vital Trading Ltd didn't show up in any of the research we did."

"An understandable oversight since Vital Trading Ltd uses the trade name 'Easy Trading'. Isobel has only ever mentioned Easy Trading of Wallingford, Oxfordshire as their sole importer. She, and we, took that at face value and never looked into Easy Trading. However, those with an above average suspicious mind to delve deeply – and, by that, I mean yours truly - will discover that the directors of Vital Trading Ltd, aka Easy Trading, are - wait for it - Peter Lester, Nick Carstairs, Boris Hamilton and Donald McVie. "

"Oh, my giddy aunt," said Mark Dobson. "I reckon you've just earned yourself a double-deck Pret a Manger, Colin. "

"Ha. And that explains the reaction to Isobel's proposals at the last Vital Cosmetics Board meeting. They were getting scared that Isobel was digging too deep. They've been relying on a hands-off, just-get-on-with-it-boys type of company Chairman who was part of the family, took her annual dividend, said thank you very much and didn't ask questions."

"Yep," agreed Dobson. "So, in short, Vital Cosmetics is being ripped off by its own directors. Eddie was right all along. Vital Cosmetics buys substandard raw materials from Easy Trading and is being used to launder big money. It's clever."

"Go careful, Mark. We've not yet got proof of laundering but if someone complained about Vital Cosmetics products and a scandal started, a solution was easy - issue a quick apology about a temporary lapse, close the company down in an apparently honourable fashion and focus on the company that would never get that sort of public scrutiny - Easy Trading aka Vital Trading Ltd. The directors can shrug and

carry on as usual – unless one of the other directors of Vital Cosmetics, the chairman in fact, starts asking awkward questions. “

“It begs the question how many other companies like Vital Cosmetics who import via Vital Trading are also being exploited.”

“You’re right. Vital Cosmetics might not be alone but you can bet your last dollar it’s the biggest because it’s been the easiest to exploit.”

Mark Dobson was still trying to digest all this but things suddenly became much clearer.

“It seems to me,” he said to Colin Asher, “that the Russian side is behaving like a giant international corporation with numerous subsidiaries. Vital Trading is one, Bio-Kal is another. That’s why Lester and Enzo were comparing notes. They were feeling exploited and wondering what to do.”

“And are Nick Carstairs, Boris Hamilton and Donald McVie aware of the depth of the scam?” Asher asked. “Do they turn a blind eye? Do they shrug uninterestedly at whatever Lester gets up to?”

“They must know something,” Dobson replied. “But unless there is no obvious evidence of money laundering, narcotics, credit card fraud, human trafficking, counterfeiting and all the rest of it, and as long as the director’s fees keep getting paid, they sit back, sign a set of decent-looking accounts at the end of each year and carry on.”

“That’s it,” Colin Asher said. “But it’s easy to see why Peter Lester is feeling a bit stressed.”

CHAPTER 48

Mark Dobson met Isobel and Eddie off the plane from KL and they shared a taxi to the Hotel in Lat Krabang.

On the way, Dobson asked Isobel for her thoughts on Peter Lester after she’d heard the recording made in Johor Bahru. “I was not surprised,” she said calmly. “It just adds weight to my feeling we have a problem with him.”

Dobson, sitting in the front seat, leaned over to face her. “There’s much more than that, now,” he said. Isobel raised her dark eyebrows and frowned. “Easy Trading,” he added.

“Yes?” Isobel replied. “What about them? They are import agents. We’ve used them for several years. They’re local, based in Wallingford.”

“Did you know that Easy Trading is the trading name for a company registered as Vital Trading Ltd?”

Isobel looked askance. “Is that just a co-incidence?”

“No. Peter Lester is a director.”

“Ah, I see.”

She was letting it sink but Dobson didn't give her time. "The other directors of Vital Trading Ltd are Nick Carstairs, Boris Hamilton and Donald McVie. "

Eddie sat forward and Isobel's hand shot up to cover her red lips. "Oh my God," she said. "I didn't know."

"Neither did we until Colin went back over our past research."

"So, they are all involved?"

"Let's say they have an interest in continuing to use Easy Trading as your sole importer." He paused. "When we get to the hotel there's much more to discuss, Isobel." But with the taxi stuck, unmoving, in a traffic jam he couldn't wait. He turned around again. "Take me back six years," he said, "to when your sister, Kathrine, bought what was then Vitality Hand Creams. Who was that company's import agent?"

Isobel, still coming to terms with other directors being involved, struggled to remember. "When I joined I remember everyone referring to them as Easy Trading," she said. "They still do and I have never felt it necessary to question it."

"That explains the problem with your raw materials," Eddie calmly said from the back seat. "And the apathy and reluctance to answer questions."

Eddie was right, but Mark Dobson didn't want to pursue that right now. He changed direction. "Why did Kathrine ask you to become Chairman?"

"She was concerned that if I didn't Peter would."

"Was Kathrine concerned about Peter?"

"They weren't getting on well. They constantly argued about business. On the day Kathrine sold me the bulk of her shares I also became company chairman."

Dobson hadn't known that, but it was important. "Was Kathrine trying to edge Peter out of the company and reduce his influence?"

Isobel thought about that. "Probably," she admitted.

"They live separately, yes?"

"I believe so."

"Do you not talk to your sister?"

"Not often."

Mark Dobson turned away leaving Eddie and Isobel sitting silently behind him. The taxi driver, bored by the slow-moving traffic, was listening to something on his headphones. A minute later, Dobson felt a tap on his shoulder.

"Mark," Isobel said quietly, leaning forward. "In the recording, Peter mentions Maria and Enzo refers to her as his cousin. Who is Maria?"

"Maria?" Dobson repeated. "Maria Stephanie Benelli is a director of your sister's company, KRJ Capital. She is also a director of a company called Parklands Capital which has only one other director, Peter Lester. She is also a director of Scatolifici Santo in Trieste, which we believe is SCAZ, the Russian mafia-run company in Bangkok. It's unlikely Kathrine knows any of this."

"Oh my God," Isobel said. Eddie shook his head. Mark Dobson continued.

“Maria Benelli is Enzo Grassi’s distant cousin and Maria Benelli has other offshore companies with Maxim Novak, Valeri Pavlyuchenko and probably other Russians. The one we know as Olga is also involved somehow. And of course, Maria Benelli and Peter Lester were, and perhaps still are, involved on a much more personal basis. An affair is the word that comes to mind.”

Isobel and Eddie fell back into their rear seats. Dobson turned. “You should talk to your sister, Isobel. We’re reaching a crunch point but it’s not over yet.”

The taxi began to move at last, heading east along Lat Krabang Road towards the Survanabhumi Hotel. That’s when Mark Dobson’s phone rang again. It was Jeffrey. He listened, switched off and then turned to the back seat.

“The Police have just raided PJ Beauty Supplies,” he said. “They’ve arrested Ho Chiang and detained Bella Tong and Jimmy. Jeffrey has pleaded with the police to keep things low key for a while for the case to build or these criminals will realise things are going wrong and scatter.”

Eddie piped up. “Quite right. If you scatter thorns don’t walk in bare feet,” he said as if a short piece of profound philosophy was called for at that moment. “And Jimmy’s innocent,” he added as if the warehouseman was an old and dear friend.

Isobel shot him a look. “Have the Malay police spoken to the Thai Police?” she asked.

“They wouldn’t say,” Dobson replied. “I suspect there may have been some high-level contact but the Thais have nothing to act on until we produce something. Ritchie and Colin still have things to do and Sannan and I have three, full 7 Eleven plastic bags to sort through. When we’re ready we’ll deal with the Thai side. Meanwhile I think you should both return to the UK.”

CHAPTER 49

Ritchie arrived outside the Asher & Asher office on Edgware Road just before 7am. He pressed the security code buttons at street level, climbed the bare wooden stairs to the third floor and opened the door to the warmth and smell of computer servers and electronics. Ching was staring at two computer screens. She looked up, said nothing, pointed behind the partition and carried on.

Behind the screen was Colin Asher, dishevelled, hair on end, staring at another bank of screens from an ancient swivel chair padded with a flattened old cushion. The table was covered with screwed up paper balls, photographs and greasy old, sandwich wrappers. Around his bare feet were three overflowing bins. The wall was covered in Post-It notes and bulldog clips holding wads of printed paper. Asher himself was scratching his ear with the end of a cheap ball pen but didn’t look up.

Ritchie looked around. There was nowhere to sit so he returned to Ching’s side, dragged Else’s vacant chair back around the partition and sat down. After a full minute of silence, he yawned loudly.

“Jet lag catching up with you, Ritchie?” Colin Asher asked without taking his eyes off the screen.

Green numbers were flowing down both screens like a waterfall until Asher hit the keyboard. Then everything stopped. More keys were pressed and the screen did something spectacular. A photograph appeared – a passport-type head shot of a dark haired, slightly balding man staring ahead with wide eyes. Another key was hit and the screen showed the immigration queue of an airport with a sign: ‘Border Control’. Asher leaned forward moved the mouse and the screen enlarged and focussed in on someone standing in the queue. A man wearing an overcoat, pulling a bag on wheels and holding something in his hand.

Ritchie coughed.

“Dry throat, Ritchie?”

Ritchie leaned back with his hands behind his head and the chair creaked. The screen changed, the man was now being viewed from a different angle. It beamed in on his face and the passport photo appeared next to it with dots and criss-crossed lines. Asher leaned in, closer still.

“There you are,” he said without looking up. “There’s the man who likes to be known as Maxim Novak - though whether that’s his birth name or not no-one knows. It doesn’t matter for now because he’s just used the Maxim Novak passport to fly from Zagreb, Croatia to Heathrow Airport Terminal 2. Note the limp, the stick and the nose. He’s probably broken it sometime. He’s also got eyes that look in two different directions so don’t tell me you won’t recognise him. We’ll now follow him on CCTV as far as possible though he’ll probably head for Wimbledon. He has a nice house on Lambourne Avenue currently on the market at a mere £7.25 million. Join his club, Ritchie, and you too can afford such luxuries, although if it was me I’d knock down the spiral staircase leading to the seven en-suite bedrooms. It’s so, seventies. Know what I mean? How are you, young man?”

He still hadn’t looked at Ritchie so Ritchie spoke to the reflection in the screen. “Knackered, but feeling good.”

“Good man. Did Mark give you the interesting facts about Vital Trading Ltd of Wallingford, Oxfordshire being behind Easy Trading, the Vital Cosmetic’s import agent, and the even more interesting names of the company’s directors?”

“He called me.”

“Good, so no point in me going over it again. While you wait for Novak or whatever his name is to call you, Ching’s going to continue your in-house training with a beginner’s guide to phone and computer hacking.”

“Not AshHack317, 318 and 319, is it, Colin? I’m so excited. I’ve been so looking forward to that.”

“No, no. We’ll move straight onto the much improved AshHack 320 if that’s alright, Ritchie. No point in wasting time with outdated software. Now go and see Ching. I’m busy.”

It was midday when Ritchie’s phone buzzed with a text message. He excused himself from Ching’s demonstration of how to hack Holiday Inn hotel guest lists, picked it up and read it: “Mr Magic. Meet outside East Putney Tube Station at 14.00 today.”

“I’ve got to go,” he told Ching, but a voice came from around the partition.

"Where is it, Ritchie?"

"East Putney Tube Station."

"That figures," Asher said appearing from behind the partition and looking at Ritchie for the first time. "Just up the line from Wimbledon. Before you rush off, I've got you a present. I hope you like it."

He handed Ritchie a big bundle of cloth which, when Ritchie shook it out, turned out to be an old navy-blue anorak. "I used to wear it every day," he said. "It's warm and waterproof but it shrank at the dry cleaners. It also smells a bit mouldy but should fit you nicely."

"That's very kind Colin but do I really need it?"

"Entirely up to you, young man. Discard it if you want to but there's a tracking device inside the toggle which we'll follow. If you're shot whilst wearing it at least we'll be able to find your body."

"Very thoughtful, Colin. I suppose it'll keep the rain off. The furry lining inside the hood is so seventies, though."

"That's the spirit. If it wasn't raining you could have borrowed my tartan beanie. Now then. A last-minute instruction. This came from Mr Dobson so don't blame me."

Asher didn't say what the instruction was immediately. Instead he scratched his ear with his pen and Ritchie lost patience. "So, what's the last-minute instruction?"

"Keep up the act."

"Is that it?"

"That's it. Oh, and he told me to tell you he's taking someone called On out for dinner tonight at a nice restaurant in Bangkok so don't call him until the morning."

"The bastard," said Ritchie. "I'll see you later I suppose."

"Barring disasters," Asher said following him downstairs. He opened the door onto Edgware Road for him and then put an arm around his shoulder. "We're not far away, Ritchie. Keep up the good work." Then he shut the door.

It was overcast and raining in south west London when Ritchie arrived at East Putney Tube Station. Unsure whether he was expecting to meet a train passenger, a car or even a taxi, Ritchie waited in the shelter beside the coffee shop. At 2.20pm a black Mercedes drove slowly past. At 2.25 it returned and stopped by the roadside and a short, squat, middle-aged man in a dull, brown suit got out and came over.

"It eez Mr Magic?" he asked.

Ritchie shook his head. "Na. Wrong person, mate." The man looked puzzled. He walked back towards the Mercedes, took a phone from his jacket pocket, pressed buttons, waited and then spoke to someone. Ritchie watched. The man returned.

"It eez Mister Meeky. Meeky Parker?"

"That's better, mate. Who the fuck is Mr Magic I've never heard of him."

"Sorry. Eez a problem wid ze communication." he said in an accent that Ritchie knew he could easily imitate.

“OK, what’s the schedule, my man? Don’t waste any more my time, OK? But with this weather it’s lucky I brought my coat with the hairy tit fer tat, ain’t it?”

Brown Suit, with his short legs and around five feet five, looked up at Ritchie. He hadn’t understood, of course. “Yah, we go see da boss. You know him I zink.”

“Never met the geezer, mate. Only the supporting staff. Where is the old bugger?”

“Get in ze car.”

Ritchie tried getting in but the front passenger seat had been pushed so close to the dashboard he couldn’t. He pushed it back to its furthest setting. “Who sat here, before me? A dwarf?”

“Boss have ze dog, sit on ze seat.”

“Nice. What’s the dog’s name?”

“Maximllian.”

“Very good,” Ritchie said as if delighted. “Million-dollar Maxim with a dog called Maxi Million.”

“Yah, it eez good.” Brown Suit replied as Ritchie now saw white dog hairs everywhere and could smell wet dog as well as stale cigarette smoke. “Where are you taking me?”

“There,” Brown Suit said stabbing the sat-nav with a short, fat middle finger.

“And where is that? I like to know where I’m going, you see.”

Brown Suit switched the wipers on, peered through the windscreen at the rain and then said, “Hi Vickum.”

“Never heard of it. Could it be High Wycombe?”

“OK, eez the same. Then ve pass Hi Vickum.”

“I’d have found it a lot easier to meet on Finchley Road but I’ll leave it to you, mate.”

Ritchie pulled off his damp anorak, lay it on the floor, plucked off a tuft of white dog hairs and made sure the toggle on the hood cord was on top. Then he looked at Brown Suit. “So, now I know the dog’s name what’s yours?”

“Erik.”

“Well, never mind. None of us get asked for opinions at that age.”

Ritchie noticed a square pattern of bright blue threads woven into the cloth of Erik’s brown suit. He felt the material of the sleeve. “Nice cloth,” he said. “You buy it in Russia?”

“Zagreb,” Erik said, pushing strands of pale ginger hair from his greasy, round forehead. He then loosened his chocolate brown tie from around the collar of his beige shirt. “Smoke?” he said fishing for a packet of cigarettes and a lighter from deep inside his jacket pocket.

“No thanks, but don’t mind me,” Ritchie said looking out of his side window to hide the disgust on his face.

The M40 London to Oxford motorway was a road that Ritchie remembered only too well from his training day with Mark Dobson and Erik’s sat-nav took them past High

Wycombe as if Oxford was where they were heading. But then Erik turned off the M40 and also switched off the satnav.

“So, you know the way, now, Erik?” Ritchie asked noticing a sign for Wallingford.

“Sure, sure.”

They didn’t speak again until they entered Wallingford and took the old stone bridge over the River Thames. Two white swans sailed peacefully by underneath and three ducks flew overhead before skid-landing on the water. Despite the grey sky and cold drizzle, the scene looked innocent and tranquil enough but Ritchie’s thoughts were on Vital Trading, Easy Trading and Vital Cosmetics.

They turned left following the river and then slowed. “Eez here.”

Erik slowed and turned through an open gate onto a gravel driveway that led to a large, red brick bungalow surrounded by lawns and mature trees. Beyond the house was the river. “Eez here.”

“Nice,” Ritchie said. “You been here before, Erik?”

“Yah. Please come.”

Ritchie got out, stretched and yawned to look casual. He looked around. The rain had stopped and he wondered about his anorak, but it was a tracking device not a recording device like the one he’d used in Bangkok. He decided it could stay on the floor of the Mercedes.

“Come.”

Erik led him along the gravel pathway. A grey and black Range Rover was parked at the side. Erik pressed a brass button to the left of a big front door and then stood back as the door opened slowly. It was Olga.

Ritchie’s heart stopped momentarily.

“Micky!” Olga stepped outside onto the door mat. “Welcome.”

“Yeh,” Ritchie said trying to conceal his horror. “Well. That’s a surprise.”

“Yah. Surprise eh? Come in, come in.” She pulled him by the sleeve of his blue shirt into a hallway bare of any furniture except a black leather armchair tucked in the corner beneath a window. “Come. I give big hug? Like Russian bear, huh?” And Olga’s arms wrapped around him almost lifting him off the parquet flooring

Ritchie tried to grin. “Well, well. Olga sweetie. Fancy that. When did you arrive?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it was last night.”

“We get around, huh? You and me.”

“Sure, sure.”

“It must have been the white vapour trail from your plane that we followed from Bangkok. I said to myself somewhere over Kazakhstan, I reckon Olga’s in that plane. up front. I can smell her perfume.”

“You joke too much Micky. Come. Sit down. Drink? Vodka?”

A cup of tea would have been nice but Ritchie said, “Why not. But mustn’t overdo it. A pint will do.”

“Ha Ha. Come.”

She led him into another sparsely furnished room – bare, wooden floors, a long, black five-seater sofa and two black leather armchairs around a glass-topped coffee table with a full ashtray and rings of dried coffee or, more likely, beer and vodka. One wall was made of exposed red brick surrounding an empty fire place and chimney. Wide French windows looked out onto a poorly maintained patio with weeds. More trees and a lawn of long grass crying out for a gardener with a mower sloped right down to the riverside. It could have been delightful but it wasn't. It was cold, spartan and didn't look lived in.

Olga disappeared somewhere and Ritchie thought he heard the car leaving with Erik, meaning he was alone with Olga. He sat in the middle of the long sofa but sensed it was a mistake. She returned with a bottle of Smirnoff and two full glasses, put the bottle and her pink-covered iPad on the table, sat beside him and handed him a glass.

"Yah, chin-chin, Micky. How you say?" She was well made up, Olga style. Puffed up hair. Red lips, red nails, red shirt and a white skirt that was too short for her build.

"Ah, that tastes good," Ritchie said. "Not had a drop for two days. How are you sweetie? What a surprise. Bottoms-up and all that. I was expecting to meet Mr Novak."

Olga lay back and slid the wet rim of the vodka glass across her lips. "He come soon. You relax, Micky. Put feet up, no?"

"You come here often?"

"Sometimes." Olga crossed her legs and the skirt rose way above her big knees. Then she swept a hand through her thick mop of hair. "It is a - what you say? – a company house. Nice, huh? Can go fishing. Can have boat all the way to London. A top up?"

"No rush. When's Maxim coming?"

She looked at her big watch. "Soon. He very look forward to meet you. I tell him many thing - I say Micky this, Micky that. Since I see you first time at Peacock I say to him this man Micky he have good idea, good spirit." She touched his arm with her red finger nails, draped her arm across the back of the sofa and edged her thighs towards his. Then her phone rang. She picked it up.

"Dah? OK." She switched off. "Five minutes. Sooner than I expect. Never mind." Without asking she topped up Ritchie's glass.

Two minutes later Ritchie heard a car and the crunch of tyres on gravel. The Mercedes was back. "This him I think. You wait." Olga got up and went out.

Ritchie needed somewhere to put the vodka but there was nowhere except back in the bottle so he unscrewed it and tipped most of it back in. Then he heard voices. Amongst them was an English accent.

CHAPTER 50

Soon after Ritchie had left, Colin Asher looked out of the only window in the Asher & Asher office, saw it was still raining and grabbed his umbrella “I’m going out for an hour or so,” he told Ching. “Else is due in shortly but meanwhile, you’re in charge. Hold the fort.”

Asher’s destination was a block of luxury apartments overlooking the Thames at Greenwich, so he took a cab from Edgware Road. The brand-new silver BMW 5 series that hadn’t been there three days ago was back, so he went up to the glass-fronted entrance, pressed the button for apartment 3 and waited.

“Hello,” said the woman’s voice.

“Miss Johnson?”

“Yes.”

“My name’s Colin Asher. I’m a private international fraud investigator representing your sister, Isobel.” He held up a business card to the video doorbell and waited. “Do you have a few minutes to talk in private?”

“I see. Is it about Isobel?”

“It’s about Vital Cosmetics which you have a minority share in.”

“Is something wrong?”

“If there was nothing wrong I wouldn’t be here, Miss Johnson, but it would be much better to discuss it face to face.”

“I see. OK, you’d better come up.”

There was a click from the door and Asher walked into a glitteringly white and spacious hallway with potted plants and a tall palm tree that rose to the skylight. He took the lift to the first floor, rang the bell to number 3 and was invited into a spacious sitting room with white furniture, a glass panelled balcony and a panoramic view of the river. Kathrine Johnson was a slim, attractive, forty-something woman with short blonde hair who, although he had still not met Isobel in person, looked nothing like the pictures he’d seen of her sister. She wore tight, black jeans and a white shirt and padded around in soft slip-on sandals that made no sound on the shiny woodblock floor. He was invited to sit in a soft white leather sofa. Kathrine sat opposite him across a glass topped coffee table holding a vase of fresh, delicately perfumed freesias. It was nice but Colin Asher never really dressed for places like this. He’d left the dripping umbrella in a stand by the lift but his shoes, his hair and the bottoms of his trousers felt uncomfortably wet.

“So,” she said taking his card. “Asher & Asher. International. Commercial fraud. Vital Cosmetics. What’s this all about?”

“It might take a while,” Asher said.

She waved the concern away with a hand that flashed blue, sparkly nail varnish. “You’re lucky. I flew back from Florida last night so I’ve given myself the day off. Tea? Coffee?”

Dobson declined. “It’s about your husband, Peter,” he said.

Kathrine stood up. “Oh Christ,” she said with her arms folded across her chest. “What now?”

“I understand you’re separated “

“Yes.”

“How long?”

“It happened. Gradually. Over the years. Why?”

“Vital Cosmetics was formed from a company you bought originally called Vitality Hand Creams. Correct?”

Kathrine nodded. “Peter’s great idea, not mine.”

Asher hadn’t known that but it was interesting and it fitted. “Peter now owns thirty three percent of Vital Cosmetics, Nick Carstairs has twenty percent, Boris Hamilton has ten percent and Isobel has thirty percent since you sold her a bunch of your shares. What’s left are some small shareholders including yourself.”

“Correct. Well done.”

“Did you know that Vital Cosmetics has always imported raw materials and other supplies through a company calling itself Easy Trading?”

“I’ve heard the name but you must realise I’ve never been interested in the business. We bought it with money made by KRJ Capital. Why do you ask?”

“Easy Trading is the trade name of a company registered as Vital Trading Ltd. It’s based in Wallingford near Oxford. Did you know that?”

She sat down, unfolded her arms, frowned and started to concentrate. “No. That’s news.”

“And the directors of Vital Trading are your husband Peter, Nick Carstairs, Boris Hamilton and Donald McVie, the Vital Cosmetics QA manager. “

“Oh my God. I had no idea.”

“Yes, that’s exactly what Isobel said when my partner told her She didn’t know either. Peter uses a different address, you see. A Wallingford, Oxfordshire address.”

“Yes, he bought a house there, not that I’ve ever seen it. So, what does it all mean?”

“It means that Vital Trading imports inferior quality, possibly contaminated raw materials but charges Vital Cosmetics for top quality. It’s probably laundering money and more than likely it’s being used to import narcotics and counterfeit products.”

Kathrine fell silent while it sank in. Asher waited.

“You’ve got proof?” she asked nervously.

“We’ve got strong evidence but I wouldn’t be here if I thought the evidence was insufficient to start involving the police.”

Kathrine took a deep breath. “I’ve never really been interested in the damned company, you see. It was Peter’s idea but it was one way of getting him out of KRJ Capital. He is – no, let me be frank – I don’t trust him, you see. His ideas and mine don’t fit. We’re incompatible. I’ve got standards, he hasn’t. I’m careful, he cuts corners. I care, he doesn’t. Rows, arguments, fights, I told him to move out so there were no more rows and lawyers could deal with it. Since then it’s been a nightmare of claims and counterclaims. It’s a messy scene. Divorce is pending subject to ironing out a pile of issues that started with me transferring most of my shares to Izzie. Conditions were that Izzie – I’ve always called her Izzie - chaired the company, which of course caused the biggest, worst argument ever. You can’t imagine how

hard that was but I fought it because it seemed to me the company was losing its way, mixed up as it was with all the other private crap.”

“Isobel is certainly trying to sort it out.” Asher said as kindly as he could.

“That’s good. I’m pleased. Is she OK?” She looked concerned for her sister for the first time.

“She’s fine. She’s currently in Bangkok with my partner and a few others trying to find out what’s been going on.”

“Bangkok? Good Lord. And where does an international commercial crime investigator fit into that?”

“It’s a long story, Miss Johnson. Would you like me to cut to the chase with a brief summary? Then you can ask me questions.”

“Please. Go ahead.”

The brief summary took ten minutes. Colin Asher had started with the phone call from Eddie Higgins and ended with: “Can we talk about KRJ Capital for a moment?”

Kathrine nodded and then sat forward clearly wondering what was coming next. “KRJ has three other directors – Peter, Michael Jefferson and Maria Benelli. Correct?”

“Peter resigned recently as part of the divorce agreement.”

“Good. What about Maria Benelli?”

Kathrine looked nervous. She squeezed her pink lips with her blue tipped fingers. “Another problem. We don’t get on so well,” she said.

“I see,” Asher said realising his own domestic affairs were a trifle of simplicity compared to all this. “Then let me tell you that Maria Benelli is also involved with Peter and the Russians.”

“Oh my God.” This time she flushed, got up, walked around again and returned.” Are you sure?”

Asher nodded. “We’ve got a recording of Peter talking about her. We think Peter and she have had some sort of personal relationship.”

Kathrine sat down, breathing heavily in exasperation. “It was Peter who suggested her for director. She has property in Italy some of which she’s bought and rents out through KRJ. We don’t often meet up.”

Asher nodded again. “That’s right. Expensive property in Trieste, Milan, Naples, Amalfi and Rhodes. Not much of it goes through KRJ.”

Kathrine sniffed. Asher continued:

“And she’s a co-director with Peter of a company called Parklands Capital which we’re still trying to unravel. We believe she’s involved in the Russian led counterfeiting, money-laundering and narcotics trafficking racket in Trieste and an offshore company with links to a Russian called Maxim Novak.”

He didn’t mention a possible link with the attempted murder of Pascale Perillo’s father but could have done. Enough was enough. Kathrine seemed too shocked to talk. He gave her a few seconds then said, “Is Peter sick? Stressed? Depressed?”

“Probably,” Kathrine said at last. “He’s highly strung, he gets emotional, he can get very angry. Why do you ask?”

“He’s on medication.”

“You know a lot, huh?”

“It’s surveillance, Kathrine. You’d be surprised what we can find out.”

“Christ. Should I be worried?”

“Not as worried as Peter. And when I say he’s on medication it’s probably not the sort of thing a doctor would prescribe for depression.”

“Again, huh?”

“He’s got history of drug taking?”

“Sure. Coke mostly. It never did him any good, of course.”

Asher looked at her wondering if drugs had also formed part of Kathrine’s past.

“Why are you telling me all this?” she asked.

“Isobel appointed us to investigate her concerns. My partner, Mark Dobson, and I agree that you and Isobel need to share some of the fallout. If there’s anything else you know that might be relevant, then tell me now. I’m talking police investigations, arrests, media interest and publicity. Isobel was especially concerned about that. It’ll need managing. So far, the UK police are unaware but they soon will be. Our private investigation is ongoing.” He checked his watch. “And one of our investigators, working undercover, is with one of the Russians, a guy called Maxim Novak, right now.”

As Kathrine watched in silence he took out a mobile phone, touched, scrolled and looked at it. “Interesting,” he said. “But not too surprising. From the tracking device he’s carrying our man has been taken to an address in Wallingford, Oxfordshire. What’s the address of Peter’s property?”

“The Wharf. It’s by the river.”

“That’s it. I must go, but I’ll be in touch. Meanwhile, you know where to find me.”

Within half an hour Colin Asher was back at the office.

CHAPTER 51

Ritchie had decided that casual indifference was the best image to present to the new arrivals. He leaned back on the sofa, legs crossed with one Converse trainer vibrating like a safety valve for his nerves as he listened to the voices outside – Olga’s, a Russian man, an English voice and a barking dog.

Should he stand up? No. He should sit there and appear to be enjoying the vodka. He casually poured some into the gap between the sofa’s cushions, sat on it to cover the wetness and listened. They were arguing. He heard Olga say “Shuh shuh.” He heard the dog bark again and Olga say, “Za Mo Chee,” which Ritchie knew meant shut up. He’d heard her say it a lot in Bangkok.

Then came the English voice. “Bloody hell. Why now? Why here? For fuck’s sake,”

“Shuh, shuh. Za Mo Chee.”

The door opened but Ritchie stayed where he was, vodka glass in hand, smiling. Olga was first, then a stout grey-haired, man in a grey suit and glasses and holding a walking stick. Maxim Novak was older than Ritchie had imagined and was hobbling slightly. Behind him was a man who Ritchie immediately knew was Peter Lester – another one straight off a plane from Bangkok or KL. He looked hot, sweaty, dishevelled and shell-shocked. He blinked and his eyes seemed unable to focus, but Ritchie gave him the benefit of the doubt. It might have been jet lag. Behind all of them was a hairy, white dog dragging a loose lead – Maximillian.

Olga went to the dog. “Poshel von”, she said. “Piss off. Get out,” and the dog turned, barked once and went out. Olga closed the door and took charge.

“Ah Micky, this is goh spo dzin Novak. Mister Novak. And this is Mister Peter Lester.”

Ritchie stood up and went towards them grinning like a Cheshire cat. “Pleased to meet you sir, I heard so much.” He grabbed Novak’s podgy hand, tried to shake it but it didn’t move more than an inch so he went to Lester. “Hi, I’m Micky. Micky Parker. Nice place, mate. Yours?”

Lester grunted, tried looking at him and failed.

“Sit, sit,” Olga said. “More vodka Micky? You like huh?”

Novak joined Ritchie on the far end of the sofa. Lester almost fell into the arm chair looking as if the whole world was on his back. Ritchie’s vodka was topped up. Novak got his in a fresh glass. Lester declined. “C - coffee?”

“How I know? It’s your house.” Olga said.

Lester wiped his sweating forehead with his hand. “Never mind.”

Olga stayed standing.

“So,” Novak said from the far end of the sofa. He dropped his walking stick on the floor at his feet, removed his glasses and wiped them with a white handkerchief he produced from his trouser pocket. Ritchie then saw his eyes – one of them half open and whitish looking, the other looking directly at him. “So, you wanna join ze team, huh?”

Olga jumped in. “He had good meetings with Dimi, Yuri and Ho. Good contacts. We all agree but you here so must meet for good relations.”

“Dah, dah. Vee speak on phone in Bangkok, huh?” he looked at Ritchie with his one eye.

“Yeh. At the Peacock but I didn’t see you.”

“Ha ha,” Novak laughed heartily with his nose half inside his glass as if the subject amused him. He then swallowed most of the vodka with one mouthful. “From Zagreb,” he added. “What you say? – HQ?”

“Ah,” Ritchie said. “Enzo, huh?”

The comment had just come to him but was it a mistake to mention Enzo? Ritchie wasn’t sure but he knew he had to be very careful. Wait to be asked questions and only offer safe information had been Mark’s advice.

He found himself staring at Novak. He was wearing a green tie and the knot was coming undone. This was the man on Colin's CCTV footage earlier but not the one in photos taken by Mark, Jeffrey or Sannan. He looked older, too. Maybe sixty as if he'd been around a while like the grandfather Ricky had watched in that old video with Marlon Brando – probably clever and political, too, otherwise he wouldn't have survived. Looking at his eye and his limp, though, he might well have been in a few scrapes.

Olga flopped into the other arm chair, pulled her skirt down and looked at Ritchie to make sure he'd noticed.

“So - you know zat man Enzo?” Novak asked and Ritchie saw him glance at Lester with his good eye. Lester was lying back with his eyes closed as if he had the worst of hangovers.

“Nah, never met,” Ritchie answered. “Just heard I'd be doing business with him, huh?”

Novak now transferred his good eye to Ritchie, checking him out, thinking, judging. Olga was smiling.

“Jah, maybe,” Novak said after too long a pause. “You made big money, young man?”

“Some.”

“Do what?”

“This 'n that.”

“How?”

“Dodgin' and divin'. Running around. Got some good friends.”

“Who?”

“Anyone that'll buy or sell on.”

Novak gave a faint nod. “Where?”

“London, Manchester.”

“Why?”

It was a strange question. Did the man have a philosophical side? Did there have to be a reason to make money? It was time to show some respect. “Gotta live, sir. Gotta make a life. I don't want to live and die a loser.”

Another short delay. Novak held out his empty vodka glass. Olga stood, topped it up and returned to her chair. Lester still had his eyes closed and was giving out intermittent deep moans as if in pain.

“Got any parents?”

That was another shock. Ritchie hadn't expected that. Had he been checked out? It wouldn't have surprised him but surely Olga would have known already and she still seemed to trust hm. Too much in fact. Olga had never asked many personal things and had believed his joke about being the son of a single mother from Tottenham who'd brought him up on state benefits. Fact was it had been a proper family, mum a teacher, him at school with nightly homework and his father something senior in the police who now did something so secret he didn't talk about it. Christ.

“Just my mum,” Ritchie replied.

“She black like you?”

“Nearly,” Ritchie said honestly. “My dad was black.”

“She work? Somewhere?”

“Tesco checkout,” Ritchie said because it was the first thing that came into his head.

“Where?”

Jesus Christ. What was this? “Tottenham,” he said because he’d seen a Tesco branch there.

Novak paused and looked right through Ritchie as if he’d just switched on a polygraph machine, a lie detector, wired to the inside of his brain. Then he snapped his fingers at Olga. Olga didn’t smile this time but got up, went outside and shut the door. Had Ritchie passed or failed? Perhaps he’d passed because Novak changed the subject and presumably didn’t want Olga to listen in. “You know this man?” he said pointing his vodka glass towards Peter Lester.

Lester opened his eyes but seemed unable to focus. And his head wobbled as if it was attached to his body by a thin runner band instead of a proper neck.

“No,” Ritchie said which was not true either. They’d never met but Ritchie knew almost as much about Lester as Mark Dobson and Colin Asher did. He’d also listened to the tape recording of Lester talking to Enzo in a hotel room in Johor Bahru. Lester was worried. Lester was panicking. Lester was in the middle of a messy divorce. Lester felt he was being squeezed out along with Enzo by the man he was being forced to sit and listen to in his own house in Wallingford. Lester was stressed out, depressed and, according to Colin Asher who’d looked inside the PC that was sat somewhere in this very house, Lester was taking tranquilisers and other things in unhealthy amounts.

Lester suddenly leaned forward, poured himself a full glass of vodka with a shaky hand and downed it quicker than an alcoholic Russian.

Novak watched him, casually, unconcerned. “This man,” he said pointing his glass at Lester again, “has been our main UK importer, but we are changing our arrangements. That means there are - what shall, I say? – vacancies - career opportunities for others.”

He was not looking at Ritchie but at Lester. Lester was being told, to his face and in front of a complete stranger, that he was being pushed out. Ritchie was watching the play-out of what he’d heard on that recording in Johor where Enzo had only made Lester’s worries worse by confirming that trust was breaking down and that Enzo himself was worried.

Novak mumbled on, “There comes a time when a big business must close factories, change agents and find new people to manage its operations. Sometimes...” he paused staring with his one good eye at Lester, “Sometimes, we lose trust in our old friends.”

Lester leaned unsteadily over to top up his drink, his hand visibly trembling, his empty glass rattling against the half empty vodka bottle.

Ritchie watched. In politer circles he would, perhaps, have crept from the room, excusing himself with a sudden desire to visit the toilet in preference to witnessing a

growing private argument. But this, it seemed, was deliberate. Ritchie was expected to watch. He was being taught a lesson. If he was to join the party then there were conditions, standards and codes of conduct to be adhered to that even Eddie would have been proud of.

And then, as if by coincidence, Novak said in a much louder voice. "Who the fuck is Professor Higgins?"

Lester looked over his glass with wide, intoxicated eyes. He was in urgent need of a shave and was wearing a sweaty-looking open-necked shirt over a shabby, creased suit. Novak's voice grew louder although he hadn't moved a muscle. "I said who the fuck is Professor Edward Higgins?"

Lester opened his mouth. "Tech...nical adviser at Vital Cosmetics," he murmured, sucking back a dribble of something that ran from his mouth.

"So why did he visit PJ Beauty Supplies with a woman that looked like the boss of Vital Cosmetics, the company you are supposed to be running?"

Lester stared back with unseeing eyes. Then he shrugged. To Ritchie the shrug made him look pathetic and Novak clearly agreed because he shook his head and turned to Ritchie for the first time in several minutes. "You see?" he said. "You see why a big company must clear out its poor management from time to time?"

Ritchie nodded his head because to do anything else seemed very unwise.

Novak turned back to Lester. "And Ho's been arrested," he said.

Lester looked so shocked that his eyes opened fully for the first time. He took another mouthful of neat vodka.

"And the police found things in the warehouse that should not have been there," Novak paused. "And an Italian who was supposed to be dead visited the Malacca factory. Why do you and Enzo not follow instructions to deal with problems? How do people I told you to deal with come back to life and cause more problems?"

Christ almighty, Ritchie thought. Had Pascale been a target after his father? Was Isobel a target? Was Eddie? He sniffed nervously but found himself smiling when Novak looked at him. "You see how it is?" the Russian said with his good eye looking at Ritchie and the dead one aimed at Lester. "This man is finished. He is – how you say - dead wood."

Lester took another slobbering mouthful of vodka, looked up and squinted as if unsure who Novak was looking at. Then a phone sounded, a ring tone not too dissimilar from the one on Ritchie's phone: synthesised drumming and a loud, tortured screech. Lester fumbled in his jacket pocket and came out with a phone that he only just managed to put against his ear.

"Yeth," he mumbled, then staggered up holding the back of his chair for support with the same hand that held the glass of vodka.

Novak and Ritchie watched. "What?" he said as vodka splashed onto the chair. "When?"

Lester circled the chair cautiously as if it was the only one left in a game of musical chairs and then toppled back into it after one full circle. The vodka glass fell onto the wooden floor, didn't break but rolled in a semi-circle leaving a trail of vodka behind. "Christ!" he muttered. "I can...not," He mumbled. "Im biz...."

Whatever it was he was trying to say he didn't finish because the phone fell into the chair. Ritchie saw it disappear behind the cushion but Lester didn't bother to chase it. He lay back looking at the ceiling with glazed eyes. Ritchie almost felt sorry for him but Novak obviously didn't. He edged forward on the sofa, grabbed his stick, hooked Lester's outstretched leg with the crook of the handle and pulled. Lester slid clumsily to the floor like a dead sheep. He rolled and tried to stand up.

"Another problem?" Novak asked.

Lester was on one knee but he turned and his head rolled. Whether it was a nod or a shake was anyone's guess. "Custom," he said. "Egg-size. Search warrant. "

"Where?" Novak asked.

Lester pointed a finger roughly towards the door and Novak jumped perhaps thinking they were outside the house. "Easy," Lester gurgled.

"Here? Wally ford?" Novak said

Lester nodded. "I go." He came upright and staggered to the door but Olga opened it before he got there. Had she been listening outside?

There was a shout from Novak. "Wait," he said. "What is this? Police?"

Ritchie's mind was racing. This felt like one hell of a coincidence. Today of all days for a Customs & Excise raid? He decided to join in and downplay it. "Maybe it's just a VAT inspection," he said knowing full well that, if Lester's brain was functioning properly, he'd have rejected the suggestion as highly improbable. "Nothing to worry about," Ritchie continued. "I had a VAT inspection once. My warehouse in Catford. They just turned up, No warning. Half an hour and they went away."

Novak seemed to relax. "You know about zis thing?"

"Sure," Ritchie said trying to sound confident.

Lester had been leaning on the door with Olga standing behind him. He shook his head as if he knew this was no coincidence. He pushed clumsily past Olga and staggered through the hallway. Olga came inside, closed the door and sat down.

"Is he driving?" Ritchie asked trying to make light of it. "Will he find his way?"

Novak shrugged and waved his hand as if no longer interested. "Fuck him," he growled. "It's his problem and he's finished. Let's talk business."

Olga settled herself in the sofa and smiled across at Ritchie.

CHAPTER 52

Isobel, Eddie and Pascale Perillo had gathered in the hotel's roof-top bar at ten, Mark Dobson had told them he'd join them as soon as he'd spoken to Colin Asher. It was now gone eleven and Pascale had unwittingly found himself the target for Eddie's opinions on cosmetics and the environment.

"Could I just say..." Pascale tried. Then: "I agree, but there is another view that..." Finally: "Mark's been a long time."

On cue, Mark Dobson appeared. "Sorry," he said. "Things are coming to a head." He turned to Isobel. "Colin met Kathrine this morning,"

"Oh, good. How is she? Was it....?"

"We felt she needed to know, Isobel, and you'll need to help each other over the coming weeks. He's also learned a lot from her and we now know why she transferred shares to you and how hard she fought to make you chairman. It's all to do with Peter. She's worried about you but wants to help."

Isobel nodded but it was Eddie who saw her dab at her eye make-up with a tissue and then glance at him and smile.

"We're now writing a report," Dobson continued. "We'll use that to get the police and others involved. I've just written some, dictated some and recorded some. The office will now piece it together with photos. I've also called Kenny Tan in Taiwan about his Red Power counterfeiting."

"So, the police will now act?" Pascale asked.

"There's no reason why they shouldn't. This isn't just a local police matter. We'll need international co-operation. Colin's also dealing with that. Our part's still not over."

"And where's Ritchie?" Isobel asked stuffing her tissue away.

"That's why it's not over. Right now, Ritchie's meeting Maxim Novak in a house in Wallingford."

"The Russian? In Wallingford?" Isobel asked. "Doesn't Peter Lester own a house there?"

Dobson nodded. "A house by the riverside. We know Ritchie's there because Colin tagged him. I'm now waiting developments."

"Is Ritchie in danger?" Eddie asked, eyes blazing.

Dobson helped himself to a bottle of water. "Just part of the job, Eddie. I'll know more later. It's late afternoon in UK and it might be a long night here. Can we order some more water? If you are all heading home tomorrow the least you can do tonight is relax."

Another big plane, wheels down, landing lights on, flew across and Eddie leaned back in his seat, staring skywards. "I'm relaxed," he said.

"Good," said Pascale with a wink at Isobel.

"Pollution," Eddie said pointing to the passing 747 Jumbo. "We've got a senior lecturer in physiology at Oxford who claims an ultra-green lifestyle - re-using, recycling, turning off all unnecessary switches, cladding her loft, growing her own lettuce, keeping her 'fridge full, putting a brick in her lavatory cistern, turning her thermostat down and wearing extra clothing in winter and then, every year, she flies to New Zealand on holiday."

"Quite ridiculous, Eddie," Dobson said, hoping that agreement would stifle further debate. Eddie continued scanning the starlit skies with the fluffy ends of his hair blowing in the warm, night breeze. Mark Dobson drained his bottle of water and put it on the table but the breeze toppled it and it rolled onto the floor. Eddie picked it up and pulled up his half-moons from inside his khaki shirt.

“You know,” he said, “We spend £74.5 billion on bottled water every year and at around 90pence, your average bottle is over 300 times more expensive than tap water. Can you believe that? Would you spend over £1000 on a sandwich or £600 on a cup of coffee?”

Dobson tried a joke. “Colin might.”

“And only around one in six plastic bottles is recycled,” Eddie continued. “The rest are lost and are left to destroy the environment. Did you know it takes more water to produce a plastic water bottle than the bottle can actually hold?”

“Terrible,” said Dobson standing up. “Listen, I need to call Colin again. Excuse me.”

“And, yet, how many millions of poor people do not have access to clean water at all?” Edie continued.

“A lot,” Pascale said.

“Water is under-valued and under-priced. Just like cosmetics, bottled water is mis-sold on the basis it’s better than tap water. As usual it was the French that started it with Perrier. Fancy-shaped green bottles to sell it, just like their fancy-shaped pink and gold perfume bottles. Tap water in most advanced countries is perfectly drinkable but selling it in small, plastic bottles is a financial and environmental scandal. The fact that no-one tackles it is an even bigger scandal.

“But where are the angry, street-demonstrating students these days? I’ll tell you where they are. They’re sitting at home putting on make-up and sucking from bottles as if they were still babies.”

Pascale looked at Isobel.

“Regulation is the answer,” Eddie went on. “There are vast opportunities for companies who can legitimately, with evidence, point out the problems of their competitors. Isobel knows this because I’ve told her. There are 13,000 chemicals used in cosmetics and only 10 percent have been evaluated for safety. The fact that thousands of them don’t even work is another matter, but once they’re used and are finished with what happens to them? They get washed down the sink using undervalued, filtered and very drinkable water and are flushed out to sea to destroy millions of critically important micro-organisms that live unseen and unappreciated by ignorant human beings.”

“I know, Eddie,” Isobel butted in. “I agree.”

“Good,” Eddie said, yawning and standing up “Time to sleep. Long flight home tomorrow. And we need to pray for Ritchie.”

“Pray?” said Isobel also standing. “Is this another of your beliefs you’ve not yet explained?”

Eddie sat down again. “By pray I mean hope, Isobel. I’m wishing him well. I wasn’t intending to fall on my knees and.....”

“Good night,” said Pascale and took the lift.

CHAPTER 53

With Lester gone, Novak relaxed slightly. He dropped his stick on the floor, sat back and pulled a packet of cigarettes from his jacket pocket and waved it at Ritchie. "Smoke?"

"No thanks. "

"Any coffee here?" he asked Olga,

"Maybe," Olga said, "Not my house." She got up and disappeared.

Novak lit his cigarette, leaned forward, pulled the already overfull ash tray towards him, took a long suck and blew smoke towards the ceiling. Ritchie, assuming it was negotiations time, readied himself.

"You were – what you say? – recommended. Cosmetics isn't it? You tried to sell the team your own brand."

"Problem with my supplier," Ritchie said shaking his head as if ready to punch someone. "Last minute. Know what I mean? I was ready to launch."

Novak took another relaxed drag. "No problem. We replace." A pause and another drag. "But you see what happens if you don't co-operate." He waved his arm towards the door and a finger of cigarette ash fell onto his trousers. He brushed it away leaving a grey powdery streak. "Co-operation. OK? You are - what you say? – independent. You run your own business, no interference, everyone happy. But we expect discipline. Without discipline things go wrong. Understand?"

"Yeh, I know. That's what I always say."

"But cosmetics?" Novak shook his head slowly and continued sucking on his cigarette. "Cosmetics is not so good. Learn from an old man and look at that stupid bastard." He beckoned to the door again. "The plan was simple - take over that company, Vital, close their factory and import everything from our own factory in Italy. But no, the stupid bastard thinks he knows a better way. He ignores advice. He decides he can make more money from raw materials. We try it. We supply the oils and ingredients but we tell him many times it's too complicated, too risky and it's not efficient. He got scared of something. No real power. We say, our way better. Still he ignores us."

Ritchie shook his head as if he greatly sympathised and Novak took another drag.

Since Lester had gone, Novak's speech was slower, calculated as if he was choosing words carefully. His good eye was looking at Ritchie, the other moving independently. He coughed like a chesty old man and a spot of something flew onto the coffee table. Ritchie watched it land but continued to sit with his arms draped across the back of the sofa. One foot was resting on the knee of his other leg, but he was unable to stop it twitching.

"So, young man, you want to make big, big cash?" Novak asked.

Ritchie sat forward. "The bigger the better," he said excitedly. He almost rubbed his hands together to re-enforce his enthusiasm but decided it was too much like drama school training.

Olga returned holding two mugs of black coffee by the handles in one hand and a mobile phone in the other. She put the phone on the table. Novak watched. Ritchie watched. "Sugar Micky? You sweet enough already?"

Ritchie grinned. "Black without. You not joining us?"

Olga looked at Novak and he nodded slowly. It was a communication of some sort. Then she went out. Novak took a sip of coffee but winced and Ritchie wondered if Olga would be in trouble for low standards and poor co-operation.

Novak wiped his mouth. "I need someone to run Bio-Kal UK. You know about Bio-Kal?"

"Sure. Enzo's business, but I thought Enzo was, you know...."

"Enzo is finished. That guy...." He flicked a hand towards the door again. "He's also finished. We start again. No problem. But we set conditions. You run it, make the money, do good, no interruption, everyone happy. But do not ignore the conditions. If we say there's a problem then there's a problem. OK? You must sort it. Do not ignore instructions. If you ignore then...."

Novak hit the table with such force with the palm of his hand that the bottle of Smirnoff jumped. Ritchie didn't jump because he'd sensed an eruption building.

"Quite right Mr Novak. I've also had to get rid of poor performers. I like what I see of your operation. If I can run it independently that suits me fine. Holding back commissions, OK. Sharing profits, OK. Fixing things so we bypass the petty bureaucrats like the VAT inspectors, OK. Tell me what you want from me."

Novak stubbed his cigarette out and fished for the packet to start another.

"Bio-Kal's the business," he went on. "Good for brand name, marketing you know, but stay small scale to keep the books straight for – what you say? – the pretty bureaucratic. It's mixed trading, buying, selling, importing, exporting, bit of this, bit of that. Now and again we meet up. We sort bank transfers, agree transactions, you deal with Dimitri, OK?"

"Yeh. Mr Medinski? Right?"

"Yah. Dimitri. You start with buying tea and coffee. We already have labels and papers for customs but...."

He stopped because Olga suddenly returned with another mug of coffee. Perhaps she'd been listening from the kitchen and, after hearing Novak's slap of the table felt it was time to return but Ritchie again saw her glance at Novak and nod.

She sat in the second arm chair, crossed her legs, picked up the phone, swiped it a few times and looked at something. Again, she looked at Novak but this time he didn't respond and carried on where he'd left off. "But, It's not tea and coffee. You get invoiced for tea and coffee but we ship together with other goods. You contact other members of our team. They buy the other goods from you. No problem."

Ritchie grinned. "Profitable goods?"

Novak nodded. "Ready market. Others sell. You supply and facilitate. Easy."

Novak now glanced at Olga. Ritchie almost rubbed his hands together again but moved them to his nose, wiped it and sniffed. "Any cosmetics?" he asked. "Because that's my speciality."

"Sure, sure. Calvin Klein or Pantene Shampoo or Nivea. You know these?"

"Calvin Klein cosmetics? Jesus. I have big customers waiting for that since my supplier of Eau de Toilette by Ritchie messed up."

Novak gave a sinister looking smile and shook his head. "Nah. Calvin Klein underwear," he said "Men's, ladies, nice boxes. You wouldn't know the difference."

"Oh, boy," said Ritchie excitedly. "When do I start?"

Novak gave another glance towards Olga. "First, we send you a pro-forma invoice. Then you issue a letter of credit in favour of the company on the invoice."

"Will that be Bio-Kal?"

Novak paused. "Maybe. Maybe. What is this company of yours?"

"Ah, you mean Pollitop. It is a good business. Dimitri knows."

Novak didn't look impressed. He sucked his fresh cigarette. "It can open a letter of credit for 300,000 dollars?" he asked.

He looked at Ritchie with one eye from inside the cloud of smoke and Ritchie suddenly didn't like the look, or the tone. Surely, he'd heard about Pollitop's excellent financial status. Was Ritchie now expected to ask questions? Was Novak testing him? If Ritchie had been genuinely about to open a big line of credit for an organisation run by Novak, he should be asking for details, for commitments and agreements from Novak's side. The fact was Pollitop Limited was an overnight creation by Colin Asher and so was the bank statement. If Ritchie appeared not to care, which he didn't, would Novak see through it and wonder why?

Ritchie was in a dilemma and, for the first time, began to feel nervous but he dared not show it.

Why had Novak wanted to meet him? Did he meet every new recruit to the cause? It seemed unlikely. So why? And why ask about his parents? Had he slipped up somewhere? Had something come to light? Had they found the tracking device in the anorak? Unlikely. Had they delved into Pollitop and become suspicious? Was Novak not convinced that Pollitop could open a credit line of some 300,000 dollars?

Perhaps the Russian was just being cautious but since he'd smacked the table with such force his tone had become menacing and so had the look on Olga's face. This wasn't acting. In less than five seconds, Ritchie decided that Novak no longer trusted him and somehow it had been transmitted to Olga. He glanced at her, sitting with her legs crossed and white thighs on show sipping from her mug of coffee but no longer looking at him, smiling or even winking. Olga was now more likely to wink at Novak or, at least, nod her head at him. What had they just communicated? Red lights flashed inside Ritchie's head but he didn't have time to sit and ponder so he plumped for showing an impatient side that seemed more in character with Micky Parker.

"300,000 dollars? No problem. When do we start?"

Somewhere amongst the smoke, Novak shook his head, but it was Olga who spoke two unsmiling words. "Careful, Micky."

As if in agreement, Novak changed from shaking his head to slowly nodding. "I think you misunderstand me Mr Micky Parker," he said. He coughed productively, swallowed whatever came up and went on. "Would a big multinational company – what you say? – jump into the bed with a stranger? No. We check. We eliminate the bad. We go with the reliable." Out of the corner of his eye Ritchie saw Olga nodding. "That's our style. That is why we survive. Forty years in business is good, no?"

Novak glanced at his Rolex watch which Ritchie assumed wasn't a Rolex and then looked at Olga with his good eye. Olga nodded back at him again and Ritchie's stomach churned. It was a cue for something else. And where was Lester? He'd heard no car leaving – not that Lester was in a fit state to drive anyway – and neither had he heard a door shut or more words. He tried smiling at Olga but it was hard to force a genuine-looking smile because Olga was staring at him with a look that had moved from her usual flirtatious or suggestive manner into something threatening.

"How long has this Pollitop been running, Micky?" she asked as if she already knew the answer.

Ritchie paused to think but it was a pause too long. They were both looking directly at him, waiting for a mistake, a slip, an error made under pressure. "Recently," he said trying to hold his casual, light-hearted, pro-Olga look. "I needed to move money to pay for the cosmetics so I used Pollitop."

Olga shrugged. Novak took another long drag on his cigarette before completely changing the subject. "You ever carry anything?" he asked as smoke swirled around his head.

He was looking at Ritchie's pockets, as if a weapon might be concealed somewhere. Surprisingly they'd not frisked him this time but it was all too clear what he meant. Carrying a sub machine gun in his boxers might have been too noticeable but what about a voice recorder in his baseball cap or a tracking device in his old anorak? Ritchie tried a drama school trained look of utter innocence. "Carry anything? Only my wits." It didn't help.

Olga sat up straight. "What is wits?" she asked urgently as if it was a weapon or a piece of clever electronic wizardry she'd never heard of and Ritchie might have laughed or made a joke of it if the new, more suspicious, mood had not descended on the room. Novak grabbed his stick, waved the last inch of cigarette at Olga as if to calm her and then stubbed it out.

"OK.... we go to London," he said struggling to stand. "You come with us."

"Why London?" asked Ritchie trying a more confrontational approach. "I thought this was it. Meet, check each other out, share a few drinks, be on my way. I've got things to do."

Olga was now on her feet. "We already checked you out, Micky. Things don't look so good."

"Olga, sweetie. What is this?" Ritchie was trying desperately hard but Olga was a changed woman. She'd gone from crotch grabber to crotch cruncher in five minutes. What had happened?

She retrieved her phone again, came around the table, stood over him and turned it to show him a photo. "Who is this?"

It was Mark Dobson sitting at a table in the Lat Krabang night market, surrounded by dirty dishes and a bottle of Fanta. It was as clear as if he'd posed for it. "You joined him," Olga said. "Who is he?"

All Ritchie could think of doing was to grin. "Well, fuck me, yes. That's my old mate Crabber. Bumped into him one night in Bangkok. But...."

“Don’t fuck about,” Olga said with a frightening scowl. “You heard what Mr Novak said just now? We check. We eliminate the bad. We only go with the reliable You aren’t reliable Micky. Who are you? Who is that guy?”

For the first time, Ritchie felt a trickle of sweat on his forehead. “Crabber, Olga. My old mate. On holiday. He told me he’d try to find me. Good customer is Crabs. If I’d had any Eau de Toilette samples left for him to sniff he’d have ordered a container load.”

Olga shook her head at Novak who was leaning on his stick. “I don’t believe,” she said.

Novak waved a hand at her. To Ritchie it meant he was either telling Olga not to jump to hasty conclusions or to delay wrenching his privates from his body until they’d found a more secluded part of the River Thames to hurl his eunuch’s corpse. But then Novak turned and went to the door.

“OK, Micky, let’s go. We got things to settle.”

CHAPTER 54

Eddie had thought he was tired. At midnight, he, Isobel and Pascale had retired to their rooms but now, at 1am, he couldn’t sleep. Poor sleeping had ruined his nights ever since he’d flown from England.

He lay on his bed, hot and naked except for his Y fronts, with the light and air conditioning off to save electricity, staring into the darkness and feeling increasingly angry about his own comments earlier. It wasn’t that he disagreed with himself. Far from it. What he’d said about plastic bottles made perfect sense. It was the sense that, yet again, no-one seemed to care enough to do anything.

He moved to thinking about Isobel. She had said she wanted to change things at Vital Cosmetics as soon as she could wield some power and that she wanted to involve him. That was good news, he supposed, if he could find the time alongside teaching and running the mycology lab. But what was her opinion on the matter of bottled water? And on flying thousands of miles just for holidays. Changing things meant changing an entire attitude. Neither of them, Isobel or Pascale, had reacted with any real passion or deep understanding and Mark had treated his views as a joke

Mark, though, had said he had work to do in his room which suggested he, too, might still be awake. So, Eddie pulled on his shorts, padded along to Dobson’s room in his bare feet and knocked on the door.

He could hear voices so he knocked again and Dobson then opened it wearing ear plugs with wires hanging over his shoulder and a phone in his hand. Still talking into the phone, he beckoned Eddie to enter and take a seat. On the table was a laptop with a picture of a house and trees and a separate image of a man talking in the bottom corner of the screen.

Dobson pointed at his ear to say he couldn’t talk right now so Eddie, fascinated, dragged a chair to the laptop screen to watch. Nothing seemed to be moving except

the small image of the man. The main image showed a car parked to the side of a house, another on a gravel driveway outside a front door and a line of trees. Eddie could now see tree branches moving in the wind so it wasn't just a photograph. It was live. Dobson pointed to the image of the man speaking in the corner of the screen. "Colin," he said.

"Ah," Eddie said. "He looks older than I imagined." Then he saw the door to the house open.

"Movement," Dobson said into his phone whilst peering over Eddie's shoulder. "You copy?"

On the screen, Eddie saw Colin Asher nod. He, too, seemed to be watching a screen.

Inside the riverside house in Wallingford, Novak limped from the room into the hallway carrying his stick. Ritchie followed. Olga was behind Ritchie but she overtook them both, opened the front door and stepped outside. Novak and Ritchie followed her. Olga turned again and closed the door of the house. The Mercedes was parked on the gravel and the driver's opened. Erik got out. He stubbed a cigarette into the wet gravel with a brown shoe, opened both the front passenger door and the rear door and stood aside like a brown-uniformed chauffeur.

That's when it started.

From behind trees and from the main gateway, uniformed police suddenly appeared, running. They ran to just beyond the Mercedes and then stopped, stood perfectly still and aimed Glock 17 pistols and Heckler and Koch MP5 submachine guns at all sides of the Mercedes. Ritchie, Novak, Olga and Erik stood, shocked, at what had happened in just five seconds.

"Police," came a shout from one of the officers in bullet-proof vest, face mask and carrying a submachine gun. "Freeze. Don't move. Put your hands up."

Olga cried out, tried to run but then stopped, turned and stared. Novak dropped his stick and stared with his one good eye and with his mouth open. Erik put his hands up as if he'd been expecting this sort of thing for weeks. Ritchie half raised his arms and looked around. Police pistols and guns were being levelled at each of their heads, including his own.

Another command came from the same officer as he raised his submachine gun to his shoulder and pointed it mostly at Olga. "Away from the vehicle. Hands above your heads. Steady. Don't move." And then he shouted in good-enough Russian: "Vy menyA panimAyete?"

Three blue and yellow Thames Valley BMW police cars then arrived, crunching their way down the driveway with blue lights flashing. Two blocked the main gate, the third stopped right behind the Mercedes.

Ritchie watched with his hands on his head, unsure where he stood in all this sudden action, but then the doors of the third police car opened. A uniformed officer climbed out from the front passenger door and stood looking around as if checking things were under control. Then a rear door opened and a tall black man in a pristine city suit climbed out and walked straight up to Ritchie.

Ritchie brought his hands down, lowered his head onto his chest and spoke quietly without looking up. "Good evening, dad. I really can't tell you how pleased I am to see you."

Keith Nolan turned his head away from Olga, Novak and Erik. "Be quiet," he whispered. "It will appear we're arresting you. Follow me."

Ritchie followed him to the BMW. "Sit in the back seat. Stay there until we're finished here. You understand?"

Ritchie looked up. "What's for dinner tonight, dad?"

In Bangkok, Eddie watched all of this but heard nothing. Mark Dobson, meanwhile, was still holding the phone.

"Who are you taking to," Eddie asked excitedly. "Colin?"

Dobson held a hand up to politely silence him. "Loud and clear, Colin. Who placed the camera?"

There was a short silence as Colin Asher replied into Dobson's ear piece. Meanwhile, the live, black and white broadcast from Wallingford continued.

"Who's the man talking to Ritchie?" Eddie asked pointing.

"Ritchie's father," Dobson said. "The National Crime Agency."

Eddie grinned. His rough, stubbly cheeks folded and wide cracks radiated from around his eyes.

Dobson smiled at him. "You really need to do something about those wrinkles, Eddie," he said. "Every time you grin, you look ninety Why don't you ask Isobel for something?"

"Wrinkles show where the smiles are hiding," Eddie replied.

Novak and Olga were body-checked, handcuffed and marched up the driveway to one of the waiting cars. Olga looked back at the car where Ritchie was sitting. Erik tried to run towards the river as if he could swim across but only made ten yards. He was handcuffed and joined the others. Then the two cars outside drove away leaving just the BMW with Ritchie inside and a dozen armed police scattered around the driveway and amongst the trees.

Ritchie climbed out and joined his father who was talking to one of the police officers. "Did you arrest Peter Lester?" he asked.

"Where is he? We were watching but he didn't come out of the house as we'd expected." Keith Nolan replied. "His Range Rover hasn't moved."

"He was pissed out of his bloody mind..." Ritchie said.

"Language, Ritchie, language."

"He was terribly well oiled, then. If Customs and Excise didn't get him the local police should have breathalysed him."

"Did you see him leave the house?"

“No. I thought he had.” Ritchie glanced towards the River. “Might he have tried to do what Erik did? Swim?”

“While pissed as a newt?”

“Language, dad.”

“Sorry.”

“And there was a dog – a white creature called Maximillian. “

“So that’s its name. It answered to Bonzo when we found it wandering in the road. It’s detained.”

“Do we need to search the house?”

“Done already. Two days ago, when we bugged it. What we’re doing now is searching the Easy Trading warehouse.

“You were listening in to everything just now?”

“Everything.”

“Including me talking to Olga.”

“Everything.”

“Then, if you see Mark Dobson tell him he needs to tighten up on his personal security procedures. He could have ruined his own investigation.”

“We need to check inside again. And what the hell have you done to your hair?”

It was 2am in Bangkok and 7pm in Wallingford. The rain had stopped and a low, setting sun was trying to make a belated impact when they opened the front door of the house with a key.

“Where did you get the key?” Ritchie asked.

“When we broke in to fix the devices we found one hanging in the kitchen. “

They were in the cold, dark and under-furnished sitting room that smelled of vodka and cigarettes. Keith Nolan switched a light on. “Is this where you talked with Novak?”

“And drank vodka,” Ritchie replied. “In case you’re worried I poured most of mine down the back of the sofa. I sat there, Novak there. Olga and Lester were in the chairs. I think Lester was drunk or drugged before he arrived but it didn’t stop him drinking half that bottle. When his phone rang he could barely stand.”

“But he went outside?”

“Maybe, but I didn’t hear his car and it’s still there. Is there a rear door? Or is he sleeping it off somewhere?”

“We’ll take a look around” Ritchie’s father said. He beckoned to the other police officer. “You’re the one with the weapon, Craig. Try upstairs.”

They soon found Lester.

He was on the floor in a bedroom, lying in an untidy heap in a pool of vomit with two empty tablet bottles beside him and a putrid smell of alcohol and drugs. His pulse was almost undetectable but Craig called for an ambulance. One arrived within a

minute as if it had been waiting outside on the road but, within that minute, Lester's heart stopped.

Keith Nolan called Colin Asher. Asher called Mark Dobson. Mark Dobson told Eddie.

"It's a nasty business," Eddie said rather forlornly. "What now?"

"One down, dozens more to go. This is a big operation, Eddie. News will spread so we need to move quickly and it's going to be a long night. I now need to talk to Sannan and Jeffrey. This is where we start opening up evidence to the local law enforcement. Are you tired yet?"

"I'm feeling thirsty," Eddie said.

"There's water in the 'fridge"

"Bottled?"

"Of course."

"Shall I make tea instead?"

"With bottled water?"

"Coffee, then?"

"With bottled water?"

"Surely Bangkok's public water supply is potable?"

"I've never checked, but I'm sure you're an expert on gastroenteritis and dysentery."

Eddie was in a dilemma but while he struggled with it, Mark Dobson called Sannan in Pattaya. Sannan immediately headed for Bangkok. Then he phoned Jeffrey.

"I've been trying to call you for hours," Jeffrey said.

Dobson apologised, gave a summary and ended with: "The Malay police still aren't aware how far this gang is spread so now's the time to tell them."

Jeffrey interrupted. "Which is why I've been trying to call you all night," he said. "When the police raided PJ and arrested Ho, I knew the news would spread so I headed for Malacca and got there in time to watch Roman Kolodin loading boxes into the back of a car. He then headed to Johor Bahru so I followed. At midnight, he arrived at the Jalan Pandan site. Two other Russians joined him and they went over to Singapore. That was after midnight. I then made a decision to go into the warehouse. I'm there right now."

"Inside? Now? On your own?"

Jeffrey ignored him. "It's an interesting place," he said, "It's stacked to roof level with Red Power, Calvin Klein underwear, branded body sprays, perfumes, cosmetics, lipsticks, tea and coffee sachets, drums of coconut oil, pam oil and, Eddie will love this, cans labelled as Krabok nut oil."

"Are you still inside?"

"I'm in an office piled high with paper, invoices and shipping documents. If I'm right then it's the usual scene – it'll look innocent and legitimate for anyone doing a quick inspection and paid for not digging too deeply."

“Right well, get out now, lock up, leave no traces and phone your friend, the Director of the Commercial Crimes Investigation Department, Abdul Rahim. Wake him if he’s still asleep and tell him to call the UK National Crime Agency and ask for Keith Nolan.”

Dobson turned to Eddie. “You see what happens while innocent people sleep?”

CHAPTER 55

The Wallingford house was left as a crime scene and Ritchie was driven, with his father, to the Easy Trading warehouse where a search was ongoing. This was no ordinary Customs and Excise inspection. The nondescript building, on a well-known, local trading estate was taped off and surrounded by police and customs vehicles.

Keith Nolan was waved through the barricade and met by a senior fraud officer. “My son, Ritchie,” Nolan said. “Ritchie, meet Steve Bryan.”

The officer smiled at Ritchie. “How was Bangkok?”

Ritchie first looked at his father. “OK,” he said, “I’d go back if required.”

“What have we got, Steve?” Keith Nolan asked.

“So far? Twenty drums labelled ‘Coconut Oil Produce of Indonesia’. Talcum powder which we suspect is not talcum powder. A hundred or more boxes of Calvin Klein men’s underwear which might or might not be genuine and a filing cabinet of invoices and other paperwork that will take time to go through.”

“Any tea and coffee?” Ritchie asked.

“A rack full. Ceiling high. Is it genuine tea and coffee?”

“Some is probably not. What about cosmetics?”

“Lots of plastic bottles of unlabelled hand creams and shampoos.”

“Anything labelled Vital Cosmetics?”

“In the ‘goods in’ area. More boxes.”

“They’ll need analysing and may not tally with items coming from the Vital factory in Oxford,” Ritchie said. “I think they’re mixing fake imported with genuine. When Professor Higgins returns, we’ll ask him to check.”

“And the staff here?” Keith Nolan asked.

“All seven have been taken to Oxford for questioning. At least some of them must have been aware of what was going on. Lester could not have been doing it alone.

“And the other directors?” Ritchie asked.

“Patience, Ritchie,” said his father. “Unless Lester has told them something – and we’ve been monitoring his calls - they may know nothing. We need to talk to Kathrine Johnson. Colin Asher will break the news. He met her earlier today. And Mark’s been watching everything live via a satellite link. He’ll tell Isobel Johnson. You could have waved to him when you came out of the house with Olga and Novak.”

Mark Dobson had seen enough. He and Eddie had watched the ambulance come and go and nothing more was happening at the Wallingford house. He switched the link off and called Colin Asher direct on the phone.

“We need to involve Singapore,” he said. “Some on the Malaysian side have just gone over the bridge.”

“We’re waiting on something right now,” Asher replied. “You remember the note Pascale found in Trieste? The instruction signed by Medinski to someone called Oreshkin to transfer 835,000 dollars to a Bangkok Bank Singapore account? Ching has contacts in the Police Commissioner’s office from when she worked there and if Jeffrey pushed the Malaysian police and threw in names of some of those wanted by Singaporean police for several years - and Maxim Novalk is one – I guarantee we’ll get action.”

It was 4am and Eddie was still listening in. “I’ll do it,” he said. “I owe Datuk Abdu Rahim bin Hassan a favour for not charging me.”

Dobson wondered if that made sense but then handed him his phone. “There you go Eddie. Give him a call. Wake him up. I’ve got things to do.”

CHAPTER 56

Dawn was breaking when Eddie finally left Mark Dobson’s room.

Sannan had arrived and he and Dobson were sat on the bed sorting through prints of photos taken at the Pattaya villa. On the floor were the 7-Eleven bags of papers now neatly sorted, clipped together and marked ‘Numbered a/cs’ and ‘Access codes’.

“You see, Eddie?” Dobson had said, “Blank credit cards and passports. Nice business if you’ve got the equipment – and there’s some of the equipment. - a thermal printer and holograms. And that’s a shot of the inside of the safe, probably worth over a million dollars.

“And this is the Winnie the Pooh folder and Colin is still sorting information pulled from the Bangkok warehouse computer – links to computers in Bangkok, Pattaya, KL, Malacca, Johor and Trieste. We’ve got email addresses, the emails themselves, names, addresses and more bank account details. These are already with Keith Nolan’s department in London. Sannan’s job today is to meet the Thai police.”

“And Peter Lester?” Eddie asked.

“Colin’s just phoned Kathrine Johnson. We need to tell Isobel.”

“I’ll tell her,” Eddie said getting up from where he’d been sitting on the floor.

“Put a shirt on, Eddie,” Dobson said. “You might frighten her.”

Eddie went to his own room, pulled on a shirt and then took the lift up to the next floor. He knocked on the door of Isobel’s room but there was no answer so he knocked again.

“Who is it?” came the voice through the door.

“Eddie.”

“Oh, goodness. What time is it?”

Standing outside, Eddie checked his watch. “Six fifteen.”

The door opened on the chain and Isobel peered through the gap.

“Important developments,” Eddie said. “Can I come in?”

“Oh? One minute.” The chain was released, the door opened and Isobel stood there wrapped in a long, white towel. “I’m not really…….”

“Sorry it’s early,” Eddie said edging past her. “I’ve been in Mark’s room all night. I have a lot to tell you. Sorry, were you having a bath?”

“I was asleep. Come in.”

Eddie looked around the room. It was an exact mirror image of his own. The difference was the smell of fresh flowers that reminded him of freesias, but there were none to be seen. The bed barely looked slept in although the pillows were a little flattened. Alongside the TV was a line of pink, plastic bottles.

“Have you been up all night, Eddie?”

“Yes,” he said looking at Isobel’s white towel. “So, has Mark. Sannan’s just arrived from Pattaya. They’re sorting evidence. Jeffrey is talking to the Singapore police.” He paused and looked at Isobel. “You look different, Isobel. “

“Different? In what way?” She brushed a hand through her dark hair and pulled the towel closer. “I’ve just woken up, Eddie.”

“Yes, but – ah, I see what it is - no lipstick. Good. We’ve just watched the arrest of Olga and Maxim Novak at Peter Lester’s house in Wallingford by video link.”

Isobel gasped. “Arrested?”

“Yes. In a house alongside the river. Ritchie led them into the trap. He’s OK. His father arrived with the police. It happened so quickly and was all filmed on a hidden camera. We watched it live on the laptop. Very clever technology.”

“Why didn’t you call me?”

“Because something else happened,” Eddie paused. “Peter Lester is dead.”

Isobel’s hand went to her lips. “Oh, my God. Was he killed?”

“It sounds like an overdose, Isobel. I’m sorry to break the news. They found him in a bedroom at the house.”

“Does Kathrine know?”

“Colin Asher has just told her. “

As Isobel sat silently on the edge of her bed, Eddie described everything he’d seen.

“It’s over, Isobel,” he said finally. “Mark and Colin Asher are handing all the evidence to the police and then it’s up to them. The only people who don’t yet know yet are the staff and directors at Vital Cosmetics, but it’s midnight in UK.”

Isobel’s mind was on the implications. She merely nodded.

” Are you alright, Isobel?” Eddie asked. “Only you look different today. I’m sorry to be the early morning bearer of the news.”

“But it’s not such bad news, Eddie. I’m shocked about Peter but I’m amazed how so much happened during the night. While I slept.”

“Perhaps you should call Kathrine.” Eddie said and then added, “While I go and tell Pascale.”

“Yes....yes. I’ll call her.”

Eddie headed for the door. Isobel followed him. “We’ll be back in London by this time tomorrow,” he said opening the door. Then he turned, pulled his glasses onto his nose and looked closely at Isobel. “Don’t you wear lipstick at night?”

“Only deep pore cleansing milk and night cream, Eddie. No eye liner, no eye shadow, no face powder. I don’t wear anything else.”

Eddie scanned the white towel from her bare shoulders down to her bare knees. “Well,” he said. “I knew there was something different. This morning you look very – what shall I say? – very nice.” And then he disappeared down the corridor in his shorts, tee shirt and bare feet.

CHAPTER 57

They had barely fastened their seat belts on the flight back to London when Eddie leaned towards Isobel and whispered. “I want to apologise for something.”

“Don’t tell me, Eddie. Did you forgot to collect your laundry again? Is that why you’re still wearing shorts? Won’t you find it cold in London?”

Eddie checked his bare knees and tried pulling the legs of his shorts down a fraction but the seat belt was in the way. “No,” he said, “it’s more important than that. I’m embarrassed.”

“You’ve never shown signs of embarrassment before, Eddie. Why start now?”

“It’s personal.”

“So is personal hygiene, social etiquette and dress sense.”

“But telling lies is worse,” he replied.

“Lies, Eddie? I don’t believe it. You are the least likely to tell lies. Outspoken directness, fearlessness, rudeness. No-one with those characteristics needs to tell lies.”

Eddie thought about that. The plane was taxiing ready for take-off. Isobel was looking out of the window so he touched her arm and she turned. “I’m very sorry,” he said, “It was my state of mind.”

“No need to apologise, Eddie. Anyone could have mistaken it for talcum powder “

“No, no,” he said. “I’m referring to my state of mind when I said I’d been burgled.”

“Burgled? Oh, you mean the break in at your house?”

Eddie nodded and Isobel turned to the window again. The plane was gathering speed down the runway. “I told Mark it was someone from Vital Cosmetics.”

“You told me that, also.”

Eddie nudged her arm again. “It’s not true,” he said.

The nose of the plane rose into the sky, the jet engines roared and Isobel turned to face him.

“I was blaming everything out of the ordinary on other people, not pointing the finger at myself,” he said. “I didn’t lose my nuts either. Or all of the genetically different Krabok trees. We can save them.”

“So, what did you lose, Eddie?”

“My common sense. My memory. I mislaid my nuts but found them in the downstairs loo.”

“And the chewing gum?”

“You were right. It was the postman. Every day he spits his gum at next door’s dog because the dog barks at him. “

“And the computer files?”

“I left the CD tray open.”

Isobel glanced away as if she half expected it.

“I’m too willing to blame others for my weaknesses because I’m too focussed on work and day to day matters.”

“Living alone can do that,” Isobel said as if she knew something “There’s no need to be embarrassed. And it’s not what I’d call lies.”

“So, what is it?”

“It’s something you told me you never do but, in fact, you do. That’s your lie. You try to bring attention to yourself,” Isobel said. “You want someone to care enough to notice you.”

“Do I?” Eddie replied, puzzled.

“Living alone you have no-one to point out your weaknesses, your ridiculous obsessions, your forgetfulness, your occasional stupidity and your irritating habits such as your untidiness and your impatience towards others. It can lead to false accusations, even private vendettas.”

“Really?”

“Definitely. How long were you married?”

“A year.”

“For a woman that was more than long enough. to draw conclusions. She drew a line and you crossed it.”

“So quickly?”

“Oh yes. These days life’s too busy to be hamstrung by miserable incompatibilities. People quickly become impatient, I’m afraid.”

“That’s unforgiveable.”

“Maybe, but so is jumping to inaccurate conclusions. Living as you do, you don’t have the checks and balances you get from a relationship so you jump to irrational

conclusions and if you are a particularly obstinate person – which you are - you refuse to listen to other views or see other, more reasonable explanations for things you don't understand or don't like."

"I do?"

"Most certainly." Isobel nodded and turned away.

As the plane hurtled upwards through low cloud Eddie's thoughts turned to what Mel had said to him in Bristol when he'd mentioned his lost nuts.

"So, what's the problem with losing a few nuts?" he'd said, and Eddie had replied, jokingly he thought, "I needed a friendly ear, Mel. Someone with a soft shoulder and a dry tissue."

And Mel then said. "Come now, Huggs. Be brave. It's only nuts." Because Mel was a friend, Mel was worried and Mel cared. And Mel was being rational.

"I spoke to a commercial crime investigator," Eddie had said.

"About a bag of bloody nuts?" Mel had yelled and he was quite right to yell of course.

Eddie nudged Isobel's arm again.

"Is that what cosmetics are, Isobel? "

"What are you talking about, Eddie?"

"Are cosmetics a quick and easy route to bringing attention to yourself because you need someone to care enough to notice you?"

"Of course, Eddie." She glanced at his bony, white knees and added: "That and the clothes we wear."

"So, it's a weakness."

"Of course. I thought we'd agreed that some days ago."

"And is it always necessary to look younger than you really are?"

The view through the window was obviously not as interesting now and Isobel looked back at Eddie, paused and said, "Do you want me to very frank, Eddie?"

"Yes, please."

"Speaking as a woman, looking young and healthy with all the essential body parts smelling sweetly and in all the right places and in all the right proportions is deemed essential for attracting a mate. It's sex."

"Oh, my goodness."

"Yes, it's all pretty basic, Eddie. I'm surprised that a Professor of biology could ever fail to understand it. But did we not just agree that you are a mere human and prone to jump to unscientific and irrational conclusions?"

"We did."

"Then are your obsessions, the conclusions you draw and the actions you take about other people and the companies they run not just plain and simple, private vendettas? Anger, in fact, directed at those you have simply failed to understand?" She paused. "Or refused to understand?"

"Oh no, no," Eddie argued, "Take the destruction of the environment for instance."

“Eddie, please. If you don’t mind I’d prefer not to discuss that subject for the moment. Stick to what we’re discussing.”

“Of course, but...I had never thought of my opinions as vendettas. Vendettas seems so personal, Isobel, like a family feud, a quarrel, as if I’m seeking vengeance. Obsessions perhaps but not vendettas.”

“Vendettas are the actions taken, Eddie, not the inaccurate beliefs that lie behind them”

“Ah yes. Of course.”

He was silent for a while as he contemplated this sudden enlightenment. At one point, Isobel glanced at him. His lower lip was moving as if he was practicing his next set of opinions. She was still watching him when the words finally escaped.

“Observation, Isobel. It was simple observation that led me to an opinion that something was wrong at Vital and then to act, Isobel.”

“For which I’m grateful, Eddie. But what I’m saying is that your observations sometimes cause you to draw wrong conclusions and then you become the most quarrelsome man I’ve ever met. You seek to change the way people think, the way they behave and even the way they look. Is that not a form of vengeance?”

Eddie couldn’t see a problem with that. If change was necessary but didn’t happen then it needed to be forced. “But I am a scientist. I seek facts by observation. I analyse what I observe and only then do I draw conclusions and act.”

“Oh, I’m sure you observe, analyse and understand your botanical specimens and your fungi and the results on your clever spectrograph machine, Eddie, but in the case of human nature you act before fully analysing and understanding their most basic emotions and most fundamental desires. You jump straight to conclusions with cold facts that you claim are scientifically sound. Wo betide anyone who disagrees with your cold conclusions.”

“Cold? Scientific facts are not cold, Isobel. They are the closest you get to the warmth of total comprehension. Ignore them at your peril.”

Isobel smiled.

“Eddie, you are a quite impossible man. You started this discussion and yet, already, you are not listening to me. The scientific fact, you obstinate man, is that people have feelings and emotions which, like it or not, can seem irrational to you. To you. Got it? You, yourself, are irrational for goodness sake. You are obsessed. Eddie. Obsessed by the belief that your views are the only ones that will stand up to rational criticism. Your opinions develop into vendettas because you do not consider other people’s private feelings and emotions. We are humans, Eddie. Even you are a human, in case you’ve forgotten it. Feelings are not necessarily explicable even by a bloody Oxford University Professor.”

That shook Eddie. Isobel had never sworn before. He pondered on the outburst for a few seconds. “Is that a fact-based opinion, Isobel, or just an emotional outburst?”

“It’s a bloody fact. Now be quiet.”

Lunch was served, drinks were brought around and Eddie was feeling drowsy but his mind was too full to sleep. Occasionally he glanced at Isobel sitting alongside him in

the window seat. She was wearing her deep blue suit with the short skirt. He could smell her perfume. If she moved, Eddie would look away, but then he'd glance back at her to marvel at her neat black hair style, the immaculate eye make-up, her flawless white skin and the painted nails which, today, were a delicate shade of pink.

He glanced down at his own white knees and pulled the leg of his shorts just a little lower. He really should have changed, he decided, and Isobel was right about his unpreparedness for London weather. The captain had announced that the weather in London was expected to be cool, cloudy and overcast so why hadn't he thought of it? Prepared himself better. Not that he'd had much choice – he'd only brought one pair of long trousers which would have been ideal for jungle exploration.

He thought about Buss.

He'd called him just before checking out of the hotel. "Give me a month or so, Buss. I'll be back. I got a bit distracted this time."

Buss hadn't seemed to mind. "That tea and coffee," he'd said. "It wasn't tea or coffee. It was methamphetamine tablets in tea and coffee packs."

Eddie again looked at Isobel. She was still sitting upright, staring out of the window. There wasn't much to see - just a clear blue sky above and clouds thousands of feet below. She seemed deep in thought and Eddie guessed what it was. He touched her arm and she turned.

"What happens to Vital Cosmetics now?" he asked.

"That's what I'm thinking about Eddie. When we arrive, Kathrine is meeting me off the plane. When we spoke on the phone, she seemed relieved. She was not upset about Peter. Quite the opposite, in fact. I didn't know but, apparently, he's been taking drugs and drinking heavily for years. She told Colin Asher that she'd speak to each of the Vital Cosmetic directors first thing this morning."

Isobel looked at her watch. "That's about now, I suppose. She'll be asking them to resign even if they are found to be unaware of what was going on at Easy Trading. With Peter's death, Kathrine will, once again, become the biggest shareholder so she and I will own most of the business. KRJ Capital will cease trading. It'll take a while to sort out but it'll mean we can, at last, make big changes with Vital Cosmetics."

"Good," Eddie said. He looked at her and smiled and then plucked up courage to touch her hand. His courage grew. "Can I take you to lunch again when we get back, Isobel?"

She glanced at his hand and then at his unshaven but smiling face. Eddie had smiled a lot in the last few days. "Yes, why not, Eddie."

"Thank you. There's a lot I've got to say to you, Isobel. I wanted to tell you last time but we ran out of time."

Oh, God, Isobel thought and turned away to consider. Eddie waited. "If it's anything like..." she began but Eddie interrupted her.

"Be patient with me, Isobel," Eddie said holding her hand more firmly. "Don't jump to conclusions. I'm only human. My thoughts, opinions and feelings can be quite irrational at times."

Isobel looked at him. His face bore an unusual expression and Isobel wondered what he wanted to say. Was he trying to be humorous or what? She felt his hand tighten its grip even more. "What is it, Eddie?"

"I'm getting quite excited," Eddie replied.

"Are you?" Isobel said, almost withdrawing her hand. "What exactly have you got in mind?"

"Krabok nuts," Eddie said.

"Krabok nuts?"

Isobel felt him remove his hand and use it instead to rub the grey stubble on his cheeks. Seemingly content with the two days growth or, more likely, absentmindedly, he went on, "Krabok seed oil has a long history in South-East Asian village life for medicinal purposes."

Isobel looked at him, expectantly.

"But there's been very little in depth scientific investigation on Krabok nut oil," he went on after taking a deep breath. "It's even been in folk lore as a cure for drunkenness, given by Buddhist monks and so on. Quite ridiculous, of course. In that respect it's on a par with the claims made for western cosmetics but...."

Eddie had a plastic cup of orange juice on the folding table in front of him and he, absentmindedly, took a sip of what was left. Isobel waited. This wasn't what she'd expected when Eddie had, moments ago, held her hand and told her he felt excited. She now willed him to continue.

"A year ago," he went on, staring into the now empty plastic cup, "we detected a rather unique component in the nuts which, I think, would compete with so-called anti-ageing creams." He looked at Isobel.

"Like the matrikines in night cream you so derided?" Isobel asked.

"Similar," Eddie stalled. "It's not a peptide but an interesting molecule that would penetrate epidermal cell tissue and....." He stopped again.

"Go on, Eddie. I'm intrigued." Isobel smiled at him and found she was now putting her hand on his.

Eddie shook his head. "It'll never halt the ageing process. To suggest that a face cream can do that is criminal, but the chemistry looks interesting and is not known by other cosmetics companies. The extraction process would be worth patenting and then, mixed with harmless, well tested and environmentally sound ingredients such as simple lanolin I think it could be very marketable. Simple, uncomplicated and free of outrageous claims, Isobel."

"That's exactly what I've decided we need, Eddie. Vital Simplicity: A new range of simple, safe and effective products. Simple ingredients in simple packaging and all approved by a simple, obstinate, argumentative but really quite likeable Oxford University Professor. What do you think?"

"Good idea, Isobel, but let's not get too obsessed. I'll still take a lot of convincing about the vanity business. If someone would renounce cosmetic surgery as a sin, I might at last think we were moving forwards."

“Oh, Eddie. Don’t start again. Try some enthusiasm. Didn’t you tell me you’d written one of your amusing poems about someone wanting cosmetic surgery.”

“I did but I doubt you’d find it amusing.”

“We’ve got ten hours left before we arrive. Tell me. If I don’t like it you can write another. How about that?”

Eddie pulled his half-moon spectacles onto his nose, scratched his rough, grey stubble with the bony fingers of his blue-veined hand and looked at the delicate white hand with the shiny pink nails that was now holding his own. He didn’t move it but sniffed self-consciously. “You really won’t like it,” he said uneasily.

Isobel shrugged. “Try me.”

“Do you want the short version or the long one?”

“Start with the short one, Eddie,” she smiled and Eddie was sure she winked. “If I like it you can then try the long one.”

Eddie bit his lip and took a deep breath. “For reciting this I usually don a white jacket,” he said shyly. “And borrow a stethoscope.”

“No socks? No sandals? You discard everything for one live performance?”

“Yes. I mean no. It’s about a young woman who wants cosmetic surgery.”

Isobel leaned towards him. “Go on.”

“Are you sure?”

“Sure.

Eddie took another deep breath. “It goes like this,” he said. “You must imagine me reciting it sitting on a spot-lit stool on the stage at The Ship in Bristol with my glasses and a white coat on and a borrowed stethoscope hanging over my shoulder. Can you do that?”

Isobel closed her eyes. “Oh, yes. Very easily,” she said.

“Perhaps we could attend Ports Night together one evening?”

“Perhaps.”

“And I’ve already explained to the audience to imagine my patient – a young woman who is dreadfully upset. She’s been crying every night for months about her appearance. She’s terribly depressed.”

“OK, I can definitely see her.”

And so, Eddie started. “She complained to me that her figure was not what it used to be – it had gone to pot. Her nose was too long and her face was wrong. Her bust was too small and that wasn’t all. Her legs were fat, her bottom was flat but her arms were like sticks and extremely thin. Her eyes were too grey, her ears too big, her skin too pale, her hair too brown and her forehead wore a permanent frown.”

He stopped, already utterly embarrassed.

“Is that it?”

“No. There’s a lot more. Are you interested?”

“Go on, Eddie. Please.”

“She listed demeaning characteristics, provided the facts and many statistics and her conclusion was that she felt too plain and so utterly depressed she was going insane. She said she wanted to start again.”

“Then what happened?”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course. Just get on with it.”

“So, I sighed and looked at this miserable sight, saddened by such a pitiful plight. For in her hand were magazines, glossy pictures for pop idol teens. So, I said to her: If you think you’re plain then think again. Plain is good. Plain means straightforward. Plain speech is strength. So, value your strengths and be true to yourself. Try to believe and aim to achieve. Those photos are only there to deceive.”

Eddie paused again but his confidence was growing and Isobel was definitely listening. He continued:

“So, I took from her that magazine, flipped the pages and looked inside, at coloured photos and snappy lines, dreamed up by youths with business minds. Slim-line models, white teeth, red lips, bottle-browned bodies with slender hips. Fleeting smiles as the cameras clicked. Fashion dress, cool and hip, weak on intellectual contribution, short on reason and sensibility. Just full of visual stimulation.

“I glanced up from my fleeting scan as she sat there with eyes cast down and I said to her, in the kindest way: You are, my dear, a classic case, of celebrity cult depression. A sickness of a modern sort – an addiction to creating a false impression. I looked at her across my specs, wondering what this sort expects, by coming in here to seek advice from someone as gross as I must look. Old, decrepit, senile to boot, a dowdy specimen of ugly manliness whose hair has going and looked a mess.

“So, I said to her: “Do you want to be like that? A false identity, an empty folly made up like a plastic dolly. You must pull yourself together, dear. Accept your little faults. For God has made us all so queer. It’s his small joke upon us folk, so he can sit and leer.”

Eddie stopped again and looked at Isobel.

She wasn’t laughing or even smiling but she was obviously listening intently and, for some strange reason, still holding his hand. Eddie felt hot and more nervous than he’d ever been when performing this nonsense on the stage.

Isobel opened her eyes and looked at him expectantly with her big brown eyes and black eyelashes and whispered quietly, through her shiny red lips. “Is that it, Eddie?”

Eddie shook his head. “Not quite,” he said.

But his confidence of just a few minutes ago had evaporated. Instead, he felt deeply embarrassed. This so-called poetry produced raucous laughter in a room full of heavy beer drinkers but now it felt like strings of scribbled words that fed off prejudice and the odd ways of others, like this poor woman patient of his imagination.

Was Isobel only holding his hand because she felt sorry for him?

Eddie now felt as if he had, for years, been mocking others - their flaws, habits, desires, emotions and weaknesses but was it, instead, a sign of a flaw in his own character?

Should he not have abandoned this ageing, whining, prejudiced and unfunny character called Huggy a long time ago? Left him behind, euthanized him, buried him and forgotten him?

Huggy had had his time. Forty years ago, Huggy had tried to change attitudes, to influence society, to challenge the way things were, but Huggy was really Professor Edward James Higgins, so-called Eddie, who sat day in, day out, looking down a microscope, checking print-outs, writing reports, cultivating moulds in petri dishes and writing accusatory letters and depressing articles that changed nothing.

Look at Isobel. he said to himself. Alive, vibrant, optimistic, positive, full of plans and well, let's be frank, attractive in her clothes, perfume, cosmetics and make-up. And now take a look at yourself. He glanced at his bare, white knees.

"Are you alright, Eddie"

"No," he said. "I've decided to stop writing poetry. It's far too embarrassing."

"That would be a pity, Eddie. It's thought provoking if nothing else. What else can we simple humans do but listen to the silly words of others, ignore them as the rantings of a fool or feel inspired and enlightened." She paused, leaned closer and now held his hand with both of hers.

"We've talked a lot in the last few days, Eddie, and I've ignored some of it as utter nonsense coming from someone who doesn't necessarily understand the modern world, in particular women. But you're also an inspiration. You've taught me so much.

"It was you who saw problems at Vital and you were right to be suspicious. Did that stem from your inbuilt dislike and suspicion of what you call the unseemly vanity industry? If so, never mind. Your suspicions were spot on. Look what we uncovered. We could not have done any of that without you.

"But we all do things we feel embarrassed about because we're all a bit odd, Eddie. In your case I think you just need to lighten up and stop being so negative about your fellow humans. Rid yourself of all those obsessions until you've gathered the evidence and listened to more views. Then you can act. Then you can feel free to start on another vendetta. And another thing. Look after yourself, smarten up and get out of your laboratory a bit more."

She was right, of course, Eddie decided.

He, too, had learned a lot about himself in the last few weeks. He should definitely smarten himself up, get out more and try to be more understanding. Mel had been saying it for years but it was good to be told to his face by Isobel. Perhaps he could start by buying a suit. And a tie. And a pair of sensible shoes.

"How does that silly poem end?" Isobel asked.

"The patient doesn't agree with the doctor," he replied.

"You see? So, in your poem you granted her the right of reply and the power to disagree. Good. Quite right too. What does she say?"

“She gets up and walks out. Then she turns and says: ‘Better I look like a street-walking tart than look like you, you stupid old’”

Isobel looked at Eddie for a moment, suddenly realised what rhymed with tart, put her hand over her mouth and laughed out loud. Then, to Eddie’s shock she leaned over and kissed him lightly on the cheek.

“I think you’re just a loveable old romantic at heart, Professor Eddie Higgins,” she said.

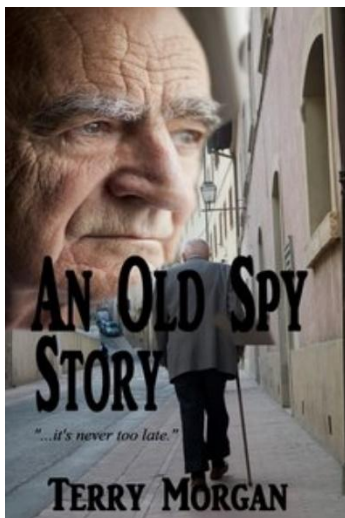
Eddie almost choked. “I see the toilets are vacant at last,” he said. “I think I’ll smarten myself up and change my socks. Would you excuse me? “

THE END

Other books by Terry Morgan

Website: www.tjmbooks.com

An Old Spy Story



The old spy in “An Old Spy Story” is octagenerian, Oliver (“Ollie”) Thomas. During a long career spent trying to earn an honest living with his own export business, Ollie was also, reluctantly, carrying out parallel assignments in Africa, the Middle East and elsewhere only loosely connected to British Intelligence. But, by using threats and blackmail, his controller, Major Alex Donaldson, was forcing Ollie to help run his own

secret money making schemes that included arms shipments to the IRA through Gadaffi and Libya, money laundering in Africa and assassination.

Now aged eighty six, recently widowed and alone Ollie still struggles with guilt and anger over his past and decides to make one last attempt to track down and deal with Donaldson.

REVIEWS:

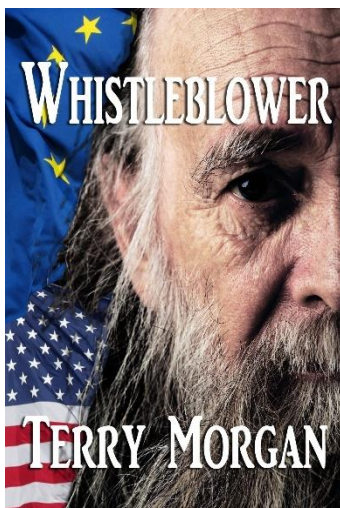
"A masterful tale by someone who knows exactly what he is writing about."

"A wonderful and moving love story from an elderly man's perspective is beautifully woven into it and the ending is masterful."

"I enjoyed it – exciting, endlessly beguiling and fun."

"Thoroughly enjoyable from start to finish. A remarkable book from a writer who has clearly been there and done it. Easy reading."

Whistleblower



Large amounts of international aid money are being stolen by those at the heart of the political establishment. Ex politician, Jim Smith, threatened and harassed into fleeing abroad for accusations of fraud secretly returns to renew his campaign. A realistic thriller covering events in the USA, Europe, Africa, the Middle East and Asia and a sensitive study of a stubborn and talented man who steadfastly refuses to fit into the stereotype of a successful businessman and a modern politician.

REVIEWS:

"This book has the sort of political intrigue that captivates viewers of shows like 'House of Cards,' but the main man is actually a decent person in 'Whistle blower.'"

As someone who prefers protagonists on the correct moral side of the spectrum, it made the book that much more enjoyable. **(AMAZON)**

"Whistleblower", by Terry Morgan, is an international thriller that stretches from England to Thailand with many stops in between.

"The plot centers around the timely topic of international aid money and the criminals who feed on it. The hero, the story's whistleblower, is British ex-politician Jim Smith, and the story follows him around the globe as he seeks to put a stop to the corruption.

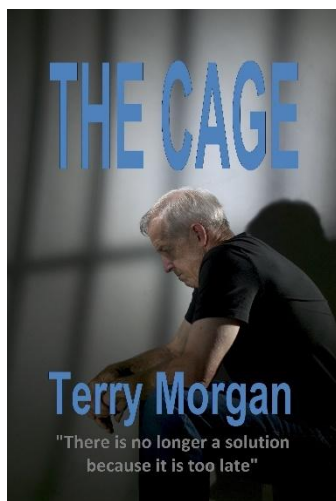
"Morgan, a world traveller who now resides in Thailand, knows his locations well. Cities in Italy and Africa come alive, and Jim Smith's home in off-the-beaten-path Thailand is wonderfully described, allowing readers to feel like they're there--this is no easy thing to do, and the authenticity of the various settings is a real strength of the book.

"Another strength includes the protagonist. Smith is not a typical hero. He's older and lacks the suaveness and action-hero credentials of a James Bond or Jason Bourne, but he more than makes up for it with his intelligence and depth--a big pleasure in the book is being invited into this man's life as he tries to pick up the pieces after an underhanded campaign aimed at ruining him.

"The plot moves along briskly, and the technology, players (politicians, intelligence agencies, criminals), and small details about the finance industry all add up to a novel that's rich in credibility and intrigue. Anyone interested in seeing the world from the comfort of a good armchair should read Morgan's book." **(AMAZON)**

"Highly convincing.....This could all be happening right now. Another realistic and highly entertaining story...."

The Cage



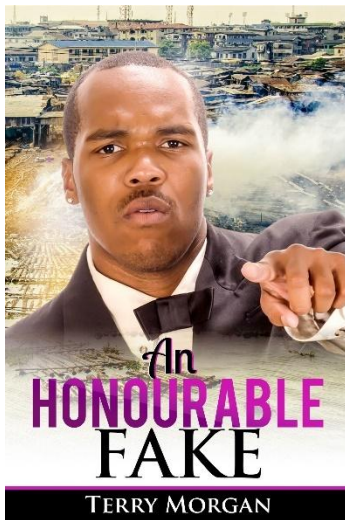
Set around the year 2050 when overpopulation is causing food and energy shortages, mass unemployment, social tension and civil conflict. An ex politician and professor of biology talks to a grandson no longer able to cope with life in an overcrowded city. A follow-up to the author's previous thriller, 'The Malthus

Pandemic', this hard-hitting short novel contains facts and forecasts supported by original papers.

REVIEWS:

"Not for the faint hearted."

An Honourable Fake



At age fourteen, Femi Akindele, an orphaned street boy from the Makoko slum in Lagos, Nigeria, decided to call himself Pastor Gabriel Joshua. Unqualified and self-taught and now in his mid-forties, Gabriel has become a flamboyant, popular and highly acclaimed international speaker on African affairs, economics, terrorism, corruption and the widespread poverty and economic migration that results.

Gabriel wants changes but, in his way lie big corporations, international politics and a group of wealthy but corrupt Nigerians financing a terrorist organisation, the COK, with one purpose in mind – the overthrow of the democratically elected Nigerian President and the establishment of a vast new West African state.

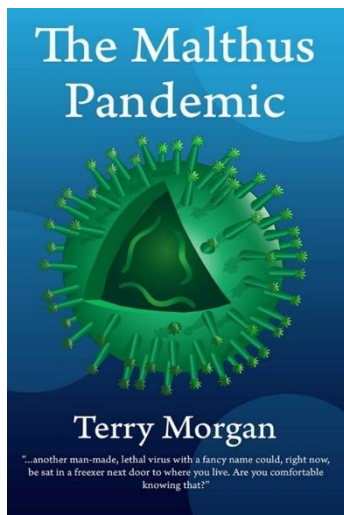
On Gabriel's side, though, are his loyal boyhood friend Solomon, a private investigator of international corporate fraud and the newly appointed head of the Nigerian State Security Service Colonel Martin Abisola.

COMMENTS:

"A rare sort of political thriller – a black African hero."

"Accomplished and knowledgeable – a class follow up to Whistleblower."

The Malthus Pandemic



Daniel Capelli is a private investigator of international commercial crime.

Armed with an unusually vague remit from a new client, an American biotechnology company, to investigate the theft of valuable research material but motivated largely by a private desire to see a Thai girlfriend, Anna, he travels to Bangkok for an infectious diseases conference. Here, he discovers that several virologists have also disappeared. One of them, David Solomon, is known for extreme views on the need for direct action to reduce the world's population.

As the investigation deepens he rapidly uncovers a sinister plot to deliberately spread a deadly new virus, the Malthus A virus, specifically created by Solomon. But Solomon needs funds and help to spread it. With sporadic outbreaks of the disease already in Thailand, Nigeria and Kenya, Capelli finds two other characters - Doctor Larry Brown, an American doctor working at the USA Embassy in Nigeria, and Kevin Parker, an academic and expert on the history and economics of population control - have also arrived at similar conclusions but from different angles.

Calling on help from another close friend, Colin Asher - a London based private investigator - it soon becomes clear that Solomon is being supported by a rich American with a history of fraud, embezzlement and murder and a secretive Arab healthcare company with a ready-made international distribution network. Their plan: To help spread the Malthus A virus and make huge profits by marketing ineffective or counterfeit drugs.

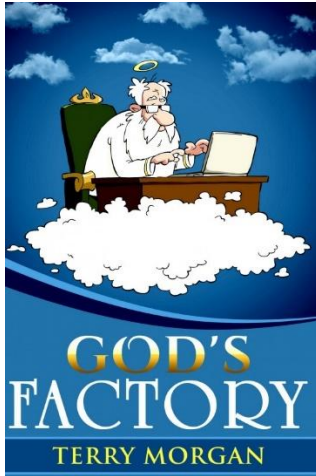
But with his cover blown by the murder of another colleague, the charismatic Kenyan detective Jimmy Banda, and with increasing fears that the virus is about to be released Capelli, Anna and his colleagues face another problem - persuading UK and USA politicians and the international agencies responsible for bioterrorism and commercial crime, to believe them and respond in time.

REVIEWS:

"Anchored firmly in the present, no high-tech Bond style gadgets, just good old-fashioned detective work. Gritty descriptions of the international locations, compelling plot and poignant rants about the inadequacy of democratic institutions

and persuasive insight on the inner workings of the global establishment. Easy reading and difficult to put down once started. Enjoyable read."

God's Factory



Terry Morgan writes mainly serious novels with a strong international background but intersperses it with less serious satire and humour like 'God's Factory'.