

WHISTLEBLOWER

Terry Morgan

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Reviews:

"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 REVIEW)

"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 REVIEW)

WHISTLEBLOWER

PROLOGUE

James William Smith, former Independent Member of the UK Parliament talking about organised theft of International Aid money to US Senator Colin Stafford and FBI Legal Attaché, Stephen Lockhart at the US Embassy, London, November 2014.

"Make no mistake, Senator, these are powerful people. They already have money and resources but they are out to make even more. Security is what keeps them out of sight. Politics and bribery is what shuts mouths. Threats and fears of repercussions are what keeps people in their place. That is the power they think they have over everyone.

They depend on ordinary people only interested in holding onto ordinary jobs by doing ordinary things - things they are told to do, day-to-day. But they'll use anyone - politicians, big and small businesses, the press, PR consultants, magazine and newspaper editors, TV, the radio - they'll pay anyone to fake a story or for a piece of news or comment to counter suggestions that things are not as clean as they appear. They'll hack phones and they'll record conversations. And if all that doesn't work then they'll bring in the really nasty elements - underworld characters who know nothing of what is going on but who'll do anything for the promise of big money.

It is a sort of white-collar mafia made up of senior bureaucrats who have learned to specialise in this form of crime. With just a few sitting at the very top there is a structure of lesser fraudsters beneath, all kept in order by threats, blackmail, bribes and promises of money.

Finding those at the top might not be as difficult as we think, but they will be protected by a reputation of dignity, professionalism and status that has been deliberately constructed to make any accusations from outside look absurd and totally inconceivable. I tried the accusations route and I was the one made to look absurd.

And they are using technology, software, the internet - anything that will help to conceal what they are doing. As for their helpers - the lesser fraudsters - they will want to keep them in charge of the day to day operations. They need all the systems to appear to be working normally and efficiently, because they might one day need to explain away security and bureaucratic failures and weaknesses they have been ruling over for years and to find plausible excuses for the vast sums of tax payers money they have lost and stolen. That is when the complete innocents and the lesser fraudsters will suddenly find fingers being pointed directly at them. They will

become the dispensable, sacrificial offerings to muddy the waters and divert attention.

I know all this because it happened to me. That's why I stayed out of sight for a while, but I always planned to come back to renew my campaign.

So be aware. Those fraudsters sitting at the top will not look like criminals. As they go about their public lives they will look and appear calm and normal because they feel untouchable.

And even if massive fraud was proven, would they automatically lose their freedom, their jobs, their status, their pensions? No, not necessarily. Because the entire system is designed to automatically cover up such activity and if it ever came to public enquiries - which is unlikely - they would point fingers at each other and then hide without fear of prosecution behind the complexity of the organisation. Things like that would take years, if ever, to come to Court.

So, we will probably show that the whole system is at fault here. Whether we can do anything about it in our own small way I really don't know, but I'm damned sure the millions of hard-working, honest, tax payers out there would support us in anything we do. That is where our strength lies."

CHAPTER 1

Jim Smith, scrambling on all fours out of the mosquito net tent that was his bedroom, had another headache.

"Dreaming again," he muttered aloud into the total darkness as he fumbled for the torch and the packet of painkillers he kept in a plastic bag.

Five minutes before, and fast asleep, he had been feeding scraps of dry bread to pigeons in Trafalgar Square in London. Wings were flapping, feathers were flying, pigeons were sat on his head and his shoulders and bird shit was everywhere. Someone, maybe it was his wife Margaret, was standing nearby watching, clutching her handbag, unfazed, untouched by even a single, grubby, feral pigeon. He had shouted to her amongst the dust and noise of flapping wings. "I need a cat, Margaret. Put a cat amongst them. No, no, second thoughts. Switch on the fan, let the shit hit it."

It was a familiar dream that had started in a way suggesting it might take off in a different direction, but it was soon back on track, the storyline much as always. In an instant, he was no longer in Trafalgar Square but standing with his hands behind his back looking down from a makeshift platform in a sports hall with five others as they waited for an officer of the local council to make an announcement. It was two in the morning - probably three in the morning when he was dreaming - and he could see cameras, reporters and bleary-eyed council staff - the vote counters - looking at watches wanting to go home. And then it came. In his dream, Jim Smith heard it as if it was happening right there and then.

"...so I hereby declare that James William Smith is duly elected as the Member of Parliament for the constituency of Amberley."

He had woken up at that point because he remembered pushing his hand through the mosquito net to grab the bottle of water. He had drunk half, was grateful for the cooling effect of the other half that dribbled down his beard and then fell asleep again to a lullaby from a gecko chirping somewhere in the total darkness. But within a flash, he was back in London, six thousand miles from his ramshackle hideout in rural Thailand and back more than three years to the time of his election. Then the headache began.

Jim Smith's qualifications as a modern politician were far from ideal. For a start he was in his sixties not his thirties, and he hadn't had the private education or the advantage or influence of an already wealthy and connected family. Instead, Jim Smith had spent thirty years running his own successful manufacturing business - "started it myself and ran it myself with a hundred or so staff by the time I sold it."

His qualification for politics was, he believed, that having seen life at the sharp end and lived off his wits in a competitive world, he could offer something different to the good people of Amberley - if not the world.

But there were downsides to being independently minded and also an Independent Member of the UK Parliament. Having no big party affiliations meant having few friends. But he hadn't cared. He had made it perfectly clear at the outset. He was his own man. What you see is what you get. Take it or leave it or just don't vote for me next time. Jim Smith had, though, stored up a few questions for government during his thirty years in business.

His first?

"Despite all the apparent checks, balances and bureaucracy behind the provision of economic and humanitarian aid, would the Minister agree with me that if many millions of Euros and Dollars of tax payer's money is regularly finding its way into the pockets of foreign criminals then there is something profoundly wrong with the system. And if evidence shows that certain politicians and unelected bureaucrats are also up to their necks in this organised criminal activity what will he do?"

That was how he had put the cat amongst the pigeons and when the shit had hit the fan. With one question, Jim Smith had touched sensitive nerves, nerves that seemed to believe that the quiet, undisturbed and lucrative life they had enjoyed for a long time had suddenly been disturbed by an untamed political animal that had just come in from the wild.

He expected some immediate action and got it, but it was not what he expected. Perhaps it had been political naivety, but he immediately realised he had touched the sensitive nerves of some very influential, unknown and invisible people. And what would you do with an unchained and dangerous animal on the loose that was threatening your way of life?

That dream in the hot, airless wooden house on stilts in the deeply rural province of Kanchanaburi in Thailand where Jim Smith now lived had stopped there, but sometimes the dreams went on far longer.

There were the sweaty nightmares of shouting, pushing and shoving, of flashing cameras and thrusting microphones and there were the cold sweaty nightmares of the scandal loving tabloid newspapers. There was the nightmare that depicted Jim Smith, Member of Parliament, as a bungling amateur with no policies except a string of grudges, no recognised party behind him and only self-interest at heart. The only

part that Jim ever agreed with was that he was on a steep learning curve about politics and the self-interests of others.

But he had always been an obstinate man and there was enough evidence to convince himself, if not others, of a climate of corruption and he knew he had trodden on some very big toes. It all added to the feeling that there was something genuinely rotten at the core. Obstinate Jim was like a dog with a bone because what, at five thirty, had woken him to his throbbing headache was no product of a vivid, nocturnal imagination. Jim had been dreaming about actual events of three years ago.

Yes, he acknowledged he may have gone about it the wrong way. His first question at Prime Minister's questions time - PMQ - was an example. The Speaker had interrupted him. "Order, order. Mr Smith, please. This is Prime Minister's Questions. Please do not beat about the bush. What is your question?"

In the cold sweat of his sleep, Jim Smith squirmed. "Ah, yes. Would the Prime Minister please ask the Europe Minister and the Minister for International Development to comment on evidence of criminality in the granting and use of EU and other international aid funds and instigate a full investigation."

The Prime Minister stood up, "Yes, I'll ask them." Then he sat down to cheers from all sides. No wonder Jim had suffered from night-time sweats for three years.

After that incident he had tried to forget things but couldn't. He wrote a letter to two Ministers seeking help to investigate his concerns and he talked to Douglas Creighton his local constituency chairman about it, but Douglas was showing signs that he thought he was going about things in the wrong way. "Just focus on constituency matters for now, Jim. Why not forget the big issues for the time being."

The living nightmare entered another phase two days after his discussion with Douglas. It was nearly midnight when his mobile phone rang in the tiny apartment in London where he stayed during the week. Margaret, he thought, and checked his watch. It was a bit late for his wife to phone and not many people knew his mobile number. It was a man's voice. "Mr Smith?"

"Yes. Who is it?"

"You must stop these accusations, Mr Smith. No good will come of it. Stop now or face the consequences."

Jim, stunned. "Who is this?"

Jim's ear for placing accents was good. The man was possibly French-speaking Belgian "Stop the questions, Mr Smith. For your sake, for your family's sake, stop now. You have been warned." Then the caller rang off.

Jim had stared at the phone and checked the caller's number but it had been withheld. "Crank," he said to himself, forgot about it and carried on reading papers. The second call came two days later. This time he was at Paddington Station about to catch a train to go home to Wiltshire for the weekend. "Mr Smith?" It was the same voice. "We've been doing a check on your old company Smith Technology and your visits to Africa and the Middle East."

"Oh? Yes, I see." Jim had stopped walking, put his case down, moved the phone to his better, left ear, pushed his long, grey hair back. "Who am I speaking to?"

"You had good business in South Africa, Mr Smith. But there was some sort of relationship with a lady in Johannesburg - a Mrs Margo Vos. Do you want to comment? And there was another lady, a Miss Dilini de Silva. Not South African but from somewhere else. Do you know who I'm talking about?"

"No, of course not. Who am I speaking to? What is your name, please?"

"We will have to report this, you understand. There are also some serious concerns about business activities in Africa and the Middle East. You will, of course, be only too aware of bribery and corruption law."

"Who the heck are you? Are you threatening me?"

"Back off, Mr Smith. Back off. You've already been warned once. Back off or face the consequences." There was a click. The caller, whoever it was, had finished.

Sometimes, at that point in the cold sweat of the nightmares in the hut in Thailand, he would force himself to wake up, switch on the torch, shine it around the room, watch the dust particles in the beam, see a large spider or another gecko. Sometimes he got up and made a coffee or just switched the torch off and tried to sleep again, but it was often useless. The headache had already started.

He remembered Margo Vos. She was the wife of the owner of an importer he once dealt with. He had had a pleasant enough dinner with them at their house in Cape Town a few times. But who on earth had dredged up this almost forgotten name from the past and why? The last time he'd heard from Walter Vos was - what? - six years ago at least and the last time he'd seen Margo must have been seven or eight years ago. Walter had sold the business. He and Margo had split up. But as for anything untoward between himself and Margo Vos the suggestion was ludicrous.

And then the other name mentioned? Dilini something? The name rang a distant bell somewhere in Jim Smith's mind, but having been married to Margaret for thirty years he would surely have remembered a liaison with someone called Dilini.

Sunday, two days later. At home near Swindon, Margaret had appeared tetchy for most of the day. She hardly spoke over lunch. He tried to talk to her at one point and even thought he might raise the idea of a rare break, a holiday or something, but the phone had rung and Margaret got up quickly to answer it. It was a friend of hers. As usual he didn't listen but he finished his lunch alone, took his plate to the kitchen and went into his study. Margaret was still on the phone. Thinking her mood was something that just happened occasionally with no good reason, he spent the rest of the afternoon there.

By late afternoon he realised he needed to get back to London. Still trying his hardest to be sensitive to Margaret's mood, he said goodbye, kissed her cheek and left. Margaret said nothing but closed the front door before he'd even got into the car. Unusual. Memorable. He spent the night in the Gloucester Road flat but on Monday was at a conference on international trade in Reading where he had been asked to speak on his experiences of exporting to Africa. He had enjoyed the experience and the opportunity of mixing with businesses, but, because he was already annoyed with press coverage, he hadn't bothered to read any of the days' newspapers.

By Monday evening, though, and no longer able to resist checking them, he bought a bundle of dailies outside Gloucester Road tube station, walked to the flat and, as he walked, checked the tabloid. And, yes, there was yet another cartoon of himself. For that paper, he had become a running joke. It was his long, grey hair they found

amusing or useful. Not that it was, in his opinion, too long. He had worn it like that for years and liked it that way. It was just that it had become greyer and thinner and he had been likened to the old Labour party leader, Michael Foot. This was, Jim thought, a gross exaggeration but it bothered him because he felt it was what was said and done that was important, not how one looked.

He let himself into the basement flat, threw the pile of papers onto the coffee table, switched on the TV and went to the kitchen to fill the kettle. With the tap still running, he swilled out a dirty mug that had lain on its side in the sink since Friday. He put it, still dripping, onto the kitchen table, opened the fridge to find it almost empty except for a tub of butter, a pot of marmalade and a carton of orange juice. There was no milk. "Black will do." He tipped two spoons full of coffee into the wet cup and stood waiting for the sound of the kettle to come to the boil. Instead, it was a familiar voice on the TV that he heard.

"So, what have you to say regarding the allegations about your husband?"

Jim rushed from the kitchen to stand in front of the TV. Margaret was standing surrounded by pushing reporters, microphones and TV cameramen. It was clear they had been waiting for her to either arrive home or come out to speak to them but she looked flushed and unsure how to deal with the situation. Jim fell into the nearest chair to watch. Margaret was standing by the gate leading to the gravel driveway of their house. The all so familiar blue cedar, the centre piece of their front garden, was behind her. The front door of the house could be seen as the camera moved to keep Margaret in the centre of the screen.

"Please," he heard her say, "I can't say anything just now. Please move away."

"But surely you have seen the pictures in the press?"

"Yes," he heard his wife say.

"So, will you be standing by your husband?"

"Please," Margaret said, "I can't deal with this now."

"Is he expected home this evening? Are you shocked by the pictures?"

Jim, in London, watched the scene unfolding from his chair. "What pictures?"

"So, what do you say?"

He saw Margaret with a female reporter supporting her elbow. "What can I say?" Margaret said. "I am shocked. I really don't want to say. I would ask you to please leave me alone so I can decide what to do. Nothing has been normal since the election. Please."

"Are you standing by your husband? Were you aware of indiscretions?"

What indiscretions? Jim Smith, watching helplessly, saw his wife push her way passed people, microphones and cameras to the front door of their house. Forgetting about his boiling kettle, he switched the TV off, fell back into the chair and put both hands over his face. Behind his hands, he felt ready to burst into tears and remained there for a minute or two, struggling with anger and a deep feeling of responsibility for Margaret. What was happening to him and to Margaret? He tried to phone her but the phone was disconnected. He tried her mobile. It was switched off. And what pictures? What were they talking about? He picked up the pile of newspapers from

the coffee table and went straight to the tabloid. He had not made the front page but there it was on page 2 - a picture and a headline - "Smith's Night Out."

The picture showed him, or someone identical, with his arm around the shoulders of a young blonde lady. She was laughing. He was smiling. His face looked directly at her as though he was about to kiss her. His hair was swept back with a parting, something he had never done in his entire life. It had been taken in a nightclub in Soho at around midnight a few weeks ago the report said. The paper had only now decided to publish it because, 'faced with other controversy surrounding the Independent MP Jim Smith' they felt it was now 'in the public interest to do so.'

Jim slumped into the chair; the paper half crumpled in his hand. He knew it was not him. He had never been inside such a club in his life. Bars, and so on, when abroad with clients, yes, but only occasionally. It went with the job. But he had no idea what went on in clubs of that sort in Soho in London. He again tried calling Margaret on the home phone and mobile. Both were still switched off. He tried Douglas Creighton but Douglas had just gone on holiday. Next morning at 5.30 he had driven down to Wiltshire to find Margaret, desperate to talk to her and to ask her why she had said those things, to console her, to tell her it was all lies and it would all blow over soon. But when he arrived, he found the main gate to the house surrounded by reporters pushing and jostling for comments and trying to get him to confirm the finer details about his apparent relationship with a night club hostess called Polly. And Margaret was not there when, at last, he got inside the house and he had no idea where she was.

He left and, surrounded by the same reporters, he had sworn at one and then raised his hand to force his way through the melee. And, of course, it was all caught on camera and they then reported his swearing and that he had hit a reporter.

He denied everything but, in reporting his denials, they would add other bits to suggest that there might be other as yet untold stories about infidelities and underhand business activities. They asked him where Margaret was and, of course, he said he didn't know. Then they asked him for details about the club hostess and, of course, he denied ever having been there and told them that he did not even know where it was. And they all took notes and held microphones and voice recorders in front of his face.

Jim's life was being turned totally upside down. He had no idea where Margaret was and no-one seemed to know. The broad sheet papers seemed generally to ignore the subject but by the following weekend all the tabloids were picking it up. And then they published another photograph of the same young, blonde haired girl, posing in a short, red dress.

Jim remembered staring in disbelief at the picture after a researcher, Ann, handed it to him late in the evening just as the morning papers hit the London streets. She handed it to him and then left his office, shutting the door - loudly. Jim would always remember her disgusted reaction and that particular incident would return much later to both haunt him and help him.

And then the same blonde girl called Polly was in all the papers for what seemed like days. She sold her so-called story - her short, sad, life history.

'Pretty Polly' the tabloids had called her and she was famous for all of seven days. She said he had arrived late at night on several occasions and always sat with her. She liked him and thought he was good fun but she had no idea he was a politician.

She came from Dagenham and her mother and father were divorced and her other boyfriend was a policeman. Jim had read it all, over and over again, but he had never seen her in his life.

Gradually a sense of hitting back drove him to sit and think clearly for the first time for a week. The alleged visit to the club was June 8th and he consulted his diary.

Around 7pm he had given an interview with a German newspaper about funding for overseas development because, by then, his reputation for being a stirrer in this area was becoming widely known. He also knew that by 9pm, he had returned to his office to recover some papers. As usual he had sat and read things for a while but had then taken a taxi to the flat in Gloucester Road. He must have arrived there at about ten thirty. There had been one phone call but no-one spoke when he answered. It had been one of the quietest days and nights for weeks. But he knew he hadn't left the flat after ten thirty and certainly not to visit a nightclub in Soho.

CHAPTER 2

Six thousand miles from where Jim Smith nursed his morning headache, stood a vast glass and concrete office block bedecked with flags of different nations.

Inside it, Committee Room 4/116 was identical to Committee Rooms 4/115 and 4/117 and all other such fourth-floor rooms. The focal point of each of the rooms was an oval table made of seasoned ash encircled by twelve chairs also made of ash with dark blue leather padding. In the corner of each room stood the essential machine for coffee and chilled water, the smaller table standing alongside each machine being for plates of biscuits, cookies and sandwiches for meetings that took longer than the two-hour bookable slots or extended over lunchtimes.

In Room 4/116, the Director General, known as "The DG" to the hundreds of staff that ultimately reported to him, had settled in the middle chair on one side of the table facing the door and wall clock. He was a slim, ordinary looking, middle-aged man with greying hair receding from his forehead and wearing wide rimmed glasses, a dark suit, white shirt and pale blue, silk tie. The heavy gold cuff links matched the watch. To his left, sat Katrine Nielsen - Danish, prim, upright, fair hair tied neatly back in a clasp, in her late twenties and wearing a dark grey trouser suit and white blouse. In front of them, a pile of papers with seven grey folders, a laptop computer and two cups of coffee.

"We'll take the Liberia one first, Katrine," the DG said. "Almost a foregone conclusion would you agree?"

"Yes, I expect so."

"And we'll discuss the smaller, Climate Change one from Yemen last. It looks to me as if it needs more work. Certainly, that was Lisa's opinion when I spoke to her yesterday afternoon."

The DG looked at the clock on the wall. The room had been booked until 4pm. It was now nearly 2pm but two hours should be enough to discuss, approve and sign off seven funding applications. He did a quick sum on the corner of a pad.

"Only twelve million, six hundred thousand Euros, so it shouldn't take very long. But not a bad afternoon's work, Katrine. What do you think?"

"Yes, assuming they are all approved," Katrina replied and looked at him as he scribbled over his calculation and obliterated it.

"Where are they?" he asked, meaning the six other officers whose presence was necessary to comply with the procedures for vetting funding bids for international aid.

"Some of them were at an earlier meeting on renewable energy, Mr Eischmann. It should have finished at midday. Perhaps it overran and they were late getting to lunch.

"Phone Carlos, will you Katrine? Tell him we're here and waiting. He needs to get his team working together. Oh, and by the way, about that guy Jan Kerkman. I've spoken to him. He should fit into the team quite nicely."

Katrine just nodded.

At that moment - it was 2pm - the door opened and in came six others, each carrying seven folders. Among them was the tall, athletic form of Jan Kerkman - newly promoted to the steering group.

By 2.10pm, with the essential coffees, teas and biscuits organised around the paperwork, the meeting began.

By 3.50pm Katrine had officially recorded the approval of six funding applications to the value of eleven million, one hundred and thirty-eight thousand Euros. As forecast the Yemeni one was deferred on the grounds that it had failed to comply with one pre-set condition. Katrine duly noted that the applicant should be notified and that a re-application with the missing elements in place would be considered provided it was received within three months.

By 4pm, the DG, Dirk Eischmann, was the only person left in the room. He removed his glasses, rubbed his eyes and then got up to look out of the big window and down into the street and heavy afternoon traffic below. Then, gathering his own few papers, he left Committee Room 4/116, took a lift to the sixth floor, swiped his security card over a doorway and walked down a carpeted corridor to a door with a sign over it confirming his name and title.

Once inside, he dropped everything on his desk. Then he opened a drawer, took out a bottle of 21-year-old Glen Scotia Scotch whisky and a crystal tumbler, poured himself a glassful and sat sipping it for a few minutes. At 4.25pm he returned the bottle and empty glass to the drawer, got up, closed the door of his office and left the building.

CHAPTER 3

The strong coffee Jim Smith made himself every morning had helped to quell his throbbing headache, but he still wasn't feeling particularly sprightly. He wobbled, unsteadily down the four wooden steps that led from the ramshackle hut on stilts that he called home, to the ground. Shading his sore eyes from the hot, early morning sun, he struggled to pull his motorcycle out from where, during the night, it had toppled and come to rest against one of the worm-infested stilts that supported the house.

As it often did during the ride into the local town, the feeling of exhaustion slowly evaporated - that was until, after parking the motorcycle amongst an untidy group of

others in the main street, he caught a glimpse of his own, sun-lit reflection in the shaded window of the farmer's hardware shop. Jim Smith did not like what he saw.

"Dear God. You look like a seriously malnourished refugee, my boy." He stuck a finger into his mouth, stretched his cheek to try to see the back teeth. "And you need a dentist - and how about a decent pair of shorts? Look at you. Your mother would be shocked."

Staring back at him was a scrawny looking stranger carrying a dusty duffel bag and dressed in cheap, rubber flip flops, a pair of sun-bleached shorts and what was once a white tee shirt. He saw a gaunt man who, when he had finished growing as a teenager fifty years ago, had stood six feet tall but now looked smaller and shorter. Thankfully, the deeply lined face was somewhat obscured by the grey beard and the straggle of long, untidy and thinning hair of the same colour. The prominent bony knees, the bare legs and veined arms were the colour and texture of brown shoe leather, the inevitable result of living under the tropical sun with little more than that pair of shorts and tee shirt as clothing and the flip flops or nothing on his feet. The reflection, he decided, looked underfed and older than sixty-six years.

The mumbling to himself, lips visibly moving, was something else he no longer liked about himself, and it had been getting noticeably worse. "Reflecting on a reflection," he muttered, "Must remember not to do that too often. Could at least buy yourself some decent flip flops."

Still pondering on the disturbing image of himself, he wandered into Lek's "internet cafe" feeling downhearted and desperate for some good news. He greeted Lek with a grunt, went to his usual far corner table, opened the old duffel bag and pulled out his dusty laptop. There was no need for him to order for Lek brought him his usual refreshment - a bottle of Singha beer and a glass of nam manow - fresh lime juice with ice, sugar and just a pinch of salt.

As a rundown construction of wood and concrete with a part straw, part rusty corrugated roof, Lek's enterprise in the small town in rural Thailand had once only catered for the dry throats of locals and stray dogs looking for shade. But after Jim's visionary suggestion that Lek might also like to add an internet facility it had become a more profitable business for Lek and, more importantly, the centre of Jim's links with the outside world. It was his communications centre, his source of all information whether good, bad or merely interesting. And the information as he logged onto his email that morning was further confirmation that undying patience coupled with long term strategy was, at long last, paying off.

He leaned back in the hard, plastic chair, stroked his beard, leaned forward again, adjusted his glasses and re-read the email message. With one finger, he typed a simple reply: "Hello Jan: As suspected, but that Italian link is new. Go very carefully now. I assume you've told Jonathan but we need to meet up again. Email me some dates." Then he pressed send, logged off, closed the laptop and sat back in the hard chair to finish his drinks. Lek would not have seen it but a smile was growing behind the beard.

Jim Smith's obstinacy and determination to continue where he left off was alive and well.

CHAPTER 4

Milan, northern Italy.

Inside a mezzanine office hidden inside an anonymous warehouse behind metal racking and an assortment of cardboard boxes, sat a short, round man in an open-necked white shirt that clung to him with sweat.

"Yah, of course it's me, Guido," he snapped impatiently in Italian into a mobile phone largely hidden in the fold between his chin and shoulder. The voice was high pitched, like a boy whose voice had not yet broken.

"Yah, I've read it. It's written in the language of the professional bureaucrat. It is English but not like the English we learn at school or the English we speak. That, Toni, my flower, is why you don't understand it. But Guido does. Guido does not sleep all day or sit with his eyes shut listening to opera music playing in his ears. No, no, no. Guido sits reading shit like this - long words with many different meanings."

The squat figure was seated behind a grey metal desk, his head overwhelmed by the oversized, high backed swivel chair, his short legs swinging, barely touching the floor. It was mid-July and an electric fan wafted air, but it was not enough to stop beads of sweat running from his forehead. Awkwardly, he extracted a white handkerchief from his trouser pocket, brushed back the greasy strands of black hair that had fallen over his forehead, slid the laptop computer that sat in front of him to one side and, swivelling slowly from side to side in the chair, picked up a small bundle of papers. The phone was still tucked in the damp fold of his chin.

"Check the second page, Toni. Where it says: 'to improve the delivery of aid through complimentary activities aimed at increasing effectiveness, quality, timeliness and visibility.' Yah, this is so beautiful. I love the English language. It is, Toni, like the Picasso painting. You ignore what Picasso said it was and you dream what it is to you. You let it say what you want it to say. So, it is very good that it is written like this. It is useful for the business."

Guido paused, chuckled, flicked over a page. "But I see the money the poor taxpayers have been forced to give them to spend has gone up - a lot. If we are to benefit from all this I'll need to consider it and to do that I'll need some coffee before I read it again or my brain won't work. I also need a shit. I'll call you back."

The phone dropped from inside his chin but he caught it expertly in his hand and put it on the desk. "Mmm," he muttered, rolling out of the chair. "Yah, too big lunch, too much wine, e troppo caro, too expensive but affare fatto. It was a bargain, a good investimento."

The rounded stomach that protruded over the tight belt of his trousers had been hurting him for an hour. He stuffed the phone into the pocket of his well filled shirt, felt the weight drag it down over his prominent left nipple and shrugged to loosen it. But the shirt was stuck with moisture and didn't move, so he ignored it. Still holding the papers, he waddled towards the door, opened it, clattered down the flight of metal stairs, turned at the bottom amongst the metal racking and went into the toilet. There was no-one else in the building but he locked it, undid his belt, dropped his black trousers down to his ankles and sat down.

"Che cazzo," he swore as he started to read. "Fucking English euro speak."

"The measures provided for in this Decision are in accordance with the opinion of the Humanitarian Aid Committee established by Article 17(1) of the Humanitarian Aid Regulation. It is decided as follows:

Sole Article Decision C(2013)4789 is amended as follows: In Article 1, paragraphs (1) and (2) are replaced by the following:

"In accordance with the objectives and general principles of humanitarian aid, the Commission hereby approves a maximum amount of EUR 759,638,745 of which EUR 593,600,000 from budget article 31 08 09, EUR 337,700,000 from budget article 31 07 06 and EUR 46,237,746 from budget article 26 09 07, of the 2013 general budget of the European Union....."

It took five minutes to arrive at the last page. He tore a few sheets of tissue paper from a roll on the wall, wiped himself, stood, pulled up his trousers, tugged the big, shiny belt tight whilst holding the paperwork between his teeth. He flushed the toilet, backed out and, still carrying the papers in his teeth, clattered back up the metal stairs to the office.

At the top, he leaned over the metal banister, scanned the floor of the warehouse and chuckled to himself. The smooth concrete floor was visible only between the racks, the area littered with pallets piled with cardboard boxes covered in clear plastic film. A row of boxes with the blue and gold European Union logo, another showed "UNHCR" - the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. a third marked with Red Crosses and Red Crescents. A fork lift truck stood idly between a set of double doors and a smaller metal door set into it that said "Exit". The warehouse was, but for Guido's high-pitched chuckling and an occasional loud, metallic, clicking sound from the hot tin roof, eerily quiet.

He returned to the office, sat in the chair, swivelled, sweated, flicked at a fly and re-read one sheet all over again. Then he pulled the phone out of his shirt pocket and pressed a button.

"Toni. Yah. This is the part. Let me read it to you and because I know you can't understand the fucking language, I'll put it in nice simple Italian for you. OK? Where is it? Yah, here it is. Now, got a pencil in your little hand? Good. Sitting down? Now listen to papa.

"It's the last part where it talks about - and excuse the fucking jargon - 'supporting existing strategies that enable local communities and institutions to better prepare for, mitigate and respond to natural disasters' blah blah. See it? Now we know what they are because we've dealt with them before. See it now? Yah. Now look at what countries are covered. That's it - Caribbean, Africa, South Asia. Right - and that'll be Pakistan or Bangladesh. The bureaucrats won't worry about money going to ISIS, Al Shabab, the Taliban or Boko Haram - or any other of their like-minded friends."

There was a pause during which the strange chuckle gurgled somewhere deep inside his throat. The pink lips of his round mouth puckered as if he was tasting something delicious and all the time, he chatted to himself.

"So, we must lick some of the cream off the top before it goes sour Toni. It is like recycling - it's good for the environment....it is a lot of money.....the more there is the more will be lost in the accounts.... but no-one will lose their job.....and there will be more bureaucrats after than before.... it is good for the heart to know we create jobs." And then he giggled.

CHAPTER 5

In a rented room off a long corridor in a grey office block in Amsterdam, a young Belgian man stared at the screen of a laptop computer on a coffee table in front of him. His visitors, two Lebanese men, relaxed and watched, legs apart, from low backed chairs opposite. One was playing with a string of brown beads.

"OK, it's set up," the Belgian said. "You want the details?"

"Not so many," replied one of the Lebanese, sitting forward.

"I have a trustworthy friend in the Isle of Man who specialises in this type of arrangement. We recommend incorporating the company in Singapore. That way you get what is known as a 'mid-shore' financial centre. You'll get a good package with flexibility for a lot of offshore activity. No tax. You can move money wherever you want.

"And for five hundred dollars a month," he continued, "You get an office address here in Amsterdam - probably this room where we're sitting now - and a call centre. The call centre will appear big to callers but be just one person trained by me. She'll operate from wherever she happens to be by call transfer to a mobile phone. It works fine. We're doing it for others right now. No questions asked, just messages taken. Everything will be referred to you in Beirut or wherever you are. As for accounts and auditing, everything will be done through the Isle of Man. It's all nice and safe. For all intents and purposes your company will appear sound, well run, secure and, above all, respectful of international law. Where necessary we can also provide evidence of a good trading history. Just tell us what you want."

He sat back from his laptop, smiled and looked at the two men opposite. "So, are you happy with my recommendations?"

The one who had remained sitting back playing with the beads now leaned forward. "How much?"

"Set up two thousand dollars, office and call centre five hundred a month irrespective of how much use you make of it. Auditing? That'll depend on how complicated you make your financial affairs, Mr Farid, so I cannot say. Like any business, keep it simple with little paperwork and keep your overheads low. That is why I am giving you just one sheet of paper to take away and why I only take cash for today's advice and set-up charges - as you already know." He smiled again and placed the single A4 sheet on the table.

"Why not use Luxemburg like I suggested?" the one called Farid asked as he picked up the paper.

"Take my advice, Farid. It's getting too expensive. The industry is being hit by all sorts of regulation and bad publicity. None of us want that. As part of my fee I'm trying to save you money and any future complications." He paused. "Anything else?"

The two Lebanese looked at one another. "No," they said, shaking their heads in unison.

"Well, I wish you well with your venture," the Belgian said, closing the laptop as they all stood up. "Are you returning to Beirut now?"

"No, we have a meeting in Milan," Farid said.

The Belgian nodded, said nothing but noted it. Milan had been the next destination of his last client. He smiled and changed the subject. "I like your company name," he said. "I wish I'd thought of it myself. Cherry Pick Investments sounds so - how shall I say - like white lambs in springtime. So innocent."

With that the three men laughed, the Lebanese handed over some dollars, they shook hands, and parted.

CHAPTER 6

Truck driver Mitchell's first job at seven in the morning had been to collect fifty-six boxes from the sea port so some hassle was to be expected. But Mitchell never thought too much about hassle either before, during or after. Life was hassle. Life was about coping with hassle.

As a truck driver visiting the port of Freetown, Sierra Leone, hassle meant sitting in a sweltering queue of other trucks. It meant arguments over paperwork. It meant coping with deliberate obstruction from self-important officials and, if things got really bogged down, it meant using a few spare Leone notes that Mr Suleiman, his boss at Mambolo Transport Enterprises gave him to keep safely in his back pocket ready and waiting for whenever there was a need to oil the bureaucratic wheels. Mitchell coped well with hassle and Mr Suleiman liked Mitchell because of that. Mitchell was future management material.

Mitchell dealt with the hassle of waiting by leaning out of the open window of his truck shouting to fellow drivers and smoking cigarettes that he rolled himself with a few leaves of something he bought on the road out towards the port. And, in between, he would gulp water from a two-litre plastic bottle that stood amongst the clutter of yellowing old newspapers, scraps of paper, empty cans of Coke and the dirty old tee shirt that he used to wipe his wing mirror when it rained.

Mitchell had finally driven out of the port at eleven fifteen with his fifty-six boxes that, according to the paperwork, contained three hundred second hand laptop computers for a charity called School Aid, Freetown, Sierra Leone and that they had come all the way from the port of Felixstowe in England.

Mitchell's destination now, according to the instructions Mr Suleiman had given him in the office, was Rocki General Supplies in Sani Abacha Street, Freetown. And ready waiting at Rocki General Supplies would be another one hundred and fifteen boxes waiting for him. But Mitchell never asked too many questions. Mitchell just drove his truck to wherever he was told to and put up with whatever hassle came his way.

In the heat of the late morning market chaos in Sani Abacha Street, Mitchell was carefully reversing his tarpaulin covered truck into a small overcrowded space between boxes of tee shirts and crates of yams and surrounded by people walking by on all sides with bundles on their heads. The heat and noise were intense. Mitchell's simple plan was to get the rear of his truck as close as possible to the rusted front door of Rocki General Supplies. But an argument had erupted because the tail end had struck an umbrella being set up to shade on-street transactions over the sale of a high stack of cans of lime green paint and caused it to topple onto the yams. Mitchell, himself, leaning from the open window, beads of sweat running from his forehead, was the target of the abuse. But, still smoking and still smiling, he

made it, reversed the last few feet up to the doors, rattled on a handle and waited for someone to open it.

The man who opened it was in a suit, albeit a dusty, ill-fitting one, with a tie and off-white shirt. A puff of cool, air-conditioned air wafted towards Mitchell as the door was scraped open and he stood for a second to appreciate it as the man in the suit wrapped a chain around the door.

"Good day, Mr Moses" said Mitchell, politely, "It is very hot today. I have fifty-six boxes of computers. They are for Daisy Charity. I think that is you, Mr Moses."

Mr Moses was a man of few words. "Over there."

Mitchell sweated for half an hour carrying the heavy boxes one by one into the dark recesses of Rocki General Supplies' warehouse. As Mr Moses watched, he piled them as neatly as he could, but not too high in case they toppled. When he had finished, Mitchell went to the truck, swallowed the last drops from his water bottle and returned with his clip board for Mr Moses to sign the paperwork.

"You has one hundred and fifty boxes for me to collect, Mr Moses?"

"Yes. Be seated."

As there was nowhere else to sit, Mitchell did as he was told and sat on a wooden crate.

Five minutes passed before Mr Moses reappeared. "Take your truck to the rear entrance. There you will find one hundred and fifty boxes."

"Is they big, big or small, small, Mr Moses?"

"It does not matter. You must take them all."

So began Mitchell's next hassle - driving away, finding the first turning left, left again and reversing up to the rear entrance of Rocki General Supplies where Mr Moses was waiting for him. Behind Mr Moses were the one hundred and fifty boxes that Mitchell thought might just fit inside his truck. He removed his shirt and started work. It took him an hour. Satisfied the boxes were stacked safely and soundly, Mitchell stood, wiped his sweating brow and then went inside to look for Mr Moses. "They is all loaded, Mr Moses. Is there something to sign?"

"No, nothing."

"So where is you want them delivered Mr Moses?"

Mr Moses handed him a piece of paper with an address and Mitchell looked at it. "Ayyya! Sulima Construction, Mr Moses. Sulima is a long way. It is nearly in Liberia. Maybe I do not arrive today or tomorrow but the next day."

It took Mitchell two days to reach Sulima after a punctured tyre somewhere between Moyamba and Mano and trouble with his engine outside Sumbuya that he fixed himself with a piece of wire. But resourceful as he was, he found Sulima Construction. It was a rectangular concrete block building with a corrugated roof in a litter filled side street by the river that smelled of used engine oil and sea breezes. But it was not until he started unloading the one hundred and fifty boxes that he noticed labels on some of the boxes. 'Daisy Children's Charity', they said.

CHAPTER 7

In Milan, Guido was also going about his daily business.

He was holding the mobile phone, as usual, in the fold beneath his chin, his pink lips wet with saliva. Scrolling through pages of words on his computer screen, he had been babbling away to himself. It suddenly stopped, he put his head to one side, his ear on the phone.

"OK. You still there, Toni? Now then, scroll further down where it says a total of EUR 57,150,000 from budget article blah blah is allocated to improve the delivery of aid through transport and complimentary activities aimed at increasing effectiveness, quality, timeliness and visibility of humanitarian actions. Yah, that's it my friend. That's where our little friend Akram will come in useful. He needs to organise the finer details of the funding application - now, Toni, now. Not sit and wait or it'll be too late. Efficiency matters. Efficiency oils the wheels. If he does as he's told he can earn himself a little more money to buy milk for his next new baby. How many does he have now? Six?"

There was a pause followed by another high-pitched chuckle as if Toni might have added a touch of humour that pleased Guido.

"Does Akram's first wife know about Akram's second wife's new baby, Toni?.....No, I thought not. But if he can't organise his private life then he needs to organise his business life. You know what to do. No time like the present. The early bird will catch the worm. He must cut his grass when the sun is shining. I thought I liked Akram when I met him in Dubai. He was a handsome and bright young man and I trained him very well. But he is now very bad at dreaming up problems that don't exist. He wastes my fucking time and I can't tolerate him anymore. You deal with him. And tell him he needs to keep his trousers on."

There was a short pause as he listened to the one called Toni, picked at a back tooth with his finger nail and sucked at whatever it was he extracted. Then:

"Yah, and he has another weakness, Toni. He needs to improve his understanding of banks. His other boss, our friendly Finance Minister, is due to speak today at the Government's post budget speech. He will be expecting big things of Akram. That means that our friendly Finance Minister is expecting big things of us - Toni and Guido. So, you must speak to Akram, Toni. Tell him you've spoken to Guido and Guido says I might promote him to Head of Operations North West Pakistan one day. He'll like that title. He can go back home with pride, he can drive there in his new Toyota and boast of his success to his stupid, impoverished neighbours. But first he needs to meet his targets. One million dollars is easy, so tell him his half of one percent commission will be more than enough to feed a fifth baby by a third wife if he has one. It can be a very fat baby. But if he cannot meet his target, we will have to speak to people much higher up and they will not be as soft as Guido. Akram still has two hands, doesn't he? Can he work with one?"

There was another pause.

"And then, Toni, there is that prick Tawfik. This bastard needs to be taught a lesson. I give him one more chance only. Tell him this. It is not right that one million Euros was lost. Where has it gone? Tell me. Tawfik is a very poor investment. It is six years we have been in this business. Tell him Guido is very cross about him. Yah. Tell him Guido will cut off his salary or, worse, Guido will cut off his balls and spread rumours for the long ears of the provincial authorities and the police. You know what that means, Toni? Yah - they are very nasty people. They are very, very nasty to those

without any balls. And while he will sleep with the rats and eat dry bread and water, Guido will still be sleeping, purring like a cat in his warm bed. Tell him many more things, Toni. Tell him he is like a bucket with holes. Tell him that if it happens again Guido will find a new bucket and throw him away - down a steep hill in the Khyber Pass. You see, Toni, Tawfiq is nothing. He is just an office boy."

Whether the person, Toni, on the other end of the phone was joining in with Guido's humour was not audible, but Toni, himself, clearly now had something to say. Guido, with drops of perspiration running off his greasy forehead listened. As he did, he leaned back in his chair, now sucking noisily on the plastic cap of a cheap ballpoint pen. But the smile and the chuckle were gone. The round face with the greasy black strands of hair now looked distinctly unhappy. His mouth twisted sideways. Finally, it appeared he had had enough. He sat forward, pulled the phone from beneath his chin and interrupted.

"OK, Enough! What the fuck are you saying, Toni? There is no-one like us out there. There are only cheats out there. We are the best because we have built the systems. Six years and we have everything in place. We are experienced. We are superior. We are sophisticated. We are the only ones. I do not want to hear you say that, Toni, OK?"

He listened briefly, once more, before throwing the chewed pen top across the room where it bounced off the fan and disappeared into a corner. "It is impossible! I do not believe this..... go check again. It is not possible. That is another one million Euros. It is incredible. Find out more.....OK, so don't fuck about. Pay him to find out some more. Yah, I know he's a greedy bastard. Tahir was always a greedy bastard. But if he knows something then give him something.....of course.....are you stupid, Toni? Give it afterwards, not before."

There was a short silence as Guido continued to listen and roll the remnants of the pen between his fingers. The boyish chuckle had, by now, been replaced by throaty growl like a small dog. Then he said more quietly, "Oh, give him what he wants, Toni..... Tahir is like a little baby...and probably a little bastard baby.... so when he starts to cry like he's a hungry little bastard baby it means he wants his bottle.....it's feeding time..... give Tahir what Tahir likes to drink..... give him some fucking whisky."

CHAPTER 8

At Lek's cafe In Thailand, Lek was shuffling around in his stained tee shirt and baggy black trousers. He'd just watched Jim Smith wander off into the hot sun muttering something in English to himself.

Lek didn't really understand the old 'farang' he'd been calling 'Jim' since he'd suddenly arrived three years ago. But Lek liked him. Despite the beard and long hair and that his lips moved because he talked to himself, Jim had been good for business. Jim, Lek thought, had a natural flair as a businessman. But for Jim there would be no red flashing sign outside Lek's Cafe saying, in English, "Cold Beer and Wi-Fi" and never any young backpackers from faraway places or local children playing computer games.

Lek's customers, even those who came in with their backpacks and mobile phones tempted by the red sign, could hardly not notice the old 'farang' sitting with his bottle

of beer and staring at the screen of his old and dusty lap top computer in the corner. But with eye contact difficult on account of Jim's long hair and beard, they rarely, if ever, spoke to him. For this courtesy Jim seemed quietly appreciative and would reciprocate their generosity by ignoring them completely. What was it about farang's, wondered Lek. So far from wherever their home was, why not talk to one another. With Jim gone, Lek continued to conduct his business by wiping tables and mopping the floor.

"Want to come up, mother? Mind the third rung. It's loose."

Jim Smith had been talking to himself and his long dead mother throughout the ride home. As he propped the motorcycle beneath the house amongst the dry, worm-eaten firewood and carried the duffel bag up the wooden steps onto what he referred to as his 'veranda', the conversation continued. Three years was a long time to have been living like this, but he had made the most of it - liked it in fact. What he missed was conversation.

"Inane chatter about pettiness is something I can manage perfectly well without, mother. Constructive dialogue is what I miss. Saying what you think aloud re-enforces the reasoning behind the thoughts."

He opened the rickety wooden door, lowered his head, ventured into the dark and stiflingly hot interior and stood for a moment allowing his eyes to adjust to the darkness. "Sorry, mother - I've done it again. I got my feet muddy earlier and there is mud on the steps. Go careful."

Living alone in a tropical hideaway with few personal possessions had not been part of Jim Smith's original plans for life after sixty-five but it suited him. "I've never been a man for material possessions, clothes, domestic appliances, cars or holidays."

To appear to be a harmless, poverty-stricken old opt-out from Western society content with painting, bird watching, private rituals and lonely meditation was perfect cover for Jim Smith's ongoing campaign. "Margaret would be shocked though, if she knew how I lived, mother. Margaret liked spending money and shopping."

There was a brief pause as he considered his habit of talking to himself. It was getting worse, but it didn't seem to matter so he did nothing to discourage it.

"Merely thinking words reduces them to insignificance. Spoken words are remembered, mother. Thoughts are so easily forgotten. Anyway.....that aside, a pleasant enough ride back from town. Give it a few days for a reply from Jan and Jonathan and then you must make a firm decision, old chap. Regret the consequences of the decision if you must, but never regret the decision itself."

He put the duffel bag with the laptop on the top of a pile of boxes, re-emerged into the bright sun and slumped into his old wicker chair. "It's not revenge, mother. Revenge is for the weak. Righting the wrong is for the strong." Then he stood up again.

"Work," he said even louder than normal. "Got to get a move on. Time to do some painting, mother. I'm a man of strict routine. Routine is part of efficiency, of self-discipline and of unerring commitment to a job that, once started, must be completed totally and utterly to one's satisfaction. Routine means good time management."

Painting, every day, before it got too hot or when it cooled down a little was a serious routine that Jim rarely wavered from, so he went down the steps again. Painting was done by perching on a plastic stool inside a flimsy structure made out of strips of wood covered in mosquito netting and tied to the lower branches of the mango tree with nylon rope.

"My studio, mother, and we'll need the electric fan on today. It's warm. Just aim it at your legs. Anything higher and the paper flaps and I can't paint."

Facing Jim was his painting of a mynah bird, the paper held by two bulldog clips to a sheet of plywood. This was propped against another plank of wood to keep it well away from the trunk of the mango tree. "It's the mut see-deng - the red ants - they march in line up and down the tree and right across my wet paint. It's partly why I prefer water colours to oils.....but, where there's a will there's a way, I work with both."

Jim was only moderately pleased with the mynah bird. Its eye was still not quite as he wanted. Eyes depicted mood, feeling and emotion and he felt he had been getting better at it, but the mynah seemed to be looking away from the viewer as if distracted. Unusually, he'd struggled with it for three days and it was not getting any better. He gave it one more try and then looked at it sideways - "A little better I suppose" - then got up, tied the entrance to the studio with a short length of nylon string, picked up the drinking water bucket and carried it into the shade of the dog-koon tree. Here, he sat down, cross legged.

"Same bloody nightmare again last night, mother. Then the headache this morning. Perhaps it's the coffee." He paused, took a mouthful of water from the plastic mug. "So, what made me wake up this morning? Oh yes, that bloody photo. Why on earth Margaret thought it was me is a mystery. It didn't even look like me. The man's hair was shorter, tidier, middle parting, probably a bloody pony tail as well and I've never been to such clubs in my life. I've been in bars and so on when abroad with clients, of course, but only occasionally. It went with the job. It was business. Serious stuff. But I have no idea what goes on in clubs like that in Soho and neither has Margaret.

"She probably imagines otherwise decent men behave badly or oddly once inside them, mother, that they used make-up and aftershave, dress strangely, do their hair to impress the waiting women in their short skirts, fluffy rabbit tails and long ears. But I know darned well I didn't leave the flat after ten thirty and certainly not to visit a nightclub in Soho."

CHAPTER 9

A shiny, black BMW pulled silently away from the government building. Inside, taking up all of the rear seat, the Finance Minister relaxed. It had not been a bad performance, perhaps not one of his best, but he had never liked addressing post budget conferences.

This was his fourth such budget speech and each time the questions afterwards seemed to get harder. That was why he no longer sat alone at the grand table with the great flag behind him but with some suitably chosen support to both his right and to his left. As they answered questions of detail and sensitivity he could now relax, place his hands together in front of him and take his time to scan the audience of press and politicians and to smile and nod.

As the Minister's car began to negotiate the chaotic early evening city traffic, he glanced over the uniformed driver's shoulder, through the heavily tinted front windscreen. The white police car was in place, blue and red lights flashing. He looked behind where the second police car followed close up to the rear of the BMW. Feeling safe, he leaned over, snapped open the crocodile skin briefcase, extracted his speech notes and flipped to sheet three.

".....so, the Federal budget is primarily aimed at bringing almost half of the country's population above the dreaded poverty line....."

Mistake. He should never have listened to Secretary of Finance, Masoog. Never use words like 'almost' and 'dreaded' and never, ever quote figures that made the future look just as bleak as the past. But he had managed to get Masoog himself, sitting on his right, to reply to the question on that one so he had smiled.

He skimmed further.

".....If we consider two dollars the minimum daily wage then ninety million people live below the poverty line, so we will launch many new schemes to help the needy, provide soft loans to unemployed youths and assist students to gain the qualifications the country so badly needs. And, following the agreements signed in New York and London, the country will now stand to benefit from international aid specifically targeted at these groups."

Good. He'd mentioned schemes, funds, loans. Positive news. He'd drawn in the unemployed, the students and had then handed questions on that to the Chairman of the Federal Revenue Board, Tariq. And Tariq, sitting to his left, had also done well. What was it Tariq had said? "These outstanding new steps will ensure sustainable development." It was always good to mention sustainability if the world's press were there to pick it up. And then Tariq had said, "The Government's Youth Programme, Business Start-Up scheme and Income Support scheme can only lead to rapid improvements for all....."

The Finance Minister smiled again, tucked the notes back into his case, snapped it shut, closed his eyes and thought instead about the purchase of the new penthouse apartment he'd just finalised in Dubai.

CHAPTER 10

"It is Mr Hamid and Mr Farid, yah? Good, good. Buongiorno e benvenuti alla bella Italia. Welcome to Italy - to Milano. I am Guido, Signore Guido if you like but Guido is OK. Oggi fa molto caldo. It is very hot today, no? OK. Come, come, follow me."

Hamid and Farid, the two Lebanese, had taken a late afternoon KLM flight from Amsterdam. They glanced at one another with raised eyebrows but followed the short and stocky frame of the Italian as he marched in quick strides towards the exit.

"Yah, my car," he pointed as they arrived outside. He ushered them towards a large black Mercedes illegally parked but watched over by an airport security man. "Molto grazie, Umberto. It is not far. Please put your cases on the back seat. That is a nice case, Mr Hamid. Is it Italian? We will arrive to talk the business in no time. Relax."

He got in and drove off but continued talking. The two Lebanese behind continued to glance at each other and shrug. Neither of them could see their host for the head rest was positioned well above the top of his head and the seat so low it was

debatable whether he could see the road ahead. Nevertheless, he drove quickly and expertly and in the heart of Milan he stopped outside a restaurant, jumped out, handed the car keys to someone and led the way into the restaurant. "Donna you worry about your nice cases. Everything is safe with Bruno. Mi segua - follow me, please."

The choice of restaurant was obvious. The Park Hyatt Milano where the visitors were booked to stay was close by.

As Guido pushed the door open, an elderly waiter in a black suit rushed forward. "Ah, Giuseppe. We are here. These are my guests." Giuseppe bent down to Guido's level and planted a delicate but manly, cheek to cheek kiss. Guido touched the spot where their cheeks had touched and smiled. "Yah," he said. "These are my good friends from Beirut, John," he said using, perhaps, Giuseppe's preferred name for non-Italians.

"Welcome, your table is ready." Then he whispered to Guido. "We have a case of 2007 Sassicaia for you or if you prefer....."

"Yes, the Sassicaia, and give Bruno a case for my car. No need for the menu. It is too late for them; they ate on the plane and they have had a busy day. Give them a pizza margarita and I will explain why it is called margarita. As for me, I'll have mundeghili de vitel alla milanese, insalatina di asparagi e salsa alla senape."

"Of course, of course," Giuseppe said, flapping white napkins. Was he pleased to see Guido? After forty years in the trade it was impossible to know.

The single bottle of wine was brought and poured without tasting. "Salute," he said lifting his glass. He sipped it, but then took a full mouthful, washed it around his mouth and swallowed. His two guests watched, sipped and looked at each other as Guido stuffed a pure white napkin into his shirt collar, coughed and thumped his wide, soft chest. "Yes, it is my favourite. I like it. It is the best from Tuscany." he announced speaking in English. "We will eat soon. Fabrizio is the master for the pizza margarita. Italian food is much better than Lebanese." He gave his gurgling laugh at his own humour and then drained the glass. "So," he said, "Your business is now established?"

"Yes, it is called Cherry Pick Investments," the one called Farid replied. "It is registered in Singapore. We can now start."

"Yah, yah. What do you have in mind?"

The two Lebanese looked at one another as if unsure who should speak. It was Farid again. "There is an organisation called the Coalition for Arab Youth - CAY," he said. "It is to support groups of young people who want to see a peaceful outcome to the many ongoing conflicts in the Middle East."

"But?" asked Guido, reaching across the table to pour himself another glassful. He smiled over the rim, the small beady eyes staring at Farid.

"But, maybe not." Farid tried returning the smile.

Guido raised an eyebrow with his own smile fixed into position. "It is not something I have heard of. Who runs this youthful coalition?"

"A woman professor from the American University of Beirut. She has a small network of teachers who try to encourage peaceful dialogue not armed struggle. It has received some publicity and has a record of organising events and conferences....."

Guido clapped his hands. "Good. A track record is so necessary. Some paperwork, a few press releases and some important sounding names like Professor X or Doctor Y. Go on, please."

Farid continued. "But she is struggling for lack of funds."

"Ah, and what would she do with money?"

"She will establish new Coalition for Arab Youth offices in Saudi Arabia, Dubai, Jordan and Tel Aviv run by women who agree with the its principles."

"Very nice. And how much would this cost?"

Farid hesitated. "About two million Euros - maybe over three years."

"Very nice. And how do you fit into this noble plan to enrich Arab youths?"

Farid looked at Hamid and Hamis said, "The Professor is my wife."

Guido did not flinch. "Ah, here comes your pizza and here comes my mundeghili de vitel alla milanese. Let us eat.....and also talk."

After one mouthful of pizza for the Lebanese, Guido, his mouth full of food, looked up from his plate. His eyes flashed from Farid to Hamid and back again. "So, where will the money come from?"

Hamid was chewing on a piece of dry pizza crust. "We need help. Can you help us? We were told you are very expert in this matter. We believe there are European funds that might be available."

"Yes, you are correct and I am an expert. The criteria will be that it meets European Middle East policy. Who decides the policy is a complete mystery to us voters but that is the way our democracy works. But once it's there we do with it what we can. Here it is similar to the old USSR but not yet as bad as North Korea." He giggled and as he did so a large piece of green asparagus landed in the middle of the table next to the water jug. Still stuffing more food into his mouth, he went on:

"And who will ensure the funding is properly used and fully accounted for? We can't have taxpayers feeling aggrieved that their money ends up in the pockets of rich men living in Beirut, or with Hamas or evil people like ISIS or Al Shebab or Boko Haram." His eyes flickered between his two guests.

Hamid put his knife down. "We have a management company in Beirut and....."

Guido interrupted. "Is this Cherry Pick, Beirut, Limited?" He giggled once more and another speck of chewed food flew from his open mouth.

Hamid tried to smile. "We are thinking to bid for funds with a management charge of say fifteen percent. That would be in order?"

He watched and waited as Guido scraped the last forkful, put it in his mouth, pulled the stiff white napkin from out of his shirt collar and wiped his face. Chewing on what was still left in his mouth he screwed the napkin up, threw it into the middle of the table and watched it slowly unfold itself once again.

"Fuck - I told Giuseppe about that. I have warned him many times. The fucking laundry uses too much starch. If these people cannot do what customers want, do they know what will happen to their business?" With that he drew a short, fat finger across his soft, white neck and glared around as if looking for Giuseppe. Then, with barely a pause:

"But fifteen percent That is nothing. It is not worth getting out of bed. With good advice and careful management, fifteen percent would be a gross underestimate. If Cherry Picking is to benefit from this well-meaning organization, it should look to make at least fifty percent. You must be more ambitious my friends. If you want advice on the bid process, to draw down money to ensure it travels in the right direction and then cover your tracks, then say so, but fifteen percent will only just cover Guido's charges."

"I see," said Farid and Hamid in unison again. "So, it is possible?"

"Of course," Guido replied and he spread his short arms wide. "To be ambitious - that is my motto. You know we have a saying in Italy - A rubar poco si va in galera, a rubar tanto si va cariera. You know what that is in English, my friends?"

"No," they said.

"Steal a little and go to jail. Steal a lot and make a career of it. Ha, ha!" As he laughed, he looked around, caught the eye of a waiter and beckoned for the bill.

Hamid and Farid, still struggling with their pizzas, listened to Guido's high-pitched laughter as it suddenly stopped and his tone became serious. Sitting with the top of his round head only just above the chair back, he asked. "So, what other plans do you have for Cherry Picking? It is such a waste if I teach you how to play the game and you only play the game once."

"Ah yes." said Hamid, "I do not always live in Beirut. Sometimes I visit my associates in Lagos, Nigeria and Freetown in Sierra Leone. We have trading companies there. They are also called Cherry - Cherry Trading, Cherry Imports, Cherry Marketing."

"And what do these companies do?" Guido asked as the waiter presented the bill on a silver plate. "Gracis, please leave it there. I will check it for accuracy."

"Ah, many things," Hamid said doubtfully and glancing at Farid. "One thing is we deal in - what shall we say - computers."

"Yah?" Guido leaned forward as much as the fully fastened suit jacket allowed. He rested his arms on the table and entwined eight stubby fingers as if to say grace. On one middle finger was a large ring with a blue stone. On the other middle finger sat a wide, silver ring. "So, tell me about these companies - or just tell me what you want me to hear."

"Yes," continued Hamid. "We plan to diversify....."

"Don't we all," Guido interrupted, "Please proceed."

"Yes, we import old computers, service them and sell them to schools."

"Very nice business," he said. "Anything else?"

"Ah, we are also in the jewellery business."

Guido used the middle finger with the blue stone to scratch his nose. "May I ask where you buy your stones?"

"Uh, Bangkok," Hamid said hesitantly.

"So, what you are saying is that the stones really come from next door - from Myanmar? Guido knows many sorts of businesses you see " The small, beady eyes moved rapidly from Hamid to Farid and back again.

"Ah, yes," said Hamid.

"O....K," said Guido slowly as if a lot was going on inside his head. "Jewellery is a nice business. I like it. With jewellery we do not need money." He paused. "Your company in Lagos, Nigeria. Who runs it?"

Hamid looked at Farid again. Farid looked at Guido. Guido looked at both of them in turn. It was Hamid who spoke. "Ah, it is a family business. My brother, Marcel is in charge."

"More family business," Guido said happily, apparently sensing it might be complicated and that he would need to concentrate if he was to remember names. He closed his eyes.

"My brother Marcel is married to Farid's sister Nadine."

"Cosy," said Guido, his eyes firmly shut as if visualising Nadine. "I like it. And your wife's name - the one who runs the so-called Coalition for Arab Youth - CAY?"

"Ah, my wife," Hamid said, apparently warming to the word cosy. "Yes, my wife is Leila. And we have two children, both girls, Nancy is seven and Diana is thirteen. My wife liked the Princess."

"How nice," said Guido, his eyes perhaps smiling behind the closed lids. "And you, Farid. How is your family?"

"Yes, I also am married. My wife is Sabah and we have two children also."

"I like it," Guido said, "It is good to keep things in a family. He opened his eyes at last and focussed them on Farid. "So, who is your contact in Myanmar?"

Suddenly forced from the soft, cosiness of family talk and back to the hard commercial, Farid and Hamid's smiles ceased. "Uh, we don't know," said Farid.

"Mmm." Guido sat back looking across the table at two half-finished pizzas. "There are new and exciting opportunities to be found in South East Asia, but I cannot tell you more about what I'm thinking without understanding your business better. A pity, but never mind." He paused. "OK, we will talk in more detail at your hotel. It is not so late and tomorrow I am too busy. Together we will ensure the future success of Cherry Picking. But....," he paused again, "You have already made a very good start by meeting Guido in Milano. The only problem was to eat the pizza."

CHAPTER 11

Jim Smith was feeling hungry.

He was still sitting cross-legged beneath the dog-koon tree in the cooling breeze from the electric fan on an extension lead, but he knew there was nothing in the house except a blackening bunch of bananas covered in fruit flies.

It was now late afternoon and thinking the headache that was threatening to return was a sign of a lack of food he wheeled the motorcycle out and drove up the dirt track onto the main road. Then he headed towards the town and a roadside shop that sold everything from meat and fish balls on sticks to baskets of 'battu' - steamed Indian mackerel. The air was still, hot and humid as he rode homewards, still talking to himself.

It was a year after his election that he had flown out of London Heathrow Airport to Frankfurt and then on to Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia.

"I needed the space," he mumbled into the oncoming hot wind as if talking to someone sat behind him on the motorcycle. "Time to think and decide what to do. I was in a serious spot of trouble. When I was running the business, I could escape to my office to think and emerge a few hours later with my mind clear and a sensible plan in my head. But in that bloody zoo, I had no hiding place, the nonsense seemed to follow me everywhere. If they thought I'd just give up, however, they were badly mistaken. They had no idea what makes me tick. I was James Smith and I am still the same James Smith, an obstinate bugger when it comes to doing what I think is right."

But as a newly elected Independent Member of Parliament Jim was, he admitted, still a bit green when it came to politics.

For the first time in his life he was unsure what to do for the best. All he knew was that someone, somewhere, wanted him out of the way. How far they might go was what worried him but the feeling persisted that he'd highlighted something so awkward for someone somewhere that they wanted him destroyed - completely.

"I knew I would upset one or two people along the way, but I assumed they'd be big enough to handle it and perhaps do something. It seemed I was an independent, free-willed, politically incorrect old fart who had no business coming into their profession and behaving like a bull in a china shop. But I didn't reckon on a bigger gang joining in."

The mumbling stopped as he turned off the road and bumped along the track leading to the house, but his mind was still on the past. The first casualty of the process to discredit him was his marriage. After thirty years of married life, he and Margaret had, as the media called it, 'separated.'

Sitting on the 'veranda', he prodded a meat ball with a stick, dipped it in chilli sauce, took a handful of raw, shredded cabbage, chewed, spat out a tiny piece of bone and wiped his mouth with his hand.

"Look at it this way, mother," he muttered. "I now realise that other politicians who suspected something of this magnitude might have decided to let sleeping dogs lie. Others might, I suppose, wait for the right moment to publish a book of revelations, by which time it would be back in the mists of time, deniable and far too late to do anything. But a book, suitably peppered with innuendo and just a few facts, might be profitable enough to boost a pension pot. Some might share opinions with one or two trusted friends in quiet restaurants and agree it was best to let the dogs lie for the sake of their careers. But I am a stubborn bastard, mother. I was not like the other elected politicians. I had no Party, no friends and no allies. I had become an awkward outsider with an unconventional style and no-one to share a cosy supper with. In fact, I knew I had made some unseen enemies."

He stood up, bent his head so as not to hit the overhanging tin roof and went inside to fetch his bucket of drinking water - water he collected every time it rained. He brought it outside, sat in the chair and gulped down a mug full. The sun had now disappeared and a fresh, cooling breeze was picking up.

So why had he gone into politics? It was as if his mother had just asked him.

"Time on my hands, mother. Not enough had been happening, you see. I'd always been so busy. But it had made sense to sell the business. Bigger businesses had been hovering around for quite a while as it became clear that the company needed the extra clout a publicly owned multinational could offer so I agreed rather reluctantly. It was my baby. I'd started it, ran it my way and was afraid it would lose its identity as part of something much bigger. But it made sense in other ways and I was pleased with the way the business had grown from a one-man band to employ over a hundred and at the cutting edge of technology. We were exporting to over seventy countries and had subsidiaries in Singapore and South Africa and a new joint venture just going in China that had taken the best part of a year to resolve the details. But, by the signing date, and having rejected the chance to continue as an advisor to the new Board, I knew I'd soon get bored."

"But what I brought with me on my first days as a new boy in politics was not a book of rules and regulations, but a bag of dirty washing and a few other files that showed that all was not quite as it should be in the corridors of power. Then I quickly learned that the rules and regulations that I had not fully read were often used to pour cold water on controversy and unpopular opinion and kick them into the long grass where they could be lost and hopefully forgotten altogether. And I quickly learned not to expect support from anyone however high up the chain of command, after all they were far too busy trying to remain popular until the next election. If they got a whiff of something that smelled a little unpleasant, they wanted to move away to where the air smelled fresher.

"But that left those targeted by this obnoxious old fart pulling dirty washing out of the bag he'd brought with him to start to play a new game - a game with few rules and no bloody sympathy."

He suddenly sprang to his feet and went inside the house, conscious of the use of a couple of words his mother would have frowned on. He had almost heard her. "Language, James, language." But he still felt annoyed, annoyed enough to use words he, himself, didn't like.

Five minutes later he re-emerged carrying a cup of coffee and wearing just his shorts. He sat down in the chair once more. Darkness was now enveloping the house.

"Yes, mother, it was one hell of a whirlwind during the few weeks before I eventually arrived in Kuala Lumpur. Perhaps if I had been any other politician facing the same sort of attention, I might have deliberately gone to ground by staying inside my London flat. In fact, I tried it for two days and spent the whole time on the internet and watching TV. But I've always hated being housebound and with a group of photographers and a TV camera parked outside it was two days too many. It was also unfair on the other residents of the block and I had gone out of my way to apologise for the inconvenience. With no rear exit that didn't involve trespassing and clambering over numerous fences and walls, I'd tried to leave by the front door just to buy some newspapers to read what sort of fuss they were now making of me. But it

had been hard going pushing my way through the crowd and then they followed me. Finally, I turned back again and locked the door. But I could read all about the fuss on the internet, TV and radio anyway so I wasn't missing much.

"But much of my life for the past thirty years involved hopping on and off aeroplanes, so a vague plan started to form. I decided to go abroad for a few days to be alone to think. So, I packed an overnight case with a few bare essentials and some paperwork, took a deep breath, made my way up the steps to street level, forced through the crowd on the pavement and flagged down a taxi to Heathrow Airport.

"I flew to Frankfurt and stayed overnight in the Sheraton Hotel. But because a small group, including two familiar faces, still seemed to know where I was and were in the hotel foyer next morning, I returned to the airport. Then, for no other reason than there was a Lufthansa flight going to Nairobi and I have always liked Nairobi I bought a ticket. A day later, I took a Cathay Pacific flight to Hong Kong thinking that that, surely, would be enough to find myself alone. But no. A new face appeared. He followed me in a taxi all the way from the airport into Kowloon - a Chinese man in jeans, just like the later one in KL. - and they no longer had cameras. That was what started to unnerve me. The next day I flew to Kuala Lumpur, mother, and they were still following me."

CHAPTER 12

Truck driver Mitchell's job was a collection from Freetown Airport freight area and another delivery to Rocki General Supplies in Sani Abacha Street for the attention of Mr Moses. "It is two hundred boxes," said Mitchell's boss, Mr Suleiman at Mambolo Transport Enterprises as Mitchell was leaving.

"But I can only fit one hundred and forty boxes in the truck and ten on the front seat," said Mitchell. It was only three weeks since his long and troubled drive to Sulima and Mitchell was concerned he might need to go again.

"No problem. You take one hundred this morning and one hundred this afternoon. Anyway, maybe these boxes are smaller."

"But if Mr Moses wants them taken to Sulima I will be gone for four days, maybe eight days," said Mitchell. "We need a bigger truck."

"No problem," said Mr Suleiman, "Just deliver the two hundred boxes to Rocki General Supplies. Let us see what Mr Moses wants."

"I don't like Mr Moses," said Mitchell, "And he doesn't like me."

"That's because he's a fraudster, a crook and a skimmer, Mitchell. All skimmers are like that. They don't like people. They only like money and they always want more. Now, go. Do not be late. And here is the money to give to the customs man if he is difficult today. We will add it to Mr Moses' invoice."

The hassle at the airport freight terminal was never as bad as the sea port and Mitchell's papers were all in order. Two hundred boxes of water purifiers it said on the documents. The supplier, a company called Ecoteck from Bologna, the manufacturer, Guangdon Trading, China and the buyer - Rocki General Supplies, Freetown Sierra Leone. It looked straightforward and the boxes were, indeed, much

smaller than the last consignment. Mitchell loaded them into his truck by taking them one by one off the pallets they had arrived on and saw that every box had the same blue letters on the sides just as the last delivery he had made to Rocki General Supplies.

But working alone in the humid early morning heat Mitchell was now sweating heavily. He was ready to go but water was what he needed first and there was a plastic bottle on his driver's seat. It was just as he drained the last drops from the bottle that he heard someone shouting. "Stop, stop." Granville, the warehouse manager was running towards him.

Mitchell jumped down, threw his empty bottle onto his seat. "Yessah?"

Granville came up, panting. "Big mistake.... they give you wrong pallets. These boxes are for not for you. You must unload them. These boxes are still waiting for collection by someone else. Your boxes are still inside the warehouse. They arrived last night Swissair from Italy. Big mistake. I already slap Tamba. Very careless. Too much girlfriend. He still drunk from last night, I think. Too much poyo. I slap him hard."

"OK," said Mitchell, "So you want me to unload my truck again?"

"Yes, we will bring the right pallets out here for you on the fork lift truck. Please start now."

"OK," said Mitchell and started to unload the two hundred boxes once more and re-stack them on the empty pallets. Half way through, the fork lift truck appeared, made four visits and dropped another four full pallets alongside Mitchell's truck. Mitchell looked at them, covered in clear plastic film. "My boss, Mr Suleiman, must buy a bigger truck, I think," he said to the forklift driver. "One for loading pallets. Mambola Transport business is growing too fast."

"These boxes are very light," said the forklift truck driver, "It is easy for you. You should not complain so much. Just do your job."

"Yessah," said Mitchell wondering if the forklift driver was Tamba, the one who had already been slapped at least once. But, indeed, the new boxes did feel much lighter. Mitchell was able to carry three at a time instead of one at a time and within half an hour he had re-loaded the truck. Then he went to look for Granville to make sure everything was now in order. He found him in his office drinking ginger beer and eating benny cake in his office.

"I have reloaded the new boxes," he said, wondering if he might be invited to partake of a drop of ginger beer. "Is the paperwork OK?"

"Yes," said Granville with his mouth full. "No problem, it was the wrong boxes but not the wrong paperwork."

"I'll be going, then," said Mitchell, lingering just a fraction, his mouth as dry as the dust lying on Granville's desk.

"Ok, no problem." said Granville and took another bite of benny cake.

This time, Mitchell drove his truck slowly and carefully along Sani Abacha Street, knowing full well how upset other traders became if their businesses were interrupted. This time, also, he reversed the truck up to the metal doors of Rocki General Supplies without trouble and knocked twice on the metal door. Then he

knocked harder. At last the little door inside the bigger door creaked opened and Mr Moses appeared. Mitchell felt a waft of cool, air-conditioned air on his face and feet. "You are late," Mr Moses said looking up at Mitchell's truck with a 'McDonnell's - the Queen of Whisky' sign printed on the new tarpaulin.

"Yes, sir, sorry Mr Moses. There was a problem at the airport. They gave me the wrong boxes."

"Ffff...ahh," said Mr Moses. "I will open the main doors. Bring them inside. There should be two hundred and fifteen boxes."

"Ah, no sir, two hundred boxes. It is two hundred. The papers show two hundred. I will show you."

Desperately hoping nothing else was wrong, Mitchell returned to his cab, retrieved the paperwork from the dashboard and showed it to Mr Moses.

"Two hundred boxes, Mr Moses. You see? From Italy. Swissair. And they have blue writing just like last time. It says UNICEF."

"OK, I will check everything when you have finished."

"Do they need to go to Sulima, Mr Moses? Because, maybe I don't need to unload them but go direct to Sulima."

"They are not for Sulima."

"They will be staying in your warehouse, Mr Moses? If not, can Mambola Transport help with anything more?"

"No."

It took Mitchell another hour to unload the two hundred boxes and stack them on the floor inside Mr Moses' cramped and dusty warehouse. Occasionally he stood in the doorway with his shirt open to let the air-conditioned air pass inside but he never dawdled for long in case Mr Moses saw him. Finally, he finished and went in search of Mr Moses. He found him sitting inside the small, dark, inner office with a strip light on and the air conditioning unit rattling. He knocked, Mr Moses got up, opened the door and stood there, the cool air streaming from the inside like the meat cold store that Mitchell had once delivered to. "I have finished Mr Moses. Two hundred boxes with UNICEF printed on the outside. Please can you sign here."

"I will check first." Moses closed the door behind him but Mitchell had already seen a cramped office, a desk piled high with files and paper, filing cabinets and shelves, box files and a trash bin overflowing with more paper. He also saw a crate of unopened Coca Cola bottles and a 'fridge with more files stacked on top. But Mitchell followed Mr Moses through the warehouse to the boxes he'd just stacked so neatly.

"Open one."

Mitchell took a box down, took his truck keys from his pocket and used it to score along the brown tape seal. He pulled open the flaps and stood back.

"What is this? It is empty. Just newspapers. Open another."

Mitchell repeated the operation.

"It is nothing but old newspapers. Italian newspapers. What is going on? Where are the water purifiers?"

Mitchell, seeing the look on Mr Moses's face backed away.

"What have you done?"

"Nothing, Mr Moses. Maybe big mistake at the airport, but I only did what I was told."

As Mr Moses checked another box, Mitchell ran from the warehouse, jumped into his truck, started the engine, drove off and hit an umbrella. But he didn't stop to apologise.

CHAPTER 13

Every few weeks or so, Jim Smith would ride his motorcycle into Kanchanaburi, the provincial capital, and then catch an early morning bus to Bangkok. Sometimes he would stay for a night or two in a cheap hotel and use the time to replenish his stock of paper, paint and brushes. He would buy copies of English language newspapers and sometimes eat in an Italian restaurant to remind himself of European food. And he would sometimes sit in a roadside bar off of Sukhumvit road, watch the passing nightlife, drink a beer or two and, if he felt people were looking at him too closely, hide behind the pages of the newspaper or move away.

It was on one of his first trips to stock up on paint materials that he had felt someone tap him on the shoulder. "James?"

The voice that accompanied the tap on his shoulder was somehow familiar but, nevertheless, it made him jump and prepare himself to deny everything. Jim's hair was longer than it had ever been. It was shoulder length and, together with a heavy sun tan, beard, grubby tee shirt, khaki shorts and sandals he was surprised that anyone recognised him. "James? Jim? Jim Smith?" Jim ducked further behind his paper but then turned to see who it was.

Standing, looking down at him was Colin Foreman, the Chairman of a business group, the Federation of European Small Enterprises, at whose annual conference Jim had spoken a year before. "Jim, I hardly recognise you. It is you, isn't it?"

What followed was a discussion that went on until the early hours of the next morning - a discussion with, perhaps, the only person that Jim could have hoped to have met by pure chance. By midnight a plan was already being hatched.

"I decided soon after arriving here that I would, somehow, find a way to prove what I had been saying," Jim told Colin as he began to relax in the unfamiliar company of a fellow Englishman. "But I'm not precisely sure what to do yet. I toyed with the idea of going back to the UK but frankly I'm worried that I'd be targeted all over again. And what would I now say to Margaret, my wife? Beg for forgiveness for something I've not done? Crawl back promising to give it all up and go bird-watching and hill walking? I could not do that, Colin. I don't want to return home like a guilty dog with its tail between its legs and then abandon it all. I just can't do it.

"But I feel I'm living under a type of stigma - a stigma that goes with knowing you were once looked upon as highly successful but were then seen for what you really were - an incompetent failure. I can't live with that either. And I don't want to return home to be shunned or be the subject of yet more mocking cartoons about my failed marriage and my style that does not fit the image they expect. I believe in free speech but I honestly believe I will continue to be treated as an idealistic oddity hung

up on matters which others find unimportant, irrelevant or downright untrue. So, as I don't want to go home just yet, I want to find a way of dealing with it from here."

"So you live here in Bangkok, Jim?"

"No," Jim said. "It's too noisy, too crowded, too cluttered and too easy for someone with connections and resources to track me down and deal with me in whatever way they decide."

"Is it that dangerous, Jim?"

"Oh yes." Jim replied and took a mouthful of the beer that lay on the table in front of him. Then he took a deep breath. "Yes, I do think it's that dangerous. I had begun to touch some very sensitive nerves although I think they thought I knew more than I did. But I left behind a big pile of unfinished business. It's not revenge, Colin. I'm above that. This is about proving I am right about the extent of corruption that exists. It's about showing how vindictive campaigns can be launched by people in power to stop someone from exposing the truth. It's about doing what is right despite the risk. But if I am to wage war on powerful individuals with no limits to their resources and no limits to the extent, they'll go to silence someone, then I think it would be a lot safer waging it from somewhere other than London or Europe. But it's still unfinished business and I've never ever walked away from a job half done. I owe it to myself and to the many, like you, who believed there was something behind what I was saying.

"So I still feel I let them down by appearing to run away. But I had no choice and all I intended to do was to go abroad for a few days to think, to decide on a strategy. I had no idea I'd end up here where days have stretched to months, but I do not want to be associated with cowardice or with lacking a will to persevere. That, on top of the character they painted of me as an incompetent fool, is not one I can live with. So, yes, I will stay here until I find a way to continue what I started. Then I might return home."

"So, you live here alone, Jim?"

"Yes," he replied.

They had moved from the noisy roadside bar to Colin's hotel on Sukhumvit Road and in the plush, air-conditioned lounge bar, Jim was shivering. "You feeling cold, Jim?"

"Yes," he admitted, "I suppose I've grown used to heat."

"So, do you live without air-conditioning?"

"Yes."

"Good lord. It's been like a furnace here today. It's a house? An apartment?"

"A house."

"Here in Bangkok?"

"No."

"So where, Jim?"

"I'd rather not say, Colin. In fact, it might be better for you if you don't know. It's remote because I appreciate countryside, peace, solitude and the satisfaction that comes from quiet contemplation - meditation if you prefer."

"You make it sound as if you've become a hermit, Jim - a monk. And what do you think about when you're.... meditating?"

Jim looked up at the huge, glass chandelier that hung in the centre of the hotel lobby. "I suppose I've become a sort of Buddhist - not of the temples, chanting, ringing bells, rituals and burning incense sort, but closer - at least I like to think so - to the original concept. I was very angry when I arrived. Living here alone has calmed me."

Jim leaned back, closed his eyes. "Revenge causes 'angry minds' - that is how it is put in Buddhist writings," he said quietly. "There is a delightful saying by a monk called Shantideva who wrote: 'This enemy, this anger, has no function other than to cause me harm. There is no evil like anger and no virtue like patience.'

"I have become a more patient man, Colin. But patience itself takes many forms including the patience of not retaliating and the patience of voluntarily enduring suffering. Yes, I've done a bit of suffering here and it's not all been voluntary. All I want is a chance to prove I was right all along."

Colin had relaxed into the back of his chair. "Mmm. So, what do you do with your time, other than..." he paused, "...other than this meditating?"

"I paint. I came to Bangkok to buy more materials."

"And you're not bored, Jim? You used to be so busy, so dynamic."

"I am very, very busy," Jim said, defensively. "It is a continuation of how I always lived my life - by commitment and self-discipline. Other than that unfinished business, I am very content. I have no need of material things. I never did. Money is nothing. It never was. I made a lot but to me it was a measure of my success in business - a yardstick. I didn't really want it or need it. In fact, I still find it difficult to spend money unless for food or things to do with work."

"I look, see something, decide I don't really need it and move on. Others seem to worship money and possessions. There is a gross unfairness in a society where those that already have money steal from the millions of their fellow beings who have actually created the wealth in the first place. Greed perpetrated by these people just because they have acquired the status or the means is true corruption. Though, perhaps, they are to be pitied for believing that money will buy them the happiness and contentment they crave. If so then they have failed to understand the transience of life and the finality of death and for that I blame our religious leaders. Perhaps, too, they are so ashamed of appearing unsuccessful that they use fraud and corruption as the solution. The only shame I felt was in being associated with incompetence, naivety and failure. That is now what drives me. I want to prove I was none of those things - that I was right all along."

"I am content with what I have but cannot forget what happened to me because it could happen to others and perhaps it already has. But it plays on my mind. I cannot forget Margaret. I cannot forget how the press treated her. I still remember the TV pictures of her when those photos of me were published. It was a lie, Colin. Someone with powerful connections was paying to circulate fictitious lies. It was a clever and complete character assassination deliberately designed to destroy me. Someone, somewhere had the money to pay for stories to be invented - deliberately. They wanted to destroy me and my marriage and if I had not gone away, if I had still persevered with my campaign and dug still more deeply into what I suspected was

going on, then I just wonder how far they might have gone. I think they believed I knew far more than I'd made public."

"And do you know more that you made public?" Colin Foreman asked.

Across the coffee table from Colin, Jim leaned back into the soft comfort of the five-star hotel's easy chair, wrapped his bare arms around himself and shivered again. "I have my suspicions, Colin. My suspicion is that it goes to the very top and is even more widespread than I suggested. And I also believe that it will become more and more difficult to detect and prove as time goes by as they use more sophisticated technology and become increasingly expert at using threats, bribery and blackmail to stifle any attempts to expose it."

Jim took a deep breath.

"I think there is a structure in place specifically aimed at hiving off huge amounts of international economic aid and humanitarian aid money. Governments and newspapers like to blame African despots and militant groups for stealing foreign aid money, building palaces, buying weapons and expensive cars, spreading extremism and living lives of five-star luxury far removed from the poverty of the people they govern, or for whom the aid was intended. There is no doubt they do, but I think they should look more closely to home. It is also wrong that billions of Euros and Dollars of international aid money from hardworking taxpayers finds its way back to criminals, politicians and bureaucrats working in public bodies and operating in a way that benefits its protectors, not at all dissimilar to the mafia. It is a well-known fact that the greatest percentage of world wealth is now held by a tiny fraction of individuals. That is not right, but it is particularly wrong that the so-called hard-working tax payer is ripped off by politicians and the vast bureaucracy that they have deliberately created for their own protection."

"You really think it is as organised as that, Jim?" asked Colin.

"Yes," said Jim, "Because I myself was approached."

"Not so long ago I lost several big contracts to sell water purification equipment to West Africa. The purchases often depended on international aid money - all perfectly proper, legal and correct. But in all cases, there was a last-minute change to the tender specifying the equipment. We couldn't match it. In fact, I didn't know anyone who could. But who gets given the contract? An unknown company. Did they deliver? No, suddenly they declare insolvency. What happened to the money? Disappeared. Did anyone check what went wrong? Yes, half-heartedly. Did I check? You bet. What did I find? The audit trail of the bid tampered with and, clearly, the company who got the business had not been properly checked out. Its trading history? Artificial. Its references? Forgeries. And who is in just the right position to interfere with due diligence and proper adjudication process? Bureaucrats. And who sits behind the bureaucrats? Politicians. You want me to go on?"

"Christ!" said Colin. He had been sitting well forward as Jim was speaking so quietly. "And who approached you?"

"Before I got elected and before I'd sold the business, someone with a Dutch accent phoned me. He didn't give his name but asked if I wanted to guarantee we got more business. Already smelling a rat, I thought for a minute but then said yes. I was then invited to meet someone called Philippe in London - the Intercontinental Hotel, Park Lane no less. I asked who Philippe was. I was told that Philippe would explain at the

meeting. So, I check this name out and, yes, there's a fellow called Philippe Eijsackers who was then head of the so-called pre-qualification team. Still smelling a rat, I wander along to Park Lane and stand around for thirty minutes. Then I get approached. Are you Philippe, I asked. No, says the man in the same Dutch accent as on the phone. Sorry, Philippe couldn't make it but would I come upstairs to a room he'd booked.

"Up we go. I find I'm talking to a guy who won't give his name but claims he can fix it for Smith Technology to get a share of the next few suitable aid bids that go in. I ask how. I get told not to ask too many questions, but as long as I put a thirty-three percent commission his way on signing the contract, he'd sort it and much more as well. And so, it goes on for thirty minutes. At the end I say I'll think about it and go back to my office. Next day, a DVD arrives in the mail - a nice quality recording of my conversation at the Intercontinental Hotel but with a slight crackling sound at the end and a Dutch voice saying thanks for agreeing to the commission arrangement.

"Now does that sound to you like the start of some sort of blackmailing or an attempt to mess me and my business about, Colin?"

Colin nodded. "And you've not told this to anyone?"

"No. You are the only one - so far. And where is that original DVD now? Who knows. But you can bet it was to be the next phase in their attack on me. I still have a copy. It's with a solicitor, but it wouldn't do me a lot of good in a court of law."

They ordered coffee and while they waited for a waitress to serve, Colin asked what he could do. Jim waited for the waitress to finish, then leaned forward again and pushed his long hair back behind his ears. To Colin it looked tidier that way. but Jim was still talking through the beard.

"I'm still looking for someone," Jim said. "Not a private investigator but someone who might work with me on this. It could be someone in a company familiar with the way international aid and public-sector funding bids operate - especially European and US funds. The person would need to understand that there would be serious repercussions for them if it became known that they were involved with me. In other words, I'm looking for someone a bit special."

Colin put his cup down and looked at Jim. "There is someone that immediately comes to mind, Jim. I know him well. He's a member of FESE and was at the conference you spoke at. I also know he liked what you'd been saying. He's another one who is inclined to get mad with the system. And there's more to him than meets the eye."

Jim stayed silent. He could see Colin thinking deep and hard. Then: "Walton Associates, Jim. The guy who started the firm is Jonathan Walton."

"Never heard of him," said Jim.

"In that case, leave it with me. I'll tell Jon just a little bit and see where it all leads."

CHAPTER 14

Night had fallen as the black BMW pulled up outside the main gate of the Minister of Finance's vast, walled and private villa. Security lighting reflected off the high, gold and silver coloured painted gates and a swarm of moths and insects

danced in the light as the leading police car stood stationary in front of the Minister's car as the following car drew alongside. The driver of the BMW got out and opened the rear passenger door. The Minister, a tall, well-built man with a heavy black moustache and wearing a light, grey suit climbed out holding tightly on to his brief case. He nodded to the driver, "My guest is staying at the Sheraton Hotel. Please bring him here at nine thirty."

"Yes, sir." The passenger door was closed and the Minister walked towards the double gates that swung open. Then he walked across a well-lit gravel driveway, bordered by a row of short palms and rose bushes, the gates closed behind him and he walked the few metres to the double, wooden door of the villa. It, too, opened before he had mounted the three wide, tiled steps. At the door stood a slim woman wearing a long black dress and headscarf, but she moved behind the door as he entered.

She closed the door and faced the Minister. "Have you eaten?" she asked. Her lips were bright red, her cheeks flushed. There was heavy mascara around large dark eyes that flashed nervously.

"It is not important. I will be in my office. A guest will arrive at nine thirty. There are to be no interruptions until he leaves. Just ensure there is coffee Do you understand?"

"Yes."

With that the woman backed away and the Minister walked through a long-tiled hallway with a glittering overhead chandelier and white and gold panelled walls, past the foot of the wide, marble stairway and towards a double door of polished wood. Still carrying his brief case he opened the door. As he did so he loosened his tie and walked into a tiled corridor lit by a row of wall lights with tasselled shades and more chandeliers that came on automatically. Through ceiling-high arches, the corridor then opened up into two separate rooms, one on either side of the corridor with white walls and more gold bordered panelling. To his right, the tiled floor was dominated by a circular Chinese carpet, six ornate, white armed chairs, a glass topped table with a vase of silk flowers and a gilt framed painting of a prancing horse. But the Minister turned left, dropped his brief case onto a settee set with gold embroidered cushions and made his way across another Chinese carpet to a glass cabinet. Dragging off his tie completely he dropped it on a wooden table next to a crystal table lamp and turned the key in the cabinet. There he filled a glass with neat whisky, took it to the settee next to his case, stretched out one leg and leaned back into a cushion. He swallowed half the whisky, placed the glass on the table alongside the crystal lamp, clicked open his case, pulled out a mobile phone and pressed a button.

"Akram?" he asked as the call was answered. "You still in Dubai? Is the purchase finalised?" He waited. "Good, now listen. It is about our bloody Italian friend...." He was interrupted, waited and meanwhile took another drink. Then:

"If that is true then it is time that we managed without Signore Guido and his friend Toni and that Egyptian, Tawfik. That crazy man Guido is too greedy. He was useful once but I am thinking he is now past his sell by date." He listened once more.

"If he now says you are not good enough, it is because he does not need you. He thinks he can save a commission, cut you out. We must cut him out. These are my instructions. Do you understand? Cut him out. And cut out that Egyptian fool, Tawfik also. Tell him you no longer need him, that you are returning to Pakistan to see your

family. Instead, we will deal with things ourselves. We are now in a very strong position. Deal with it Akram. It is urgent."

The Minister switched the mobile off and leaned back on the ornate high-backed couch and put the other leg up on the table. He checked his gold watch, drained the last of the whisky and closed his eyes briefly. But then he stood up, went to refill his glass and, as he did so, heard the door to the corridor open. The woman in the long black dress crept down the corridor in soft slippers, walked around the edge of the Chinese carpet and placed a bronze tray with a dallah, a large, Arabic coffee pot and china cups on a long glass topped table next to a jade statue of yet another prancing horse.

"It is nine twenty," she said, "Coffee for your guest." And then she stood, removed her headdress, pulled a clasp and let her long black hair flow across her shoulders. The Minister watched, smiled, looked at her, up and down.

"That is good. Please show him to the room when he arrives. We will be finished in an hour and then....." The woman nodded, smiled, touched her red lips and bowed almost imperceptibly. Then she backed away, turning briefly to smile again as she passed from his sight down the short corridor.

The Minister was still standing with the bottle in his hand. He held it up, checked the Glen Scotia label, raised his glass to something or someone and then drained it.

CHAPTER 15

The speed with which Mitchell drove his empty truck back to the barbed wire encircled compound of Mambola Transport broke his previous record by almost five minutes. He skidded to a halt in a cloud of red dust outside Mr Suleiman's concrete block office, leapt from his truck and ran inside. Mr Suleiman was sitting on a large, wooden crate, speaking into a mobile phone.

"Mr Suleiman, Mr Suleiman. Big problem. Mr Moses is very cross. I ran away in case he slapped me or"

"Shhh. I am having important negotiations. You must wait."

Mitchell waited, fidgeting, first on one leg, then the other. He went to the window and glanced into the yard to check if Mr Moses might have followed him. Mr Moses had once told him that if anyone ever crossed him then they could expect serious consequences and then, as if to re-enforce his determination, Mr Moses had pulled out a long and very sharp looking knife from the drawer in his desk and pointed it at Mitchell's nose.

"Sorry for the interruption, Mr Taylor," Mr Suleiman continued calmly, "It was one of my drivers. OK, so that's fifty boxes every day for one week starting on Monday from Cobra Printers to go to Awoko newspaper. That is very good, Mr Taylor. No problem. My driver Mr Mitchell will be responsible. He has just returned from his last delivery and I will make sure he obeys all the instructions. Yes. Thank you, Mr Taylor. Good bye.....What is it Mitchell?"

"Big problem, Mr Suleiman. Mr Moses is very cross. I ran away in case he took out his big....." Mitchell was still out of breath.

"His big what, Mitchell?"

"His big knife, Mr Suleiman."

"Ha, ha! No problem. I told you already, Mr Moses is always cross. He is a crook, a swindler, a skimmer. Mr Taylor who I have just spoke to is the opposite. He is an honest, hardworking family man with six children and his old mother. Don't worry. As long as you do your job it's OK. Moses won't hurt you."

"No, no, Mr Suleiman. There is a problem. All his boxes had newspaper inside. I saw with my own eyes."

"Ha, ha. No problem. It was packaging paper, plastic foam, polystyrene, don't worry."

"No, no, not packing paper. Nothing to pack. Nothing inside except paper. Nothing. That is why they were lighter than the first two hundred boxes."

"What are you saying? What first two hundred boxes?"

"There was a big mistake, Mr Suleiman. Tamba the forklift driver was drunk from last night and got slapped by Granville. But, before he got slapped, he made a mistake and gave me the wrong two hundred boxes. So, I unloaded the wrong ones and loaded the right ones. Then I took the right ones to Mr Moses. But I think they were the wrong ones. Then Mr Moses checked inside and it wasn't what it said on the paper - it was paper."

"What sort of paper?"

"Newspaper. Italian newspapers. But no water purifiers."

"So, there is a problem."

"Yes, that's what I'm telling you, Mr Suleiman. And Mr Moses thinks it is me."

"Ha ha! No, no, no. It cannot be. I will phone the airport. It is that bloody man Granville."

"Or the bloody man Tamba. But it wasn't me, Mr Suleiman."

"OK, no problem. I will sort it. Here is your next job. Thirty-six crates of chickens. Collect from William's chicken farm and take to Sani Abacha Street."

"Sani Abacha Street, Mr Suleiman? Again?"

CHAPTER 16

At nine thirty-five, the Minister of Finance heard the expected knock on the door. Placing his empty glass on the cabinet, he pushed the half bottle of Glen Scotia away out of sight and closed the glass front. Then he walked to the door, greeted a short, balding man in a dark suit and primrose yellow tie and ushered him to sit in one of the gold braded arm chairs next to the glass topped table and the tray of coffee.

But just as the Minister started pouring the steaming, black coffee, a small red light appeared on some electronic equipment laid out in the kitchen of an apartment in a grey, concrete block less than a mile away. Sat alongside it were three men, one a tall, well-groomed man in a smart suit and tie, the other two wearing casual clothes. All three wore headphones.

"He's in, sir," said an American voice, "A pity about the sound quality - it's the fucking walls but OK, we're recording.....sorry for the language, sir.....and that's the

Minister's voice, sir.....and the other belongs to our little friend from the Central Bank.....Shahid Masud."

There was a long pause as the three Americans listened through headphones. Then:

"Hear that name, sir?"

"Did he say Mendes?" the suited one asked.

"Yep. I reckon. It proves Mendes is involved somehow, somewhere. That's the second time in a week we've taped something. It just adds to suspicions but it's still not enough to do anything."

"Silvester Mendes, huh? Jesus."

"Yep.....that's just what we wanted you to hear, sir.....listen now, sir. Hear that? Government contracts. They're now talking online tenders. It'll be another fucking stitch up sorry 'bout the language, sir. Any aid going in there is supposed to be awarded via open tenders but it'll probably be another fix, a stitch up by the adjudication committee - chaired by that same little bastard Shahid Masud and signed off by the Minister..... Listen! 'Education', hear it? Young people, students.' The only beneficiaries will probably be the Minister, this little guy Masud and a few other characters."

The smartly dressed one now asked a question. "That fund they're talking about is not US money, it's European.....it was only officially announced last week and it was in the Minister's budget speech today....." He was interrupted.

"Yep. Dead right, sir. Listen again, sir. Sorry about the sound. They're now talking money transfers. Electronic. Switches. No wonder their foreign exchange reserves dropped by sixty percent last year.....OK, listen, that's a new name. Who the fuck is Tahir? And Italy? He just said 'our Italian friend.'.... You get that as well, Steve? What's the Italian connection? Don't tell me Silvio's involved here as well, sir. Ha!Sorry sir, now they're moving around. Did you hear a name? Weedo? Get that, Steve? Weedo? I think they've already finished. He used a mobile earlier but we couldn't get a fix or enough voice clarity. All we got was a definite mention of Dubai and the Dubai Asia Investment Bank.....and the sound of a bottle..... Yep, they've finished. It's a fucking enormous villa, sir. Gold everywhere and a fucking big jade horse. We got a few pictures inside once. Now the sounds gone. He's probably seeing him to his limousine outside. But, that enough, sir?"

"Yep, keep it coming, boys, but we gotta improve that sound quality." The suited one got up, dropping his headphones alongside the equipment.

"Just one thing. sir. Before you go. Let's check out this guy, Tahir."

There was a pause as the man tapped names into a computer. "It won't take a minute.....there. See? Could that be him? Tahir Babar, nice picture. If that's him then he's another Central Bank Board member. Figure?.....We'll now try for a match. And let's check this Dubai Asia Investment Bank. Ever heard of it?"

The tall, smart one shook his head. "Nope, never."

CHAPTER 17

Guido had decided his two Lebanese guests should stay at the expensive Park Hyatt Hotel in Milan. Had they been interested and had it not been past ten in the

evening a short stroll would have enabled them to shop in the celebrated fashion houses and boutiques of Via Montenapoleone and Via della Spiga. But after leading them on foot from the restaurant, Guido ushered them into the hotel lobby and, as he left them to gaze at the opulence perhaps wondering who was paying for this, he walked to the reception area.

"Your rooms are booked," he said as he returned, "But I am very busy so you can check in later. Please leave your bags with Marcel. Marcel will take care of them while we talk. Marcel - per piacere - do your job. These are important guests - all the way from Amsterdam." Then he giggled.

As Hamid and Farid watched their two bags disappear once more, Guido walked quickly on, shoes clicking on the tiles, arms marching in unison with his short legs. "Follow me. We will sit and talk You will take an Italian beer, yes?"

Still walking, he beckoned a passing waiter carrying a tray. "Birra Moretti - due - two. For me, acqua minerale frizzante - San Benedetto."

In the far corner of the lobby he gestured towards a long sofa set against a glass topped coffee table. He made straight for the sofa, sat down in the middle and lay back with his feet barely touching the floor, his trousers riding up to expose bright yellow socks and white legs. Holding his arms out, he then beckoned them to sit either side of him. "Yah. This is comfortable. Here we can talk."

He looked to his left at Hamid and then to his right at Farid, both perched uncomfortably on the edge of the sofa.

"Milan is a very nice city, yes?" he continued from where his head lay on the back of the sofa. "It is much better than Beirut and I expect it is much better than Lagos. But I have not yet been to Nigeria. I have my own managers in Lagos. One is called Frederico because he looks like my dead uncle who was called Frederico. Lagos Frederico is of course as black as the night. Uncle Frederico was as white as snow. The other manager is still learning the business. He is called Dada because his hair is long and curly."

Again, he looked to his left and then to his right as if waiting for a round of applause at his humour. "So," he said, spreading his arms on the settee behind his guests' backs. "Tell me about your Nigerian company."

There was another silence as the two Lebanese looked at one another across the space that Guido occupied. "Come. You must not be shy. If we are to be partners, we must be open."

Hamid looked particularly uncomfortable and he moved as if he might get up and go, but he was interrupted by the arrival of the waiter with a tray. "Ah, here is your Birra Moretti and my San Benedetto,"

As the waiter prepared the table with three delicate white doilies, placed chilled glasses for the beer and filled Guido's glass with his mineral water, the silence continued. But Guido was now beaming broadly as the waiter bowed his head and went away.

"Sante," he said lifting his glass of water and beckoning them to try their beer. "You must not be shy with Guido," he said, from virtually inside his glass of water. "You must relax. Now - tell me about your Nigerian business."

His tone was changing, almost to a command, but the silence from the other two continued as neither of them seemed inclined to try their beer or to speak.

Then: "How is Mr Johnson? Is he well?"

Hamid visibly jumped. "You know Mr Johnson?"

Guido tapped his nose with a stubby finger. "Of course. So, tell me about your Nigerian business." The tone was now even more serious.

"It is fine," said Farid, bravely, and he lifted his glass of beer to his lips.

"Fine? Fine? Do you understand your business? It is not fine. I have checked. It is weak. It is struggling. It needs fresh ideas. It needs what the Americans call 'an injection of expertise'. How can you even think of a project in Sierra Leone without an injection of the right expertise? And as for Sulima Construction, it is not structured properly to attract funds. And yet.....and yet.... you are sending Mr Johnson to London to ask for help with a funding bid? It is ridiculous. Tu sei stupido."

Hamid stood up. Farid edged even further forward on the settee.

"How do you know about Johnson?" Hamid, visibly insulted now, hissed the question from his standing position.

Guido himself then sat forward. He quickly took off his jacket and tucked it behind him on the settee as if preparing for a fight. Hamid appeared to almost laugh at such an apparent show of aggression from such a little man, but he was distracted by the damp sweat marks at Guido's arm pits and the shirt that stuck to his round chest. And, instead of raising a fist, Guido stood up - to the height of Hamid's own shirt collar - and held out his arms.

"It is my business to know everything," he hissed quite clearly and deliberately copying Hamid, even with a touch of the Arabic accent. "Why do you come to see me, if not for help, Mr Hamid?"

With that, using the tips of his toes, he raised himself two more inches but still only looked into the black stubble on Hamid's chin. His tone was menacing but in the confines of the Park Hyatt, Hamid, tempted though he was to punch the little creature in the face, looked around and thought better of it.

Guido continued to hiss, quietly but very clearly in English with only a slight Italian accent. He was less than twelve inches from Hamid's face.

"You were advised to see me; Mr Hamid and I know who advised you. And you will fucking well know from the person who recommended me that you were asked to treat this meeting with total secrecy and extreme confidentiality. That is what you were told and that is what made you so excited, Mr Hamid. You smelled big money and a big opportunity and you talked to Farid about it and you both agreed it was worth a little more investigating because, like so many others, you are greedy. You run a backstreet business that no-one has heard of, you have a family to feed and you want to prove something to your wife or to yourself that you are very clever and can make big money."

Guido's rosy lips curled into a snarl.

"So, I have a right to know about your Nigerian business and your Cherry Picking and your ideas for this so-called Coalition for Arab Youth. If you want funds from international aid organisation and you think you can make a few dollars out of it for

your own pockets then the only person who can help you is Guido. Guido has the systems in place. He has the technology. He has the contacts and he is very, very clever, Mr Hamid. You cannot come here to Milano and treat Guido as if he was an Egyptian selling cheap bronze teapot in a backstreet of Beirut or an illegal Burmese immigrant selling coloured stones from a plastic bag in Bangkok.

"You must raise your game, Mr Hamid. If you want to play in the big league then you will need a big partner who costs money and who expects to be treated with respect. Because if you don't treat him with respect you will find you get stung, very badly and very painfully - and so will your family. This is a dangerous game you are trying to play Mr Hamid. You need insurance."

Briefly he stopped, dropped down from his tip-toes and offered a twisted smile. "There are many benefits of working with Guido, Mr Hamid. You get a package deal that includes free insurance. But the insurance is quickly invalidated because I am also the underwriter."

With the smile gone, his small eyes bored into Hamid's but then he turned to face Farid who was still sitting down

"So you need to become more professional, Mr Hamid and Mr Farid. You are small players. You must learn to be big. You need to drop these old-fashioned ways of trying to make a few thousand dollars here and a few thousand there. It is a waste of everyone's fucking time, Mr Hamid and Mr Farid. I do not operate with small individuals. But if you insist on staying small, I suggest you fly back to Beirut or Lagos right now and forget about your plans to grow and diversify and make easy money from generous taxpayers. If you don't co-operate and do things my way you will find other problems arising for you because Guido may not be tall but his arms are long and they stretch a very long way."

He raised a short, stubby first finger and tapped Hamid gently on the chin. "Agree to do things my way, Mr Hamid," he said in his high-pitched voice. "If you don't, you and brother Farid may not even get out of Milan, let alone return to Beirut or Lagos. Understand?"

Hamid was also now sweating. His face felt sticky as if Guido had been spraying him with spit. He wiped his cheeks and looked at Farid, but Farid was looking at the floor.

"Or....." Guido paused as if for effect. "If you'd like to make more than a few thousand dollars out of this project in Sierra Leone and would prefer to make five million Euros instead then tell me about your Nigerian business."

With that, he sat down next to Farid, picked up his glass of mineral water and downed it all.

"Now," he said, wiping his mouth, "Are you going to sit down Mr Hamid and be a nice friend to Guido or shall I walk out and leave you to pay the hotel bill."

Guido was starting to lose more friends.

CHAPTER 18

Colin Foreman had returned to the UK and Jim to his old house in Kanchanaburi. The day after was the one that changed Lek's business for ever - the day he first met the old 'farang' with the grey beard and long hair called Jim.

"Why not turn your business into an internet cafe, Lek?" he'd suggested. "Get young people in playing online games after school and paying you for the time and for their Fanta, Coca Cola, crisps and their dried squid and seaweed snacks? I'll pay for a few second-hand computers and for the internet connection, but please decide quickly because I want to be your first customer."

Ten days later and with far greater efficiency than he imagined possible, Jim tested the new system out and it worked well. Lek's internet business was up and running and Jim was in contact with the world again. His first task, another email address and a message to Colin announcing he was in business as agreed in Bangkok.

The following morning came Colin's reply. "To JS. So quick! I've chatted to Walton Associates. Jonathan has tentatively agreed and wants to meet you. Any chance of you getting over here, or if you don't want to go through Heathrow Immigration and into London how about Paris or Amsterdam? Regards, CF"

Jim's reply was by return. "I'll go for Amsterdam. Give me a date when JS is free and I'll be there waiting."

Ten days later and Jim had spent a night of unaccustomed luxury at the Ibis Hotel near Schiphol Airport - a hot shower, dinner of beef steak and potatoes in the restaurant, a beer in the bar, a good night's sleep in a proper bed and no headache next morning. He changed from his shorts and tee shirt into long trousers and a long-sleeved shirt, tied his hair back with an elastic band, trimmed his beard just a little in the mirror and sat reading European newspapers in the foyer while he waited. By mid-morning, Jonathan Walton of Walton Associates arrived and, introductions over and an agreement to call each other Jim and Jon, they sat outside overlooking the clear lake and beds of multicoloured tulips in warm spring sunshine.

"I understand Colin has explained more about me and what went on," Jim began.

"Yes, and I did some research of my own. You were given a hard time."

"And you're still interested enough to want to meet me?"

Jim was not prepared for the passion that poured from Jonathan. He listened.

"Of course. You were always right, Jim. Someone has to ask awkward questions. Economic development support and international aid systems are flawed. Vast sums are wasted or go astray. I know, after all it's the business I'm in. Much of what you were saying at the time was absolutely correct. The only difference was that you named names. Trouble is, like a lot of things, we tend to live with it. But why the bloody hell should taxpayer's money have been used to build useless airports, motorways and such like in places like Spain? Why give European aid to regions like Cornwall in the UK? Have you seen any improvements there that would not have come from direct private investment? Vast sums of money go out, only a fraction comes back in real benefits. Does it really do anyone any good? Look at the state of countries where much of the so-called economic aid goes. Have they really benefitted from interference in market forces? Rarely. Is some charitable assistance good for some countries? Yes, provided it's sensible, well managed and it encourages self-sufficiency and not continued dependency.

"And then there are the billions spent on humanitarian and other international aid. Can we afford it? Is it for political influence? Is it for compassion? Is it to give them all a better life and if so why does everyone still think the grass is always greener somewhere else and migrate? Did anyone ask you if you agreed to your tax going to pay for public sector workers in Gaza who never go to work because there is nothing for them to do? Should we not be using the money in more efficient and more visible ways - like increasing the support for the growing numbers of our own old people who, in my opinion, get a very raw deal. Should we not spend it on improving education for our children, on our own economic development and infrastructure?"

"But because accountability is inadequate, where does a lot of your money end up instead? It ends up in the pockets of corrupt construction companies whose owners now sun themselves in the Caribbean or on the Costa Brava. It ends up in the pockets of small-time politicians in town halls from Latvia to Romania and with African despots and terrorist organisations in the Middle East. And some of it ends up with bigger politicians and already well-paid bureaucrats.

"Look at Africa, Jim. You know Africa well. Has Western aid money got us any extra business and influence there? No. In fact, we've lost it. They took our money and ran off to Paris to buy designer clothes, jewellery and new cars. And, instead, the Chinese are the new colonialists and Islamic extremists are the new missionaries. They didn't give aid they just moved in with direct investment for their own benefit and started to employ locals.

"And how much is wasted on the bureaucracy to give the money away. It's billions. It's bureaucratic monstrosities like the European Union trying desperately to keep thousands of people off the unemployment registers that embarrass all our politicians because of all their other short-term thinking. And those same politicians would like more and more of our tax to spend just to appear kind and generous. Why? So they get re-elected. But it's so much harder to cut the costs once you've already started it. It should never have been given in the first place.

"But don't get me wrong, Jim, it's not just governments. Charities are just as bad. They have far too much going into bureaucracy, into management staff, executive salaries and expenses. What percentage of your kind donations actually gets to where you think it's going? Ten percent? Less?"

Jonathan's passion was music to Jim's ears. He sat and listened as Jonathan, also sensing he was with someone who would agree with him, spilled it all - the opinion, the facts, the anger and the frustration. Finally, Jim got back to his proposal.

"But Walton Associates, your company, the one you started, is in the business of offering advice to organisations wanting a bit of this free money isn't it, Jon?" It was meant to be provocative.

"Yes, but don't forget Jim, I started the business as a straightforward management consultancy. But we were constantly being asked if there were any government funds available - for staff training, apprenticeships, research or exporting - and for help in applying for it. We stuck it on the website and promoted it and were overwhelmed. It grew. But we got selective. We ditched the small stuff and focussed on the bigger applications and funds - European regional aid, overseas aid and so on. And we learned a lot - how to bid successfully, who our clients should lobby - and we got to understand the process from the beginning to the end. The end as far as we were concerned was getting the funds in. After that they were on their own."

"However," Jonathan went on, "We've recently gone back and checked a few of the successful applicants we helped and one or two we rejected. And then we've found some very interesting things. We may well be being overly strict but we're talking about public money here - you have to be strict."

"And what have you found?"

"Weaknesses, gaps, flexibility not entirely in keeping with the original conditions, a willingness to turn blind eyes, short cutting of pre-qualification criteria, inadequate scrutiny of delivery, invoices that look, and are, dubious. You want me to go on?"

Jim already knew it, but: "And how do you know this?"

"Disgruntled ex-employees, disgruntled existing employees - nervous people but potential whistle blowers if you like the phrase. They are rare but we quickly got to recognise them."

"Interesting," muttered Jim. "What happens to them?"

"They either resign, find a new job, or they stick it out - take it all as part and parcel of the way the system operates. Apathy if you like. They shrug - that's the way of the world. And, of course, they are afraid. Afraid of losing their jobs, the income, the pensions."

"And what about the organisations you refused to work with?" Jim asked.

"Yes, I was always insistent we stuck to advising legitimate companies and organisations, ones we've checked thoroughly. I think we have become very good at identifying rogues just after free hand outs. They always ask the same questions - how much detail do they need to give for successful bids, how much paper accounting for the spend or for audit trails, for instance."

"So," Jonathan concluded. "I think we're good at what we do, Jim. Colin thinks we are and Colin also seemed to know that you and I might see very much eye to eye on things. Am I right?"

"Yes," Jim replied. Then he leaned over, shook Jonathan's hand once again and smiled. "OK, let's discuss an idea for a way forward over lunch and you can then tell me if you're up for it. If not, we'll just forget our discussion. You can go back to London and I'll go back to where I came from."

It was after lunch. They had moved to a quiet corner of the hotel lobby for more coffee when Jim asked about, what Jonathan had called, potential whistle blowers.

Jonathan described how to recognise them but how much harder it was to recognise anyone who might actually go through with it. He mentioned three - who they were, where they had worked, where they still worked, what they did day to day, their ages.

"OK," Jim said, surprisingly quickly. "One of them looks a possibility for what I'm thinking of. Let's see if he's up for it and if we can start pulling a few strings."

That had been Jim's first meeting with Jonathan Walton. His second was a month later - another eighteen hour one-stop flight via Dubai and another evening of comparative luxury. Jonathan arrived from London next day at mid-morning. Jonathan's whistle-blower arrived at midday.

Jan Kerkman was Dutch and had assumed he was being poached for a job with Walton Associates - an informal 'get to know each other' session, English style. Jim introduced himself as a senior partner in Walton Associates. They let Kerkman talk for a while, encouraged him to be frank. Over six feet tall, athletic looking, with short cropped, fair hair, his idea of informality was a dark grey suit and open necked white shirt. He was thirty-five years old, single, bored and frustrated with his job. He wanted some action back in the private sector from where he'd come - financial services. He was, he said, so frustrated that he had been tempted to join the Dutch police or go abroad or anything just to get out of the job he'd been doing for almost six years.

"Yes," Kerkman said in his Dutch accent, "It was OK to start and I was good at it. I got promoted a few times. I could probably ask for another move if I felt like it."

The more Jim listened, the more he had grown to like him and after lunch and after a short private chat with Jonathan while Kerkman sat alone with a beer, Jim described to Jan what he wanted.

"You know the English saying, Jan? If you can't beat them, join them. Well, I've got my own version of that. If they are winning, learn their tricks and beat them at their game."

Kerkman smiled politely and nodded, unsure where all this was heading. "Have you ever seen me before?" Jim asked.

"No. But you don't look like a senior partner in Walton Associates," Jan replied. "That tan doesn't come from sitting in the next office to Jonathan." He saw the faint smile inside the grey beard. The teeth were big and yellowish as if they needed a good clean and some dentistry.

"I'm an outcast from the British political system, Jan. I was a Member of Parliament for a very short time but didn't fit in. And you're right, I don't work for Jonathan."

He took a slow, deep breath. "I didn't fit in because I had some rather unwelcome opinions about the workings of government. For instance, I said there was evidence of serious corruption over the use of international aid and economic development funding - internal fraud and corruption - and I had the audacity to speak out about it. But I spoke too loudly and I was too blunt and the system didn't like it because I also mentioned a few names and pointed a few fingers. All I wanted was an independent investigation into what was going on. Instead, I was hounded out, so I went abroad to decide what to do."

Jan Kerkman had nodded and listened intently.

"From what you said before lunch and what you've said to Jonathan in private it seems you, too, don't like what's going on," Jim went on.

Kerkman nodded. "I'm damn sure there is a lot wrong and I've already told Jon that I was unhappy with it. But, as you found out, you can't just make claims. You need proof. And even with proof, the system is likely to close ranks because there is too much at stake for certain people."

Jim had then looked at Jonathan seeking permission to take it a stage further. He got a nod. "Go ahead, Jim."

"Do you want to help expose what's going on?" Jim had asked. "Stay working inside the system. Dig a bit more. Find out what you can? Pass anything you get to Jon? Meet up with us both from time to time? Help us form a sound case?"

Jan Kerkman sat and thought, his eyes flicking from Jim to Jonathan and back. "You're serious, are you? Don't fuck me about, OK."

"Jan," said Jim. "I'm serious. I've already been fucked about as you call it. I know what it's like. When I've gone Jon can tell you some more about me. But I'm deadly serious. This is an offer to act as a kind of spy inside the system, a mole or a whistleblower if you prefer. There are risks, yes. But I think you could handle it."

"And what happens if I get caught? What protection will there be?"

Jim's reply was immediate. "There would be no protection. We'd need to face that when and if it arises. But you're looking for a bit of a challenge - excitement if you like. You'd just have to keep looking over your shoulder - just as I still do. We'll just see how things develop."

Jim had paused as Jan Kerkman looked down, clearly unsure what he would be getting involved in. His eventual reply was, again, music to Jim's ears. Kerkman was someone refreshingly motivated by something far greater than money.

"I would 'whistle-blow', as you call it, right now if I was sure it would do any good and someone might listen and act. But I wouldn't want to be arrested or have to fly to Moscow or South America or somewhere to be untouchable. I'd need your support and I'd want to meet up with you regularly - in secret. But yes, I'll help."

Jim had then returned to Thailand, Jonathan to London and Jan to Brussels.

CHAPTER 19

Mitchell was pleased he had finished his work for the day. It had started badly with Mr Moses and the boxes full of nothing but newspapers, but the delivery of the live chickens had gone without a hitch with only one chicken found dead on arrival. As usual he reversed the truck into his allocated space next to the concrete block headquarters of Mambolo Transport Enterprises and jumped out.

In a line next to his truck were the three small vans that made up the rest of the fleet, but he was surprised to find the three van drivers, Samson, Big Saidu and George, sat together on a pile of wooden pallets outside. With the exception of Mr Suleiman himself, Mitchell was normally the last to leave.

"What's up my man," he said to the three.

"You must go to airport," said George.

"Why? I was there this morning."

They looked at one another. It was Big Saidu who spoke. "Big problem. Mr Moses from Rocki Supplies came here this afternoon. Sampson saw him."

"Yah," said Sampson. "Big argue-ation. Moses very vexed. Suleiman come out, seem very gladdy and say to him, 'Ow du boddy?' - polite like - but Moses ala man, he stat to shout too much. Say Suleiman is big teef. Say cost him fifty tousin dollah. No much fun, Mitchell. I see every ting with mine eye. Then Moses he show big knife

and come to Suleiman, but Suleiman brave man. He stop, say let me alone, I not big teef. Suleiman stand tall. Say come in office, sid dan, tock man to man."

"Yah. I warned Mr Suleiman," Mitchell said. "Mr Moses is trouble. Suleiman says Moses is a big teef and a skimmer. But Moses thinks I, Mitchell, am the big teef. I told Mr Suleiman. Where is Mr Suleiman?"

"He went to airport," said George. "He want you go there. Check things out. See what happen."

"OK, I'll go now. But you got any watta, man?" Mitchell asked, resigning himself to an extension to his day. "I gave all my watta to chicken but bastad still die."

Mitchell then raced to Lunghi airport, hoping Mr Suleiman was still there and thinking all the while about the old cargo warehouse he'd been to that morning. It was small, too small and many pallets and boxes were often left standing outside, even in the rain. No wonder they made mistakes.

"Disorganised mess," said Mitchell to himself as he drove. "And that bloody man Tamba - people like him only make things worse - drinking poyo, fucking around when he have job to do."

Mitchell was right because he knew about warehouses. He visited them nearly every day. But the old warehouse at Lunghi was not secure. There was nothing for cold storage, dangerous goods or even weighing and many airlines refused to carry goods due to the lack of security checks. But, somehow, Mitchell's consignment of two hundred boxes had arrived and so, it would seem, had two hundred boxes containing Italian newspaper instead of water purifiers. He stopped his truck at exactly the same spot as that morning and saw Mr Suleiman and Granville, the manager, sitting on chairs just inside the warehouse entrance.

"Ah, here is my driver," Suleiman said. "We will ask him..... Now then Mitchell, please sit.....OK, no more chair, then you must stand..... Are you sure that all the boxes contained newspaper and not water purifiers?"

"I don't know, I didn't check all two hundred. Mr Moses was still checking when I left."

"OK, listen. There is too much confusion here. Still sitting in the warehouse behind us are two hundred boxes. Granville and I just checked them. They all contain water purifiers. The paperwork says they are for Daisy Children's Charity and they come from Freeways Freight Forwarding in Milan. But there is no Daisy Children's Charity in Sierra Leone. And Mr Granville cannot find Freeways Freight Forwarding in his book. That is why these boxes are still here.

"But Mr Granville received a telex from Freeways Freight Forwarding admitting an error in the paperwork and asking that the boxes be released to Rocki General Supplies. Mr Granville did not know what to do because Daisy Children's Charity is in Liberia not Sierra Leone. And also, something was changed on the documents that were faxed. Mr Granville said it smelled like old fish.

"Then the new consignment of two hundred boxes arrived by Swiss Air also addressed to Daisy Children's Charity with a Post Office Box address but with no consignee's name. Contents of boxes shown as water purifiers. Correct, Mr Granville? I will now ask the warehouse manager, Mr Granville, to explain."

Granville coughed. "This is very bad. I do not know what is happening here."

"Thank you, Mr Granville. That is a very clear conclusion and very honest."

"Now then, Mitchell. Please tell Mr Granville that I once told you that Moses from Rocki General Supplies is a fraudster and one big-time skimmer."

"Yes, sir." Mitchell then looked down to where Granville sat, shaking and scratching his head. "It is true. My boss warned me that Moses is a teef and a big-time skimmer, Mr Granville."

"You see?" said Suleiman. "He is up to no good. It is well known in Freetown, but people are scared to say. They keep quiet because Moses has a big silver Mercedes and a driver with a gun and knows the Government and the Ministers and they think he has other big friends with important jobs. But I am not afraid."

Mitchell raised his hand as if wanting to offer something new. He did.

"Mr Suleiman, sir. Please do not forget that I delivered fifty-six boxes that according to the paperwork contained three hundred second hand laptop computers to Mr Moses last week. These were for a charity called School Aid but I delivered them to Mr Moses. Do you think you should also check if there is a charity called School Aid? And I also took many boxes from Mr Moses all the way to Sulima. It took me four days. It was for a company called Sulima Construction but Sulima Construction was like an empty garage, Mr Suleiman. And I saw labels with Daisy Charity on these boxes also."

"This is good thinking, Mitchell," he turned to Granville. "There is something going on here. I smell bad fish and dead rats. Mr Mitchell is my best driver, Granville. He is the eyes and the ears of Mambolo Transport Enterprises Maybe he will become a manager one day."

"So, what will you do?" Granville asked.

Suleiman beckoned Granville to sit forward. "Mr Moses pull a knife on me but I never pull a knife. I pull rugs. I pull carpet. Moses is not the only one with friends. I pull strings."

CHAPTER 20

At his north London office, Jonathan Walton was working late. Seven thirty wasn't unusual but he'd been sitting at his computer since morning. It was Friday, he was tired, his eyes were losing focus and he had the makings of a bad headache. Thinking enough was enough, he rubbed his eyes and sat back. As he did so, the main office phone rang. With a sigh, he leaned over and picked it up. The caller was male, the voice deep and strong and with an accent that Jonathan put down as African, but he had never been good enough at accents to pin it down any further.

"Ah, is that Walton Associates?" asked the voice.

"Yes," repeated Jonathan, "I'm Jonathan Walton, the managing director."

"Yes, I see. Your website says you help charities to bid for money."

"Yes," said Jonathan and because he was tired, he was tempted to reel off the exact words on the company's website that the caller had just mentioned. But he thought better of it and shortened it. "Yes, we offer various types of help to businesses and charities and that includes bidding for funds."

"Yes, I see. We would like some help."

"Mm" Jonathan thought. "This looks like it might take a while." He said, "Can I ask your name. sir?"

"I am Mr Johnson."

"And where are you from, Mr Johnson?"

"Ah, Lagos, Nigeria, but I am in London."

A red light flashed somewhere inside Jonathan's aching head. Scams and other illegal practices were too common from that part of the world and this, even at this stage, had all the right signs. "And the charity's name?" he asked.

"Well, sir, it is called African Young Business."

"And what does it do?"

"It helps young Africans start businesses."

"I see. So, do you know if there are sources of international funding for that sort of thing?"

"I was hoping you might know about that."

"Yes, we can sometimes help there."

"So, what else can you do?"

Jonathan took a deep breath. His headache was suddenly getting worse. Unable to come up with anything fresh, he started to quote from the website. "We can assess your project. We can help you find suitable partners and provide legal advice for partnership working. We can develop and draft international grant applications where there are suitable funds. We can help lobby for your organisation. We can offer project management training. There is a lot we can do - but it all depends on your organisation and what you need."

The last bit was a polite way of warning Mr Johnson. We're a busy company, we are selective who we work with and I do not want to be messed about, OK? Jonathan hoped he had got the message. Perhaps he had, perhaps not. Either way it didn't matter. Even if this turned out to be commercial fraud on an international scale, Jonathan had been wanting to find something like that since meeting Jim Smith. He had told Jim it might not take too long to come across something suspicious. His suspicions were now immediately re-enforced

"OK, Sir. Well, perhaps I'll leave it for now."

Jonathan heard the phone click, touched the red button on his own receiver and pressed his hands around his throbbing head. "Ah, well," thought Jonathan and went home. "More than likely, he'll phone again."

He did. The second call from Mr Johnson came on Monday morning. The call was taken by Sarah, the receptionist and Jonathan's PA. As Mr Johnson already said he'd spoken to Mr Walton on Friday, Sarah put the call through to Jonathan.

"Good morning, Mr Johnson."

"Yes, good morning. We spoke on Friday."

"Indeed. Have you thought about how we might help you?"

"Yes. Can we meet?"

"Before we do, can you tell me a little more about your project - a brief summary perhaps?"

"Ah, it's for Sierra Leone."

"I see. A little more information, perhaps?"

"Yes, sir. It is an eco-tourism project. My associates are building a 50-million-dollar tourist complex - hotel, apartments, restaurants and shops. It is to attract more foreign tourists."

"Mm, very interesting. But I thought it was called African Young Business."

"Ah, yes, that is another project."

"So, we now have two projects. Who is leading on the Sierra Leone one?"

"It is what we call a joint venture. "

"Yes, I have heard about joint ventures," Jonathan said. "Who are the main partners?"

"Ah, yes. Ah, the main partner is Sulima Construction. The other is Vacation Afrique. It is a French company."

"So why do you need funds?" asked Jonathan. "These partners sound big enough."

"Ah, no. It is for the extra work - work not included in the main contract."

"And what is that extra work?"

"It is for the, uh, solar water heaters, waste water recovery systems, insulated walls and roofs, double glazed windows - other energy saving systems.....and, uh, so on." Jonathan felt sure Mr Johnson was reading from something lying in front of him. No matter, he often did that himself.

"And who is supplying and fitting the energy saving systems?"

"Ah, it will be subcontracted."

"Can I ask, to whom?"

"This will depend on funding, sir. Without funding there will be no energy saving systems."

"That would be a big pity I agree. Do you work for Sulima Construction or Vacation Afrique, Mr Johnson?"

"Ah, neither, sir. We are acting as consultants to the project."

Well, there was nothing better than a consultancy to hide behind, Jonathan thought, smiling to himself. "And the name of your company - the consultants?" He asked.

"Ah, perhaps we should meet?"

The meeting was fixed for 8pm on Monday night. The venue, a small, cheap place that called itself a hotel but was, more aptly, a bed and breakfast joint off the Cromwell Road in west London. In his mind and in the current jargon of the business, Jonathan had labelled the meeting as 'exploratory' and so arrived with nothing except a business card and his laptop. But this was far more than Mr Johnson had when he arrived, late, at 8.45. Jonathan had sat, his patience almost

expired, in an uncomfortable, sagging arm chair next to a table stained with coffee cup rings and a wilting, potted plant.

When Mr Johnson arrived Jonathan shook a large, sweaty palm and Mr Johnson dragged up a hard, upright chair. Then they eyed each other across the table and spoke in barely audible whispers. The Nigerian was big and heavy but well dressed - newish looking suit, whitish shirt, cuff links, big gold ring with a red stone - but the entire effect was spoiled by a badly tied, off-centre tie and a pair of black, lace-up shoes that were in desperate need of some polish. When he finally shook the Nigerian's big hand again at 10pm, Jonathan's instinct told him that something was definitely going on here that had little to do with youth start-up businesses or leisure complexes. Getting even that far, though, had been hard work.

"I checked Sulima Construction, Mr Johnson. Sulima is in Sierra Leone but there is a very small company with that name based in Ghana. But I could not find any trading history or names of directors."

"Yes, but it is growing very fast."

"And I checked Vacation Afrique. The only company I could find with that name was a travel agent in Paris."

"It is not that travel agent."

"And you mentioned you represent a consultancy."

"Yes."

"So, can you explain more about this consultancy, Mr Johnson? You see, I am struggling a little to get my head around your business."

Mr Johnson looked around the so-called TV lounge as if he had no wish to be overheard. This was unlikely. The TV was on - a film of something, but with the sound off - and there was only one other guest, a man who might have been a plumber on a short-term contract. He was fast asleep, grunting occasionally, a crumpled copy of the Daily Mirror slipping from his lap.

"Ah, yes," the Nigerian scratched the side of his nose and then pulled on his ear lobe. "But I thought Walton Associates specialised in this sort of thing."

"What sort of thing would that be, Mr Johnson?"

"Well, I was told that you have experience in finding funds for projects in Africa....especially if it is to do with the environment."

"Yes, a little. Go on."

"And, uh, my Lebanese associates spoke highly of you."

"Your Lebanese associates?"

"Yes. They recommended you."

Jonathan said nothing. He had no recollection of meeting any Lebanese, but almost six years of trying to fathom out what the hell was going on in certain business and political circles had already meant rubbing shoulders with some unusual people. Within the last few weeks, though, since meeting Jim and Jan Kerkman, sections of circles were starting to join up. He had made a promise to help look into certain matters and knew it might be fraught with risk, not least to the reputation Walton

Associates. But the promise had been made and he had no wish to suddenly walk away.

Seconds of silence passed as he considered his position but, finally, he smiled at the Nigerian. It was a deliberate smile, as honest a smile as he could summon. It was a smile aimed at communicating a desire, however repugnant, to do business in a way that would ignore the straightjacket of regulation. The Nigerian smiled back, similarly.

"Then it might be best, Mr Johnson, if, for this venture we use another company with which I am involved. Walton Associates, you see, mostly deals with rather ordinary business advice to UK companies and charities and I normally delegate that sort of thing to my staff. I suspect that, in this case, we may need the use of my other company. It is a much more outward looking and flexible business. Is this what your Lebanese friends are referring to?"

Mr Johnson's smile grew into a wide grin. "Yes, I expect so, Mr Walton. Like you, we have to be sure that the partners we choose are fit for purpose."

CHAPTER 21

It was Jim's third visit to Amsterdam.

He had taken a hot shower, added blackcurrant cheese cake to his evening meal of steak and potatoes and was lying naked on the bed on freshly laundered white sheets and staring at the ceiling.

"I've always said, mother, that to fully appreciate luxury, it must be an occasional experience. Luxury that is commonplace goes unappreciated and the mind quickly resets a higher level for its definition of what counts as luxurious." He paused.

"The same cannot be said about routine, however. No routine, or a constant change of routine, is a quick route to a disorganised mind and a dysfunctional lifestyle." He paused again. "Yes, mother, I know, don't keep on. I may appear untidy, but untidiness is a matter of opinion. It is routine untidiness and so I know where everything is."

He sat up, cross-legged, dragged fingers through his beard, tucked the long strands of hair behind his ears. "So how would you describe yourself, Mr Smith?"

The imaginary voice was from someone with a microphone and recording equipment, though whether a he or a she or from the press, radio or TV was unimportant. "Patient," Jim answered aloud to the ceiling in the Amsterdam hotel room.

"You've been on your own a long time, Mr Smith."

"Yes." Jim had learned the hard way. He would stick to simple answers when it came to questions from the media.

"Aren't you lonely?"

"I find my own company perfectly satisfying."

"But it's rather basic here if you don't mind me saying so, Mr Smith. You are a little cut off from civilisation and the house itself looks in need of some, what shall I say, refurbishment."

"Yes."

"Is there anything you miss?"

Jim stroked his beard. That was a leading question. "No comment."

"So how do you manage?"

"Self-discipline."

Jim, sitting on the hotel bed with his eyes closed, could hear planes taking off at Schiphol Airport. He opened his eyes, reached for a bottle of mineral water on the bedside cabinet and took a mouthful. "What time is it? Ten thirty. Jonathan and Jan at ten in the morning. Oh, well, no-one's listening. My mother's fault all this talking to yourself....fifty years ago.....eating cottage pie."

As a boy, he could distinctly remember his mother telling him - over that cottage pie one lunch-time - that he must, at all costs and at all times, adhere to a set of priorities, standards and rules. A man's character she told him, would be judged on taking full responsibility for your actions and on delivery of positive results.

Over the years, he had to admit that he had gradually adapted his mother's rules, codes, priorities and standards to fit his ever-changing situation, but he had always remembered them and never wavered too far from the course she had set him on. That he had ended up where he was now could probably be related back to his upbringing. But he was content enough with that. He closed his eyes again.

"Your core principle of judgment on results has remained a constant, mother. Even now, at the ripe old age of sixty-six, I still feel it necessary to be judged on doing something tangible. But who is there to judge me now?myself, I suppose.....doing something tangible is precisely what I've been doing..... even from out there. It's a small world now, mother. What with the internet and airline travel, it's not like it was when you were young. We've all had to adjust and adapt.....quickly. But.....I've never really stopped, mother. I've hit a few bloody snags on the way - personal and otherwise. But I'm still going at sixty-six. You should be pleased. Are you? No, I thought not."

He paused.

"Painting is my creative side, mother. The other stuff is work in progress - problem solving, putting right the wrong, proving something to myself as much as to others. What would you say, mother, if I told you that after I sold the business I got involved with the international criminal fraternity? You'd be a bit cross I expect. You'd certainly wag your finger at me then, wouldn't you? Quite right too.

"But you never pointed out one thing, mother. It's all very well working hard, showing commitment, taking responsibility and delivering results but what if someone points out there is a fourth requirement. Do you know what that fourth missing requirement is, mother - the one that you missed from the lesson over the cottage pie? It's the need to grow a thick skin, to be insensitive - to be so bloody insensitive that you are immune to criticism even if the criticism comes from someone who would fail every one of your first three tests.

"I lacked that one ingredient, mother. After thirty successful years when being sensitive was an important and valuable asset, I entered a profession where it is a vital necessity to be a thick-skinned, self-centred, hypocritical bastard. I used to listen to criticism because I wondered if there might be an element of truth in what

was being said, but I know now that the criticism aimed at me was unfounded and that it was just the start of a vindictive campaign because I was starting to touch nerves.

"Yes, I know mother. I know I'm repeating myself - you've heard it all before, ad nauseum, but you must try to understand me. I'm sixty-six now and I can't escape it you see. I was accused of incompetence even though I was totally competent. I was accused of doing things that I never did. I was held up to public ridicule because of the way I am and the way I spoke and the way I dressed and..... and.....because I believe in stating facts and not blinding people with lies, bullshit and hypocrisy. I was blunt in my words. But I was still learning how they played their games. I learned it, but I learned it the hard way. At one point I wondered if I should also start telling lies, talking bullshit and being a bloody hypocrite. But because I couldn't and didn't and because I stuck to my principles, do you know what I have ended up with, mother? Nothing."

Jim Smith, eyes tightly closed, smiled. Nothing was OK. Having nothing, wanting nothing and being perfectly happy with nothing was the perfect argument against those driven to corruption for their own solution to happiness.

"So how is your wife, Margaret, Mr Smith? Seen her recently?" The reporter had returned.

"I'm not too sure I've even got a wife anymore and that's probably your fault as much as mine."

"Oh, we were only doing our job, Mr Smith. Selling stories to attract advertising."

"Precisely. And who was paying you?"

"Don't take it so hard, Mr Smith. That's the way of the world. But don't you miss your home, your garden, the washing machine and the nice big bed with clean sheets smelling of flowers of the forest conditioner, Mr Smith"

"No, I bloody don't. I manage on three hundred baht a day. That's six pounds or about eight dollars. It's enough."

"Don't you miss dear old England, across the channel there? It's only a few minutes into Heathrow from here."?

"No, not much. And let me save you the need to think up more pathetic questions. Do I miss the way the world is now? No, not at all. Do I miss having responsibilities for anything or anyone other than for myself? Yes, a little."

"So, is there anything you miss, badly, Mr Smith?"

"I miss talking to people - sometimes."

"So how the hell do you manage without anyone to talk to, Mr Smith? You were always a bit of an oddity, what with the long hair, the beard, the messy tie you could never quite manage to fix, the sandals and the socks you once wore to a meeting."

"There you go again.... judgement by appearance. But how do I manage? I talk to myself. And I'm very self-critical so don't assume I can get away with saying anything blatantly wrong, untrue or offensive. It might be politically incorrect, but I can get quite heated with myself at times as my mother knows."

There was a pause.

"Is there anything you need, Jimmy?"

"No, mother, thanks for asking.except I suppose I want to be listened to. But even then, I still remember your words, mother. You remember what you said? Be patient with everyone but above all be patient with yourself. I'm being patient, mother, and you were absolutely right - we're starting to show results. I knew it would take a while, but three years? That's at least two years longer than I thought. But do I care? No, not really. I live happily enough albeit with the increasingly desperate need to finish what I started."

"Well, that's a blessing, Jimmy. So, what else have you discovered about yourself since I passed away?"

"That I am a man with only very simple and basic needs, mother. That eastern practices of patience, tranquillity, self-analysis and contemplation suit my character rather well. I enjoy the simplest of daily tasks, although it didn't used to be like that. I was once an absolute stickler for efficiency - they all said so - and they all suffered as a result. But if they downed tools in a fit of pique, I would, nevertheless, pick them up and say - here, carry on, just do your best."

"That's my boy."

"Please, mother, don't embarrass me."

"Did you know, mother it was once said by an ancient Buddhist monk. 'How wonderful, how miraculous - I fetch wood, I carry water.' It is this basic simplicity of living a life that is all too short that pleases me, mother. That is why I do not understand the ways of the corrupt who take more than their fair share from others."

Jim slept soundly that night. There were no dreams and no headache and at just after ten next morning he was with Jonathan Walton, just flown in from London and Jan Kerman, just driven up from Brussels where he lived. They were in the bar with a tray of coffee.

"I've just become 'Project Manager - Economic Development (Africa)." Jan announced and raised a celebratory fist in the air. "Ten days ago."

All three looked at one another as Jan's fist waving stopped. "Yeh, I know," Jan went on, looking embarrassed. "I've stepped up the ladder again and I'm living the high life. But don't laugh, OK? It's so fucking unexciting I find it hard to get up some mornings."

"Your reluctant enthusiasm brightens the day, Jan. You are about as stubbornly patient as I am. So what does the Project Manager - Economic Development (Africa) do?"

Jim was leaning back in the chair, his hair longer now than it had ever been but he had, as was now usual for these meetings, tied it back with an elastic band in a vain attempt to appear business-like. Regular emailed updates from Jonathan were useful but there was nothing better than these face to face meetings despite the forty-eight-hour round trips. But it had been hard to keep Jan motivated and Jim and Jonathan both knew he had become increasingly frustrated by the seemingly never-ending routine of meetings, reports and nine to five. He might have been slowly edging in the right direction but it had been six months since their first meeting and he had, at times, seemed almost ready to give up.

"I still move paper around and attend meetings," he said, dismally. "But I'm starting to see funding bids when they come in and I sit in on policy meetings and I'm starting to rub shoulders with politicians and....." he paused.

"This might not be important but I've now met the DG - that's the Director General - several times - he's rude, he's short tempered, he's.....," he paused yet again. "I don't like him. His manner, his attitude, his commitment - it all seems wrong for the position he's in. His personal assistant - her name is Katrine - told me she doesn't trust him either. Saying that to a work colleague is potential career suicide. She wants to move out. But - anyway - Katrine and I have become friends."

Jim and Jonathan looked at one another. Was something personal being said in a roundabout way? But Jan went on, "I suggested that if Katrine wanted a move then she should ask for one, just like I've been doing and, if she did, could she recommend me to take over from her. Now, things don't happen like that in the system. We have to keep to proper procedure, job advertisements, decisions on internal applicants, vetting, assessing experience, equal opportunities etcetera - you know how it is.

"But Katrine and I had lunch one day and she told me something she thought I should know - that the DG spends most of his time away. He rarely ever attends routine meetings these days. When he does it is usually ones where funding bids are discussed. He has to sign them off so I suppose he has good reason to be there. I think Katrine has suspicions about him. We've not yet talked like that, you understand. If she knew what I was doing with you.....well...I just don't know."

Jim stood up, wandered away a few steps. "How long has he been in the job - this Director General - the DG?" he asked, leaning on the back of Jan's chair, almost whispering into his ear.

"Several years." Jan turned his head to face Jim. "It's unusual. The President himself has discretion on appointments like that and there is a sort of reshuffle occasionally, but it's all a compromise - if you appear to be doing the job OK and are not getting any flak from anywhere you keep your job."

Jim was still crouched behind Jan's chair. "The man you are referring to as the DG is Dirk Eischmann, is it?"

"Yes."

"And he was once in Environmental Policy?"

"Yes, before this job."

Jim returned to his own chair and Jonathan and Jan looked at him, expectantly. "OK," said Jim, "Now you want to know something? Naming this man in the wrong place was what started my troubles. I know all about Dirk Eischmann. He's Austrian. He grew up in Linz. He was a member of Die Grunen - the Green Party. He moved to Vienna. He used to push an anti-corporate, anti-business line until he suddenly started to make money himself. He was made a director of an Austrian renewable energy company. That got taken over by a German company and suddenly Eischmann finds corporate life much more to his liking. He changes.... does a complete U-turn.....joins the Social Democrats....again does well for himself and rises up the ladder of influence outside Austria Then he gets given Environmental Policy - it was his green credentials you see. And that was, co-incidentally, just the time my own business, Smith Technology, started to lose business to unknown

contractors who failed to deliver - I could time it - almost to the month, certainly to the year."

"So, when I started asking myself why we were suddenly losing contracts when we knew all along that we were almost uniquely placed, Dirk Eischman's name cropped up. Let's not say how I knew this for certain now but someone was instrumental in changing technical specifications and a bundle of other conditions that were almost impossible for any business to match. As you know, Jan, it's all done by committee - committees of grey people who know nothing about the technology or the business but are influenced by politicians with their own agendas, by outside lobbying or by other factors.

"Let's be frank. Money talks. Small businesses who do not have resources or influence are deliberately put at a disadvantage - even put out of business - by big corporations with money to buy the influence and the contacts. It's all denied of course and denying is easy because proof is impossible to gather. It's like a big club. The way politicians and bureaucrats move up the ladder is done in exactly the same way - and it starts with parents, upbringing, schooling, wealth. Even those who fight to get somewhere from a so-called working-class background without the silver spoon in their mouths at birth are often spoiled by money and status later - again we can name names - at least, I could."

Jim knew he was already on a roll on a completely different subject now. It was what had got him into trouble before. He took a breath, forced himself back to the subject.

"But, returning to my experience. Instead of Smith Technology winning the contracts as we hoped, unknown start-up companies - and one in particular - started getting the business. Sometimes they still came to us to buy equipment because it wasn't available from anywhere else, but what they bought was just a small fraction of what we would have supplied if we had the contract. So where did the rest of the funding go - the money that was supposed to be for more equipment, training, technical help and so on? That is still the great mystery."

"You reckon he's our man, Jim?" said Jonathan.

"I suspect he is one of them." said Jim. "There are others, but he's been at it for seven years. That's time enough to secure his position and build the security bubble around him. It's probably in several people's interests to keep him there - at the top of the tree. But then, I have a suspicious nature."

CHAPTER 22

Jan had grown to like Katrine Nielsen, Eischmann's assistant, and he was well aware that the feeling was mutual.

They had met socially with other work colleagues around, but soon it became just the two of them, first for a glass of wine after work, then for dinner at a Chinese restaurant. Their third date was Katrine's invitation to Jan to join her at a film club she belonged to. Perhaps she had planned it, perhaps not, but the film was the 1987 classic 'Wall Street', starring Michael Douglas as Gordon Gekko, an unscrupulous corporate raider.

Afterwards, they walked to a noisy, Brussels bar and Jan found himself putting his arm around her shoulders. She had looked up at him in a way he recognised as

encouraging, but it was a Friday night, the bar was busy and crowded. Katrine was a career girl at heart - ambitious, work orientated, serious. They moved out, found a quieter tapas bar and the discussion got far more interesting. Katrine was Danish and they spoke in English. Triggered by the film they had just watched, their shouted discussion in the first bar had been about corporate fraud and why the film had encouraged a lot of young, American graduates to go into banking, financial services and big business. In the quieter Tapas bar, it turned back to work.

Jan was ordering wine at the bar and, while he waited, glanced over to where Katrine was sitting at their corner table. Her short blonde hair was covering her face but he could see she was checking something on her phone. He took the two glasses over and sat down.

"We've now got six bids to assess on Monday," Katrine said, still playing with her phone. If Jan had thought this was going to turn into a romantic evening ending back at his apartment, then it was quite clear he needed to alter his plans or, at least, take things via a different route. "Seven if we include the Bangladesh one," Katrine went on, sipping at her wine without a thank you or even looking up.

"Can't get away from the office even on a Friday night, Kat?" Jan said. He was now calling her Kat as he'd heard some of her other friends do.

"Dirk Eischmann," Katrine said. "He takes it home at weekends and expects everyone else to as well."

"That was Eischmann?"

"Sure. He wanted me to remind him of the value of the bid from Bangladesh that he now wants added to the agenda on Monday."

"And how much is it?"

"Over three and a half million Euros."

"Why's he so interested?"

"Hmm," Katrine said, still looking at her phone.

"What do you mean, hmm?"

"Probably someone in Dacca is lobbying him for a favourable decision."

"Not allowed, that sort of thing, is it?"

"Of course not."

"So why?"

Katrine shrugged, slipped the phone back into her small handbag but said nothing. Instead she took another mouthful of wine and picked at a dish of olives.

"Come on, Kat. Why phone you on a Friday night about something that could wait until Monday? What is it about this guy?" Katrine looked away, sniffed and then sighed, audibly. Still she said nothing. "What is it Kat?"

"Sorry, I think I need to go now."

"Why, we've only just got here. What's up with this guy? He upsets you I can see that. You've told me before you want a move. What's going on?"

The corner of the bar where they were sitting was dimly lit but it was bright enough for Jan to see that Katrine's eyes were watering. She was still holding her wine glass as she looked away, sniffed again, picked a tissue from the table, wiped her nose and then her eyes. Jan's protective instincts took over. He touched the hand that was still holding the glass of wine. "What's going on Kat?"

Katrine took a deep breath and wiped her eyes once again but she didn't move the hand he was holding. "I don't know what to say, Jan, but you know I'm looking for a new job right now."

"Why, Kat? You've got a good job. And if it's Eischmann that troubles you, he can't last forever."

Katrine looked up, the tears disappearing as quickly as they came, but she still didn't move the hand that Jan was holding, tighter now. "Of course, he'll be around," she said. "He likes the job, and he feels secure."

"No-one is secure."

"Hmm. Eischmann is. Eischmann is secure because Dirk Eischmann has friends.....I shouldn't say it, but it's true. You need to realise how things operate here, Jan. Friends get elected. No-one gets voted in or voted out anymore. It keeps the status quo. Competence is old fashioned. A total incompetent can get a job and then stay in it if they've got enough friends. It's networking. It's rubbing shoulders as the Brits say. Dirk Eischmann rubs shoulders. Dirk Eischmann has good friends and Dirk Eischmann may get lobbied by others, but Dirk Eischmann is the biggest lobbyist of all."

Katrine pulled her hand away, the one that Jan had been holding. "I need to go, Jan. Sorry for spoiling the evening but I've had a tough week and tonight's text from that shit arse has ruined my weekend again. Sorry, but even my language is not good tonight."

Jan had no wish to lose this opportunity, in more ways than one. He liked Katrine enough to have taken things a lot further tonight, but the personal challenge he had agreed with Jim and Jonathan was just as strong.

"Listen, Katrine. Please don't go. I've always believed that if something is wrong then you should stay and fight, not run away." He paused briefly, unsure how to continue. "I met someone once who publicly accused Eischmann of fraud and taking bribes," he said, eyeing Katrine. "It was denied of course, but you know Eischmann well enough. Could he be taking bribes, earning commissions or something?"

It was a risk to ask Eischmann's personal assistant, but after weeks of slow, plodding progress, Jan was desperate to move things quicker now and Katrine seemed, by far, the best route. He saw Katrine shrug. "Yes, I remember that - he was a British politician."

"But there seemed to be some strong evidence at the time, but Eischmann is still there. You yourself said he has powerful friends, he rubs shoulders with people, he has money, contacts and he travels a lot and you told me once he visited Italy a lot - Milan I think you told me - not that that may be relevant."

"Exactly - it proves nothing."

"No, but..." Jan paused. Something was building inside him and it needed to come out. "Listen. I hate people like Eischmann, Kat. How can you work with that fucking

slob? His sort are just selfish money grabbing, status-chasing bastards with no thought for the poor people out there who pay their fucking big salaries and pensions - and yet they tout their compassionate, socialist messages all the time. Wasn't Eischmann a green politician once, Kat? Didn't he suddenly change his politics and become a share-holding, fee earning, money grabbing capitalist?" He paused again. "Sorry, Kat. You've got me using bad language now."

Katrine smiled and grabbed Jan's hands that had been thumping the table. "No need to apologise, Jan. Nice to hear you talk honesty. Inside that concrete block over there we are surrounded by fear. Fear to talk, fear to step out of line, fear to criticise, fear to argue, fear of losing our jobs - we're so afraid that we even read messages on our mobile phones on a Friday night knowing full well it's going to spoil our weekends."

"I'm not afraid, Kat. I wouldn't even be afraid to break ranks and go public sometime. I wouldn't hesitate to be a mole - listen, watch, learn what goes on and then..... But I need to get more involved. I'd love your job Kat but I'd prefer you stayed at it and don't give up. Help get me a role on one of the main steering groups or something. And I want to chat to Eischmann - privately - soon."

Jan achieved two objectives in quick succession that night and the following Saturday morning. First - Katrine stayed overnight at his apartment. Second - over breakfast on Saturday morning, Katrine said she would fix it for Jan to meet Dirk Eischmann for a private meeting to discuss a possible job move within the department.

Achieving the third objective began at 9.30am on Monday morning as Katrine sat alongside Dirk Eichmann preparing papers and waiting to start the first meeting of the week. Eichmann was, as usual, getting impatient, looking at his watch.

"We'll be without Alicia this morning, Mr Eichmann," Katrine announced, "Don't forget she moved to Energy Policy last week. It'll leave a gap on the Steering Group"

"Alicia? Alicia? Remind me."

"She normally comes with Pierre. They work in the same office. Alicia Ferrera? Blonde?"

"Oh yes."

"We'll need to replace her quickly with the new allocation of funds and the fresh bids coming in. It's a busy time coming up."

"Anyone in mind?" Eischmann was not showing much interest in the subject of staff but turning over the pages of the Bangladesh flood defences bid."

"Jan Kerkman," Katrine suggested. "He'd be good. You've seen him in action on the Africa group. Outspoken, full of fresh ideas, critical but constructive..... " she paused. "A bit impatient and ambitious but he's learned a lot very quickly."

She glanced at Eischmann out of the corner of her eye. He had stopped turning pages for a moment, listening. "I spoke to him last week," she went on. "He was ready to put an application in there and then but I told him things didn't work like that. There was a process we needed to follow. But he was so keen he was ready to phone you direct. His weakness is he's impatient. He tries cutting too many corners."

"What's his background?"

"He planned to be a stock broker but was made redundant in the financial crisis. He then did a postgraduate course in England. He joined us here as a stop gap and he's still here. It's all in the HR files. But he's very good on IT and finance and we need someone with an eye for discrepancies."

Eischmann continued to flick through the pages of the bid that appeared to interest him more than the others.

"Would you like a chat with him or shall I approach him myself?" she asked, knowing fully aware that what she was suggesting was against procedure. It didn't bother Eischmann.

"I'll chat to him. Get him to call me at 4pm. I've got a meeting at six out of town."

Katrine's short, verbal, curriculum vitae was accurate as far as it went. Jan's father had been a broker in Amsterdam and his postgraduate degree had been in Corporate and International Finance at Durham University in England. Jan and Katrine had agreed he could probably tie Eischmann up into knots with financial jargon once he got talking. And so, he did.

At 4pm he was invited to Eischmann's plush corner office and found the DG sat at his desk in his shirtsleeves, the suit jacket hanging next to a potted fern in the far corner. He did not get up or shake hands, but beckoned Jan to sit in the chair across his desk. "So, Mr Kerkman, you want to progress your career?" He paused, still not looking up. "Why?"

It did not take Jan long to get going, deliberately appearing brash and over-confident, an impatient guy, cynical and critical of the system. He had no worries if he came over as rude or harsh. If Eischmann didn't like it, so be it. But he was sure Eischmann would listen, maybe even take a liking to him.

Eischmann, the wide-framed spectacles on the end of his nose, was still not looking at him but reading something on his desk, but he was listening, taking it all in as Jan went on:

"Sorry to say, Mr Eischmann, but in my opinion the whole systems need tightening up. That's my view anyway. I've looked at some of the procedures and the accountability processes and I see gaps, especially on Economic Development Aid. I'd love to help out. I just wish we all worked on a commission basis here, just like my old career, hah.....I reckon I could save the business a fortune in lost revenue and..... sorry, sir, I didn't mean business as such but you get my point. But it's like a business, isn't it? And there has to be better accountability, otherwise it's more like a game of monopoly using tax payer's money..."

And so, he went on as Eischmann stopped reading and swivelled around in his high-backed chair, facing one of the two wide windows overlooking the boulevard. Jan was still talking, seeing the back of Eischmann's sun-reddened bald head and watching the flash of gold from the cuff links on the long sleeves of his crisp white shirt.

"You're out of place here, Mr Kerkman," he said in his Austrian German accent. "You're wasted. Anyone who suggests being paid on a commission only basis for saving money or spending it more efficiently has got the right approach, but the system won't allow it, you see. You should be in business."

"But I'm sure I'm not the only one willing to work on a commission only basis, Mr Eischmann," Jan continued. "Save a million, earn half of one percent. Stop a million draining out of the system earn another half of one percent. I always liked incentives." He laughed as if he might just be joking but continued. "Find a way to stop funds being wasted or getting into the hands of fraudsters, earn another half of one percent. I'd be a millionaire in a year. As my father used to say, life's too short. You got to make it while you can."

Jan laughed again, deliberately looked at Eischmann as if he might not be joking, but he knew full well that Eischmann was no fool. There was no way the bureaucratic system could ever allow anyone to work on a commission basis. Salaried, pensionable posts were the only way. But that wasn't the point of Jan's humour and by 5.30pm, Jan knew Eischmann was listening and thinking.

"Paying commissions is, of course, impossible, Mr Kerkman, and I think you know that. But there are always other opportunities for those who think outside the box."

Eischmann stood up and went to the large, picture window, looked down into the street below and then repeated the words as if needing to reassure himself that he was making a right decision. "Yes, there are always opportunities. I have a meeting in Eindhoven on Wednesday afternoon. Meet me at the Novotel at 5.30pm. Let's discuss things in more detail. We need individuals like you, Jan - point out weaknesses, identify opportunities. You said you like flexibility. So do I. Just don't tell anyone we've discussed anything, OK?"

CHAPTER 23

It was raining in Milan and Guido didn't like rain, especially heavy, late summer thunderstorms. He had parked the black Mercedes as close to the door of the warehouse as he could but it was still too far to walk or run without getting wet. Every few seconds he looked up at the almost black sky to see if the storm might be passing but, whenever he did, there was a flash of lightening that made him blink, wince and wait for the next crash of thunder. Short, fat, impatient fingers tapped on the steering wheel. Then his mobile phone rang.

"Allo? Yah - of course it's me," he snapped. "You think someone has stolen my phone and is answering my calls?"

There was another flash of lightening, the rain hammering onto the roof of the car and he expected another loud crash of thunder at any second. "Yah, you need to speak up, Toni. I can't hear you. The world is coming to an end. God is throwing his furniture out of the window and my shoes will get wet."

He shifted in his seat, put a podgy hand over one ear to block out the crash of thunder and tried listening to Toni with the phone in his other hand. Then:

"Yah, yah. Stop! Stop! Let us discuss this, Toni. Anything to do with America needs to be taken seriously. The USA is not Nigeria or Pakistan where everyone is expected to play little games. It is not even like Europe where it is so complicated and they are afraid to speak out. No, Toni, in the USA politics and business are linked together and we do not have anyone in place who is reliable enough. In the USA they ask questions about money that goes missing. And let me remind you that we have talked many times about finding a place for American AID in our business. But we are not yet ready. Like all things American this US Agency for International

Development is crazy.....yah, I know Toni, I know it's exciting but you must calm down, my flower. Do not twist your underwear. Guido has a long-term business strategy which must be followed and that strategy was, if you remember from our discussion a year ago, that we would steer clear of USAID until we had made better contacts. So, no, Toni. No, no, no - do you hear me?"

Hail stones now pounded onto the roof of the Mercedes and tiny lumps of melting ice slid down the windscreen. There was another flash, another huge crash and Guido shut his eyes. Wherever Toni was, the weather did not seem to be a factor because the excited voice was still coming through the phone. But suddenly Guido opened his eyes and his mouth, the pink lips formed a perfect circle and he let out an excited squeal like a wounded rat.

"Weeeee! Well done my flower.....yes, I remember him. Silvester was his name, right? Once a New York cop, then a private investigator, right? But not a private investigator but more of an investor. Silvester the investor who met our very own Tahir in Islamabad offering to invest his time on anything to do with USAID. Silvester the imposter who was not in Pakistan representing the US government at all but was in Pakistan representing Silvester the investor. And Silvester the friend of our friend, the Deputy Prime Minister Kabodi who oversees the USAID malaria projects and the other big money. You mean that Silvester?"

The response was clearly yes.

"Weeeee! Yes! Toni. Get him over. We can use him. Buy him a first-class air ticket. Fly him to Paris - no, fly him to London. Book him at the Dorchester, Park Lane. Our expense. Anything."

As Guido stopped talking, the rain also stopped and a patch of bright blue sky showed somewhere over Linate Airport to the east. He gingerly opened the door of the dripping car, thought about taking an umbrella that lay on the rear shelf of the car but, instead, tiptoed his way through puddles towards the warehouse door holding up the bottoms of his trousers. Once inside, he stood, took off his wet shoes and walked in his socks past rows of boxes to the spiral staircase leading up to his office, made straight for the laptop computer, logged on and then onto the USAID website.

There it was, exactly as he remembered:

"USAID Central Africa Regional Program for the Environment." And on another page the sentence he had been reciting to himself almost word for word for over a year. " USAID welcomes individuals and organizations to share their ideas on how we can do development differently. New ideas and innovations for addressing global development challenges can come from anywhere - a start-up entrepreneur, a university research institute, a corporation, or a grassroots community organization."

It had always fitted like a glove and suitable local people were already in place, ready and waiting. The missing part with USAID had always been having the right man on the ground in the USA. Silvester the investor and imposter had always looked a good investment.

CHAPTER 24

Midnight in London and Jonathan Walton had been reminding himself for an hour that he had a home to go to an hour's drive away and a wife who was prone to

get upset if he stayed out late. The later it was the more upset she got. But getting away from the Nigerian, Mr Johnson, was proving difficult. The man had changed dramatically from the vague, uncertain individual of their first phone conversation into a talkative, enthusiastic man with only one real interest in life - fraud.

Jonathan's private thoughts as the Nigerian talked on and on were that, during the preceding hour he had done far too good a job on Mr Johnson. Two minutes of a story, invented as he went along, had seemingly convinced the Nigerian that Walton Associates - or a secretive, somewhat unofficial subsidiary of it that had its registered address somewhere offshore like the Cayman Islands - was the key to successfully defrauding the international development aid system. But it had been his deliberate use of jargon that had been so convincing.

"We'll need to describe frameworks that clearly explain our goals and ambitions," Jonathan had said with all seriousness. "We'll need to demonstrate the economic outcomes and economic drivers.....show the benefits to the community at large.....provide evidence of our past experience of achieving alignments with the overall strategy.... we'll need to demonstrate co-ordinated approaches using cross cutting themes....."

It all smacked of just the sort of public sector bureaucracy that he, Jim Smith and Jan Kerkman had discussed - language written by officials that, it was argued, reduced the likelihood of fraud but only succeeded in making genuinely sophisticated fraud far more difficult to detect. Sophisticated fraud, Jonathan decided, was precisely what Mr Johnson seemed to have in mind.

"And you can do all this, Jon?"

Johnson was smiling enthusiastically at Jonathan's explanation that evidence of delivering other similar projects would be required, but not to worry as a set of falsified company trading accounts and other fictitious or forged pieces of paper were easily the quickest solution. "Of course, that is our business," Jonathan replied, embarrassed but smiling nevertheless.

Mr Johnson - Jacob as he was now required to call him - was still smiling and interrupting throughout. "And we can do all this as well - anything - with your help, of course.....We can ensure many cutting schemes.....The benefits to the community are very clear.....the people can use the facilities....."

"So are you really going to build this energy efficient leisure complex in Sierra Leone? I was under the impression that...."

"Ha, ha, ha.....no, probably not. But it is up to you to help us and together, well.....you know. This is West Africa. We are used to this sort of thing. Ha Ha."

At that point Jonathan had had his knee loudly slapped by the Nigerian who was, it seemed, enthusiastic enough to sign up with Walton Associates before the night was finished. But he was still talking and Jonathan was still looking at his watch.

"So you will deal with the bid, the paperworkthe English are so good at this.....my friends will deal with the local situation.....the letters of support from the Ministry signed by the Minister....that sort of thing....no problem.....the architects plans, the technical things, anything you need to go with the bid.....we will see to that...we are very good at that.....just ask. Yessah, my brother is a close friend to a big chief in Sokoto. The chief has a wife in Sierra Leone - it is his fourth wife but he is willing to help us. His wife, the one from Sierra Leone, is a Minister and she can pull

strings. We may need some cash to start it off just a bit of dash here and there you know..... but my other brother will have a small stake in the project..... my other brother will pay some money to oil the wheels.....we need the bank involved.....but this is also already sorted....the manager is a friend of....."

Jonathan had already lost the plot, but finally Mr Johnson edged his bulk to the back of his chair and sighed. Is that it? Jonathan thought. Has he finished at last? If so, it was his, Jonathan's, turn again and he'd now have to perform even better. Jonathan needed to show he was not a pushover and that the mysterious subsidiary of Walton Associates would not be taken for a ride by a bunch of African rogues. There had to be a show of toughness to suggest there was, despite everything, a need for at least an ounce of respect.

"So," Jonathan said before Johnson had time to start again. "Shall we wrap this up, Mr Johnson - Jacob? I need to get home or my wife will think I've been out in Soho not sat in Gloucester Road....."

He was interrupted almost before he had begun. "Ha, ha. Yes, there will be time for that Jonathan," - his knee was slapped again - "We'll have a good time when it is finished. It is my promise. My girlfriend in Brixton....."

"Yes, of course," Jonathan interrupted, but intrigued by the word promise. "So, to summarise. You will provide me with the details of your consultant in Freetown and the other details I asked for. We have agreed to bid for thirty-five million Euros under the so called EAWA Economic Aid funding which I am familiar with. Don't forget that this must include a written promise of three point five million Euros from your friends in the Ministry to demonstrate the Ministry's own commitment to the project. No money will ever need to be transferred of course - it is just for the paperwork, you understand - to demonstrate the project has received official Government recognition and support."

"Yes, yes, good, good." said Jacob Johnson, smiling broadly.

It was no surprise to Jonathan that he was not asked for details of the fictitious subsidiary that he was proposing to use as part of the fraud, but he was pleased with the name he had invented on the spur of the moment. He might sort that out first thing in the morning but only after he'd slept on the night's events.

"My subsidiary, JWS Projects," Jonathan went on, "will act as your advisers, prepare the bid and deal with all the questions and requests for further information that are bound to arise. They always do. For this, you have agreed to pay JWS Projects two hundred thousand Euros when the bid goes in and a further two hundred thousand Euros when the funds are transferred and are in safe hands in Sierra Leone. These amounts can be added to the total bid - it is quite legitimate to show these sorts of expenses, although we may disguise them a little. Are we both agreed?"

"That is it - exactly. That is it."

Johnson's reply was hardly a sign that official agreements, signed, witnessed and legalised, were to form any part of this relationship but Jonathan let it pass.

It was one thirty by the time he slipped into the warm bed alongside his wife, Claire, and put his cold arm around her. There was no reaction, but Jonathan's mind was on other things. Despite the hour, he was still wide awake. Something had happened tonight that might add another dimension to what Jan Kerkman was already doing

and the idea growing in his mind would need Jan's help. But he also desperately wanted to speak to Jim.

At 5am he could wait no longer. He got up and emailed Jim to suggest another meeting.

CHAPTER 25

It was four fifteen in the afternoon, another meeting was over and another thirty million Euros of funding had been agreed on schedule.

Dirk Eischmann, the Director General, gathered his few papers together and left Committee Room 4/116. As usual, he took the lift to the sixth floor, swiped his security card over a doorway and walked down the carpeted corridor to his office at the far end. And, as always, he dropped the files onto his desk, opened the drawer, took out a fresh bottle of Glen Scotia Scotch whisky, poured himself a glassful, loosened his tie and took his glass to the wide, leather chair in the corner by the potted fern and the coffee table. At 4.35 pm he returned the now empty bottle to the drawer, got up, closed the door of his office and left the building.

By 5.30 pm, he had parked his black BMW in the basement car park of a shopping mall. He took a lift up and made his way to a coffee shop. Casually dressed in jeans and a white tee shirt, and already sipping a cappuccino at a table close to the main concourse, was Jan Kerkman. Eischmann scraped up a metal chair and sat down as Jan wiped froth from his mouth with the back of his hand.

To Jan, Eischmann looked as if he was trying to conceal something that pleased him. He was right. Eischmann spoke first. "Exactly as expected. All agreed except the one for the Sudan. That made sense. The politics there are too fragile."

"Coffee, Mr Eischmann?" asked Jan thinking that perhaps the Bangladesh bid had been approved and that was what pleased Eischmann.

"No."

Jan's first meeting with Eischmann had been at the Eindhoven Novotel a week ago but he had no idea what to expect next. He tried appearing eager to help. "What can I do, sir?"

"Nothing yet. You will meet someone on Sunday who will explain. You can expect a phone call."

Eischmann seemed distracted, on edge. He was glancing furtively around the mall as if was also uncertain about what to say next, but he clearly decided to bite the bullet. "Yes, it was a good afternoon's work - twenty-nine million Euros granted - let's call it thirty million - a drop in the big ocean and no real issues. We will draw you in slowly, bit by bit. There is much for you to learn."

Jan just nodded.

"I'm meeting a Minister from Pakistan tonight," Eischmann continued. "He is here with his Central Bank officials. They seem to think a bit of lobbying might be good for them but I always remind them that bribery and corruption is frowned on. And, anyway, the systems, procedures, checks and balances are so tight it's impossible."

He paused and looked straight into Jan's eyes. "This is just the start," he said seriously. "You will learn much more on Sunday."

With that, he nodded, pushed his chair back and walked away.

CHAPTER 26

Jim's morning headaches troubled him. Sometimes it was like a hangover though, to the best of his knowledge he had, until recently, only ever had around three drink-related headaches in his life. But some mornings, instead of a throbbing head, he felt dizzy and disorientated. Strong coffee usually fixed things especially if he just sat quietly, talking to himself whilst waiting for the caffeine to circulate through his system. But the feeling that something was wrong came soon after he'd return from his latest trip to Amsterdam.

It happened as he was taking his morning shower. The cold water was always a shock to Jim's naked body and, inevitably, caused a sudden intake of air into his lungs, but he regarded regular cold showers as a good ritual, one which his mother would, undoubtedly, have approved. He had dropped the shampoo bottle. It rolled out of sight beneath the plastic curtain of the makeshift cubicle and he had struggled, bending, twisting in the confined space to find it. Soap was already stinging his eyes. "Damn.....where the blazes did that.... go....out of sight."

But the next few seconds or minutes of time were lost. The next thing he remembered was lying on the rough timber floor with water trickling on his head and the torn shower curtain tangled between his bare legs. Strangely, it was the sound of the water and the rustle of the plastic sheet that seemed to revive him from whatever blackout he had had. He remembered trying to unravel the shower curtain, staggering and grasping the blue plastic water pipe to pull himself up. But the two screws holding the pipe to the wooden wall came away and, once more, he found himself on the floor with the water now running not from above but along the floor next to him.

Eventually he struggled to sit upright but his neck felt hot, as though someone had tried to strangle him.

"Bit hot around the collar..... so, to speak..... and, God, the chest feels a bit tight.....must have strained a muscle somewhere.....but can't sit here like this.....got to get on....."

He stood holding the loose, blue pipe in his hand with the water spraying lightly on his feet whilst he steadied himself. The water then stopped running. "Perfectly normal.....was expecting that.....only enough in the tank for one shower at a time."

Leaving the pipe and curtain to be fixed later, he strolled naked into the middle of the room where the bright, morning sun shone through the open doorway leaving dark shadows in corners and showing up hanging strands of grey cobwebs. But he couldn't stand. He felt weak, dizzy and disorientated and so he sat on an upturned bucket holding his throbbing forehead. "Another coffee - that'll do the trick - strong, three spoonful's."

Jim's coffee was always made with Nescafe granules, hot but not boiling water, two spoonful's of damp sugar containing the specks of dead or living ants, the contents of a Carnation Coffee Mate sachet and a thick pouring of similarly branded condensed milk direct from a punctured can. It was good but always tasted the same. Finishing quickly, he put the empty cup on the floor by the upturned bucket

and slowly dressed in his usual pair of underpants, khaki shorts and yesterday's grey tee shirt. Then, still feeling drained of energy, he shuffled to the door.

The direct sunlight almost blinded him and didn't help his throbbing headache and he slumped into the low wicker chair at the top of the steps. For a while he just sat, looking out over his plot of land. A koel called from the trees, a pair of peaceful doves came to scratch around below and tiny blue butterflies flitted amongst the damp grass. But then came the distant sound of a motorcycle, a tractor and a truck, passing on the road beyond the track. He sometimes smelled the school bus a minute or two after it passed. Like everywhere on earth, people and their transport were encroaching. Nature hung on as best it could.

"Another coffee?" he asked himself. "But you need to finish the painting of the grasshopper. Got to get on, there are things to do. And you need to visit Lek's to check email."

Jim struggled to stand up, leaning heavily on the timber support post, then on the door frame. He shuffled inside, but the bright morning sunlight outside now made it difficult to see anything inside, so he switched on one of the two strip lights knowing it would make no difference. All he could see were dark outlines of boxes and reflections off jars of paint. And he still felt weak. It was his legs and arms now. There was something definitely wrong. "Fever? Insect bite? Last night's chicken past it's sell by?"

He groped his way to the far corner where his latest work - the unfinished painting of a grasshopper - was propped against the wall. It was an experiment using several shades of green - the insect several times life size, its square looking head, feelers and eye giving the impression it was watching the painter. "Not bad. One hind leg is too long - and perhaps you need to add a simple flower, a daisy perhaps - white and yellow - good contrast. Bloody headache, though. Legs feeling terribly weak."

He brought the painting outside into the growing shade of the overhanging roof. Around him the trees hung motionless and there would have been total silence but for a few birds and the throaty snarl of the punctual school bus on the road.

He climbed gingerly down the wooden steps and walked the few yards to his toilet - a ramshackle affair of slit bamboo with a sparsely thatched roof, the darkness inside lit only by lines of sunlight shining through the bamboo, but still dark enough for scorpions and spiders. They gathered together around and under a plastic bucket of water and a small plastic bowl that he kept next to the porcelain crouch facility. "Must move the WC soon. Might try behind the house for a change. I'll get some more bamboo. It works well, lets the air circulate."

Five minutes later he emerged feeling just a little better. The throbbing headache had become just a dull pain in his forehead, his breathing was normal but the weakness in his legs was still there. "Crouching, I suppose. Darned knee's hurting now. Did you hear the bone crack?"

He remounted the steps and almost sat on the incomplete grasshopper. "Mmm, go careful - a full day's work almost ruined..... chicken must have been past it's sell-by.....why don't you go to Lek's earlier today? Then you can come back and finish it off? Break the routine a little. Perhaps you'll be more productive later."

Jim continued to mutter quietly to himself but then found himself staring at the mango tree. He couldn't take his eyes off it. His almost incoherent muttering was

about grasshoppers, beetles and blue butterflies, but the tree was distracting him. He leaned forward, looked at it with one eye through his rolled hand once, twice. It didn't look right. "It's the grass around the base and the aerial roots hanging from the tree behind. The balance is gone, at least from this angle. The lower branch needs to come off."

Forgetting the lingering headache and the earlier faint or collapse or whatever it was, he went down the steps again, retrieved an axe that was propped beneath the house and carried it to the tree. It was not a long branch or a thick branch but he could only just reach it and getting the right angle to remove it with a good clean cut was difficult. He struck it - once, twice, three times - he started to sweat and his arm ached. Finally, the branch cracked and splintered. "Damn it." It was not the clean cut he'd wanted and he branch bent and fell to the ground at his feet. He wiped his sweating brow with the back of his arm and bent down to pick it up.

That was when Jim's problem occurred for the second time. He felt a sharp pain in his chest and the same feeling of dizzy disorientation as if he might collapse yet again. The pain was definite. It was across his chest and down one arm.

"Not good.....Christ!.....dear me.....that hurts.....is this it, then, the final calling? Couldn't he make it less painful? Need a..... bloody ambulance....but out here?.....Perhaps I'll thumb a lift.....Christ!"

He couldn't smile. It was impossible. The sweat ran from his forehead, his armpits felt thick and greasy and the wet tee shirt clung to him. He stayed, crouching down, staring wide-eyed at the severed mango tree branch and the axe he'd dropped almost onto his bare feet, feeling the pain, frowning, wincing. He stayed there unmoving, hurting, disorientated, confused, dizzy, not even able to mutter. The coffee of earlier rose into his throat and stayed there, but the chest pain started to subside and his arm felt lighter.

Jim remained crouching down, uncomfortable, his heart pounding irregularly though whether from fear or a definite physical defect he could not tell. Consciously, he decided he would feel more comfortable if he sat down but, because there was not enough energy to stand up first, he fell backwards and turned onto his side to make it easier for the coffee to decide which way it wanted to go. He lay in that ungainly position for several minutes, gradually feeling confident enough to try to sit up again. He did it first going onto his hands and knees and then slowly into a sitting position. Then the mumbling started again.

"Christ!.....what the hell was that?.....a coronary? You need to get to a doctor, old chap.....want them to find a skeleton wearing only a pair of shorts.....when they come to widen the road.....in ten years' time? And what about Jan and Jonathan?"

Jim suddenly felt very old, sick and worried.

"So peaceful here normally.....I hate this sort of disruption.....it upsets the rhythm, the pattern, the routine. Such a damned nuisance.....comes to us all in the end. I feel a bit like the white egret I saw flapping around by the coconut palms last week - disorientated, unsure what was happening to itself - looking a bit untidy - dirty white feathers - its beak opening and shutting, scrabbling to fly but without the energy. Flies were already buzzing when I passed by the next day."

He glanced behind him at the house, the tin roof bathed in bright sunshine, the veranda now in shade, the wicker chair with the grasshopper waiting to be finished.

"Definitely needs a flower, behind its back.... yellow anthers, white petals, like a daisy.....perhaps two flowers....one in full bloom, the other just opening.....need to finish it today.....then tomorrow?.....Start another.....I've not finished yet. So many things to do.

"Need a few more years.....if possible.....after that, well.....so where does it all end?.....I planned to leave things tidy, sorted, accomplished..... I know one job leads to another but what about Jan and Jonathan? That'll never get finished at this rate, mother. Should I just draw a line, say enough is enough. But I've got new responsibilities now besides the old ones.....Jan Kerkman for one.....it was my idea..... yes, he was willing.....but Jon says he's getting cold feet, nervous now.....I can understand that.....he needs some help, mother.....and that's my responsibility.....I need to help."

Jim Smith had never had a day's serious illness in his life. He had lived a busy life, travelled a lot and put his mind and body through a long hard test. Was it, he wondered, starting to break up? He knew that if anyone could see him they would also be worried about him. He struggled further upwards and leaned on the trunk of the mango tree for a few minutes.

Slowly he started to feel better. The pain subsided, the heavy sweating stopped, his heart seemed to revert to its normal pace, he pulled up his shorts that had fallen to an indecent level and then reached into the back pocket. to take out a small, menthol nasal inhaler that had been there for weeks. With no confidence that a popular treatment for a stuffed-up nose was a good enough treatment for a heart attack he leaned on the mango tree, stuck it up each nostril and then into his mouth and inhaled the vapour. Surprisingly, the improvement felt immediate, but he continued to lean for a while, taking in a few more breaths and looking in turn at his bare feet, the axe and the jagged length of tree branch.

A few more puffs and he felt strong enough to walk slowly, stooped, back towards the house. He pulled himself up the steps, feeling drained of energy once more and slumped into the chair wondering what to do or whether to stubbornly ignore it as a warning only - a warning not to overdo things, not to think about travelling to Amsterdam for a while. They were brave thoughts and Jim knew enough about body matters to know he should probably see a doctor. But who and where? He had never had to bother. It had crossed his mind occasionally over the years that the time may come when he would need one.

"Never had a day's illness in my life, mother. Never even took a day off in forty years. Was too darned busy but I put the old torso through a few hard times over the years, heart too I expect. A bit stressful at times.....normal for running a business with responsibilities for staff.....anyone can get mad sometimes, the bureaucracy, the politics, the inefficiencies of others.....but I always took it as part and parcel of the day to day. Now look at me."

He knew his bank was still making regular payments to a health insurance scheme - he had a card somewhere - but he had never made use of it and had not checked the policy for years. Perhaps he should see if it was downloadable. There were a few small clinics in Kanchanaburi - he had seen notices outside buildings in some of the side streets - and there were dentists that advertised themselves with diagrams of molars. The local pharmacies also had dubious looking clinics attached but they were hardly the place to go for a heart problem. He also knew there was a big public

hospital, overcrowded with locals and a smaller, private one somewhere else. But he had no phone and no-one was likely to come to see him because they never did. Suddenly he felt hungry. His stomach groaned; his bowels seemed to shift.

"Ah, good sign.... not much to eat here, though."

He eased himself up and wandered inside the house, still feeling shaky and weak. He was right. There was not much to eat. A bunch of bananas hung on a hook, fruit flies swarming around them, a tin of lychees in syrup, a bunch of red onions hanging on another hook, the coffee ingredients and a plastic sack of rice. Deciding that, if nothing else, he needed to eat something, he decided to take the motorcycle - "not so strenuous just sitting there, holding the handle bars."

He found his wallet and the keys to the bike, shut and bolted the rickety door, climbed down the steps and pulled out the motorcycle from beneath the house. Minutes later he was on the main road, the breeze in his beard and long hair and feeling as if nothing had happened. He stopped at a row of roadside stalls, leaned the motorcycle against a concrete post and went to the shade of some tattered umbrellas above tables laden with fruit. Several locals were sat in the shade of a clump of banana trees and shouted out to him, "Hallo, Jim." Jim only waved. He wasn't up to conversation today.

Instead, he stood and scanned the fruit - green mangoes, bananas, pineapples, rambutan and fresh green coconuts floating in polystyrene boxes of iced water. He bought his favourite, ice-cold coconut, the stall owner expertly hacked off the top with a large knife, stuck in a plastic straw and smiled as she handed it to him. Jim tried to smile back but wasn't sure if she saw it. Inwardly, though, it was as if she were the doctor who had just saved his life. He paid her and went to sit back on the saddle of the bike in the shade to drink the cool, sweet juice. Bliss, except he kept remembering the morning's little problem. It was spoiling his day.

CHAPTER 27

Jan Kerkman had been sitting in his car in a side street in Bruges, Belgium, for more than forty-five minutes.

Patience had never been one of his strongest characteristics and, despite the digital clock behind the steering wheel showing 10.46, he looked at his watch as if there might be a fault with one or the other. Being Sunday and, despite heavy overnight rain, he would have preferred to have been in the gym or on a longer run - perhaps even a half marathon as he had planned. On one side, locals with dogs walked on the wet pavement and on the other side bicycles and cars passed by on the road. As a mild distraction to the increasing boredom, the car radio was on but it was a local channel - family chat, adverts, a phone-in and sweet music. He turned it off and tapped the steering wheel.

As requested, he had driven from Brussels to Bruges and the phone call he had been expecting for forty-six minutes was to confirm a meeting place with someone going by the name of Guido. At 10.52 his mobile phone rang. The voice was sharp and clear, like a church choirboy with a hint of an Italian accent. "Mr Kerkman? Is that you?"

"Yes."

"OK. You will meet me at the Cafe de Oude Hans. It is close to the old church in the centre of Delft."

"But that's in Holland. I am in Bruges."

"Holland? Belgium? Bulgaria? Latvia? We are all one big, borderless community are we not? And, anyway, I thought you were Dutch. You'll be coming home. And what is the problem with a change of venue? I decide meeting places, not you. Are you driving a car or on a Dutch bicycle?"

"I am in my car," Jan admitted.

"So, you will know that Delft is not so far to drive. We will meet at 2 pm. Arrivederci."

Delft in the south of Holland is an old city with a historic centre and canals. It is a pleasant tourist attraction, the birth place of the painter Vermeer and of the famous Delft blue pottery. In some ways it is not unlike Bruges and like many parts of Holland, it has a history of international trade and influence. Delft blue pottery is, itself, a Chinese influence. So, there is little doubt that over the last four hundred years or so Delft has seen its fair share of money-making deals and other transactions within its ancient walls.

Despite his mild protestation about a change of place for his meeting with the Italian, Jan knew Delft well and with the fast motorway heading out of Bruges free of heavy traffic, he was early. He parked outside the city centre and walked over a canal filled with water lilies, past the City Hall and easily spotted the Cafe de Oude Hans. But as it was only 1.30, he walked past and went to lean on some railings overlooking the canal and to smoke a rare cigarette because he felt a little nervous. The sun was now quite warm and it had brought out short skirts and tee shirts and so Kerkman leaned, smoked and watched the passing female talent. He thought about Katrine and wondered what she was doing. Fraternising with staff, especially one so close to Eischmann as Katrine was, was not going to be easy.

And he wasn't looking forward to this meeting. He had only spoken to the man called Guido by phone twice. The first call had been very brief, the second had been the call earlier. What had struck Jan was the man's voice. It was strange - high pitched and clear as a bell, just like that of a boy he used to know at junior school. What was his name? Stefan, that was it. Stefan Scheele. They'd all mocked him, the poor lad, just because his voice took years longer to break than anyone else's.

And Jan knew nothing about Guido except for a brief description given in an impatient tone by Eischmann as they passed on the empty corridor on the sixth floor. Jan felt as if he had overstretched his position and was being petty by asking such an unimportant detail. Perhaps he had been. Certainly, the DG hadn't liked being stopped. It had been a mistake. Jan knew he had to be very, very careful.

"Short....dark suit.... you'll recognise him," Eischmann had said, and then he was gone.

What his family name was Jan was not told. Neither did he know if Guido was just a nick-name. But when he saw a taxi pull up and a short, fat little man in a dark suit climb out, there was little doubt it was him. The Italian stood in the middle of the narrow road looking around. He then spotted the canal and went to look over the same railing that Jan himself was leaning on just ten metres away. Jan watched him nod his head as if in appreciation of the water lilies below and then look around. The Cafe de Oude Hans was right in front of him, its entrance surrounded by colourful

hanging baskets and the pavement area outside laid out with small metal tables and chairs, each table with a Delft blue vase of lavender flowers. Guido nodded his head once again and walked towards it with quick, short steps, his round head with its flat mop of jet-black hair turning rapidly from side to side like that of a small bird.

Jan made a move and as Guido looked up at the hanging flower baskets, he tapped him on the shoulder.

"Guido?"

"Ah, sì, che è in me - that's me. You must be Mr Kerkman."

He looked at Jan - up and down his full six feet three inches from his size 12 black shoes to his short cropped, fair hair. "Mmm, you are very tall and so.....mmm.....bureaucrats are normally so dull."

He held out a short arm and a white hand emerged from the long sleeve of his suit jacket as he continued to gaze up at Jan.

"I'm pleased to meet you." Jan said, feeling self-conscious. He grasped the small hand that was offered and was shocked at how cold and small it felt. The top of Guido's head barely reached Jan's shoulder.

"Nice, nice," Guido said turning his back mid hand-shake and indicating the flowers and tables. "But we are not eating today."

"Then a coffee, perhaps?" said Jan trying to be polite and pointing towards an empty table.

"No, no, no. We will go to my apartment."

"You have an apartment in Delft?"

"Yes. It is small, compact and bijou. But it is enough."

"Have you owned the apartment long?" It was small talk but the answer was unexpected.

Guido giggled in a boyish way. "Yes," he said chirpily, looking at his wrist and a small faced watch circled with clear stones that might have been diamonds, "For twenty minutes. Here is the key. Come."

Jan was led along the side of the canal and then left into a narrow-cobbled street of old, two and three storey buildings, small gift shops of Delft Blue china and a pleasant-smelling bakery. Between the bakery and a gift shop was a shiny, black door with a brass plate bearing numbers of flats above and some security buttons to press.

"My little key," Guido said, holding up the key. "But I must first remember the entry code." He scratched his head with the key and closed his eyes. "Ah, yes." He pressed a few buttons, the door clicked and he pushed it open.

Jan followed as he mounted the carpeted stairs daintily but sideways like a crab. On the first landing, he stopped, turned right and faced a closed door with a brass number 2 above his head height. He inserted the key in the lock and went in.

"Come. It is not large. It is a room only - a pied a terre, a rabbit's burrow, a fox's hole. Ah - no, no, no - it is none of those. It is the den of a small wolf with big teeth that growls but does not howl at night in case it wakes the neighbours. But sometimes, if I sleep here, I might snore." He chuckled like a boy of eight telling jokes.

The single room had a pine, laminate floor and was bare except for a black leather two-seater sofa, two matching arm chairs and a pine coffee table. The blinds on the only window were shut. "Sit," said Guido, clicking on a lamp that hung from the ceiling. "I have a kitchen big enough to make a cup of espresso and a bathroom big enough for cleaning my teeth and a shit."

Jan sank his frame into one of the leather-clad arm chairs, crossed his legs, felt he should say something and said the only thing he could think of. "You will stay here often?"

"Sometimes." Guido stated firmly as he perched on the edge of the other chair. He then leaned back slipped off black loafers and put his short legs up onto the coffee table to expose a pair of pure white, hairless legs above bright yellow socks. Now almost horizontal, he wiggled his toes as if he might prefer to be wearing carpet slippers. He giggled. "It is enough. It is comfortable. It can be an office and a meeting room. Delft, you see, is not Amsterdam and it is not Brussels and it is not Paris or London or Frankfurt or Madrid. Delft is perfect."

He suddenly sat up straight, placed his yellow socked feet side by side on the pine floor, pushed his discarded shoes with the neat leather tassels together and rested his small white hands on his knees. "Now, to business," he said, clearly having finished with any small talk. "The Democratic Republic of Congo."

With a deliberate flourish he produced from the inside pocket of his dark grey suit a tablet phone. He pressed a few buttons.

"Excellent WIFI here.....it was a strict requirement. It means we can begin your education, Mr Kerkman. Yes, the Democratic Republic of Congo - we will call that mysterious and dangerous part of the dark continent the DRC, OK? My tongue is not sufficiently good to say Democratic Republic of Congo in a way our French colonialist cousins prefer. But then I hate the fucking French. Their standards have fallen beyond recognition and their food - their food - yuck! - it is now worse than the English." There was a brief pause during which he sucked at his front teeth before adding, "That is between you and me."

Jan was smiling but feeling increasingly uncomfortable. He put his own hands and fingers together and, because it was a bad habit, cracked a few knuckle joints. Then he moved his head as if a neck hair had caught in his tee shirt. Guido clearly sensed some nervousness. His small eyes now focussed directly on Jan's hands. He squinted, frowned a little.

"Mmm," he said and paused before continuing. "OK. To continue. The DRC. Previous kind gifts to this huge country were fraught with accusations of inefficiency in delivery. Unsurprisingly, local politicians and the President himself seemed the biggest beneficiaries. The poor received very little. This is, of course, most unacceptable. Our job is to find a much fairer way to distribute thirty million Euros. Once we have dealt with that, we can then deal with the next thirty million and so on and so on. That puts a huge responsibility on our small shoulders, don't you agree?"

He stopped abruptly having delivered the last few sentences at the speed of light. "This, of course, is precisely the sort of thing you have expressed an interest in helping with. Is it not?"

"Yes," said Jan., still trying to smile.

Guido giggled, still looking at Jan's nervous hands. "Nice. Nice." Then he stood up and wandered daintily around the chair in his yellow socks, with one hand holding onto the chair back as if he was a final competitor in a game of musical chairs at a children's birthday party. He circled the chair twice and then stopped to briefly examine his finger nails. He bit on one.

"This new project is a good one," he chirped. "It is why I decided to open a special branch office here in Delft. We need to manage it properly to ensure that less funds disappear into the pockets of African despots and their henchmen and more find their way into, what shall we say, more deserving projects. The money has come from generous taxpayers so let us ensure that it is put to better use and that some of it returns."

He circled the chair once more. "We may install a member of staff here for a week or so - long enough to form a company and make a funding bid or two. Then.....we will make it disappear. It is an interesting life."

Chuckling to himself, he sat down on the chair once again and loosened the belt around his waist. Then he let out a long sigh and swiped a stubby finger across the screen of the tablet phone.

"They have such nice websites and many files that, if you so wish, you can download. There is too much of course because they think it will drive innocent browsers into a deep sleep of boredom - a policy which forms the background to much of what they do. Public apathy, you see, helps them to rule. But it is also their subtle way of showing how democratic, open and accountable they are. But you, Mr Kerkman, know all about this. You work there and you see this website every day.

"You will also know that they still use far too much paper - piles of it. There is so much paperwork and bureaucracy, you see. They assume that all their checks and balances and processes plug the leaks in their buckets. But they only succeed in making matters worse. Their buckets are rusty. No-one understands the systems now. Bureaucracy, you see, has superseded democracy. Western politicians are now such weak bastards. They rely on the bureaucrats to avoid the need to make decisions. That way they can wave away mistakes or accusations of incompetence and point fingers at others. But there are so many bureaucrats that their fingers never alight on any one in particular so everyone is perfectly safe from public anger. But I, Guido, know exactly where I will point my finger, Mr Kerkman. But we will come to that.

"And bureaucrats like you, Mr Kerkman. What do fucking bureaucrats do? The bureaucrats rely on consultants. And so, if one looks hard enough, the bureaucrats and the politicians can all be found hiding behind the long skirts of private consultants.

"But first they must pay the consultants huge sums of money to ensure that their recommendations and conclusions do not upset the status quo. The consultants must, you see, only recommend what has already been decided. The politicians want to be re-elected, the bureaucrats want to keep their jobs and the consultants want more business. It is a very simple game when you know the rules.

"So, what do we do, Mr Kerkman? I am sure you are dying to know.

"Well, we are also a type of consultancy but we are not like the rest. We are extreme specialists. We are not rewarded with lucrative contracts. Oh no. We earn our

rewards by staying ahead of the game. But we like bureaucracy. It is the fuel that drives our engine. The more there is, the better it is for us and the faster our engine runs."

Guido paused and Jan watched as he craned his smooth neck backwards as if trying to look at the ceiling. With that apparently failing, his eyes moved up, the tiny pupils disappearing somewhere inside his head, the whites filling the space. Then he lowered his head once more.

"But let us return to why you are here and why you have been allowed out of your stuffy office and into the fresh air. You have been so highly recommended that you are granted the huge privilege of meeting Guido. That's me."

He pointed at himself, beaming. "So, welcome to our little team," he said. "Yes, you are welcome.... welcome." And Jan felt himself scanned once again from his feet to the top of his head.

Guido went on. "To continue. So, the requirements they set for granting funds are subjective and their definitions of what will be accepted and what will not be is also subjective. And the ways they transfer money are archaic. The whole bureaucratic process, Mr Kerkman, is like Milan in January - cold, wet and very foggy. It makes me laugh." And so he did. Another fit of girl-like giggling erupted.

Then, quite suddenly, he looked intense and serious. Jan, increasingly unnerved, watched him as he smoothed the eyebrow over his right eye with his little finger.

"And so let us return to the DRC. Because the processes are so foggy, we will be trying out some new technology. We will introduce a....yah, what shall we call it? Yah, we will call it a virus. We will introduce a virus into their archaic processes. And that is where you come in, Mr Kerkman. I shall be teaching you what to do because it is best done from the inside. Although....." he paused, "Although not for too long. Guido always stays one step ahead so we will soon be able to deal with it from.... from.....anywhere - even from Delft."

Jan had been sitting, trying hard to relax with his long legs apart. But Guido's small, beady eyes deeply inset into his round, pink face began to wander. They started at Jan's feet, moved up his legs, stopped momentarily at his crotch and then went up to his shoulders and arms. Jan felt as if he was being sized up by a bespoke Italian tailor for a suit or, perhaps, by an overconfident woman. Then, to Jan's surprise, Guido got up, leaned across and squeezed his biceps between his thumb and finger.

"Yes, you can take care of yourself. It may be unnecessary but you never know." Then he sat down again. "So, why are you here? Let us discuss that. You already have....."

Suddenly there was a buzzing sound, Guido stopped, put his hand into his jacket pocket and came out with another phone. He squinted at the screen and pressed a button. "Not now Toni, I have a new student." He then stuffed the phone away and leaned back again, his feet on the coffee table, his chin almost embedded in his chest.

"Yah, you already have some experience of the ways of the Commission and the influences you have made and work you have done during the last few months come recommended. Your character references show certain unique talents. As an officer operating inside the system you are in an excellent position to benefit. But you will need some more advanced training. This is my job. Only Guido can teach you. So,

this little place in Delft is not only an office and a meeting place and an occasional sleeping place but it is also a College. But we will not call it the Delft College. Instead, because we teach very special skills and we are quick, skilful and nimble we will call it the Deft College."

He chuckled, sat bolt upright and placed the tablet phone on the table. Rapidly, he swiped a few times and turned the screen around for Jan to see. "You see? A copy of the recent approval of eleven million, one hundred and thirty-eight thousand Euros for Bangladesh. It is like magic, Mr Kerkman."

He turned the screen back to face himself, swiped it again and then returned it for Kerkman to see what had now appeared.

"This is my invention, Mr Kerkman. We know about the awards before the people far away who bid for the money. We can even put in our own bids if we so wish. Then we start work. We are so efficient now. We can track these processes, step by step to Latvia to Bulgaria, to Sierra Leone, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Libya, Ghana, Gaza or a hundred other places that are the lucky recipients of European and American taxpayer's money. But then, just as the money is transferred - bingo! - something even more magical happens. Some of it disappears."

He waved his hand in the air like a magician with a wand. "Puff - the magic dragon, lives here," he giggled, "In Delft."

If it was because he found he could not laugh, Jan would never know. But the Italian's whole demeanour suddenly changed. He stood up and waddled across to the door of the apartment and gripped the door handle. Jan sensing that the meeting might already be over or that Guido was leaving him alone, got up. But Guido stopped. He looked back and beckoned Jan to come to the door leaving only enough space for Jan to squeeze past.

As he did so, Jan looked down onto Guido's round face and rose bud lips, at the strands of straight, greasy black hair that hung across his forehead. How old was Guido? Even at close quarters, Jan could not tell. The skin of his face was smooth, clean, pink and free of wrinkles. Was he forty, fifty, sixty even? But there was no laughter from the Italian now. Instead he looked up at Jan and frowned.

"Mr Kerkman," he said as he opened the door, "A little gift of twenty thousand Euros was transferred into your private bank account today. For Belgian tax reasons and your bank, you may need to invent an explanation for why it is there and where it came from. You have, as yet, done nothing, so it is just a small gift - a token. In the future you can expect a bigger share in our business but you will need to earn it. I understand you like earning commission. Well, you can become very rich by working with us. But, meanwhile, consider your position very carefully."

Guido was staring up, unblinking, at Jan.

"With your sheltered little life as a middle ranking bureaucrat who shuffles paper for a living," he said, "You should know that living in the world outside where one dog eats another dog is more difficult. Survival is hard. So, we will start how we will continue. If you tell anyone about me or this meeting or this place, you will find you and your family are in serious trouble. You will never find Guido because no-one knows Guido. But we will find you.

"We already have a growing international team of what I call 'Members', but along with these Members and others not in our team, you are already implicated. You said

you wanted to earn money. Well, you have already started. But you are already up to your fucking neck in deep mud, Mr Kerkman. So, go very carefully. Tell no-one. Go back to work, do as you are told and wait to be contacted. But show the slightest sign of incompetence or make even the smallest mistake and you are finished. We are undetectable. But upset the system that we have perfected or even be tempted to upset it and you will be made to disappear. No warning given. Understand?"

CHAPTER 28

Jim usually left his motorcycle amongst an untidy row of others near the shops and market where a minibus of tourists sometimes stopped on its way to some poorly maintained archaeological remains - some stone buildings, a crumbling temple and a few skeletons - the town's only tourist attraction. They never stayed long and usually left, looking disappointed, to head back towards Kanchanaburi and the river Kwai. The archaeological site was another of Jim's ideas: "Tidy it up, make people feel as if the visit was worth it," he had told Lek.

There was no bus today but the small market was where he occasionally saw backpackers and might reluctantly engage in short conversations - usually directions to somewhere. He never understood why they sometimes asked more personal questions but he thought it was probably his appearance and voice.

It had been a young, bronzed American girl in shorts and her red-haired Irish friend who had, some months before, convinced him of his appeal to that generation. He had been talking Thai to a man off-loading pineapples from the back of a truck and, as the Irish girl stood shyly in the background, the American asked for directions to a local guesthouse that was mentioned in her travel guide.

"Yes," he told her, "The Pong Phen Guest House. It is located over the bridge, on the left. You can't miss it."

His further explanation had been pure, clear and precise Queen's English and he knew she hadn't been listening, just staring at him - an aging, long haired, hippy-like Englishman hiding behind a beard and heavily tanned and wrinkled skin. She had asked him where he lived, how long he had lived there and what he did. Jim reluctantly gave his usual short explanations, but watched the much shyer Irish girl as she tried to pull her friend away.

Jim, too, had edged away with his plastic bags, a live fish and some vegetables, but the American girl followed and strung together more questions spoken in enthusiastic wonderment as though it was so much better to be living like he was.

"Say, I wish I lived like that. I'm Karen from Boston and this is my friend Katherine. She's from Dublin - Ireland, you know? Boston is so cosmopolitan. You really live in the jungle? What sort of art? Do you exhibit anywhere? Ever get back to England? Did you know the Beatles when you were young? You look real cool. You ever get to bathe out there?"

And, all the time, the attractive Irish girl with the red hair had watched and listened but said nothing.

Jim, remembering this encounter for no good reason but more concerned with the weakness in his legs, propped the motorcycle and walked shakily to an ATM, withdrew some money, stuffed the few notes into the back pocket of his shorts and

walked slowly towards Lek's internet cafe carrying his duffle bag with the laptop over his shoulder. When he got there, it was unusually busy. Lek's wife's speciality of boiled chicken with rice, a thick and spicy ginger sauce and clear chicken soup - kamun gai - was becoming very popular. It was another of Jim's suggestions because he himself liked it, but today, even his corner table was taken. Lek apologised, beckoned to a front table nearer the road and went to get his beer and lime juice.

Jim didn't like this table. He didn't even take out the laptop. Instead he sat resting his head in his hands and muttering to himself. "I won't stay long - try again tomorrow. Such a waste of time carrying the computer. I can't use it here.....far too exposed. I'll go back home, finish the painting.... try again tomorrow.....still feeling dizzy."

Lek brought his drinks. "You say something, Jim?"

Jim looked up, "Only to myself."

And then he saw the thick set man with white skin, wearing white shorts, white tee shirt, white socks and white trainers. It was as if he had arrived straight from a northern European winter. He walked past Lek's cafe, a few yards from Jim, looking around as if unsure where he was going. Then he turned, his uncertainty evaporated. He brushed past Jim's elbow into the cafe but then returned, pulled up a red plastic stool that was too small for his rump and sat at the next table to Jim, just two yards away.

Jim's feeling of over-exposure soared. "Bloody hell." He looked out of the corner of his eye at the man and, as bad luck would have it, the man saw him. He nodded. Jim ignored him. Lek brought a beer for the stranger and stopped to ask Jim if he'd like another beer and lime juice. Jim said yes and waited, staring into the street with the unopened duffel bag between his legs.

The fresh drinks arrived, but because of the unwelcome arrival of the stranger and a sudden desire to go home, Jim swallowed half the bottle in one go feeling the gas rising into his throat. He couldn't help it and his mother would have been disgusted, but he burped. Tears came to his eyes and a mouthful of beer rose in his throat, but he swallowed it again. He remembered that. He also remembered wiping a few drops of beer from his beard, but after that, things were far from clear.

He put the bottle down, checked in his back pocket for some change to pay, slid his chair back and got up. Then the dizziness hit him again - and the pain in his chest. He sat down again, heavily, jarring his spine. He remembered glancing towards the white stranger and their eyes met. He remembered light brown eyes, close together, deeply set and peering sharply at him from beneath a receding line of auburn hair. And he remembered a freckled face with a touch of fresh sunburn on the nose. But then Jim slid from the chair and collapsed for the second time that day. Everything went black.

CHAPTER 29

"It's the American Embassy, Jonathan."

It was an ordinary Wednesday morning when Jonathan took the phone call from the US Embassy in London. He had spent the previous evening at home finalising the draft bid to the European Aid West Africa (EAWA) fund for Jacob Johnson. There

were large gaps that needed filling and no word from Johnson for two weeks. Jonathan, though, was still feeling confident enough with his performance of a few weeks ago to expect the Nigerian to emerge again in the next few days. He wanted to be ready.

"I have the deputy Legal Attaché, Scott Evora, for you Mr Johnson," said the female American accent, "Are you able to take the call?"

Jonathan raised an eyebrow to himself but said yes.

"Mr Walton?"

"Yes."

"Scott Evora, deputy legal attaché, US Embassy. Not sure if you're familiar with the US's worldwide legal attaché offices, Mr Walton, but basically, we're FBI. In my case, we're FBI's office in London. Heard about the FBI?"

"I am aware," said Jonathan.

"Good. Cut to the chase, Mr Walton - Jonathan is it? Been checking your website. Management consultancy specialising in helping businesses bid for grants and international aid. Would I be right?"

"Spot on," said Jonathan.

"Good business, Jonathan?"

"We keep busy."

"Come across any Nigerians in your line?"

Talk about cutting to the chase, thought Jonathan. Was it just a co-incidence?
"Sometimes," he answered.

"Anything shady?"

"Always," joked Jonathan wondering where this was leading. In the brief case at his feet was the draft bid for Jacob Johnson.

"Sure, you bet. Done anything for organisations wanting USAID? United States Aid?"

"No, never," said Jonathan honestly.

"Might they ever cross your path?"

"Certainly, not so far, but I'm fully aware of USAID. Have to be in this business."

"Sure, I understand. West Africa, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Jonathan. Done anything there?"

"Yes, but only using EU aid money."

"Ghana? Sierra Leone?"

"Yes."

"Sound? Honest? Above board? Anything ring alarm bells?"

"Always, but we only help writing the bids, perhaps give some advice on lobbying etcetera. We don't deliver on the ground. If it's fraud you're referring to, then that's where it usually happens - the delivery end." Jonathan tried to laugh.

"Dead right. And not getting any better, huh?"

"We are very selective who we take on," Jonathan added.

"OK, sure you are." There was a brief pause from the man called Scott Evora - a clicking sound as if he was tapping a pen on his teeth. "Now, listen up. It might be useful to meet. Any chance? Get down here to the Embassy, Jonathan? Me take a ride up to you? What do you think?"

"What have you got in mind?"

"Broaden our discussion out a bit. Frankly we need some eyes and ears. Anyone with an eye for fraud, theft or money laundering linked to aid funding would be useful. Sounds like you're just what we're looking for."

"Sure," said Jonathan, suddenly seeing a glimmer of light. If things got more difficult for either himself and especially for Jan, who better than to have a friend from the FBI on board. They agreed. Jonathan invited Scott Evora to visit him on the Friday afternoon.

Meanwhile, Jonathan decided to widen his bedtime reading about aid fraud in the USA. Some of it was well known, other parts less so. Nigerian criminals, he noted, were the most widespread fraudsters. No wonder Evora had mentioned them at the start. They were costing the US alone an estimated one to two billion dollars each year and most of it went undetected or unsolved. There were the arrests and prosecutions like the nearly two million dollars of USAID fraud by two aid workers in Liberia, but it was only a fraction of what was going astray.

The US government was well aware of huge losses that were undermining its aid programmes. As with Europe and as Jim had found through his bitter experience, there was a political culture around foreign aid that stifled criticism or any serious investigations. Meanwhile, millions of dollars were finding their way onto back streets just from money given for anti-malaria drugs. Once granted, USAID was unable to track the money properly and there were hundreds of examples of it being funnelled, mismanaged and used in unintended ways. 'The surprise is that anyone is surprised. Twenty percent of aid is lost. If that happened in the private sector then USAID would have been shut down.' One quote said.

"Yes," thought Jonathan as he yawned and checked the time. "But it's mainly the private sector that's creative enough to invent the new fraud schemes. The private sector will always stay a step ahead - which meant there were probably dozens of people like Jan's new friend Guido out there."

CHAPTER 30

Jim woke up gradually but kept his eyes firmly shut, not wanting to know where he was. His head was the first thing he felt. It hurt. He had fallen backwards, first hit it on his chair and then on the concrete floor. Then he felt his chest. It was as if someone was sitting on his rib cage, and his arm ached. At last he opened his eyes and saw four faces looking down at him. Three were brown, the other was very pale. Beyond the faces, the ceiling fan still turned as if nothing had happened.

Then he felt the pale faced stranger, the red nosed man with the freckles, doing something to his tee shirt, twisting it, trying to loosen it. He felt the man touch his neck with hot, fat fingers and then the same hand went to his wrist. Jim was sweating and uncomfortable, but it was the pain in his chest that worried him. He

could feel his heart beating, or trying to. He could hear it pounding and his ears were throbbing, like earlier that morning. Everything hurt, and he felt so hot and sweaty.

He tried to move, to speak, but the same pink hand with the short ginger hairs and blotches came on to his forehead and pressed him back down. So, he lay there waiting, wincing, sweating and frowning. Then the red tipped nose came closer and the fat lips, inches from his face, said something. "Are you OK, now? To be sure, you just gave me a fright. Just lie there, don't even try to move just now. Take it easy. Sure, you'll be OK."

Through all the dizziness and disorientation, Jim recognised an Irish accent.

The three brown faces still looked down from a much longer way up. One of them was Lek, holding his hand to his mouth. He moved away, then came back. Lek seemed worried about his best customer and business adviser and Jim, through all the discomfort, wondered whether he might have taught Lek too much about quality assurance, profits and investment.

"Just take it easy. Let's put this under your head, OK? Sure, it made a loud thud when it hit the ground. You'll have a mighty bruise there by tomorrow I expect."

Jim did as instructed and something soft was pushed behind his head like the luxury pillow at the hotel in Amsterdam and slowly the rest of the pain started to ease and the world stopped turning round, although the fan above wasn't helping. Meanwhile the Irish one seemed to be giving instructions to Lek because Lek disappeared. He ran and there was a loud clatter as if he too had collided with something. Someone was using a mobile phone though whether to summon medical help or to gather more spectators was not clear. And Jim could do nothing. For the second time that day he felt old, helpless and very vulnerable.

The Irish one fussed a bit more, adjusted whatever softness was now under his head and neck and Jim wanted to speak to say sorry for the inconvenience, that he would be OK in a moment and would be on his way, thank you very much. But he had a feeling that there was a bit more in store for him just yet before he could go back to the peace and comfort of his studio, the house, the veranda and the garden.

So, he closed his eyes, tried to forget where he was and listened to the sounds of the world he thought he might be leaving. He heard incoherent muttering, a motorcycle outside, a tractor chugging past on the road, a dog barking, the ceiling fan's rhythmic squeaking above and then he remembered he had once decided he would like to die lying in a summer meadow in England, surrounded by fresh green grass and buttercups whilst looking up at a blue sky dotted with fluffy white clouds and filled with swifts and swallows. That his passing might happen on a rough concrete floor in Thailand had never occurred to him.

It took twenty minutes for the cream and green ambulance to arrive. By that time a small crowd of fascinated onlookers had formed outside Lek's cafe, some sitting astride motorcycles as if a quick getaway might be necessary. They watched as a brown-skinned, rough-looking, bearded old 'farang' was first attended to on the ground by a young man in some loose green shirt and white trousers and then put on a stretcher and loaded into the vehicle which then sped off, a red light flashing on its roof. They then dispersed, their morbid and short-term interest in witnessing what, for all they knew, may have been the final minutes of suffering of a fellow human being well satisfied.

It was a day later that Jim opened his eyes and started to come to terms with his situation again. His room looked clean, organised, efficient and quiet except for the hum of air conditioning, beeps from machines and the soft, squeaking shoes of staff on a polished floor.

He was wired up to a machine with flashing lights and a plastic tube that ran from a fluid bag above to disappear beneath a dressing on his wrist. An oxygen mask covered his face, but the air was good and cool and he felt relaxed. He also appeared to have been undressed by someone and re-dressed in a sort of blue nightshirt. But the real shock came when a nurse came in, removed the mask and said something to him in Thai. As he raised his only free hand to scratch his face, he discovered that much of his beard had gone. From six inches or more it now felt little more than two. Perhaps it had been necessary but he had lived with it for a long time and the discovery was like waking to an amputation.

It was on the second day, sometime in the afternoon that Jim's visitor arrived.

He had been lying imagining the sunset from the hillside behind his house and, at first, he thought it was the nurse, but it was a much heavier squeaking sound and so he kept his eyes firmly shut.

His visitor saw the closed eyes but also saw them moving behind the lids. He came closer, stopped and waited as Jim opened them, one at a time, and recognised the pink face, large white hands and ginger hair. It was the Irishman, but Jim was still nervous of strangers and had got out of the habit of receiving people he did not know.

"Do you recognise me?" the big, ginger one said coming closer, his accent obvious but the sound quite pleasant on the ear. Jim looked at him, nodded but said nothing. "Jesus, what have they done to the beard? Are you sure it's the same fella?" He smiled but there was no visible response from Jim.

"I hope you don't mind me coming, but for sure you gave me a real fright the other morning. There I was just about to swallow the first of the day and, by Jesus, what did I see out of the corner of my eye but a man collapsing in front of me."

The Irish-ness of the words were almost enough to make Jim smile, but he was not ready for smiling or interaction with a stranger and so he mumbled a "Thank you."

"Not at all." There was a pause. "So, how are you? I called the hospital to check and they told me you were not dead but under observation, whatever that meant. Had a mite of a problem trying to make myself understood on the phone you know, but I managed. You know how it is." He looked down at Jim and frowned. "They said you were on your own, no visitors if you know what I mean. So, I thought, well, the man might need a bit of a hand. They said they thought you were English. Is that right?"

Jim felt mildly touched. He nodded.

"Can I sit down? Do you mind?" The big man pulled up the only chair but then sat at some distance from the bed with his back to the second window. But the brightness from outside meant that Jim only saw a black silhouette. "So, how do you feel? How long did you own the beard?"

Jim turned his head to face the silhouette. "I miss it," he mumbled.

The Irishman then put his head on one side "Jesus," he said. "To be sure you can't see me sitting here. The sun outside is very bright today."

He got up, moved his chair closer to the side of the bed and sat down again. Jim could now see he was about fifty years old, well-built but with a widening middle and probably the same tee shirt and shorts as yesterday. The Irishman folded big arms across his stomach and as their eyes met for the first time, Jim stirred beneath the white sheet and tried easing himself into a more dignified and respectable position to meet a stranger.

"I would like to thank you for whatever it was you did for me. It was an unusual predicament. I don't normally collapse in public."

The Irishman looked at him, noted the accent and shook his head. "Not at all. Lucky, I was around. I'm sure you would have done the same for me. But I'm not sure if the ambulance would have come so quick if I hadn't kicked the bloody barman. It seemed to me he was more interested in watching you gasping for air than doing anything to help."

It was Jim's turn to note something. He'd have a word with Lek sometime about his treatment of sick customers. It was never good for business.

"The name's Tom, Tom Hanrahan. I'm from Dublin."

Jim moved his hand from his face towards the hand that was outstretched and his artist's eye then noticed the colour contrast - dark brown hand against white. And the shape - a sinewy hand against a podgy one, as his mother used to say. "I'm pleased to make your acquaintance," he said and briefly took the hand. Then there was another silence.

"So, what's your name. To be sure you must have one."

"My name is, uh, Jim. I'm not used to welcoming visitors to my bedside."

The words were odd, the voice baritone and clear, the accent straight from popular English films of the fifties and, for some reason, the Duke of Edinburgh sprang to Tom Hanrahan's Irish mind. It was pleasant on the ear for all that and he waited for more. Nothing seemed forthcoming so, to encourage him, he said, "Jim. Well that's good enough for me. Tom and Jim. Doesn't sound as though either of our parents had much imagination but I reckon you can get by without too fancy a name. Did they give you a middle name by any chance? They dubbed me Patrick after my father, so its Tom Pat Hanrahan. Can you do anything better than Pat, Jim?"

"It may interest you to know that I, also, was named after my father."

"And what might that have been, Jim"

"William, so I suppose it's Jim Bill. Nothing imaginative as you've noted."

"So, what are you up to in these parts, Jim?"

Jim was thinking, worried about giving too much away to a stranger. "I live here."

"Yes, I thought as much. The tan is a bit of a giveaway, Jim. I know a few folks who'd pay a fortune for a tan like that - women mostly. They'd even spray it on. And how long have you lived here?"

The small talk was getting too much. "A few years."

"Obviously you like it."

"It has its attractions."

"And what might they be Jim? What do you do with your time?"

"I paint a little."

"You're an artist?"

"I try to be."

"So, what do you paint, Jim?"

"I find natural subjects of most interest."

"Well that's a fine thing. I like to go fishing, myself. Have a friend in Donegal. We often go fishing together. I like the peace and quiet. Nature's a wonderful treatment for the frustrations of modern living, don't you think?"

"Yes, I suppose it is but I must admit to not having had much to do with civilization for a while."

"Ah, you're a wise man for sure you are. So, you're well known in the town so to speak?"

"Well I would hardly say I am well known. Easily recognized is probably a more appropriate expression."

"Ah, yes, the beard must have had a bit to do with that." Tom gave a wide grin to encourage Jim to keep going. He was finding him slightly hard work but he had decided to pay the visit so he thought he'd persevere a while longer. To his surprise, Jim spoke, unprompted.

"The locals seem to regard them as far too hot and perhaps a little unhygienic but of course I make a point of washing every day. I admit to feeling somewhat undressed in its shortened form." That was better, Jim decided. Far more polite and sociable.

"So, when are they letting you out?"

"I am a little uncertain at present. The doctor has advised me to take things easy and I will need to take some medication for a while."

"So, do you live alone, Jim?"

"Yes." Jim said and crept lower beneath the bed sheet.

Tom watched, suddenly unsure about the wisdom in visiting the old man. He, himself, hated intrusion without invitation. Jim had looked like a weather worn tramp in the café and now looked like a sick tramp in blue pyjamas. There was a kind of secrecy about him but the way he spoke suggested a far deeper side. As he watched, Jim nestled down still further and Tom wondered if he was to be left watching a man fall to sleep. He coughed deliberately. "So," he said, "I'll be getting along then. Pleased to see you are OK now. Take care now." He started to get up but Jim stirred and turned his head.

"You need not go just yet," he said quietly and then moved more abruptly as though trying to sit up. "That is unless you have other matters to attend to." Tom saw a look of concern on Jim's face as he was trying to ease himself up. He appeared weak. So, Tom took his arm, the one that was not connected to the tube and helped him into a sitting position. "There you go now," and he pushed two pillows behind his head and sat back down to watch.

For the first time, Jim seemed to say something without being asked. His mouth twitched and his dry, cracked lips opened and shut slightly.

"I am most grateful you know for your help and for coming to visit me - a complete stranger. I didn't expect it." He paused. "I live alone and it can be a little quiet. I don't meet too many folk like yourself."

To Tom, it sounded as if he had been categorized, but that the category was not a bad one and Jim's sentences were getting noticeably longer. "I have a very pleasant home and paint a good deal but conversation is mostly with myself these days. I travel around on my motorcycle and have recently been travelling abroad on business, but I often end up in Lek's internet cafe where I had my unfortunate experience. I believe the doctors would say I do not take adequate care of myself - diet and so on - but I have to say that until a few days ago I had not had a day's sickness in my life."

"Well, for sure you look a lot better than when I saw you on the floor. I must admit to having found myself on the floor of the odd bar on occasions in the past but nothing so serious that required an ambulance." Tom laughed, perhaps a little falsely and it went on too long. But it was a symptom of hope that humour might lubricate the conversation. Jim merely looked at him.

"So, are you visiting the area at present? On holiday perhaps?"

It was Tom's turn to pause as though he, too, was not now sure what to say.

"Yes, yes" he said. "A holiday."

"So why here? Why not Bangkok, Phuket. Pattaya, the beaches, the north. Do you have a special interest in the bridge over the River Kwai in Kanchanaburi? The war graves? Why here?"

"Ah yes, the bridge. I did stop there."

"So, when did you arrive?"

"Ah, two days ago."

"And where are you staying?"

"I think it is called the Pong Phen Guest House. Do you know it?"

"Yes," Jim said and another silence fell,

Tom now tried another tack. "So how old are you, if you'll excuse my impertinence."

"Sixty something"

"Sure, that's not so old. But just to make you feel very old I can tell you I am a mere youngster. I'm only fifty-six." He laughed before continuing. "So, have you no family at all?"

"No," Jim said, "No, not here."

"Did you never marry or anything, Jim?"

"Yes," he replied, "It seems a long time ago."

"Did she pass away, Jim?" Tom's question was blunt but he had his reasons.

"No. Just problems, complications."

"But you got over it, Jim?"

The question was again deeply personal. He pondered on a suitable answer. A thousand events poured through his mind in seconds. He constantly toyed with regrets and was still haunted by the stigma of being finally recognised as an inept failure. Had he got over it?

"Probably not," he replied and his eyes met Tom's.

"Well I must tell you, I lost my wife, Maeve, a year ago. Breast cancer. Doctors failed to spot it quickly enough in my opinion. But what can you bloody do? By then it was too late. For sure I miss her - every single day. Even on the plane I thought how much she would have liked to join me on this trip. But, well, there you go. What can you do?"

Jim was staring at him. "I am sorry. Life can be very depressing, but it is meant to be a struggle. Without daily struggle we are lesser people."

It wasn't much that he had said but, for Tom, it seemed enough for now. "Well I think I must be on my way. I hope I can get a taxi out there."

Jim was still looking at Tom's slightly sad blue eyes with his own, unblinking brown eyes. "Will you come again?" Jim asked. "Tomorrow?"

"Sure, be pleased to. In the afternoon? Would that suit you, Jim?"

"Yes, very well."

"Till tomorrow then," Tom said and held out his hand. Jim took it. There was a single shake and Tom turned and went towards the door. But as he did so, he heard a movement behind him as the bed creaked. He turned. Jim was sat up, no longer supported by the pile of pillows and looking straight at him.

"You're from the press, aren't you? You tracked me down. Deliberately."

CHAPTER 31

Jan Kerkman was pressing the button for the lift when he felt the hand on his shoulder. He turned. It was Dirk Eischmann, "One minute, Jan. Come."

A fear erupted inside Jan's stomach.

"Uh, the EAWA Steering Group is in five minutes, will it take....." he offered.

It was Thursday, 1.50 pm and a meeting of the "EAWA Steering Group" - a group of middle-ranking officers who reviewed funding applications for West Africa - was due to meet at 2pm. Jan's mind, as he felt the hand, had been on what Jonathan had told him the night before. Jonathan's Sierra Leone funding bid for the Nigerian Mr Johnson might soon come the way of the EAWA group and Jan was already pondering on how to use it.

"One minute only," Eischmann said and walked towards an open office door just a few paces away. He beckoned with an impatient nod of his head once more. "Come."

Jan followed him into the committee room, empty except for the usual meetings table and chairs. Eischmann closed the door. "Expect a call," he muttered. "Our Italian friend wants to meet you again. He has an office somewhere that you know about - apparently, you've been there. I know nothing about this but he left a message saying that more tuition has been organised. Do you understand?"

There was a brief pause before Eischmann continued. He was looking at Jan from the corner of his eye. "Our Italian friend will have warned you about confidentiality," he said. "He may well have spelled it out very clearly in his usual style. You will be well advised to heed the warning. OK, you can go." Then he opened the door once more.

Jan, who had said nothing, returned to the lift and was sat in the EAWA Steering Group meeting room before the clock showed 2pm.

He assumed the call from the Italian would come on his private mobile phone - the one known also to Eischmann. He did not expect the summons to come the way it did.

It was 6.30pm and almost dark outside. Jan, with his mobile phone in a back pocket, was on his usual jogging route through the Warandepark, the Parc de Bruxelles, close to the Royal Palace when, in the light from a path-side lamp, he spotted a man on a wooden bench with a dog on a leash.

Seeing a man wearing a white prayer cap and a large, brown Labrador dog on a lead in this park was unusual enough but as Jan got closer, the man suddenly stood up. The dog ran across the track. But the man stood still and the leash stretched right across the track like a finishing line. Unable to go further without either jumping the lead or ducking beneath it, Jan stopped running. The man in poor fitting jeans, a long, dark anorak and curly black hair showing beneath the prayer cap walked up to him. "Pardon, monsieur.....mon chien.....crazy. This for you, monsieur." And with that he pushed a slip of paper into Jan's hand and walked after the dog.

Jan stood, staring after the man as he walked quickly across the grass behind the dog towards the park gates and the brightly lit road. Then he unfolded the slip of paper and read, "Delft 1pm, Domenica." Domenica being Italian for Sunday, Jan was in no doubt that this was the message he had been told to expect. He started walking, the motivation to continue his jog gone, replaced by a feeling of nervous apprehension. More than anything he wanted to talk to Jonathan.

In London, Jonathan also wanted to talk to Jan about Jacob Johnson but they had both agreed at the last meeting with Jim that they needed to be increasingly careful and that included communications with one another. Both used separate mobiles to their normal day to day phones. As Jim had re-enforced during their last meeting in Amsterdam: "Make no mistake, these are powerful people. They already have money and resources but they are out to make even more. Security is what keeps them out of sight. Politics and bribery is what shuts mouths. Threats and fear of repercussions are what keeps people in their place. That is the power they think they have over you."

And then Jim had gone on to explain how they had dealt with him when they felt he was on the verge of blowing the top off of their lucrative business.

"Don't think they are all criminals in the usual sense of the word. Oh no. They depend on ordinary people only interested in holding onto their ordinary jobs by doing ordinary things - things they are told to do day to day. But they'll use anyone - politicians, big and small businesses, the press, PR consultants, magazine and newspaper editors, TV, the radio - they'll pay anyone for a story or a piece of news or a comment to counter suggestions that things are not as clean as they appear. They'll tap phones, they'll record conversations. And if all that doesn't work then they'll bring in the really nasty elements - underworld characters who know nothing of

what is going on but who'll do anything for the promise of big money. I know because it happened to me and if they think I'll come back and start again then they'll target me all over again. That's why I'm staying out of sight for the present. But I'll be back."

Jan had driven back to Brussels from his first meeting with Guido with Jim's words echoing in his ears and Jonathan had lain in bed next to Claire remembering them after his meeting with Jacob Johnson. Now, Jan was remembering the words once again as he walked back to his apartment thinking about another meeting with Guido on Sunday.

"I think we will find they are a sort of modern mafia who have learned to specialise in this form of crime," Jim had said. "There are probably just one or two sat at the top with a structure of lesser fraudsters beneath them, all kept in order by threats, blackmail, bribes and promises of money."

Had he, Jan Kerkman, become one of those lesser fraudsters? Definitely, Jan decided, but in his case, it was deliberate. He'd become a whistle-blower when the time was right.

"Finding those at the top might not be as difficult as we think," Jim had continued, "But they will be protected by a reputation of dignity, professionalism and status that has been deliberately constructed to make any accusations from outside look absurd and totally inconceivable. I tried that accusations route and I failed.

"And I also suspect they are using technology, software, the internet - anything to conceal what they are doing. As for the lesser fraudsters, they want to keep them in charge of the day to day operations because they still need them. They need all the systems to appear to be working normally and efficiently, because they might one day need to explain away the bureaucratic weaknesses they have been ruling over for years, and they'll need plausible excuses for losing vast sums of tax payers money. That is when the complete innocents and the lesser fraudsters will suddenly find fingers being pointed directly at them. They will become the dispensable, sacrificial offerings to muddy the waters and divert attention.

"So be aware, those fraudsters sitting at the top will not look like fraudsters. As they go about their day to day lives, they will look and appear calm and normal because they feel totally untouchable.

"And even if massive fraud was proven, would they automatically lose their jobs, status, pensions? No, not necessarily. Because the entire system is designed to automatically cover up such activity and if it ever came to public enquiries - which is unlikely - they would point fingers at each other and then hide without fear of prosecution behind the complexity of the organisation. Things like that can take years, if ever, to come to Court.

"So, in a way, we will probably show that the whole system is at fault here. Whether we can do anything about it in our own small way I really don't know, but I'm damned sure the millions of hard-working, honest, tax payers out there would support us in anything we do. That is where our strength lies."

After Jim had finished, both Jan and Jonathan understood exactly why Jim had gone into politics after a career in business and for Jonathan, who, until then, was still feeling slightly reluctant to get involved, it had been the turning point. He was in it, up to his neck in it and determined to see it through to whatever conclusion.

In Brussels, still clutching the piece of paper, Jan gave up on his evening jog and walked back to his apartment.

CHAPTER 32

"You are from the press, aren't you? You found me. Deliberately."

Tom Hanrahan had stopped, one foot still inside Jim's room, the other foot already in the corridor. A nurse passed by; another went the other way carrying a bundle of papers. They smiled at him.

"Well?"

Tom turned his head to see Jim sitting bolt upright in the bed looking as if he was about to get out. "Yes," he said, "But....but I'm not the sort of reporter you dislike, Jim."

"And what sort of reporter do I dislike?"

Tom turned fully around to face Jim but remained standing in the doorway. "Those who ruin good men by inventing stories to satisfy a public mood or are paid to find scandal where there is none. Those who wound and then rub salt in just to sell copy. Ones paid to find faults and weaknesses where none exist. Highly paid character assassins, liars, cheats, empty self-publicists, paparazzi..... that sort."

Jim listened intently. He had hardly blinked. "You're using some of my very own words, Mr Hanrahan - words I used when I once spoke to Der Spiegel because I thought they'd like them and might translate well into German. Been checking my life history?"

"Yes."

"And so what sort of reporter are you?"

Tom moved just inside the room. "One who wants to get to the truth. One who once hated what he was being asked to do so much that he gave it all up to run a feckin' paper shop in Dublin.....and still does."

Jim, one arm attached to the drip and monitor, the other dug into the pillow behind to support himself, raised a questioning eyebrow although Tom Hanrahan would not have seen it. Long strands of grey hair covered most of Jim's glistening forehead. "So, what do you want?"

Tom came another step closer, but the door to the corridor was still wide open. "I hated what was going on, Jim. I watched you on TV. I watched your wife give an interview under huge pressure from somewhere. I watched the reporters outside your London flat, stood, huddled, waiting like hungry lions by a waterhole....and I was supposed to be one of them... but I couldn't do it. I refused, got called in, got another disciplinary warning - I was beginning to collect them. But this one, I was told, was my last - official stuff, written down, refusal to obey instructions, employment law crap. I'd already said that what was going on was bloody wrong. I said we needed to find the real story, the story behind the hounding."

"Answer the question, damn you. What do you want?"

"I'd like to help, Jim."

"And what else?"

"I suppose I want a story."

Jim seemed to relax slightly. "Bloody hell. Honesty from a sacked hack. What paper?"

"I told you I don't work for one any longer. I run a feckin' paper shop - sweets, crisps, chewing gum, fizzy drinks, lollypops - high quality stuff for overweight kids." Even from a distance, Tom saw beads of sweat on Jim's forehead. In his condition, this was not a good time for a discussion like this, but he was still shocked by how quickly Jim had cottoned on.

"So how did you know where to find me?"

"Jim, listen to me." Tom edged even closer. "This is the God's truth. It was sheer chance I sat next to you yesterday morning in that bar. You didn't look at all well. Next minute you're on your feckin' back. I didn't plan that, for Jesus' sake."

"I said how did you know where to find me? Are there any more like you on their way?"

Jim coughed and a hand went to his chest. He coughed again and then slumped back onto the pillows, mumbling something. Tom went a few more steps closer wondering whether to call a doctor. He went right up to Jim, bent over him and touched his arm.

"Jim - take it easy, OK? I'm sorry but I was going to tell you. But I didn't even know for certain it was you. Give me a chance. You've changed you know, I hardly recognised you."

Jim turned his head away.

"Listen, Jim. I want to help you. But only if you want me to. You don't know me but I feel I know you. I always admired you. I'll never forget some of the things you used to say - the election, your speeches, interviews, fantastic stuff. I found it so refreshing and I wasn't alone."

Jim turned to face Tom who was now doing something to the duvet cover, drawing it up over his chest with fat hands. His big pink arms with the mass of thick, gingery hair looked enormous. He took a deep breath, his grey eyes blinking, watery, red. His voice was quieter now, sounded weaker. "What speeches? I hardly made any. I didn't get a chance."

"You know what I mean."

Jim shifted, tried to sit up again, failed.

"Hanrahan," he muttered as if remembering something. "Tom Hanrahan. Are you the one who punched that photographer outside my flat?"

"Yeh, sure. You remember that? I had a right brawl with that fucking prick after you left. Never upset a Paddy when he's already mad, OK? It was the start of my own problems. Another warning. Aggressive behaviour towards a colleague. You want to try sitting up again? There you go. You need some more rest, Jim. Why don't I go now? Come again to see you. I'm trying to help, Jim. Believe me. Can I come again tomorrow? Quiet chat. Would you like that?"

Jim looked at the big Irishman. He remembered him now. At the time, he'd actually felt pleased that someone had done what he had been tempted to but daren't. Yes, he had once been grateful to Tom Hanrahan. He looked away and closed his eyes

but behind the lids his mind was racing on everything that was important to him - the unfinished business, Jonathan, Jan, his house, his paintings, his garden - Margaret. Where was she now? What was she doing? Was she well?

But he knew that if he opened his eyes right now, he'd see his predicament - tied to a hospital bed with a needle in his arm, a plastic tube, a drip and a bleeping monitor. And far too close, next to him, was an Irishman whom he could hear breathing heavily through his nose - a press reporter who had been there when he had finally decided to escape from the madness to get away, to think and to decide what to do - three years ago. Three years was a long time to still be trying to resolve the mess he had found himself in. And what had he achieved so far? Nothing yet.

But what had he learned about himself in three years? A lot. That he was just as determined and opinionated as ever, but also a different person - calmer, despite what it may have just appeared - more sensitive, far more aware of his surroundings. He saw many things quite differently. Forgiving those that had tried to destroy him was hard and wrongs still needed to be put right, no-one could argue with that. Perhaps he should at least make a start on forgiveness. Could he not bring himself to trust just one of those who had once pursued him - pursued him merely because it was what he was being paid to do.

A quote suddenly came to him - he had read it somewhere - a saying similar to one about a small ant that he'd told Colin. 'Forgiveness is the fragrance that the violet sheds on the heel that has crushed it.' That was it.

Tom was watching Jim's lips moving. Then his eyes opened, he mumbled something and turned his head. "Mark Twain I think it was." Then a pause. "Just tell me something, Mr Hanrahan. With the whole world to choose from, how did you know to come to this particular, far flung outpost?"

"My daughter, Katherine," Tom said without hesitation. "She was on a gap year, travelling with an American friend of hers. Pure chance again. She recognised you and told me when she got home. She knew I liked you. I told her not to tell anyone. But I couldn't do anything at the time. My wife, Maeve, was sick - cancer you know.... I'll get the nurse for you, Jim. You just lie there. Rest. Take it easy. Then, for sure you'll be up and running around in no time. I'll come back tomorrow. Would that be OK with you?"

"Yes," Jim said. "I think so."

CHAPTER 33

"Delft 1pm, Domenica."

Jan, with the small slip of paper on the front passenger seat, parked in the same place in Delft as last time. It was only 12.30, overcast with a light rain keeping the road and walkways damp, but the car park was full and the city busy with bicycles, families, shoppers, day trippers and sightseers. Normality was all around him. He sat in the car until 12.45 and then walked towards the canal, past the Cafe de Oude Hans - this time with posies of damp looking carnations on the wet tables - left into the narrow-cobbled street to the bakery and the gift shop and stood outside the glossy, black painted door. He checked the brass plate of shiny buttons, pressed number 2 and waited. Nothing happened.

He pressed it again and stood with his ear to the grid in case he had missed hearing something but still there was nothing.

In light coloured chinos, a blue shirt and navy-blue jacket and, wondering what to do, Jan stood in front of the cluttered window of the gift shop next door and, barely without thinking, looked at his own reflection. But what he also saw, standing close behind him, was a familiar shape - that of a small, squat man in a white shirt and dark suit. But before he could turn, he was prodded in the middle of his back with something hard and sharp.

Jan turned. Guido was standing there, smiling broadly, his pale, moon-like face looking up at him with a flowery umbrella, its shiny stiletto tip now pointing straight at Jan's forehead.

"Mr Kerkman. We meet again. A cool and rainy day, but I've brought some flowers with me," he said, indicating the umbrella covered in giant red poppies that sparkled with a scattering of rain drops. He folded the umbrella, shook off drips of water and then pointed it straight at Jan's head again. "You have come to Guido's special Sunday School for innocent children. Did you remember to bring your bible? Your hymn books? Your colouring books? Your box of crayons?"

Jan tried smiling and held out his hand but Guido merely pushed the spike of the umbrella at it. "Let us go in. The lesson is already prepared."

Jan followed as Guido went up the stairs - sideways, as before, like a crab. At the door of Flat 2, he stopped, unlocked it, pushed it open and beckoned for Jan to enter ahead of him. "Go in, go in."

Jan stepped into the room and then heard the door shut behind him. Guido was on the outside. Already nervous, Jan found himself in the same room as before but it had been transformed by a wide TV screen that filled half of the wall next to vertical blinds that covered the window. An open laptop computer sat on the small coffee table, but, immediately, the wide, wall screen lit up and Guido's round, smiling face appeared.

"Mr Kerkman. Do not look so nervous," the high-pitched, boyish voice said. "Please take a seat so that you can use the keyboard of the computer on the table. Your training course will now begin."

Guido's face, with the beady eyes looking directly at him, stayed on the big screen. "Press 'enter'."

Jan sat down, pressed 'Enter' and waited. In front of him and also on the wall screen was the first page that Jan saw every morning on the computer in his office - with one notable exception. It was the page he saw after he'd keyed in his password.

"Does it look familiar?" The boyish voice asked from somewhere. Jan was unsure whether to speak or not, after all it was an empty room. "I said, is it familiar? Have you lost your tongue?"

"Yes," said Jan.

"Go into the file covering the recent award of 12,480,000 Euros to Romania for its regional development programme. The internal reference number is EDPEU 36A.

Jan knew the file well. It took him less than ten seconds.

"Now, go into the section concerning payments. And, please, Mr Kerkman, at each command from me just say 'yes' or 'no', will you? For one thing, it helps me to know whether you are still alive in there."

"Yes," said Jan.

"Now," Guido chirped, "As you know, because it is your job to know, this section gives details of where payments are to be made once funding is approved.....Yes?"

"Yes," said Jan.

"Graci. Now, find the bank details of the Romanian consultancy company that submitted the bid."

Jan was puzzled. "Ah, it is not shown. We never show it."

"Well done, Mr Kerkman. I was just testing you. Instead, go into the section showing who will receive the funding once it is approved and where the funding is to be sent."

"Yes."

"Now. This is the clever part, Mr Kerkman. Listen carefully. Click on where it shows the name of the bank."

"Yes."

"What do you see?"

"The request for the code. But I do not have the code. It is confidential."

"And why is it confidential?"

"Because..... because it can only be done by a special instruction to the bank from the Treasury. It is all encrypted - security checks before transfers of funds are finally authorised."

"Correct. But you see, it is not secure because we have created a special authorisation code, Mr Kerkman. Listen to me very carefully. Key into the laptop exactly what will now appear on the big screen."

Looking up, Jan saw @ (j k) 2112 \$ kerkman in large font size on the big screen. He keyed it in on the laptop. But what the hell was going on. Why was his name shown?

"Have you done that? Not a single dot missed?"

"Yes."

"Press enter and now what do you see?"

"My private bank account details - everything - name, bank code, account number."

"Yes, you see it is a very clever system, Mr Kerkman. But now it becomes even more clever. You can now enter your private bank account, which, as we can see, is with ABN AMRO in Utrecht. Do this by clicking on the box that says 'transfer to this account', Mr Kerkman. There is no need for numbers and codes and such like because this is Guido's express service. OK click now.....click now.....very good.....Now you will see another little box on the right. Do you see it?"

"Yes."

"What does it say?"

"Amount."

"Correct. Now key in the amount of 12,480 Euros. That is good. Well done....."
There was a slight pause.

"Aha," Guido giggled. "You see? My little friend 'Puff the Magic Dragon' has performed a magic trick again. Congratulations. It has worked. You, Mr Kerkman, are now richer to the sum of 12,480 Euros. You have just earned yourself an exact but small percentage of the Romanian Regional Development Fund. It is so simple. Yes? Soon you will be even richer. It is a good system, yes? The important thing is to remember your key code: @ (j k) 2112 \$ kerkman. Are you there, Mr Kerkman."

"Yes," said Jan, thankful he was not expected to say anything more. He was speechless. Instead, he continued to stare at the screen as it automatically flicked through some unrecognisable pages until.....suddenly, he found himself looking at his ABN AMRO online account page as if he had just logged on in the normal, secure way from home. But he had not. He had just bypassed everything and, what was more, he could see that his account balance had just increased by 12.480 Euros.

The big screen suddenly went blank but Guido's voice came from somewhere inside it.

"Mr Kerkman. Guido's Special Sunday School is now finished - nearly. Are you still there?"

"Yes."

"Now listen very carefully to me. This is our new system - I call it 'Puff' because it is magic and it makes money disappear like a puff of smoke.

"But we have another system called 'Slush' that replaces what has been taken out electronically. It makes things look as if nothing has happened. It is not your job to understand the workings of 'Puff' or 'Slush' so I will not bore you with the technical wizardry. Neither will I explain to you how the accounts finally get cooked to avoid having to explain mysterious losses and discrepancies which, even under normal circumstances, can amount to many millions of Dollars or Euros. These are often picked up by the auditors as we know but the auditors are, of course, ignored by our leaders because everything is too embarrassing for them to have to explain.

"Your job, Mr Kerkman, is to make friends with Puff. But do not think you can type in your key code and transfer more money to your account every time you are short of cash. We can turn Puff on and we can turn Puff off - on and off - just as we wish. If someone logs on without permission then.....woosh.....what is it the English say? A ton of bricks will fall on their head. Your job is to use Puff to transfer money to whoever and wherever Guido says. Understand? New versions of Puff and Slush have just been re-launched but without a fanfare of trumpets of the sort that Mr Gates used to use."

Jan had felt cold and damp on arrival. He was now feeling hot, sticky and very nervous. He was being spoken to by a screen and yet the man himself was probably sat outside somewhere, presumably with his own computer. But the deeply troubling scenario was the fraud he had just perpetrated by pressing a few keys on the laptop. The other concern was the scale of what was possible and what he was involved with. Just as Jim had suggested, it was technology that was making this possible.

But he was also sure that at any minute, Guido would start the threats and blackmail. He was right.

"Now, Mr Kerkman. Like any good bank Puff needs security when it hands out money. Your 12,480 Euros is not a free gift, Mr Kerkman. If necessary - but only if it becomes necessary - documents will be drawn up to show you have only borrowed this money from a Zurich finance company and are due to repay it at the normal bank lending rates plus seventeen percent. By tomorrow you will owe Puff in Zurich 250 Euros in setting up charges alone. But you do not need to worry about paying this at present.

"You will pay it off by co-operating with Guido and our other Members and adding to your credit score. Oh, it is such good fun once you become used to it, but it is easy to become addicted. To be addicted is not good. And it is also very difficult to explain to anyone how it works. But no-one will because we are all beneficiaries. And, anyway, our Members have influence. Some of them have great power as well as influence, Mr Kerkman.

"But provided you are a very good boy and do not tell tales or do anything that contravenes the conditions I warned about the last time you were here, Puff will, one day, remove all traces of a loan - in a puff, so to say - and you will retain your accumulated credit. Do you follow me? Some people are now very wealthy, Mr Kerkman. One or two are multi-millionaires.....Now, do you understand all that I have told you?.....I'm waiting."

"Yes."

"Good. Now, let us put the financial conditions to one side for the moment and discuss private matters. It is quite obvious that you must not talk about this to anyone. Not even Mr Eischmann, do you understand? Mr Eischmann is a very senior Member of the club. He has no wish to know details of what you do or what you will be told to do. He is a busy man and does not have time to concern himself with day to day officialdom. But he will call on you sometimes with his own code that is similar to yours. You will then do as you are told - won't you? Won't you?"

"Yes."

"And one other thing....." Guido's boyish voice from the blank screen paused. "This is very important but I hate discussing matters of a sexual nature. I find the subject quite distasteful. It is not human to do things like that. It is much more suited to pigs and dogs, don't you think? But rumour has it that you have had, what shall we say, an intimate relationship with another member of staff. This is very bad practice particularly as the lady concerned is so highly thought of. Katrine is a very nice lady and very innocent. She does not belong to the club but we want her to stay in her position for as long as possible, so do not upset her, Mr Kerkman. Leave her alone, OK? She must not leave. She must not know anything. If she does, then.....well, accidents happen to all of us. Puff has very long arms, much longer than mine."

What followed was a short but chilling giggle. And then: "You can leave now, Mr Kerkman. Look on this as an exciting, once in a lifetime opportunity and wait for more instructions."

Jan, sweating and bewildered by what was happening continued to sit. All he had said throughout was "yes", but there were a hundred questions and he really had no

wish to be involved. He took a deep breath. "I have some questions. Who should I ask?"

"Meee," came the shrill answer. "You ask meee. But not now. I am too busy."

"So how, when?"

"The same way you received the notice to attend your training course."

Jan thought for a moment. "It was a man with a dog."

"Yes, the man with the dog is a local celebrity near where you work, Mr Kerkman. You are not the only one who has met him, you know. You have been given a very special and important job but there are others who receive just small tokens of appreciation now and again. Ibrahim is a refugee from Somalia. He is blind and so we supplied him with his dog as his eyes. That is our charitable nature but, also, he cannot see who he is meeting. But have pity on Ibrahim, Mr Kerkman. Everyone needs to earn their daily bread in different ways. Ibrahim is a messenger. He gives and he takes. Trust him. Now, I must depart. I have important things to attend to. The door is open. Switch off the lights before you leave, please."

CHAPTER 34

"Well, do you look at that - the first time I've seen you in a vertical position."

Jim's clean, blue pyjamas contrasted starkly with the brown, stick-like arms protruding from the short sleeves. He was sitting in a chair next to his bed, when Tom Hanrahan arrived the following afternoon but pushed himself up, walked the two steps to take the outstretched hand and tried to smile. "Good afternoon. The doctor said I should stay for another day. Unless I have another experience similar to the one at Lek's cafe then there is no reason to detain me, but I need to take some medication daily."

Jim returned to his chair and Tom sat on the other side of the bed in a white tee shirt with 'O'Sullivan's' emblazoned in green across the front. "I brought you this," he said handing over a paper bag. "But don't tell the doctor."

Jim looked inside and pulled out a bottle of Irish whisky. "Thank you."

"From the airport and to remind myself of my local back home."

"And where, precisely, is home?" Jim asked.

What followed was Tom's family history, where he lived, three grown up children living away and the death a year ago of his wife, Maeve. It ended with a phrase Jim decided he would always remember. "Life can be a bloody depressing way to spend your time.....you know what I mean, Jim?"

Jim had nodded. "Life is not supposed to be easy. You only get one go at it, it's not a rehearsal, there's no script and circumstances play odd tricks."

A nurse brought iced lemon tea and the conversation edged forward until Tom asked: "So what will you do when you get out of here, Jim?"

"More to the point, what will you do? Write your story?"

"There is no story. I found you. Nothing more to be said."

"Hmm. That's utter nonsense. I suspect your dismissal had nothing to do with a refusal to obey instructions or striking a fellow reporter, Tom Hanrahan. You were probably dismissed for total incompetence. Of course, there's a story. There's always a story for a good reporter. You could even invent one - others would. A few quotes, a few misquotes, a nice description of my swarthy looks, say you found me so drunk somewhere that I admitted who I was and that I was running a brothel in Bangkok. Use your imagination for goodness sake. Photograph me and do a nice Photoshop retouch showing me in the clutches of a Thai bar girl. You can't lose. You could do it. You've got a decent way with the spoken word if not the written one."

"That's just it, Jim. I can't. I need to report truth - no frills, no opinions, just facts. I started out wanting to do investigative reporting but never got the chance."

"Then start now. There's one hell of a story I can give you. What's more it's unfolding as we speak - which reminds me to check my emails - urgently. I should have been doing that two days ago at Lek's cafe but some blighter had taken my corner table and I wasn't feeling quite myself that morning."

Tom raised his grey to auburn eyebrows and saw something in Jim's eyes - alertness, hardness, intensity, seriousness. Jim Smith was on to something. The bit was still gripped firmly between his teeth, held fast by the same utter determination that had always characterised him. So, what was he up to? Appearances apart, he hadn't changed much. He watched Jim's lean form get up and walk slowly across the room in the blue pyjamas. At the window he looked out onto the hospital grounds.

"I intend to return to England," he said with his back to Tom. "At least, for a while. There are things I need to sort out and other matters that are coming to a head. And...." he stopped himself. "Let's walk outside. The garden looks good and it's cooler now."

They walked along a stretch of corridor and through a double glass door leading onto a stone courtyard and then a lawn. For several minutes, Jim sauntered around talking quietly, almost incoherently. Tom followed, trying to hear but increasingly aware that Jim was actually talking to himself. Behind a clump of Manila palms, was an ornamental pond with water lilies. The water shimmered in the low, early evening sun. Jim, barefoot, sat down, crossed his legs and put his hands together in his lap. Tom also sat down, clumsily, his legs, feet and white trainers outstretched before him. The red water lily flowers were closing up.

"I must paint them " Jim nodded.

"You paint, Jim?"

"A little." he frowned and squeezed his eyelids together. Time, he felt, was running out. He wanted his youth back again. Big ambitions were behind him, but he had no wish to stop now just because he was getting older. It was the unfinished business. It was becoming urgent, taking far too long. And he had no wish to take medication every day for the rest of his life. Thoughts of Margaret then. Margaret liked gardens.

Tom watched Jim's moving lips and his closed eyes that flickered from point to point as if he was seeing things in his mind. His hair was a mess - long and straggling. His brown body, clad in the blue pyjamas, looked thin, undernourished, like a prisoner from a concentration camp. He had changed - physically if not facially - since Tom had last seen him. But for the long hair and beard, he was almost unrecognisable. But it was definitely the same Jim, and Tom knew why he had come. Somewhere, he

had the feeling that the man might appreciate a chance to chat, to talk openly. But there had been no sign of this or even a desire to glance at him when he had walked into the cafe. Jim had deliberately ignored him and possibly even hated him for the intrusion into his space. It was in the cafe that he had first seen Jim's lips moving, talking to himself. He had watched him fidgeting as though he had remembered something urgent that he had to do. But then he had suddenly stood up, tottered and collapsed. But, as soon as Jim had fallen, he, himself, had rushed over driven not by the feeling that it might lead to some form of rapport or even a good story but by a feeling of respect and compassion.

"Shall we go back now?" Jim broke the silence and stood up. Easily, Tom thought, as he himself struggled to unbend stiff legs.

"Jim," Tom said, holding onto Jim's thin, sinewy arm. "Excuse me for asking but did you never find yourself a new woman out here because I get the feeling you live alone. Sure, 'tis a grand place for a romantic soul like yourself."

"Is that what I am? A romantic soul?"

"Sure, it is. I see it in your eyes. You see beauty and colour and you say you're an artist. It's a fine talent to have but don't you feel a need for someone to share it with?"

Jim looked away, conscious that the question struck surprisingly close to what he had just been thinking, but he kept walking. "I left a woman behind in England," he said.

"Sure, you could start again."

"Look at me, Tom. What woman in her right mind would even want to be seen talking to, let alone living with, a man like me - wearing blue pyjamas as well."

"Some women would appreciate the man inside the pyjamas, Jim."

"Mmm, Perhaps the man inside is as much of a mess as the man outside."

"I don't think so. In fact, I'm damned sure that's complete and utter nonsense if you don't mind me saying so."

Jim was breathing hard, his chest heaving.

"So, when was the last liaison with a woman then Jim?"

"Are you interviewing me, you Irish rascal?" There was a pause. "During a short-lived but intense relationship with Tiger beer. I woke up one morning and there she was. I was in the middle of sorting out certain, private matters but we were together off and on for four long months. For me it was an intense and highly enlightening time. I learned a lot about life, about living, about myself. I discovered a side to my own character that had been completely hidden. I suppose I learned the basis of pure Buddhism, Buddhism without the painted concrete images and the gaudy temples that sometimes reminds me too much of the Catholic church. I have always been frugal and money has never meant much to me other than as a measure of commercial acumen. So, having sorted out my main financial commitments back in England I learned how to live from day to day on a shoestring of a budget.

In fact, I bought the house I now live in, and the small plot of surrounding land, to give to her and her young daughter Oy who was just three at the time we met. Noy

was thirty-six. I was sixty something and a lot better looking and fitter than I am now. It seems such a long time ago."

"So, what happened, Jim?"

"I saw them off on a bus going to Kanchanaburi to see Noy's parents. I waved them goodbye through the bus window. They both smiled and waved back at me. It was raining heavily. There was a terrible road accident and they were both killed." Jim sniffed. "So there, my Irish friend, you have another long, true, interesting and ultimately heart-rending story that I could elaborate on. Neither would it need any of the fabrication you apparently detest."

Then he walked away, still breathing heavily.

CHAPTER 35

"I have no idea where he is."

It was late evening and Jan had phoned Jonathan to check if Jim had been in touch. Jan had felt increasingly nervous since his Sunday experience in Delft but they had both known there would be risks. It was the scale and sophistication and now the direct involvement that was worrying Jan. And the solution and a way of extricating himself seemed further away than ever.

Jan wanted to talk, but Jonathan was sitting, for the first time for a week, trying to watch TV with Claire. Claire was listening intently to Jonathan's side of the conversation.

"I see now that Guido's Puff and Slush schemes are just the ingenious mechanisms to hack into sites, extract and move money and then hide the gaps in the accounts that that generates," Jan was saying. "It's very clever. But I'm in this up to my neck now, Jon. Jesus knows how I'm going to get out of it. Even if I run, report it somewhere and ask for some sort of protection I genuinely fear for my parents, my sister, for Katrine. This Italian guy Guido is sinister. He makes me nervous just hearing his voice. I wake up at night thinking I can hear him. Who is he? Where is he? Is he the top man or just the technical brains? Is he part of a bigger organisation? And where does Eischmann fit into this? Is Eischmann just on the take or is he a ringleader, as high up the chain or higher than Guido?"

"Puff and Slush are the mechanisms - the technology side that Jim used to talk about," replied Jonathan hoping that Claire would rapidly lose the plot and, with it, her interest. "But the organisation itself has infiltrated companies, charities, government departments - organisations that can legitimately bid for funds - to influence them and divert funds to whoever they decide? A charity leader, a government official, a politician, a Minister, a President."

Jan agreed. "And it makes sense to go a step further and set up fictitious bodies specifically to bid for funds - targeting pots of money already ring-fenced, earmarked for humanitarian aid, economic support, social projects, healthcare, education. That, we know, is what Jim believes because he had the personal experience. They could be pocketing billions. But I think even Jim would be taken aback by Puff and Slush."

In Thailand, Jim had just made a crucial decision.

"I would like to invite you to my house, Tom. There are things I'd like to discuss."

Tom had imagined a modern dwelling, a bungalow perhaps, on the outskirts of Kanchanaburi - two or three bedrooms, en-suite, a kitchen, flower beds, a lawn. He did not expect the bike ride to take almost an hour. They stopped twice - once to buy iced coconut, the second time to buy clear soup, sausages, rice and a meat and chilli dish from a roadside stall - all packed into clear plastic bags tied with elastic bands. By the time Jim suddenly turned off down a dirt track and announced "We're here," the sun was sinking behind trees and the distant hills.

Tom's concerns then rose.

In one corner of a small, grassy clearing liberally scattered with shrubs, a forlorn banana tree and a small patch of dry looking vegetables, was a rough looking wooden structure built about a meter or so above the ground. A few wooden steps led to a platform partly sheltered by an overhanging corrugated roof. "Home," Jim announced cheerfully as he dismounted.

So started Tom's night at Jim's house. Where he imagined it might be in the suburbs, it was on the edge of the jungle, surrounded by night-time insect and other noises. When he thought it would be modern, it was old, wooden and ramshackle. If he thought he might get offered a beer, he got rainwater from a huge clay pot and he was wrong when he thought he might get a bed and bathroom if he stayed the night. But it had electricity - a bare light bulb dangled above the wooden steps and a strip light hung by a cable inside. And it had a small refrigerator, albeit empty but for a few cartons of soya milk and a yellowing cabbage.

As Jim busied himself outside in the deepening gloom, Tom looked inside. It smelled smoky, dusty. The strip light showed a piece of grey netting hanging by strings from the ceiling in one dark corner, wooden shelves holding jars, cups and paint brushes, a cupboard with a few clothes hanging inside and a pile of stacked cardboard boxes some tied with string. In the fourth corner was a bundle of plastic sheeting and a blue plastic pipe with a shower spray attachment lying across the floor.

They ate the contents of the plastic bags on Jim's veranda and nothing was said for a while. Eventually, Tom felt he needed to say something. "Well, Jim, I must say, this is a fine place for getting away from it all. You don't appear to have any neighbours to bother you."

Jim nodded. "You are thinking I must be mad to live here, is that right?"

"For sure, it had crossed my mind."

"But you don't ask me."

"OK. I ask you now, Jim. Why the bloody hell are you living in this place, miles from anywhere? I know why you left the UK, but why stay here. It's very - what shall I say? - basic." Tom flapped away another large, flying insect.

"There, perhaps, is part of your story, Tom."

The darkness was making it difficult for Tom to see Jim's face. He was sat, cross-legged, staring out into the chirping, croaking blackness, sipping occasionally from a plastic mug of water. "Then tell me the story, Jim. If I don't like what I am hearing, I'll stop listening."

"Would you like a drop of the Irish whisky with the water?"

"Good idea. I'll open it."

"Go ahead. And if you need to empty your bladder at any time, use the undergrowth. There is a toilet of sorts over there," Jim pointed. "I have a torch but you'd need to be familiar with the positioning of the hole. I would also warn you about the scorpions, not to mention the frogs, which are probably using the same facility at this time of night. Don't, for goodness sake, use my art studio by the mango tree, but feel free to utilise the area by the two banana trees, instead.....I think I will if you won't."

As Tom started on the whisky in the flickering candlelight, Jim got up, clambered front first down the steps and disappeared into the blackness. When he returned he began talking from the bottom of the steps with his elbows on the platform where Tom was sitting.

"We're beginning to make progress in proving what I accused certain people of doing three years ago - corruption, fraud, that sort of thing. Fraudulent use of international aid on the scale I described is rife."

Tom tried seeing Jim's face as he continued. "In Europe they will want to deny it. Accusations of that sort, especially with evidence, are not compatible with their need to conceal the truth from the people, you see. There is a massive democratic deficit. But there is a story developing. Do you want it?"

Tom, shocked by the change of topic, gulped down another half cupful of water mixed with Irish whisky. "Sure. It would be interesting." It didn't sound convincing but he was barely concentrating. Something was biting his neck.

"I need to show that the accusations I made about fraud and corruption are true - with evidence this time."

"So, you've got the evidence, now? If I recall that's why they got a bit mad with you at the time."

"It's coming together."

"Enough to raise the matter all over again?"

There was a definite pause of uncertainty from the darkness as a yellow candle that Jim had lit flickered in a breeze that had suddenly picked up. The flame almost went out, but it was enough for Tom to see Jim's teeth and strands of his long grey hair flapping in the breeze. "I hope so," he muttered.

"Enough to warrant going back? You'd need to be sure this time, Jim."

"Yes, I know. I understand the risks. But I need to go back. There is work to be done to prove what I said and I need to clear my name. I need to show that what I said was right, that I was right to speak out, that I'm not an incompetent fool and that it was worth electing me for speaking my mind, my experience in business, my honesty."

The breeze became fresher, stronger and Tom heard what he thought was a rumble of distant thunder. "Would anyone listen to you?" he asked.

"We'd need something to get them to sit up and take notice."

"Like what?"

A flash of distant lightening brightened the sky, Jim's so-called garden and his face. A long, rumble of thunder followed from somewhere behind the house and a few

large spots of rain fell on the tin roof above Tom's head. The trees rustled and a clump of tall bamboo to his left creaked and swayed. But it was as if Jim had seen or heard nothing.

"As well as pursuing my case," he went on, "I will lecture on materialism, discuss the merits of Buddhism in a Godless society, speak on issues that the Church is afraid to discuss - death, family values, self-dependency, population control, individual responsibility....."

Tom was considering how much interest these subjects might attract and was grateful for another long flash of lightening followed by a deafening crash of thunder that seemed to split the sky.

"I think I will join you up there," Jim said. "It will rain now - heavily, perhaps for ten or fifteen minutes. But, first, excuse me while I move the guttering around to fill the second pot. Rainwater is so much nicer to drink."

As Jim disappeared once again into the darkness Tom filled his cup having now resigned himself to staying the night. The whisky was good but it was making him feel a little lightheaded and he still felt a sort of responsibility for Jim's health. The man had only just come out of hospital yet he was behaving as if nothing had happened.

Jim reappeared as the rain began falling in torrents. Another flash, another loud crack of thunder, the lightening already showing up puddles and water streaming off the roof onto the ground below, driven by a breeze that had become a cool wind. As water splashed onto his feet, Tom got up holding onto his cup of water and whisky and made for the door that had swung half shut. Behind him, Jim settled into a crouching position with his back to the wall of the house out of reach of the water falling from the overhanging roof. The struggling flame on the orange candle only just hung onto the wick.

Tom made for the far corner next to the boxes feeling drops of water falling on his head from nail holes in the roof. Another flash outside, another crack of thunder.

The boxes were loosely covered in plastic bags and a small pool of rainwater had already formed on the top one. Above it, on a wooden shelf, sat rows of small jars containing paint brushes, different colour paints and dirty water. A square, plywood, sheet, stained with paint and with bulldog clips fastened along the top, was propped against the back wall. Tom stood, looking around but not daring to touch. But as more water dripped onto the top box, he opened it and drew out a flat, plastic bag containing what looked like sheets of thick paper. Pulling out the top sheet, he carried it towards the strip light, held it up and stared at it.

At first, he thought it was a large colour photograph or print. He felt it. The surface was rough, and at the edges he could see smudges of colour. He strained to look at it. If it was a painting, then, to his untrained eye, it was brilliant. He turned it around trying to detect imperfections but the nearer to the light he got, the more perfect it looked. It was like a colour portrait taken by a skilled photographer - a second in time caught with absolute perfection.

It showed a smiling young, oriental woman with just the top of her bare breasts exposed. She was kneeling down and leaning forward, trying to get closer as though she wanted or expected to be kissed. Her smile was perfect, her eyes dark, wide and full of life. Her hair was long, black and fell in a dense curve over one shoulder. But it

was what Tom could see within that flowing, dark hair that made the picture an absolute masterpiece of artistry. A young girl's face, mischievously but purposely forcing itself into the picture, her face a perfect, miniature version of the young woman. Her black eyes smiled and looked directly at him like her mother's, but their appearance suggested they might at any moment look away, perhaps up towards her mother either for a hug or a reprimand. The child's own jet-black hair merged with her mother's but the straight, short fringe of black hair was painted to perfection. Tom stared at it.

He had admired photographs and paintings over the years but nothing had had the same effect on him as this. "Incredible," he mumbled it to himself, "It's brilliant."

Tom continued to look at it, turning it around, still barely able to believe that he was not looking at a photograph. But this was better than any photograph he had ever seen. Another flash of lightening pierced the interior. The rain was heavy, noisy on the tin roof above his head. He took another sheet out, holding it up to the light again. The paper, this time, was dark, perhaps green - he could not tell in the poor light - but the centre of the paper was dominated by an orchid, purple and mauve with a yellow centre and mottled with irregular patches of purple and white. The light green stem was bent in such a way that it showed one other orchid, a less mature one just showing signs of opening, tucked away behind the main flower as if seeking the same opportunity to participate as the child in the first picture. As he stared at it, the heavy rain stopped, the next crash of thunder was further away, the lightening just a prolonged, flickering flash.

"Brilliant," he said aloud, but a voice behind him made him jump.

"Not so brilliant." Jim said. He was standing just inside the doorway, silhouetted by another flash of lightening.

"Jesus, you made me jump. I hope you don't mind me looking at these."

Jim turned, moved away, said nothing. Tom replaced the paper in the bag, put the bag back in the box and covered it with plastic sheeting. Then he went to the door. "The rain was dripping onto the boxes," he said. "I'm not an expert, but what I saw looks very, very good. The one of the mother and child is incredible, Jim. You should take more care."

"Why bother?"

"Because they are good, Jim."

"Who says they are good?"

"I say. I am not an expert but I think they are good."

"So, what did you see and what brought you to that profoundly unprofessional conclusion?"

"The mother and daughter, the orchids. I just liked them. It's not a professional opinion - just a personal one."

"Noy and Oy," Jim said, "Painted from memory about a year ago. The orchid, on the other hand, grows up there." He pointed into the darkness.

"Has no-one else seen them, Jim?"

"No."

"You should take more care of them."

"Why? Give me a good reason."

Tom thought for a while. "Because, if I had a rare talent like that, which unfortunately God has not blessed me with, then I think other people should be able to see it, to appreciate it, to respect it."

"And what good would that do?"

"If I felt that I had absolutely nothing else to offer, other than a talent as an artist, then I would want to finish my life feeling that I had at least been able to contribute something, however small."

There was just the briefest pause. "You are not answering my question. My question was what good would it do?"

"But I am answering your question, Jim. You ask me what good it will do? Well, whatever else, if it does me some good by showing people what I had done, however small, then it would be good for me. Sometimes you have to be selfish. Do things for yourself not others."

"And if they mocked it, denigrated it, drew cartoons depicting a self-possessed, publicity seeking old man devoid of talent?"

"If it's good enough there will always be praise from those that recognise true talent. Where has your confidence gone, Jim? Stone age cave paintings done with one finger are simple. Are they not respected? And, anyway, if you were a talentless, self-possessed, publicity-seeking old fool then you'd be joining a very large club, Jim. You'd be lost in the crowd."

Tom saw him nod and perhaps he smiled, but Tom took advantage. "If you are really serious about getting people to sit up and take notice of you and what you believe in, then I suggest you show them what you've been doing while you've been away. If I like your art, Jim, I'm sure others will too."

"The world has changed," Tom went on. "There have been too many mediocre, talentless politicians over the last few years for people to sit up and cheer yet another one spouting off about something they are not the slightest bit interested in. No longer do they bother to listen to fine words from a man or woman in a suit with a party rosette stuck in their button hole. But if there is something interesting and visual to look at - something to take their minds off the stupid old fart's rhetoric - then they might actually also start to listen to the words being spoken - especially if those words strike a chord with people. And especially if they think they're getting a raw deal while others selfishly exploit the system. People still like politicians who stand out from the rest. But it's all about presentation. Have you ever considered that perhaps presentation was your biggest weakness, Jim?"

Jim looked at the Irishman stooped inside the low doorway to his house - his first ever visitor. "Mmm," he said, apparently considering Tom's words. Then he nodded again. "Then, if you liked just two, I'll show you a hundred or so more in the morning," he said. "The first public viewing of the work of an unknown artist. How about that?"

"For sure, I'd be very honoured, Jim."

"Then I suggest you get some sleep. You can bed down anywhere. I think I'll stay here. But I suppose I'd better take my medication. Doctor's orders must be obeyed."

CHAPTER 36

"Mr Evora has arrived, Jonathan."

Jonathan had never met a FBI agent before, but Scott Evora was a perfect match to his preconception of one - a six foot, thick-necked, fair-haired and muscular man who looked as if he spent most of his spare time working out in a gym somewhere. Probably, Jonathan decided, they had one at the Embassy. Formalities over, cups of black coffee served by Sarah and Jonathan decided he'd try out Evora's method and cut to the chase.

"So, how can we help?"

"We need some eyes and ears, Jonathan. These are difficult times for ordinary US citizens with ever rising costs of living, unemployment, cuts to services - you got it here in the UK. I watch the BBC news. And American taxpayers especially hate the thought of their hard-earned taxes going into the pockets of a bunch of already wealthy despots in Africa and elsewhere. US politicians are getting their ears burned so we get ours burned. There's pressure to be stricter, to track down villains, bring them to justice. Some argue to stop aid altogether, but it's fucking politics isn't it - handing out aid is supposed to win friends and influence people."

"So, what are you looking for?"

"First off. Tell me about your business. How long have you been going?"

Jonathan stood up. "Twelve years. But come, see for yourself. I'll introduce you to some of the staff. No problem."

A walk around tour Walton Associate's office could have taken all of three minutes. Handshakes with six staff - David, Lizzie, Carol, Mark, Steve and one receptionist cum PA, Sarah - but it took an hour. Jonathan showed him bids they'd submitted, a wall map showing flags with the bigger projects in Bangladesh, Pakistan, Bulgaria, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Libya.

They stopped to look at Carol's computer screen where she was using a template to write a bid for some money for the UK - a rural economy project. Scott Evora just followed Jonathan around, shook hands, nodded and listened. Then they returned to Jonathan's office and sat in the two arm chairs across the coffee table. As Scott Evora took over again, Jonathan filled the coffee cups.

"We just stopped a racket in Pakistan, Jonathan. Twenty million dollars for Christ's sake. Awarded for an educational project near Islamabad. Money's gone. Vanished. Where? Fuck knows. We got a couple of local guys but just can't nail their US partner. There must be one somewhere, but in Islamabad they clam up, shrug, say they know nothing. Trouble is they're probably right. We can't put our finger on the top local guys.

"We also just sentenced a US sub-contractor for four years for issuing false invoices. And you will have heard about the \$295 million contract with the Afghan Ministry of Public Health. Money came from USAID. But where did a lot of that \$295 million go? Fucking Taliban and Islamic extremists of course. We think some went to Iran, some

just disappeared into local pockets. The rest? God knows. And why don't we know? Because there aren't any proper controls that's why. We just hand it over with smiles on our face and hope it'll be spent wisely. Hope doesn't work, Jonathan. We just gotta get tougher."

Evora stopped, took a gulp of his coffee. Then, without moving his eyes from the bottom of his cup: "You ever dealt with USAID, Jonathan?"

"No, never," Jonathan said, remembering that Evora had asked him that before. Was Walton Associates suspected of something? "We leave anything to do with USAID to American consultants or contractors," he added.

Evora nodded, seemingly believing what Jonathan had said. He looked up from his cup.

"But that's why we need the feedback, the snippets of intelligence that come the way of businesses like yours on this side of the pond. We especially need to know one hell of a lot more about the contractors involved, the agents, the sub agents, the consultants. We need to start spot checks. Walk into their offices off the street. But first we need to know who to spot check. It's a moving target. They come, they go. They appear, they disappear - deliberately of course. A few names crop up, then they crop up again somewhere else and then they disappear. And how many fucking people do you know called Mohamed? We need stricter controls but the bureaucracy is bad enough already."

Evora was sitting back, totally relaxed in the arm chair, his long legs spread wide, the half empty coffee cup hovering in his hand over the arm of the chair. He took a deep breath.

"Now." he paused. "What, in your opinion, is the UK government doing, Jonathan? What is the EU doing? Are they concerned? The outward signs are they don't care a fuck. Am I right? But from what I understand, the figures are just the same as the US's - massive losses, huge discrepancies. Don't taxpayers over here care? Why don't they say something? Don't your politicians get it in the neck like ours do? Why give billions of dollars in aid for the teeming millions of poor in Africa, the Middle East and Asia only to find some tin pot dictator or despot has just stolen it? Why not spend the billions at home on your own poor - after all, it is these very same home-grown poor who have paid the tax in the first place? That's what US citizens are asking.

"You've been in the business a while, Jonathan, you must have your opinions and suspicions?" he concluded.

Jonathan sighed, seriously wondering whether to say 'just look what had happened to Jim Smith'. And then, of course, there was Jan, sat at his desk behind a computer right at the heart of the system. Should he even mention the mysterious Guido or the suspicion that the system itself tolerated, wittingly or not, the antics of top bureaucrats like Dirk Eischmann.

And there was another worry. Did Evora suspect that Walton Associates might, itself, be involved somewhere? Had Evora come with another agenda? If so, he needed to proceed very carefully. Did the FBI already know about Jacob Johnson, for instance? Were they so on the ball that Johnson was being watched? If so then was Walton Associates also being watched. He stood up, wandered over to the window and

looked down into the car park where he could see what he thought must be Evora's car - a Ford Mondeo - parked next to his.

"Yes," he said still looking down. "We have a lot of suspicions and so we are, as I mentioned earlier, very selective who we work for. But you are right, Scott, the international aid business - if we can call it that - is huge, it is massive, it is bureaucratic, the world is a very big place and the money handed out is vast. But the attitude seems to be that you have to allow for discrepancies - twenty percent is a figure that often gets mentioned - because it's just not practical to tighten things up enough to stop it. It's probably a lot more than twenty percent but can you imagine a private business accepting even a twenty percent loss?"

"No fucking way they would," Evora said. "So, they turn a blind eye, is that what you're saying?"

"Yes." Jonathan hesitated, enough to be noticed. "They turn a blind eye, but there's more to it than that." He walked back to the coffee table. "Because if someone suggests something's wrong, that huge losses are unacceptable and that massive international fraud and political corruption is suspected, they close ranks." Jonathan hesitated again but then went for it.

"I remember," he said, "A few years back. A UK politician, Jim Smith, asked questions in Parliament. In fact, he even went as far as to make allegations, named names. Unfortunately, it didn't do him a lot of good. You should check it out - a good man was Jim Smith."

"What happened?"

"He was hounded out."

"So, who the fuck did he name? The Prime Minister?"

"Perhaps you should ask him."

"Where is he now?"

"He went abroad."

"Where?"

"I don't know," said Jonathan honestly. "But I suggest you do a bit of research on the trouble Jim Smith encountered. The only thing he managed to prove was that it's not at all clever to point fingers at, and ask questions about, certain people in power."

Scott Evora sat forward. "It sounds to me, Jonathan, that what you're saying is that over here the corruption begins closer to home. Would I be right?"

Jonathan nodded. "Yes, I think you can say that."

"Jesus. Listen. Thanks Jonathan." Evora had apparently heard enough. He stood up, held out his big hand. "You've been a real big help. Can we stay in touch? You've got my card. Anything crop up you just call me, OK? Anything - suspicions, evidence that'll stand up - anything. It's the US side that the FBI is tasked with but I suspect we might find some cross-over somewhere. And what was that English politician's name again?"

"Jim Smith."

"Jim Smith. That's easy enough to remember. I'll check him out."

"Yes," thought Jonathan, "But you'll draw a complete blank from the day Jim boarded that plane to wherever he went."

For the first time for weeks, Jonathan began to think there might, just might, be a way forward here. If they needed a law enforcement agency to sit up and take an interest, why not the FBI. For now, he desperately needed to talk to Jim.

CHAPTER 37

Tom was grateful for the whisky he'd drunk. He'd found a cushion lying near the boxes of paintings, lain down on the bone-hard, wooden floor and slept.

It was still dark when he awoke so, hearing nothing outside, he crept to the door. The big yellow candle was still alight, flickering but steady, but Jim was nowhere to be seen. He switched the strip light on inside and checked to make sure Jim hadn't crept in during the night, but there was nothing, not even inside the net curtain in the corner which, he assumed, was Jim's usual sleeping quarters. He checked his watch. It was five thirty and just a faint light was showing over the distant hills. Feeling a little nervous, Tom went back outside and sat in the chair, the air cool but still full of buzzing and chirping from the ground and the trees. A bird was calling from somewhere.

"Where the bloody hell is he?..... Jesus, I see why Jim talks to himself. I've started already."

He found his trainers, went down the steps and then reached up and by touch only, found the torch. He shone it around Jim's so-called garden and spotted a bamboo hut which he assumed was the toilet. "But I suppose I can piss anywhere."

Standing at the bottom of the steps, Tom pissed. It was just as he finished that he heard the motorcycle. He hadn't thought to look to see if it was there. A beam of light shone through the trees and Jim appeared. He drove up to the wooden steps and stopped.

"Early start, Tom. Breakfast. We've a lot to do today." He pushed the motorcycle up against a timber support and went up the steps, carrying more plastic bags. "The food stall a mile or so down the road opens well before dawn."

"That early, Jim? Christ it's still night-time."

"Nonsense, it's nearly six o'clock and a good time to work. It's cooler. I always get a lot done before eight," he said, emptying the contents of the plastic bags into dishes in the light from the candle.

Tom returned to the wicker chair. Jim sat cross-legged on the floor spooning rice and soup into his mouth. "Did you take your medication, Jim?"

"No, not yet. Later. I was thinking during the night and have made some decisions. I am going to England. I need to check my email and book a flight. But first I would like you to view my paintings and decide which ones to take with us."

"Us?" thought Tom as Jim stood up, wobbled on his feet and grasped the upright holding the roof. Tom jumped, ready to support him. "Are you sure you're up to all that, Jim?"

"Of course," Jim said, "Ageing and sickness is inevitable. Youthful vitality diminishes with age. Our eyesight deteriorates, our hearing fails, we are exhausted more easily.

Even our intellect is less sharp and our memories fade. Make hay while the sun shines. Loneliness deepens in old age as we start to understand our mortality. But death comes to us all. We come with nothing; we go with nothing. But we should not fear death and we should never regret our past life. Never. That is why I want to go home - at least for a while. There are things I need to do, things I need to say, wrongs that need to be put right. Do you understand?"

"Yes - I suppose so," said Tom, realising that Jim was on a roll, talking as if he had a far larger audience than one.

"None of us are immortal, Tom. At the end, money is nothing, possessions are unimportant. Yes, leaving loved ones to cope alone is painful. But what is important is to leave your mark on them so that they remember you with happiness and understanding. When we die, our body decays or is cremated. A dead human body is just an empty shell. It is useless and mindless. It was, in any case, just a temporary, organised, coming together of molecules. Accept it. Believe it. Live in accordance with it. The atoms, the molecules, are all recycled. Nothing is actually lost. Everything is, once more, re-organised, reshaped into other things. It is our thoughts, our opinions, our contribution and our actions that live on."

"Mmm," said Tom, scraping his dish and drinking from the cup of rainwater that Jim had placed before him as if it was freshly squeezed orange juice.

"What do you think, Tom? Do you sit and think? Do you ponder on such things? Do you worry about money, possessions, whether you have a big house, a fridge, a car, a TV? And those who already have all these things - what do you suppose they want? A bigger house, a better car, a newer TV, more and more money? Why? What for? Do they ever ask themselves what is really important? Do you, Tom? What is important to you?"

Tom had no need to think.

"Maeve was important to me and....."

Jim immediately interrupted him. "No, Tom. Maeve IS important to you. Do not forget that. Please continue," he said, spooning rice into his mouth.

"Yes, but she is no longer with me although I still feel she is. Even on the plane out here, I was thinking about her, how much she would have enjoyed the trip. She'd have sat beside me with her arm tucked around mine just looking down on the clouds. I know. I seemed to feel her. And when I go home? She's not there, but she is. Do you understand?"

"Of course. There we have it, Tom. Maeve still lives. She lives in your heart. Keep her there. She is still around here somewhere." And Jim, still chewing noisily on his breakfast, waved his arms towards the trees and the distant hills where the sky was getting brighter by the minute.

"What was her favourite colour, Tom?"

"Pink, I suppose."

"Then look over there beyond the hills. What colour is the sky?"

"It's pink," Tom said.

"Then show her, Tom. In your heart, quietly, to yourself, tell her to look over there and then just sit still for a moment and remember her - while I wash the dishes."

CHAPTER 38

Deputy Legal Attache, FBI agent Scott Evora, had only been gone an hour when:

"It's Mr Johnson for you, Jonathan."

"It's just as well he didn't phone an hour ago," thought Jonathan. "Good afternoon, Jacob," he said aloud.

"Good afternoon, Jon. It is so pleasant to hear your voice again. Have you, uh.....?"

"Yes, all is in hand. Everything is in my brief case right here. But I'm still waiting for certain documents from you."

"Yes, that is why I am calling you. I now have them. They arrived by courier this morning. It is efficient, eh?"

"Yes, very good. And the, uh, Minister's signature on the, uh.....?"

"Yes."

"The confirmation of the ten percent contribution from the Ministry?"

"Yes."

"Excellent. Then it shouldn't take long for me to complete everything. Will you send them to me or.....?"

"You will need the originals or will copies do?"

"We will need to submit originals with the bid but, of course, we will keep copies."

"Ah, so we must meet. I will hand them over in person."

They agreed. 7pm, same venue as last time. "And there's one more thing." Johnson added. "We....we have another project. This one is in the Middle East. My Lebanese associates."

"I see. Can I assume you will also want to discuss that this evening?"

"That is very good of you."

This time, Jacob Johnson was waiting when Jonathan arrived just before 7pm. Documents handed over, quick clarification of next steps done and it was obvious that Johnson was keen to move on to his new project.

"Ah, we have another company now. It is called Cherry Pick Investments," he began. "My Lebanese partners asked for our advice concerning a funding bid. Naturally I was able to tell them that we have a new partner - of course that is you, Jonathan - and we advised them to utilise your very detailed knowledge of these things. Of course, I did not mention your name. That is not the way to retain strict confidences. But I told them we were already at an advanced stage in one big project."

"I would hardly call it an advanced stage, Jacob, but never mind, these things take time. I would say we are making good progress."

"Yes, that is what I told them."

"So, Cherry Pick Investments?"

"Yes, that is it. There is, ah, in the Middle East that is - an organisation that supports young people who want to see a peaceful outcome to the problems in the Middle East."

"I see. What is it called?"

"Ah yes, let me see." Johnson fumbled in the inside pocket of his oversized suit and pulled out a wallet, a passport, a dirty credit card and a torn off scrap of paper. He laid it all on the coffee table besides their empty cups. "Yes, it is here. It is called the, uh, Coalition for Arab Youth. It is also called CAY."

"CAY - that would be an acronym," said Jonathan.

"Yes, that is it, a.....yes."

"And CAY needs funding, is that it?"

"Yes, but it is our Lebanese friends who want the funds."

"Of course, how stupid of me. So, what do you want me to do?"

"To prepare a bid for this money, of course, just like the.....like the other one"

"The other one being the Sierra Leone bid?"

"Yes, that is it."

"How much money is needed?"

"At least two million dollars."

Slowly, laboriously, Jonathan extracted details. Jonathan's Lebanese partners were called Farid and Hamid and were linked somehow by wives and family and a University in Beirut and something to do with Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Tel Aviv.

"So why can't the wife of Hamid bid direct? She sounds very professional - a professor, in fact, did you not say - at the University?"

"Ha ha ha. Yes, that is true but as I said they are, uh, wanting to, uh, ensure that they can, uh, handle the money themselves - you cannot trust anyone. There is too much, uh, interfering. You know?"

"So have they already tried to bid for funds?"

"Ah no, not yet. I said I would speak to you. They are not very, what shall I say, happy with another arrangement they have tried."

"They were not successful with a previous bid?"

"Oh no, no. They talked to another, ah, consultant. They were not happy with the, uh.....they were not confident - that is it - not confident. They were not confident that the arrangement would be good for them. They, uh.....yes."

Jonathan listened, learning nothing, as Jacob Johnson continued for a while. Then: "So you can help on this one, Jon?"

Inwardly, Jonathan shrugged - he was in for a penny so it might just as well be a pound. "There is an international education fund we could try for this one," he said. "It might fit perfectly. Provided we receive the usual support, good and timely information and all the right paperwork from your side."

"Good, good. That is exactly what I told Farid and Hamid. I said I knew a much better person than the Italian man they were talking to."

Jonathan's ears almost moved, but he let it go for the moment. "So what sort of financial arrangement are we talking about here, Jacob? Same as Sierra Leone?"

"Yes, of course. No problem."

"So, what exactly?"

"It is the same as before."

Jonathan took a deep breath. "Yes, but the value of this bid would be less. I do not want to appear greedy. How about 50,000 Euros when the bid goes in and 100,000 Euros when the money is granted and transferred?"

"Yes, of course. That is not a problem."

"That's agreed then," said Jonathan, as amazed as last time about the way Johnson operated.

But would the Nigerian honour anything? Probably not. And why? Because Jacob Johnson was just a small cog in a bigger wheel - a message boy. Because, when the time came, Jacob Johnson would think of himself first and foremost but mostly would be under pressure from others not to give away anything at all. And so, what might happen in a few weeks or months' time when two lucrative commissions could be expected to be paid to Jonathan? Well, Jacob Johnson would probably disappear back to Nigeria or somewhere. Jonathan would, most likely, never see him again.

But did Jonathan care? Not a jot. Despite what was running through his mind, he managed a smile. "So, I'll just wait for more information," he said. "Exactly like last time - names, addresses, letters of support, preferably from a government Minister etcetera. And we'll go for the Education fund I mentioned. Is that correct?"

"Yes, yes and I'm moving to live here in London so we can handle more projects like this."

News of a move to London was a surprise but Jonathan kept smiling. "Oh, that is good news. More coffee? A beer? Something stronger? I feel our partnership is already flourishing, Jacob."

"Yes, yes. It is. It is definitely, uh.....flurrying."

Jonathan went in search of the man who had brought them their coffee earlier. Once found - he was reading the paper in the kitchen - he asked for two beers. Then he returned to join Jacob Johnson to wait. "Two beers are coming - eventually," Jonathan said. Then: "Tell me, Jacob, who is the Italian you mentioned?"

"Oh, crazy man. I don't know him. Hamid told me. They met him in Milan. Not a nice man, Jon. Not trustworthy. I said it is better to deal with English. But Italians? pffff..... probably mafia and they don't speak English. It is not suitable to deal with the Italians. They know nothing."

"Yes, I know what you mean," said Jonathan. "But I had no idea there was an Italian consultant competing with us? What is the Italian company's name?"

"I only know his name. He is called Guido."

"Never heard of him," said Jonathan. "Ah here comes our beer."

CHAPTER 39

It was Jan Kerkman's second encounter with the man and the dog. This time the man stayed sitting down, but the big Labrador stood up, and plodded towards Jan wagging its tail. There was no leash.

Jan stopped running and stood still as the dog sat down at his feet, barked up at him and then continued to sit with its tongue hanging out. It was then that Jan saw the piece of paper under the dog's leather collar. As if to say, "Go ahead, it's for you," the dog barked once more. Jan glanced at his owner with the white prayer cap. He was staring ahead as if nothing was happening. Jan bent down, patted the dog's head, pulled out the paper and watched the dog walk away to sit once again by the man on the bench. Had anyone been watching what happened, they would have assumed it was just a friendly dog and that the jogger liked dogs.

Jan pushed the paper into the back pocket of his track suit and started to run again. But with the pressure of wanting to read the note getting the better of him, he turned and ran back to his flat, past where the man and dog had been sitting. They were both gone.

"Fund: EAWA. Ref No: RSFF 312A. Code: rs\$5198701@rs1 Transfer USD 35,000.

"Fund. CAHA. Ref No: CAHA 418F. Code mx\$5198701@kp9. Transfer Euros 260,175.

Jan lay back in his chair, stretched his legs out in front of him and stared at the paper. It was so simple. Was that all he had to do? But by doing it, he knew he would be party to fraud. There was no way he could do this. Could he? Transferring money to his own account was bad enough. But over a quarter of a million Euros to someone else? Who was it? Would he find out if he went through the process that Guido had demonstrated.

This entire, massive, fraudulent scheme needed to be exposed but to whom? But Guido had said, with some justification, that not only was he undetectable but so was the fraud itself. And Guido had known about Jan's private life - about the one night with Katrine who he had not seen, even socially, for three weeks because he felt it was too risky. Was he being watched? Followed? Bugged even?

He picked up his spare mobile phone, the one he used to speak to Jonathan, left the apartment still in his track suit and tee shirt and started on another long jog, this time through Grande Place, towards Rue Neuve and the vast City 2 Shopping Mall. He walked fast in through and around the Mall, then exited and, feeling like a fugitive on the run, turned into a side street. Here, still in his track suit, he found a bar, ordered himself a beer and sat watching other customers come and go. Satisfied at last, he phoned Jonathan to report.

"And I had an interesting meeting last night as well," Jonathan said. "It seems my new Nigerian friend, Jacob Johnson, has friends who have friends who have recently met Guido. Seems they ran scared of him. But if Guido ever finds out he's lost a client to Walton Associates then I'm also worried."

"And what about Jim?" asked Jan. "Where is he? It's now urgent. What do I do, Jon? Do I log on tomorrow morning and transfer over a quarter of a million Euros to the bank accounts of people I don't know? What should we do? Go to the police? The press? But if we did, then I'm not going to hang around here waiting for them to decide I'm not a whistle-blower at all but a total crank - just like Jim."

CHAPTER 40

"What are you saying, Toni? This is the second time you have come to me saying there is another Guido out there?"

Guido was plodding around his office in his yellow socks, holding the mobile phone in one hand, a spray can of blue paint in the other and wearing a pair of oversized decorator's overalls. "I am too busy to be bothered with this sort of shit. I told you to sort it out, find out more. Did you give Tahir his bottle of whisky?"

He listened. Then: "Tahir is no good, Toni. You must kick him. Yah, I know he has an important job in the bank. That does not make him useful. He got his job on the Central Bank Board because we and our big friend fixed it, but he will lose the job just as quickly. There are plenty of others who'd like to earn a million dollars - it's so easy now with Puff and Slush Version Two."

Guido, listening, still walking in circles, still shaking the rattling can of spray paint, looked at the ceiling and held the phone away from his ear as if the one called Toni should speak to the wall instead. His pink, bud-like lips twisted and there was a piecing scream.

"Yaaaahh! Enough, enough. Your voice, Toni. It reminds me of a talking, fucking parrot - on, on, on, problems, problems, problems. Where is your good news?" He paused, put the can of spray paint on his desk and sat in his swivel chair.

"Do you want some parrot seed? A mirror to see your red, blue and yellow face with the long-hooked beak? Pretty Polly, pretty Polly. You want to speak some more parrot talk? Now you listen to me. Guido is going to ask you a question. If you get the answer wrong Guido will visit you, drag you out of your cage and wring your fucking scrawny parrot neck. OK? Are you hearing me?.....Good. Now here is my question. Get it wrong and you know what will happen. Are you ready?.....? I don't fucking care, Toni parrot. You are either well informed on this business or you are as about as fucking useless as baby Tahir.....Are you ready now?.....Good. Here is the question. What is the name of Hamid and Farid's company set up to deal with that Lebanese business?"

He sat back, reached for the spray can, turned it around and around and looked at the ceiling, rolling his eyes, waiting.

"I'm waiting, Toni. Did you hear the question? Because if you don't fucking know the answer, how can you check why they have not been in touch, where they are and what the fuck they are doing instead of doing business with us. In other words, Toni, what the fuck is going on? So.....come on.....I'm still waiting..... Yes, you are right. It has something to do with picking fruit. What fucking fruit?.....OK.....enough. I will come and wring your neck, but only half a turn because you got it half right. It's Cherry Picking Investments you stupid parrot. What is it called, Toni?... That's it. And what are their names, Toni?.....Correct.....And what are you going to do right now, Toni?.....That's right. Find out what the fuck is going on and let me know. Guido has a very busy day today. It is a hands-on day, not a looking at computer day. And I have another two hundred boxes full of old newspapers that I have to spray with nice blue marks for Daisy Children's Charity andWhy? Because Mr Moses in Sierra Leone will buy the two hundred boxes of water purification equipment still sitting in the airport in Freetown. So how else can we satisfy our buyer and not attract attention if we don't replace them all with identical boxes. Our boxes will fly out tonight on Swiss Air. But I've got blue paint all over my overalls and in my hair."

CHAPTER 41

Jan was early into the office he normally shared with two others. He logged into the system as he did every morning and then, one by one, followed the precise order he had learned in Delft.

The first one, Fund EAWA, covering Economic Aid to West Africa. The Reference Number given on the slip of paper was RSFF 312A Jan typed it slowly to ensure he got it right. Yes, there it was exactly as in Delft. A Tourism project, total value 3,450,000 Euros. But nothing especially secret there.

Now the section showing who had been awarded the funding. He clicked. And yes, just as in Delft, the perfectly legitimate page came up indicating the bidder - Republic of Cameroon, Delegation of Tourism.

And the section for the name of the bank? There it was, Bank de Littoral. "Never heard of it," thought Jan. Then the request for the code. He checked the typed code on the paper and carefully typed it in. Then he pressed Enter and up came a new page: Amount. Jan checked the paper again and typed in 35,000 US dollars and pressed Enter again. The page went blank. He waited, watching. The screen flickered and up came the original front page again as if waiting for him to restart.

"Jesus," said Jan to himself, looking around. He was still alone. "Job done, I suppose. No sign of where it went or who it went to."

He sat back, nervous, sweating. But at 35,000 dollars, that was the small one. The next transfer was for 260,175 Euros. He started again.

Fund: CAHA - Central Asia Humanitarian Aid. Reference No: CAHA 418F. There it was. Funding to help build and equip a huge refugee or natural disaster support facility in Pakistan. All the equipment to be stored waiting for the next humanitarian crisis whenever and whatever came - earthquake, political strife, floods. Jan remembered it well. He'd sat on committees discussing it. It was for the purpose-built building, tents, blankets, water purification equipment, portable toilets, enough to support a large town. 260,000 Euros was, perhaps 10 percent of the total cost but a nice pay off for somebody. Did that person then pay others?

He repeated the process of the last case, each time double checking what he had typed. He typed in the special code and the amount page came up. Then he typed in Euros 260,175 and pressed Enter. There was absolutely no sign of where the money had gone or, indeed, if it had. Again, the recipient, whoever it was, was just a numbered account. Jan sat back once more and stared at the familiar log in front page that appeared on his screen every morning. It was clever, there was no doubting that.

"You're in early, Jan." Jan jumped. It was Hans who he shared an office with.

"I couldn't sleep," Jan said honestly. "Want a coffee?" Then he stuffed the slip of paper with its instructions into his pocket.

He was in the office and alone again at 5.30pm. For a reason he couldn't explain, Katrine was on his mind and he was tempted go and see her, chat generally, perhaps ask if she'd fancy another drink one evening. But was it wise with someone, somewhere watching everything he did in the office and out of it? He was sat at his

desk; the computer was still on. Suddenly it beeped - an internal email to him, personally. No sender's name just 'Admin'.

"City 2 Shopping Mall, basement, car park, 6.30pm."

Jan stared at it.

Someone must have known he was still there. Was it Eischmann, whom he had seen earlier that afternoon? He deleted it, switched off the computer, got up and walked out. Then he walked the mile or so to the Shopping Mall, took the car park lift to the lowest floor and stood, leaning against a concrete pillar. At just after 6.30 a shiny, new, black BMW came silently down the ramp from the floor above, circled the car park once and then reversed into a space. Thinking it might be Eischmann, Jan wandered over, expecting him to get out or perhaps even open a door for him to get in. But with heavily tinted windows, Jan could not see who was driving it. He walked on past the car, turned right by the lift shaft, circled it and returned once more to stand against the concrete pillar next to an Audi TT sports car.

But it was not Eischmann who emerged from the BMW but a tall woman in a dark trouser suit, white blouse and shoes that clicked as she walked on the concrete floor. Her hair, partly hidden inside a beige head scarf, was long, jet black and her eyes, as she quickly glanced at Jan, were big and dark. In just the few seconds Jan had, she looked Arab, perhaps Indian, and she carried a small brown envelope. She clearly saw Jan but passed by and went to the other side of the Audi, put the envelope on its soft roof and walked back towards the BMW. The next minute, Jan heard the BMW starting up again. It went back up the ramp and disappeared. Jan looked at the envelope. Assuming it was meant for him he picked it up and walked the mile or so back to his apartment. When he got there, he opened it. Inside was a simple, typed note on a sheet of A5 sized plain white paper. In capitals it read:

"CONGRATULATIONS - YOU PASSED THE FIRST TEST. EXPECT A MESSAGE REGARDING FURTHER TRAINING."

There were no other words and no signature. Jan stared at it just as he had stared at the email earlier.

In the evening, Jan checked his bank account. At 12.28 pm a sum of 2,250 Euros had been credited to his account. But there was no reference attached to it to say where it had come from. It just said "JK Credit."

CHAPTER 42

"Go through these bags and boxes, Tom. Check what there is. Those that you think are of a quality worthy of public exhibition, please put them into this empty bag. But we will take only thirty."

"Are you not going to help, Jim? Surely the artist himself should decide."

"No, the decision is yours. I have something else to do. I will be gone for about an hour. When I return we will drive to the town."

In the bright, warm, morning sun, Tom took Jim's dusty boxes and bags outside to sit and sort them. Bearing in mind that Jim had sat under a mango tree to create them, they were all, in Tom's unprofessional opinion, masterpieces. And each had a certain unique touch - two birds, two flowers, two trees, an old lady and an old man, a

cockerel and hen, a hen and a chicken, a snake coiled around eggs with a small snake emerging, And there were abstracts, too - sunrises and sunsets - colourful bands of pink, purple, orange, blue and grey, some with a black silhouette of a single coconut palm or banana tree leaf intruding into the picture. Selecting just thirty was hard.

Jim had been gone an hour. Tom had watched him walk off, leaving the motorcycle propped beneath the house. He had disappeared between the trees behind the house where the hill started and rose gradually to somewhere out of sight.

For Jim, the track was well worn by his own feet. He now knew every bend, every rock, every tree, every fallen branch. At the top, it ended in a small clearing, dominated by a single, high rock that looked over the tree tops to the east on one side and to the west on the other. To the south flowed the River Kwai that, during the rainy season, was high and wide. At other times, as now, it was barely visible through the trees. It was the view of sunsets and sunrises from here that had inspired Jim's abstract paintings. The rock itself was difficult to access. After rain it was wet, slippery, dangerous. This morning it was dry and easy going, but he still had to scramble, almost crawl to the very top. Once there it was bare and flat, with just a few wide cracks giving root holds for shrubs and grass. He was out of breath when he arrived. His heart pounded and he knew he was pushing himself too hard. But he made it, staggered the few final yards to the pinnacle and slumped down.

He may have sat there for an hour or more, but time on that rock meant nothing. He sat cross-legged, his thin, brown legs drawn underneath him, his hands in his lap and his grey hair blowing in the cool breeze from the west. He closed his eyes, smelled the air, listened to the wind and the sounds of small birds in the treetops and felt the soft breeze on his skin.

"This is my place, Margaret. This is where I come to find peace and tranquillity. It is like nowhere else I have ever been and no-one comes here except me. Perhaps others found it once but they have never returned. But do you see the wildness below? This is how it has been for thousands of years. It is untouched by humans. It is as it always was - untainted by money, by selfish greed, by hypocrisy, by jealousy or by any other human weakness. There is no anger here, Margaret. There is no pushing or shoving, no envy, no fighting over land or space. Instead it is a place of utter peace.

"Sometimes, I find it difficult to tear myself away, even to return to my house down below. It is timeless here. I hear the wind in the trees and the birds. I smell the air, the ground, the damp leaves, the dryness, the rain, the scent of flowers in the tree tops. It is a strange but a most exhilarating experience because, with my eyes closed, I feel as if I am travelling somewhere, though I know not where or how.

"And sometimes I feel I am about to fall, to crash. And when that happens, I open my eyes and look up into the sky where I have been flying and what do I see? I see endless time. I see me. I see myself as just an insignificant part of everything else that is around me, like a tiny fragment of cosmic dust. And I find that so comforting. I am, you see, made up of just small particles of matter, organized into a single living unit. And that unit, my body and my mind, is merely obeying basic laws of chemistry and physics. The simplicity is what matters because it explains everything.

"But sometimes, Margaret, my thoughts lead me into areas where I still struggle for explanations. What puzzles me most is the working of my own mind. I know my mind

is what dictates opinion, belief, anger and affection, and I know that this is just an evolutionary advance on what dictates the migration of birds, the movement of animals and shoals of fish and the chemical intelligence of ants, but I still struggle with explanations of anger and revenge. Are they just human characteristics? Are they strengths for which we should be proud, or are they weaknesses for which we should feel ashamed? Unfortunately, I suspect they are merely characteristics that have enabled the human species to dominate over others. But it is still pretty shameful, don't you think?

"And there is another feeling that is very personal. For a while, I did not understand the suggestion that I was incompetent and had failed because I had not thought of myself as a failure. But I am a sensitive and thoughtful man who listens to the opinions of others. That stigma of failure and incompetence has stalked me like a dark shadow for too long and I have to address it before it is too late. The time to act is now."

Jim's eyes were still firmly shut. He stretched his arms above his head, moved them in circles behind his back with his hands and fingers held taught. He drew his legs out from under him and one by one stretched and moved them in a circle upwards and outwards from his hips feeling the pain in every muscle, every tendon and every fibre. Finally, he settled again with his legs crossed and his hands in his lap. Then he opened his eyes, looked around and smiled.

"It's a bit like a church here, mother - like the village church where you used to drag me as a boy to arrange the flowers around the pulpit. But it is also like a temple in that when I'm here I feel vulnerable and insignificant with an overwhelming feeling of total loneliness as if I've been carried to a world devoid of other men. It is a very peaceful world, mother. I like it. I admit I have whimpered a little here, because I felt so alone, but I have also felt strong and totally content because I was alone. And I am at my most content when my mood allows me to see my own body and my life as just one small fragment. Death seems so insignificant when viewed like that. This is a much more dangerous place than the village church, though mother, because sometimes I feel I want to jump from this rock. It would be so simple, one day, just to lean forward and topple."

Then he stood up, rubbed his aching legs and started the easier and quicker walk back down to the house where Tom was already waiting.

"We must go, Tom. You are leaving for London and Dublin tomorrow?"

"Yes, I must return to Bangkok tonight."

"Then I will meet you in London. If you are willing to help, then I guarantee you a story."

CHAPTER 43

"**Jan, I'm worried about something.** I really didn't know who else to call. Can we meet? Now?" It was Katrine.

Jan had just returned from his routine evening jog when there was a call on his mobile phone - the one he used for what little social life he had and for his mother's regular calls. Within the hour they were sat in the same corner seat of the same

Tapas bar as before. Jan put two glasses of white wine on the table and sat down. "Sorry I've not phoned you, Kat, but I've been busy. What's bothering you?"

Katrine took a sip of the wine but didn't smile. "There's something going on, Jan. Something to do with the Humanitarian Aid and Economic Development funding that we all sit around discussing nearly every day. Do you know that millions are going astray?"

"Well known, isn't it?" said Jan, smiling. "Once the money is handed over there has to be a certain amount of trust that recipients use it for what it's intended. But we all know a lot doesn't. It just goes. Somewhere, somehow. They keep saying they'll tighten up the accountability....."

Katrine nodded. "Yes, but....."

"What's up Kat? Why ask me to join you tonight?"

"I've got a friend in Treasury," she said. "I'd better not name her. But she thinks someone is hacking the finance system. Everything stopped working - it crashed - and someone was called to look at it, but by the time they arrived, everything was normal. It has happened several times in the last few weeks. The IT people have checked, but they say they can't find a problem. It's like it crashes due to an overload of people going online. But that's impossible and there are only a few security checked staff with permissions to access certain data."

Jan, feeling the heat building, sniffed.

"And my friend in Treasury," Katrine continued. "She thinks something happens during the short time the system goes down."

"Like what?" Jan loosened his collar.

"That money goes out - big amounts - but then it comes back in again. But on one occasion last week, she actually watched something happen. It lasted just a few seconds. 900,000 Euros suddenly went out of an Aid to Bangladesh fund. The point is, it wasn't due to go out. It was already ring-fenced but there were still some remaining issues with the bid. The system seemed to crash for no more than a few seconds before coming back on again. Then the 900,000 Euros came back in but she is convinced something happened during those few seconds."

"Did she report it?"

"Yes, to senior management. But she is already very senior, Jan."

"And what did they do?"

"Nothing - she's been told there was a glitch and it's sorted, but it happened again today. This morning. Another 480,000 Euros, one minute gone, next minute replaced. But, again, it went before the final approvals and checks are complete, sometimes at the meetings that you and I attend. It went - somewhere - but then came back almost instantly. It doesn't make sense. If I was in charge I'd want to know more - a complete investigation, top to bottom. But no-one seems bothered. It's as if there's a cover up."

"Does Dirk Eischmann know?" Jan asked, deliberately bringing him into the equation.

"Yes, I mentioned it after yesterday's Environmental Policy meeting."

"And?"

"He didn't seem concerned. He just said there must have been a computer error somewhere."

"So, not interested?"

"Like others, he shrugged it off as if it was nothing. He just didn't want to talk about it. He told me it was not my department anyway and so I should not get involved. But surely we are allowed to express concerns."

"You say the money goes out and then comes back in within seconds?"

"Yes, but you know what it's like Jan. We work for a huge organisation that deals in billions. We take it in and we hand it out. Half a million here and half a million there is nothing. If the sums don't add up at the end of the year, they'll just write it off as they always do. There are bound to be a few anomalies, they say. But if there were anomalies then, according to my logic, some years you'd end up with more than you started with rather than less."

"My logic would say exactly the same," said Jan, "But it's electronic money, Kat. They move these sums around and only at a certain point might it become hard cash. At other times, well.... accounts on that scale are complicated, Kat. I understand a bit about how the financial markets operate but I really don't profess to know much about the system here." Then, in nervous desperation, he added. "I wish I did."

He thought for a moment about what Guido had said. Explaining Puff he said:

"Your job, Mr Kerkman, is to make friends with Puff. We can turn Puff on and we can turn Puff off - on and off - just as we wish." And then: "We have another new system called 'Slush'. Slush replaces what has been taken out to make it appear nothing has happened. It is not your job to understand the workings of 'Slush'. Neither will I explain how the accounts finally get cooked to avoid having to explain mysterious losses and discrepancies which amount to millions of Dollars or Euros."

"Maybe," Jan said aloud to Katrine, "What goes out is turned straight into hard cash, but what goes back in is electronic money just to balance books. Electronic money is a digital equivalent of cash, stored on an electronic device or remotely at a server. One common type of e-money is the 'electronic purse', where users store relatively small amounts of money on their payment card or other smart card, to use for making small payments. I've often thought it was open to all types of fraud if you can hack servers. And if we're saying this looks to you and me like some sort of crime then I suppose it could easily be laundered money, proceeds of crime. The amount of money laundered each year runs to billions of dollars."

Jan was unsure if what he'd just said made much sense. The fact was he didn't understand how Puff and Slush worked, but it didn't matter. Katrine looked at him.

"I hadn't thought of it like that," she said. "If it's true then it's scandalous. It needs exposing. We could be watching massive fraud in action - fraud using technology."

"Yes, and the fact that you get nowhere when you and your friend in Treasury ask questions and when you ask Eischmann might prove the point - a massive cover up."

"You mean it's not just one or two people involved but many?"

"Remember, you've had suspicions about Dirk Eishmann for a long time - how he keeps his job, how he networks, how he rubs shoulders. Maybe the ones he rubs shoulders with are fraudsters and Eischmann is pure and innocent."

"I can't see Eischmann being that naive, can you?"

"No," Jan said and shook his head.

Katrine stared at him. "So, what do we do?"

"Find the evidence and expose it. But without firm evidence it'll go nowhere. If we're right then we need to go public. Whistle blow as it's called. But that's very, very risky."

They talked on for a while until Jan said, "Let's meet again, Kat. Decide what to do. If you are as sure as I am that there is something fraudulent going on, it's not just a matter of going carefully but deciding what to do about it. But don't do what you were once tempted to do - move on and find another job. That's defeatism. Stay inside, at least for the time being. Keep an eye on things." Then he added, "I'm off to London on Saturday - a weekend break to see some friends - let's chat next week."

Jan's weekend break in London was with Jim.

CHAPTER 44

Jim had just emerged into the arrival's hall at Heathrow Airport when he heard the familiar Irish accent.

"Jim. Welcome to London. In fact, welcome home. Was it a good flight, Jim?"

"Restful."

"No more bags? Are the paintings in there? You're lucky with the weather - very unseasonal. Even Dublin was warm." Tom chatted nonstop. Jim listened and followed Tom. "The beard is coming along nicely, Jim.... I hired a car.... I flew in from Dublin last night..... stayed the night at a hotel in Windsor and I booked you there also.... close to London, but not in it if you get my meaning.....and I left Mrs O'Casey in charge of the shop, so I did.....she's OK for weeks if I give her a cut of the takings."

Jim remembered the hotel in Windsor. It was where Margaret had first expressed misgivings about his going into politics. After check-in, he looked around his room.

"Like it was yesterday.... bed too high.....bath big enough for ducks to swim in..... pink soap.....and what's this? His and Hers white dressing gowns. Dear me, mother, how typically British and quaint."

He lay horizontally on the bed for a while staring at a pink light shade. "I suppose you'd like the colour scheme, Margaret. For the feminine touch it deserves a higher score than Amsterdam. Personally, though, I would recommend a total revamp."

Tom had told him not to rush "Have a shower, Jim, take a nap. No rush. Got to take it easy. I'll wait."

He showered, used the toilet, checked the growth of hair on his face in the mirror, cleaned his teeth, checked them in the same mirror. "I've told you not to do that, but you never learn." Then he changed into a pair of crumpled, long trousers and a long-

sleeved shirt and went downstairs where Tom was drinking Guinness and working through a pile of newspapers. He glanced up.

"Hah! Smart enough to take tea with the Queen, Jim."

"Only the Tudors wore as much clothing as this for afternoon tea."

"Sure, you'll get used to it. Beer?"

The barman took an order and they went to a corner table by the window overlooking the street, but if Tom thought it was going to be an hour of relaxation, he was wrong. Jim had plans and the formal manner - the one Tom had first encountered in the hospital - had returned.

"I have a few phone calls to make, Tom - not many - a few friends and contacts. First, though, we need to decide how best you can help me and how I can help you. There can be no written contracts, only mutual trust. Misplaced trust of others was a weakness but I'm willing to try it once more.

"This is my proposal. First, there are things I need to do towards providing evidence for the accusations I made in Parliament. This could take time. Days? Weeks? I really cannot be sure. If it looks like taking much longer then we'll need to decide what to do. But to begin we will meet two friends of mine who have been working with me to gather the evidence....."

Tom interrupted, grinning. "And are they getting anywhere, Jim? But I'm so pleased to hear that. I really thought you were just sat out there hiding and doing nothing. This is more like the Jim Smith I used to admire."

"We will meet them on Saturday. In secret."

"Jim," Tom interrupted again. "Trust me. Just let me help. If there's a story at the end of it you want written then tell me. If not, I'll just keep everything to myself. Meanwhile, I'm here to help - in any way I can."

Jim nodded. "I don't want press and media descending on us in droves. Our location must remain a secret and no mention will be made of restarting the old campaign until we are ready. Then we will need a few appropriate words and phrases to release. That's your job. Media management was something I'd never thought about before."

"Ah. 'tis something I also learned about - the hard way- but from the other side."

"Then," Jim went on, "I need some urgent help on another matter - the truth behind those photographs of me. Nice, juicy bits of unearthing from a freelance investigative journalist that the tabloid responsible will, whether they want to or not, have to publish just to satisfy the mentality of their loyal, scandal-loving readers. Track down Polly if you can, Tom. Get her story - nearly four years after the biggest thing that had ever happened in her life - lovely stuff for the entertainment of some. She might even give you names of those behind it. That would be useful."

"OK," said Tom with a smile.

"Also," Jim went on, "I need to see my wife." He took a mouthful of his beer and looked out the window. "I can't foresee the outcome to that just yet. But it is a very private matter. I will have no control over what my wife may decide to do or say afterwards. Similarly, I cannot anticipate what my own feelings will be. It's something we'll have to play by ear for the time being.

"But as for what you write, how you write it and who you sell it to, that's your choice. Just choose the right publication. You negotiate your own financial arrangements because that is your private matter. Whatever deal you strike is of no concern of mine. But, what I am saying Tom, is that I am offering you exclusive rights to report on the reasons for my leaving the UK and my return and hopefully the evidence - the evidence I lacked at the time."

"And the paintings, Jim?"

"Leave that with me for a day or so. I might try to arrange a small exhibition somewhere. What do you think?"

"Small? Well, I suppose an unknown artist has to start somewhere. But may I make one other personal suggestion, Jim. And please don't get me wrong because you know my feelings on the subject. But, well, for the benefit of the public it might be better if you adopted a smart, clean-shaven approach. You, more than anyone, know what the press is like. Think about it. Compare a picture of a bearded recluse trying to recover a seedy political reputation with a smart, bronzed, handsome-looking brute, an ex-politician and captain of industry and now an international artist of some repute. You know which will win hands down in the eyes of the image conscious public, don't you?"

Jim's smile, or what counted as one, appeared. His teeth showed and the grey hair on his face moved upwards and outwards towards his ears and eyes. "Ah, my image consultant as well as my press agent, I see."

"And also a good and trustworthy friend, Jim."

"I hope so. But the beard stays, OK? I'm comfortable with it and that's what matters. And there's no need of a haircut either. I'll might just tie it back a bit - for the sake of appearances. Though perhaps I could use a new suit."

"And may I suggest a couple of mobile phones - numbers only known to you and me? Why don't we venture into the town to see if we can find an outfitter, suitable for an English gentleman? And two phones. After a decent lunch that is. When did you last eat?"

"Two days ago," said Jim.

CHAPTER 45

"**Yes, I am listening, Toni.** You want to talk to me about Cherry Picking Investments while I am driving in the middle of Zurich?"

Guido was in the black Mercedes, sat low in the driver's seat, his head barely above the steering wheel.

"What do you mean, I gave you the wrong name? It is not Cherry Picking? Then what is it?.....Cherry Picking, Cherry Pick..... there is no difference..... I will still wring your parrot neck for impertinence you understand. Wait - I will stop the car.....OK I have stopped. What is it?"

The news from Toni was clearly not good.

"Yes, I know that Hamid and Farid have a Nigerian connection. What is the problem? Did you speak to Hamid? Did you speak to Farid?..... Why did they not want to speak to you? Where are they now? Beirut or Lagos?.....So is the telephone not

working in Beirut?..... And they refused to speak to you? Did you remind them that you are a member of Guido's senior management team like I told you?.....What the fuck?.....So did you try the Lagos number?.....Very good, Toni.....And you pretended to be another consultant offering to help with funding bids.... this is much better. Maybe I'll pay your salary after all.....And what did the Lagos office say?.....What does this Mr Johnson do?.....He's their fucking consultant now?.....No, no, no, this I cannot believe. There is more to this. A Nigerian? A consultant? No, no. If anyone mentions Nigeria you think scams, scams and more scams. Even a Lebanese would not trust a Nigerian to help with this. Nigerians are clever at scams and nothing else. I think we need to mention this Cherry Picking to Mr E.....Yes, Mr E. Do I need to say his name aloud into my telephone.....Yes, that Mr E. If we have lost this one maybe Mr Eischmann will be able to pull it back on track from his side. I will phone him. But I must go, my appointment with Credit Suisse is in twenty minutes."

CHAPTER 46

Jim ignored the three plastic bags of new clothes on the bed next to him. Instead, he retrieved an old address book from his duffel bag and set about checking the new pay-as-you-go mobile phone. Taking a deep breath, he phoned the number of his old house in Wiltshire - Margaret - but the number was no longer available.

Another deep breath and he tried the next number - that of Douglas Creighton, his one-time, so-called, constituency party chairman. The 'phone was answered by a man whose voice he did not recognise. "Good afternoon. I am sorry to trouble you but I am trying to locate Mr Douglas Creighton."

"Oh yes - Doug. He owns this house - we rent it from him. His wife died a few years ago. He moved away and rents it out. Do you want his mobile?"

Jim then called the mobile. It was answered by a man with an elderly voice he hardly recognised, but Douglas was now over seventy. "Douglas?" Jim checked.

"Yes. Who is it?"

"It's Jim Smith." There was a silence as though the listener was checking a hearing aid. "Douglas? Are you there?"

"Yes. My God."

"It is not God, Douglas. It's only me, Jim Smith - once an Independent Member of Parliament, a role in which I was grateful for your undying support during some brief but trying times."

"My goodness. Where are you? We thought you were dead or living abroad."

"Did we? Well, I'm alive you'll be pleased to know, and I'm in England. I arrived this morning."

"Where are you staying? What are you doing? My God, Jim, this is quite a shock hearing your voice after so long."

"I was hoping we could meet."

"My goodness, Jim. Ah, yes. Does anyone else know you are here? Why the return?"

"Time to have another go, Douglas."

"At what, Jim?"

"At addressing the same problem that made me go away."

"It's a long time, Jim. Most people have forgotten."

"But I haven't forgotten Douglas. I am here to resurrect things, make a few more people jump around, possibly the same ones. And if a few media people managed to find space to publish a few facts instead of fairy tales perhaps they'll jump even higher."

"You haven't changed much then, Jim."

Jim wanted to move quickly on to his reason for calling, but first: "Tell me about Megan. I heard something when I phoned your old number."

"Megan died about two years ago. We'd been married thirty-five years. Cancer. Getting over it a bit now, but it takes the stuffing out of one."

"I'm sorry, Douglas. I have fond memories of Megan."

"Thank you.... and what about your private plans?"

Jim saw through it. Private plans meant Margaret. "Private plans are private plans, Douglas. But can you and I meet? Cup of coffee? Beer?"

"Yes, I suppose. Why not, I suppose. When?"

"Tomorrow afternoon. It's rather short notice for which I apologise, but I'm in a hurry - as ever, you might say. Can you get to London?"

"Yes, I suppose. By train. Goodness me. Where?"

"Let's not make it too dramatic, Douglas. I know you used to frequent the Ritz from time to time but with their strict dress criteria means I may not be allowed in. How about the Cumberland Hotel, Marble Arch as I wouldn't even need to wear a tie? Say about three? Tea? Coffee? Beer? Gin and tonic? But please, Douglas, this is between you and me at present. It's strictly confidential."

Jim lay back on the big, soft bed, reflecting on Douglas and his irritating habit of saying 'My God' and 'I suppose' at every opportunity. It was a habit the man had dragged around for decades, yet no-one seemed to have told him how annoying it was. "Wasted opportunity, mother. If that was me, they'd have found some cartoons and jokes there."

Beside him on the bed lay the bags of new clothes. Two new suits off the peg, one dark grey and one navy blue, three white shirts, two ties, three pairs of navy socks, a pair of black lace-up shoes and a plastic pack of underwear - all Tom's choice, like a caring and thoughtful wife. He stood and held the suit against his chest, brushed a hand through his hair and beard. Tom was right. He should probably shave and have a haircut. But, no, they either saw him as he was or not at all. Wearing a suit and, perhaps, a tie was as far as he was prepared to go, but only if necessary.

He tried on one of the shirts, the underwear and socks and finally the trouser half of one of the suits, tried to remember how to tie a knot in the tie but gave up. Finally, he bit off a few sales labels with his teeth, pulled on the new shoes, tied his hair back with an elastic band and looked at himself in the full-length mirror.

"Hah! Lek! Sawadee Kap! Recognise me? It's Jim. How's the business?"

The clothes felt heavy, cumbersome, restrictive and itchy and he knew the shoes would cause trouble. He took them off, sat on the bed cross-legged and made the third phone call. Jonathan had been expecting the call for most of the day.

Meeting fixed for Saturday, Jim pulled the new shoes back on, tied them loosely and walked painfully down to the bar to find Tom with an opinion.

"Well, I suppose we're part way there, Jim, but frankly I prefer you in your shorts and sandals. Ah well. Never mind. It's alright. It'll help to serve a purpose so it will."

CHAPTER 47

Seeing an elderly man with a noticeable limp and a walking stick standing, trying to find his glasses, Jim wandered over, left a large brown envelope next to his pint glass of beer and tapped him on the shoulder. "Douglas - I'm in the corner, over there."

Douglas Creighton disengaged the stick and glasses and took Jim's hand. "Hello, Jim. My God. You look.....ah, different.... very brown, I suppose. Long hair as well."

"And you look much the same, Douglas," Jim lied. "Take a seat. Beer? Gin? Whisky? Coffee? Tea? The Cumberland serves everything - at a huge profit."

"A cup of tea, I suppose. Oh, my goodness, what a shock. Such long hair." Jim beckoned the waiter, ordered a pot of tea and another pint of draft beer.

"So where have you been, Jim? Somewhere sunny I suppose. And you're still not shaving very often I see." Douglas was trying to prop his stick against his chair.

"I'm living not far from where I finally managed to lose the posse of threatening pursuers."

"The press followed you, Jim?"

"I don't think they were from the press, Douglas. Someone somewhere seemed to think I was getting rather too close to the truth for comfort. And, if someone suggests that all is not as it should be within the corridors of power, naturally it requires money to be spent to make sure things are stopped firmly in their tracks."

"Oh dear. Well it all died down pretty quickly after you left. You know how it is. People get on with their lives. Newspapers find another topic. But you know how I sympathized, Jim. I tried to help as much as I could, but sometimes the pressures make it impossible to change fixed opinions."

Jim was not sure how to take the last comment. Who was the one with the fixed opinions? He didn't ask, but watched as his fresh beer and a pot of English tea with milk, sugar, a little cup and saucer and a plate with three square biscuits was laid on the table.

Douglas then talked - about Amberley, the new local Member of Parliament, Jim's replacement - "Unlikely to survive the next election". About arthritis - "Never thought it could get as bad." About the weather - "Gone a bit autumnal."

Jim listened, intrigued by Douglas's manner of speaking when nervous, a manner enhanced by a skill of picking on a subject and twisting it so that it fell more comfortably on the ear of his listener. It was a talent Jim admired, but only because it

had evaded him all his life. Finally, even Douglas seemed to run out of topics. His listener was, after all, not talking but, instead, taking in large mouthfuls of beer through a long, grey beard. There was a moment's silence.

"It's in here," Jim said, pointing to his brown envelope.

"In there Jim? What is in there?"

"Evidence. I picked it up from my solicitor on the way here. Evidence of tampering with economic aid bids in favour of specific contractors. It's not enough of course, but it'll help the growing case. My problem was always one of presentation, Douglas. Sometimes I regret my mannerisms and my methods but they had always been effective - until, that is, I went into politics. But there was far more to it than that. I touched some tender nerves. To some it looked as if I was about to tread very heavily on some very big toes. That's why the heavy mob moved in with their - what shall we call them - their alternative methods.

"And their first target, of course, was Margaret. And then....., well, you know what I'm talking about. That finally put paid to our marriage. It destroyed all that was left of a relationship that was already being torn apart by outside interference, press speculation and the pressures of my job. I denied that one, particularly sordid accusations then. I deny it now and I believe it, too, was part of a deliberate ploy. I also think there were other reasons behind my final marriage problems, but those were private and personal matters, not to be raked over, speculated on and minutely examined by groups of seedy, raincoat-clad press reporters and cameramen and whoever was paying them for their stories."

And then Jim really got going. In ten minutes, he managed to cover standards of reporting, freedom of the press, phone hacking, the Royal family, the European Union, trouble in the Middle East, Islamic extremism, religious intolerance, democratic deficits and the lack of spiritual leadership. But throughout, Jim carefully watched Douglas sipping tea from his cup that he held between his thumb and first finger and, at one point, saw him check his watch. "Can't he even give me ten minutes after all this time?" he thought as he talked.

"Am I out of touch, Douglas?" he then concluded. "Is my view distorted by just one or two bad experiences or do I see things with much greater clarity than most? Has anything really changed for the better in the last fifty years?"

Douglas placed his cup daintily in its saucer, bit on a biscuit and sighed. "No, Jim, I cannot tell you it has improved. I understand your feelings. I think I always did. The problem is that people just get on with their lives. They are not so critical and analytical as you. Perhaps they don't have quite the same vision. They shrug, you see. Their attention span is short. They move on to the next page."

Jim sat back, tried looking around at other hotel guests getting on with their lives - a young couple side by side, two pairs of serious businessmen facing each other across their coffee cups, a young man alone with his mobile phone, a group of giggling women in smart suits, drinking white wine. "So, was it just my style, my manner?" he asked.

"Yes, I suppose so. Biscuit?"

Jim felt like laughing. "Well, that's reassuring - I suppose," he said.

"So why come back, Jim?"

It was a good question. Perhaps Douglas was concentrating at last, Jim thought. Because there is no tea left and he's eaten the last biscuit. He wanted to say more about why he'd come back, but, for some reason, he didn't trust Douglas. There was something odd about Douglas that disturbed him. Perhaps he just hadn't noticed it before and three years was a long time.

For all Jim suddenly cared, Douglas could go away from here saying he'd met Jim Smith at the Cumberland. He imagined stories told over cups of Earl Grey tea and biscuits or with white wine and cucumber sandwiches. Yes, he's back from somewhere sunny - still looking a bit of an oddity - aged a lot and hair all over the place with a long beard - but just as opinionated as ever - quite clear the man should never have gone into politics in the first place.

"Oh, I just needed a break, Douglas, that's all," he said with unnatural flippancy. "Thought I'd look up a few old friends. Buy a few things to take home. I won't be staying long."

"And Margaret?" Douglas asked.

"Yes," he said, returning instantly to his natural seriousness. "I want to see her, talk to her. I need to know she is well and not lacking for anything. She will be sixty-five now." Jim knew he probably sounded vague and disinterested. In fact, he was both desperately longing to see Margaret and, at the same time, dreading the moment. There was also a side telling him he might be making a terrible mistake. "But, Douglas, I don't know where she is now."

"Ah, yes," Douglas said, "Ah, she ah, she moved - to Bristol about two years ago. She sold The Rookery to a family from Birmingham. You transferred pretty much everything - property, pension, the lot, to her I understand, before you, uh, disappeared - or just after. Am I right?"

"Yes," Jim confirmed but wondering how he knew.

"But what did that leave you, Jim? What do you live on? Fresh air?"

"I get by. My daily needs are rudimentary."

"So where are you living, Jim?"

"South East Asia."

"Where exactly?"

Jim had waited so long to say it. He'd practiced it many times as he sat on the veranda in the morning sunshine or up on the hillside on his rock. "Oh, it's just a small place in the countryside, backing onto the hills. Nice spot. Lovely views. All mod cons. It's really quite cool as they say. You should come and see it some time. Nice garden. Not too many neighbours to spoil things."

"It sounds delightful, Jim. Uh, you live.....alone?"

"Oh yes. I live quietly."

"So, what do you do with your time?"

"I paint."

"My goodness. I had no idea you were good with a brush, Jim."

"I was quite good at school, but I've now had time to practice. In fact, I've brought a few pieces of my work along with me. I thought I'd show them to a gallery, perhaps even put on a small exhibition one day. I'll keep you posted."

"So, you're planning on coming back again - at regular intervals? Perhaps permanently?" Once again, Jim saw that Douglas seemed far more concerned about this possibility than the joy of having an old friend around once again.

"Perhaps," Jim replied, deliberately deciding to leave the possibility wide open. Douglas wiped his mouth, nervously.

"So, what else do you do, Jim?" Douglas asked as if trying to get a firmer fix on Jim's plans.

"I think a lot," he said. "I suppose you might call it meditation."

"My goodness. Where did you learn that, Jim?"

"I didn't learn it, Douglas. No-one taught me. I designed it to suit my needs. But I received some deep insight into the Buddhist philosophy of living. It appeals, Douglas. It appeals to my own natural instincts and my scientific training. I feel comfortable with it. Christianity is dying as a form of spiritual guidance. Islamic teaching, whilst tougher on discipline, has become too entrenched in outdated history and infighting. Islamic fundamentalism is filling the vacuum left by bewildered and disillusioned Christians and it is doing so by exploiting mass unemployment, deprivation and gross disparities in wealth.

"How many go to church on Sundays now? Christenings, weddings, funerals, yes, but there has to be a stronger reason for going to church than that. They go only because they feel it is socially right to be seen to go, not because they derive any real benefit or enlightenment from it or because they know it will help them become better, more responsible and understanding people. Instead, of worshipping the wonder of life itself they are being taught to worship money and possessions."

Jim felt himself moving into heavy territory once again - an outpouring of deeply felt opinion was likely unless he could stop himself. But - what the hell. He went for it. Douglas needed to hear it and he, Jim, wanted to say it.

"I detect a deeply worrying moral and spiritual vacuum. People must be encouraged to contemplate far more on their own lives and their contribution to the lives of others. Death is still not understood and has become a taboo subject. Just look at the hysteria, the bunches of flowers and soft toys you see these days when someone dies. There is no dignity in such public displays because they are shallow demonstrations of a society that has become too brash and obsessed with materialism.

"The living are barely understood either because no-one thinks deeply enough about life's origins or its destiny. Life to me is a mere function of matter but that does not mean it is to be dismissed as an irrelevance.

"I believe the world needs a new form of spiritual leadership. It needs valid explanations to the real questions that educated people ask. But there are no strong and influential spiritual leaders left. Christianity is a relic of the past, unfit for a modern way of life. What's more it is guarded by an army of bigots who seem to be as much at sea as the rest of us when it comes to explaining real issues about life and death.

"People need guidance and advice, explanations and new, constructive ideas to toy with. They want leadership by example. They don't want to be further disillusioned by confused and fanatical religious committees who fight and argue amongst themselves about such shallow issues as wealth and status. It is shameful. People need warmth and vision, wisdom and fresh ideas, not weird stories about resurrections, angels, holy ghosts, miracles and fresh virgins waiting in a field. They don't need outdated regulations on how you conduct the most personal sides of your life or edicts to wage war on non-believers. I ask you, Douglas. Who would you rather listen to? The Archbishop of Canterbury, the Pope, an Imam, an Ayatollah or the Dalai Lama? I know who wins, hands down."

Delivered at a symposium on modern religion it might have gone down well, but Douglas, Jim noticed, was looking around the bar that was becoming busier by the minute. Jim also saw him glance at his watch again. He heard him mutter, "Mmm." Enough was enough, it seemed.

"Do you want more tea, Douglas?"

"No thank you."

"And do you know where Margaret lives?" Jim asked.

Douglas now shifted in his chair. He grabbed at his walking stick as if it was about to fall, which it wasn't.

"Ah, yes. But are you sure about this, Jim?"

"Yes, of course. She's my wife. I know it's a long time and we are both getting older now."

Douglas fidgeted again and his facial expression changed. "But you are divorced, Jim."

The words hit Jim - hard. The shock showed on his face as a sudden widening of his eyes and a lowering of his jaw as his mouth opened. He looked at Douglas across the table. "Divorced?"

"Yes, a year or so ago."

Jim leaned forwards. Douglas leaned backwards, away from him, as if in need of a safe distance. "You left her, Jim. You disappeared. It was separation or desertion, or so I understand."

Jim sat, his mouth open, the need of dentistry on show. He tugged at his beard, looked at Douglas and then down at the table. It was not that the possibility had not occurred to him. The thought that he might now be a divorced man had, like all things, been given his normal, deep and analytical consideration. Even on the plane he had wondered what he would think and how he would react if he knew the answer. But as he did not know the answer, the impact on him could not be imagined. He had not allowed the likely effect to penetrate deeply enough to worry him and had fought it back. In fact, he had not considered how he would feel or how he would live his life under such circumstances. It was as though his inner conscience had been trying to protect him and that it had decided that it was easier and less bothersome to remain in a state of not knowing.

But he now knew the truth and it was so sudden in coming. He was a divorced man, a divorcee and for Jim that meant the stigma and shame attached to the word.

Divorced was a title conferred on those who had failed. The fact that more than one in three marriages ended in such a way was in no way comforting. The word was ugly. It was a word that meant mistakes had been made, relationships soured, that there had been unresolved differences and an incompatibility and it said that the legal profession, an intruding outside body of professionals, had been brought in for a fee to apply their cold, bureaucratic wisdom to a highly personal matter and had, after due consideration, pronounced the relationship finished and, irretrievably, broken down. Documents had been drawn up and signed, at least by one party.

"Have you seen her, Douglas?" Again, he noticed the delay in Douglas's reply. Despite the distraction of the sudden news, Jim saw the look that appeared on Douglas's face and how he looked away. Douglas was embarrassed. Why?

"Yes," Douglas said nervously. "Megan used to talk to her. Woman to woman chats. Megan was ill at the time, you see."

"And since Megan died?"

"She's, ah, well."

"So where is she living. Can you tell me?"

"Are you sure you know what you are doing, Jim?"

Jim disliked the suggestion and his irritation showed. "Yes, damn it. Of course."

"I see. Then I suppose I must give you a phone number."

"I need to see her, Douglas, not speak on the telephone. She might refuse to see me and I could not stand that."

"Call her first, Jim. It would be better." He put his hand inside his jacket and withdrew a small black address book, scribbled something and tore a page out. "There," he said, "though I am not sure it's a good idea."

"Why do you say that, Douglas?"

"It's dredging up the past, Jim. Sometimes it is best to put things aside and move on. Shrug and turn the page as I said earlier."

There was an uncomfortable silence for a minute. But then:

"Douglas," Jim said abruptly. Douglas almost jumped. "Do you remember Anne?"

"Anne? Anne who?"

"Anne McAllister, a Parliamentary researcher. I had been an MP for a few months and suddenly it was suggested I might benefit from a research assistant. Up crops Anne McAllister, Scottish, fairly recently married to an art dealer. She'd worked in Brussels for a while. Degree in sociology I think."

"Ah, yes," said Douglas. "I think I remember."

"What did you think of her?"

Douglas looked confused. "I probably only met her once - you introduced me because she came into your office. Why do you ask?"

"It doesn't matter. Forget I asked."

CHAPTER 48

Tom was not in the hotel when Jim returned to the hotel in Windsor and so he went to his room, looked at himself in the mirror, didn't much like what he saw and lay on the bed. Margaret was on his mind, but so were Jonathan and Jan. He decided to go for a walk around Windsor, breath some fresh air, find a distraction, then go back to check if Tom had turned up.

He walked for half an hour, felt cold and returned. Still there was no Tom. He sat on the bed. "Well, I suppose I can't put it off forever." He reached for his jacket, removed the mobile phone from the already sagging side pocket, then dug deeper for the slip of paper from Douglas. He stared at it a while, took a deep breath and pressed the numbers. The phone clicked. There was a pause and then a voice.

It was a voice that he knew - such a familiar sound. It was a voice that had accompanied him everywhere for forty years, a voice he now realized he had sometimes failed to hear. A clear and feminine voice, perhaps older now, but still softly accented by the Bristol upbringing. It was a voice that flashed memories at him so vividly. It called him to come down from upstairs on a Sunday morning. There was the faintly talking radio and the desk in his small home office. There was the kitchen and the smell of cooking of Sunday lunch. He was reading by the bedroom window, clean sheets and sunlight, the freshly mown lawn. Just an instant but backwards in time.

He choked and his voice was gone. He forced himself to find it. "Hello. Margaret?"

There was nothing. Had he imagined it? But then. "Jim?"

He swallowed hard. "Yes. Yes, Margaret. It's me."

"But....Where? What on earth....?"

"I have come home."

"But how? When?"

"I met Douglas today. I was sorry to hear about Megan." It was all he could think to say and he waited in silence. Then he could wait no longer. "Margaret?"

She spoke again. "I'm sorry. I can't believe it. Why, after all this time?"

"Why." Jim said. It was more of a statement. Did he know why he had come home? He had thought he did, it seemed clear a few days ago. "Why?" he said it again, this time as a question but perhaps to give him time to remember. "There are things I want to sort out. Unfinished business." Business? Did he have to use that word so soon?

"But why?"

"Because it was not right." There was silence but for a faint breathing. "Douglas told me something today," he paused. "I did not know, Margaret. Until today I did not know. I always felt as though, maybe, just maybe, one day...." He stopped, uncertain, swallowing hard. Margaret. I must see you."

"Why? After all this time? Over three years, Jim. Without a single word." He heard her sniff but waited. She was right of course, he knew that. "No, I can't. I don't understand," she went on.

"But neither do I, Margaret. I stopped understanding almost four years ago and still I don't understand. I saw problems and possible reasons for difficulties but it was not so bad, Margaret. Was it? Just a temporary problem. It would have blown over."

"It's over, Jim. Finished." The tone was surprisingly strong. "I don't understand why you have called. I thought it was.....my God, Jim. You call. Out of the blue. No warning. No news from you for years and suddenly you call."

"But, can we not talk now? Is it so wrong to try to talk? To understand? How are you? I need to know. Every day I want to know."

He heard her sniff again. "Please, Jim. What is all this nonsense about? Why now, of all times?"

"I've been away," he repeated, as though it was fresh news. He realized the absurdity, but his mind was racing now. He had so much to say and the thought that she might just switch the phone off dominated his side thoughts. "But now I have come back. I want to renew my campaign. Provide the evidence. But I have also come to see you. I still do not understand what went wrong."

He came to a sudden halt. He had always been utterly useless at this sort of thing. It was why he'd put it off for so long and he'd probably already ruined everything anyway. Relationships were not like other things. "Margaret, are you still there?"

"Yes."

"Can we meet, just talk? There is so much I don't understand about why you stopped supporting me. I need to know, Margaret. It still bothers me so deeply. I always tried my best for us. I know I have my shortcomings and I made countless mistakes and errors over the years. But I don't understand what finally went so wrong. Was it the pressure, Margaret? Was it the hounding of the press? Was it the politics? What was it, Margaret?"

There was silence from the other side but he could hear soft breathing and a rustling sound. "Margaret? Please. Talk to me. Don't leave me like this."

Now he remembered those same, identical words he had used four years ago. Margaret lying on the bed after an outburst, the one that started the downward spiral of their close and loving relationship.

"Where are you, Jim?" Her voice was calm. He was encouraged.

"Staying near London. I flew back yesterday."

"So where are you living?"

"South East Asia."

"Where? Asia is huge."

"Oh, just a small place in the countryside, backing onto the hills, lovely views....."

The entire conversation probably lasted three minutes. To Jim it felt like an hour.

Finally: "So, can I come to see you, Margaret?" He heard the phone squeak as if her hand might, like his, be sweaty and damp.

"I really don't think it's a good idea, Jim. Certainly not here. Neutral ground, perhaps, so to speak."

She sounded very much in control. Jim was pleased but also surprised and concerned. She sounded different, more in charge. "Whatever you say. Wherever is convenient."

"Bristol. Clifton. The Bridge Hotel. You know it? One o'clock. Lunch time. Monday."

"Fine. Lunch time Monday it is."

Jim heard the 'phone click, switched his own off and fell back with his head on the pillow. He felt tired, hot, his heart was pounding and his chest hurt a little. Then there was a knock on the door that made him jump and did nothing to improve his throbbing head. He wiped some wetness from his cheeks, sat up, put his bare feet on the floor and stood up. There was another knock. He felt dizzy and supported himself for a moment with his hand on the wall before going to the door. "Coming."

"Jim." Tom came into the room or, at least, part way. It was in almost complete darkness except for the orange light from a street lamp outside. "Been asleep, have you?"

"No, not at all. Wide awake."

Tom switched the light on. "Are you OK, Jim?" Tom peered at him like a doctor on an evening tour of sick patients. "You're not about to have another funny turn, are you?"

"I'm fine."

"Did you meet your friend?"

"Yes."

"Good meeting?"

"We reminisced."

"Well, that's good, so it is. But I've not been busy socialising. I rang a friend who phoned someone else and I now know more about Polly. She's Pollyanna Andersen and she lives in Stockholm."

"So quick?" Jim's sad-looking eyes widened.

"Did I not tell you I was more cut out for investigative reporting than camping outside politician's apartments?"

CHAPTER 49

"I'd like to introduce Tom Hanrahan," Jim said.

It was late morning, Saturday, and Jim and Tom had been waiting in the lobby of the big, anonymous hotel near Heathrow Airport for Jonathan and Jan to arrive - Jan from Amsterdam, Jonathan from north London. Preliminaries over, Tom spoke to Jan.

"I thought Jim said you lived in Brussels not Amsterdam."

"Yes," replied Jan, "But I'm being watched and checked. I thought if I told as many people as possible that I was going to Amsterdam for the weekend and then got in my car, drove there and caught a flight from Schiphol, it might just put off any followers."

It was Tom's first understanding of the risks Jan was taking.

"Who is checking on me is a mystery," Jan continued. "He or she could be sat at the desk next to me - a totally innocent employee fed on such a diet of suspicion that you are required to spy on work mates."

"It's as bad as that?" Jim asked.

"Sure. It happened to me in my first week. I was called to a meeting with four or five others for a two-hour session on security, secrecy and confidentiality. Vigilance was the word they wrote up on the white board. And it works. Someone knows what I do, where I go and who I see socially. It's probably passed along a chain. Guido even knew about my meetings with Katrine. She spent the night with me - just once. Days later, Guido knew."

"Dear Mother of God," Tom said.

Jan shrugged. "I'm trying to appear just as trustworthy to my corrupt handlers as my official employer so I'm living a lie."

Tom again: "Tell me about this Italian - the Guido fellow."

"A short, fat, sinister little guy in a suit who should sing soprano parts in Italian opera. Guido sits close to, or at, the centre of the web. But there are others, maybe many others involved. He calls them 'members' but who the members are is another mystery. But I think he's key to unravelling the whole organisation. Eischmann might be untouchable, at least to start with, but the organisation is international with individuals - the so-called 'members' - not necessarily aware of the structure behind it. But once you've got the structure in place....." Jan opened his arms.

"There are thousands of people out there looking to take bribes, commissions or big, fat fees for fixing things," he went on. "They are the ones with suits, shirts and ties. Then there are those who get their hands dirty, those who steal equipment, food, medical supplies or anything else and sell it for cash."

The discussion between the four men took in lunch and went on until well into the afternoon.

"So where do we take it, Jim?" Jonathan finally asked. "That's the dilemma. Since you, Jan and I first met in Amsterdam I still feel we're at the stage of gathering evidence. I'm risking my business but Jan is risking his life. Jan and I had a few ideas about using the Sierra Leone bid as a test case, but we'll just have to wait and see. We're using mobile phones that only the two of us know about, but I live in dread of late-night calls from Jan when I'm supposed to be cozying up to my wife. She already thinks Puff and Slush are a couple of exotic dancers at an African night club I've started going to with a Nigerian man called Jacob."

Jim had listened for almost three hours. It had been mostly for the benefit of Tom to see at first-hand what was going on. But then the conversation moved on to what they should do next.

"If it was action to issue arrest warrants," Jim said, "we could go to the Home Office and get Interpol involved. But we still don't have enough evidence. And if they saw me sitting behind it like a ghost from the past you can just imagine the ridicule."

"So that approach is a nonstarter at present but I'm wondering whether an organisation like the ICC - the International Chamber of Commerce's Commercial Crime Services and the Financial Investigation Bureau or even the Serious Fraud Office - the SFO - might help. Their role is just what we're talking about here -

commercial crime; fraud in international trade, financial instrument fraud, money laundering, shipping fraud. It might be worth checking the ICC out Jonathan. Join them - it's a membership organisation. Joining might also help deflect any future suggestions that you are involved in fraud yourself. Come clean with them, say you suspect fraud linked to some of the innocent help and advice you are giving. No need to be specific.

"And one reason for me coming back is to start more covert investigations. Tom and I will deal with that and we'll start with Guido - perhaps travel to Holland, check the Delft apartment."

Tom jumped in.

"Careful Jim. Think what you're saying." He turned to Jan and Jonathan. "Here speaks the man who I only met because I watched him collapse on the floor just a few days ago. And I'm still not so sure if he knows what the diagnosis was. It was me who scooped him up but he really needs a proper check up with a cardiologist."

Jim waved his arm dismissively.

"I'll just keep taking the medicine, Tom." Then, to the other two: "So what do you think of our new recruit, Mr Hanrahan? Do you think he'll enhance the team? It's his big chance as an investigative journalist and he's sworn to secrecy until we've got a sound case. His job is the undercover work, but his CV isn't good. He's already failed once. What is it you call an incompetent Irish paparazzi? A green reporter?"

Tom, fortunately, laughed. "Ah, yes. But beware if someone gets in my way and I don't like them."

"That's true. It's why he became a friend. I've known him for almost two weeks and, fortunately, we've not yet fallen out."

"So how long are you staying here?" Jan asked Jim.

"As long as it takes, I suppose. I have one private matter to sort out but this business is my top priority."

The three other men watched him as, his rare humour died as quickly as it had arrived. He glanced away and appeared to shake his head and frown.

Amongst the wispy strands of the grey beard, his lips were clearly moving. Yes, I know, Margaret. I've said it now. But you must understand, Margaret. It is about professional reputation and integrity. I have to prove I was right - before it is too late. He looked up, saw the others watching and snapped out of it.

"But I'd like to meet your FBI friend, Jonathan - Scott Evora," Jim said. "At least he won't be part of the local establishment."

CHAPTER 50

As Jim, Tom, Jonathan and Jan continued their meeting in London, somewhere in Italy Guido was taking a bath. As he wallowed in deep, white foam listening to Puccini's Tosca he heard his phone ringing. Turning the opera volume down with a remote, he leaned over to retrieve the phone. Then he lost his soap.

"Yah." There was a pause as Guido switched on the loudspeaker function and, still searching frantically for the lost soap with one hand, listened with the other short, white arm holding the phone above the thick layer of scented bubbles.

"So why has Mr Moses phoned you, Toni? And why do you phone me when I am in the bath? It is very inconvenient. The soap gets into my phone and it echoes like the Duomo di Milano in here. I can sing opera here - Puccini, Tosca, La Boheme - because the acoustics are like La Scala, but I cannot always hear the bloody phone.

"OK, wait. I am getting out of the bath. I feel very naked when I am in the bath and speaking on the telephone. Where is my towel? And my bottle of Sassicaia Yes, now I have it. Mmm. Now, what is the problem, my flower."

Guido was sitting, wrapped in a vast white towel with his short legs crossed on a stool next to the bath and a white table with his bottle of wine. First, he sipped but then he spat.

"This, Toni, is gross incompetence. We cannot upset customers like Mr Moses. How has this happened? It was quite clear. Mr Moses was to receive the boxes of water purifiers, valued at a mere 34,300 dollars as part of his much larger contract with us. It was just a small shipment. Easy. Simple.

"Why is it that we can successfully ship pharmaceuticals and baby foods worth over 365,000 dollars to him that have cost us nothing except the cost of an invoice and on which he will make at least thirty percent when he sells it to Liberia and yet a few boxes of water purifiers.....fuck! It is a mess, Toni. And we must sort it quickly. I do not want to lose our water purifiers to bastard thieves at Freetown customs. The thieves are supposed to enjoy the fruits of their thieving by reading old copies of the Corriere della Sera. That was the plan. Someone is to blame, Toni. Mr Moses does not want old newspapers."

There was a pause as he listened, his spare hand playing with bubbles.

"Yes, Toni. You must sort it. Immediately. But do not go away, Toni. I have something else to ask you. What has happened with Cherry Picking? I have heard nothing from you.....They are still not answering your calls? This is very bad. We must not lose this Sierra Leone project you understand? Guido hates failing. There is a stigma attached to failure. It is as if we are foolish and incompetent. We must not fail on this one, OK? And another thing. Silvester the investor. Have we made contact?.....Good. Well done, flower. Now fuck off and sort out Signor Moses."

Guido unravelled himself from the huge towel and stepped into the bath again.

CHAPTER 51

Jan was ready to leave the hotel to catch his flight back to Amsterdam but Jim was anxious to thank him once again for what he was doing.

"I'm suddenly becoming a rich man, Jim. But it's dirty money and I don't want it. And I still don't fully understand the loan system that Guido explained. It sounds more like a bribe with strings attached, like blackmail, a hidden threat. I don't know what to do with it. It's sitting there in my account and each time I look at it I wish I'd never offered to help. But then I think again and I know exactly why I'm doing it. Do you understand?"

Jim nodded.

Standing behind them, Jonathan's mobile rang. He excused himself but was straight back. "FBI - Scott Evora," he said. "He wants another chat. I said I was tied up at present but I'd call him back. And Jacob Johnson has left a message so I might need more excuses to give Claire for another night of debauchery with my Nigerian friend."

With that, Jan left in the taxi, the others returned to the lobby and Jonathan made his phone calls as Jim and Tom listened. First up was Jacob Johnson.

"You still in London, Jacob?.....Yes, everything is OK. We've already submitted the Sierra Leone bid and we've had a formal acknowledgement. My contact there thinks we might be required to present more information but.....yes, yes, this is quite normal.....As for the bid for your Lebanese associates - the Education funds bid - this still needs some more work. Give me a week or so on that, OK? And please chase your letters of support from Beirut. We'll get nowhere without those."

Jonathan finished the call and nodded to Jim and Tom.

"He seems content enough. And Jan might get to see this Sierra Leone, Sulima Construction bid on Monday as he's on duty with the Economic Aid West Africa - EAWA - committee. But it's too early yet to decide how we might use it to prove anything fraudulent on the funds side. I admit, though, it's me who has misbehaved. I've submitted the bid knowing full well that documents are questionable."

Jonathan paused.

"The name of the unheard-of consultant in Sierra Leone is Cherry Pick Investments," he went on. "But the documents they sent over look convincing enough. It's a Lebanese company, registered in Singapore, headquarters in Beirut, offices in Sierra Leone, Lagos and Holland. They've provided a list of projects already completed but I've not had time to check them out. My bet is they'll look feasible on paper but are actually fictitious. Documents show it's been trading for fifteen years but I think it's a start-up. The Minister's signature also looks convincing - so convincing it may be the only thing that's not forged."

Tom shook his head in amazement. Jim looked unfazed.

"Let's now phone the FBI - Scott Evora. Listen in," said Jonathan. He pressed the numbers, waited until the American accent came on and turned on the loudspeaker.

"Ever come across a guy called Silvester Mendes, Jonathan?" Evora began.

"No."

"He's never called you any time?"

"Not that I'm aware of. The staff also take calls."

"Ever advised on overseas aid for Pakistan?"

"Yes, once."

"Afghanistan? Bangladesh?"

"Bangladesh, once or twice."

"Was it European money?"

"Yes."

"And you told me you've never had anything to do with USAID, right?"

"Correct."

"OK, listen up. I'm about to tell you some things that are a bit, what shall I say, unusual. OK? I don't normally say things like this on a phone but we're a bit concerned about this guy, Silvester Mendes - have been for some time. He's black, probably runs around on a couple of US passports that look legit, nice and clean, so he comes and goes as he pleases. He actually runs a private detective agency with a few staff who check hundred percent clean - he's an ex New York cop, by the way, so he knows a few tricks.

"But he was in Islamabad a few times a year or so back - our guys got wind. He met up with a Mullah or two, the CIA were watching. He also met a few Pakistani government members and Central Bank officials. No names, OK - but it was about the time some USAID poured in. Our friend Mendes was posing as someone he wasn't. No names again. But he now seems to know the system well. He's learned a lot by rubbing shoulders with influence in some very foreign places. Not nice influence, get my drift?"

"Anyway, then there was another load of USAID money went in, none of it ended up where it was supposed to. Mendes goes to Islamabad again. We watched him quite recently but still got nothing that'll stick. Mendes then gets on a plane for Dubai and disappears from the radar for a while, six months or so. Turns up back in New York. Says he was on a case down in Miami for nearly six months, undercover - problems with a drug syndicate that involved Afghan and Pakistani taxi drivers - that was the excuse he gave for going to Islamabad when asked. A plausible story as it turned out so, yet again, nothing gets pinned on him. I could tell you more, Jonathan, but I've already said more than I should.

"Now - reason for call. We know he's in London. Right now, he's staying at the Intercontinental Hotel, Park Lane - been there three days already but not doing a lot - spending money, eating, drinking, womanising a bit. But we're planning a few tricks of our own. One of our team is getting close to him. Feedback we're getting is vague - he's clever, wary, keeps cards close to his chest. He's still just an innocent, private investigator on his holidays, or that's his line. But we've tempted him with a few thoughts about international aid funds being available - thrown in mentions of huge sums like 75 million Euros and he's starting to realize that Euros are bigger than dollars and that over here they don't seem so bothered about money going astray." Scott Evora paused. "Are you getting the picture, Jonathan?"

"Yes," Jonathan said, nodding for the benefit of Tom and Jim.

"OK. Will you help us?"

"What on earth can I do?"

"You know this business better than anyone. Jonathan. If you're willing, what we'll do is try fix a meeting for you with him to explain what you do. Suggest in a roundabout way you are very flexible in the way you work - get my meaning, Jonathan?"

"Yes," Jonathan replied thinking he was becoming well used to flexibility since meeting Jacob Johnson. He winked at Jim and Tom.

"You sure you're OK with this, Jonathan? Any problems for you and we'd back you up. OK?"

"Yes, I understand, but, uh, how..."

"But what?" Evora asked.

"Don't you feel you're tinkering a bit with the official role of a Legal Attaché, Scott? I thought the role was co-ordination with host countries not pro-active investigation and intelligence gathering."

"Hmm. Been reading us up?"

"I always research my clients."

"What? I'm now a fucking client of yours?"

"Not a normal one."

"So, what are you saying, Jonathan?"

"I suppose I'll turn a blind eye to your methods in the interests of continuing to build relationships between our two great nations."

"Now who was it said that? So, you're still on?"

"Yes. I help you. You help us."

"Good man. OK, listen. Thanks a million. Sorry to mess your weekend. Where are you? With the family? I'll call you back soon, OK?"

CHAPTER 52

Freetown, Sierra Leone.

Mitchell's boss Mr Suleiman, having said he smelled bad fish and dead rats, was now pulling strings by calling upon friends and acquaintances. He started with a manager at Standard Chartered Bank.

"There is no Daisy Children's Charity in Sierra Leone," said the manager, "Neither is there a charity called Schools Aid, but we checked and there is a charity called Schools Aid for Africa in England. They send second hand laptops to Africa."

Suleiman noted it and went on his way. His next stop was his old school friend Seymour at the Pyramid Bank because he knew they had a branch in Sulima.

"Sulima Construction?" Seymour scratched his head. "I'll phone Wesley in Sulima."

Suleiman sat and waited until: "Wesley says there is no company called Sulima Construction and he has lived in Sulima since he was born."

"Let me speak to Wesley," said Suleiman and took over Seymour's telephone. "My driver has been there so there must be a Sulima Construction. It is by the river, across from the boatyard, a concrete building with a tin roof."

"Ah, no sir, I know that building. It is owned by Cherry Enterprises. It is a warehouse for storing goods before they are put on the boats."

"And who owns Cherry Enterprises, Mr Wesley?" asked Suleiman.

"It is a man called Mr Moses."

"Aha," said Suleiman, smiling and nodding towards Seymour. "And the office of Cherry Enterprises is also in the concrete building?"

"Oh, no, no, sir. Cherry Enterprises has an office in the town. There is Cherry Trading, Cherry Transport, Cherry Industries, Cherry this and Cherry that, sir. So many cherries I cannot remember."

"And Mr Moses owns these companies?"

"Ah well, sir, that I cannot say. Maybe he owns all of them or just some of them, but all of the Cherry companies trade in Liberia and Nigeria and they own many boats by the river."

Suleiman thanked Seymour and Wesley, returned to his office and checked his watch. It was late morning in London - a good time to phone his cousin, Cole.

Cole Harding, distant cousin to Suleiman, a lawyer and senior partner in Fitzgerald, Waterman & Harding was, just as Suleiman imagined, at his desk in his smart office in Brighton, England. Born in Sierra Leone but educated since the age of seven in the UK, Harding had made money for his practice by becoming known amongst the West African community. But he had long ago ditched immigration problems in favour of commercial advice to the increasing numbers of West Africans with businesses. But Harding was selective. He had a nose for a rogue and deeply disliked the fraud and corruption that was rife across West Africa. He had been outspoken about it. "It is the hard-working poor who create the wealth," he had once written in a commercial law magazine, "So why should they be the ones who then suffer from greedy politicians, thieves and corrupt big businesses?"

The keen sense of smell, especially of bad fish and dead rats, ran in the extended Suleiman family and if anything made Cole Harding drop everything for a day or so it was when he smelled something rotten. He quickly understood what Suleiman was saying and noted names, companies and charities. By mid-afternoon he had also spoken to the Charity Commission and the National Fraud Authority about the level of charity fraud. The information, as he had expected, was shocking with the National Fraud Authority estimating that fraud against the charity sector cost over one billion pounds a year.

He spoke to Schools Aid Africa, a small English charity in East Anglia that took free gifts of old laptop computers from the public, made them fit to use, boxed them up and sent them to places like Sierra Leone. "Do they reach their destination?" Harding asked. They didn't know. They hoped so.

"If I told you a consignment you recently sent to Sierra Leone was stolen and resold in Liberia and Nigeria for tens of thousands of dollars what would you say?" They were shocked.

"So who do you deal with in Sierra Leone?" he asked. That was easy. It was Daisy Children's Charity who were not just in Sierra Leone but had branches in Liberia, Nigeria and Ghana. Had they checked Daisy Children's Charity out? Well, no, not thoroughly, after all it was a name given to them by the British Embassy and so was bound to be legitimate. And had they ever meet anyone from Daisy Children's Charity? Oh yes. A nice man called Mr Moses had met them in London two years ago to explain how his charity worked. And how did they send their computers to Sierra Leone when the airport was well known to be a little unreliable. That was easy, also. They had been told to use an Italian freight forwarder who worked with Swiss Air. All they had to do was send the computers to Freeways Freight Forwarding in Milan and they did the rest. They were, after all, a charity, so couldn't be expected to check everything. Resources were thin on the ground.

Being Friday, Cole Harding decided to leave it over the weekend to decide what to do next. By two in the morning on Saturday, though, his thoughts had already moved onto theft of international aid. One report stuck in his mind because, for once, it had been properly investigated - Cambodia and millions of dollars of funds for mosquito nets. The kickback had been fifteen percent with two officials pocketing \$500,000 each and the director responsible getting \$351,000. In the end, the nets were useless because they had not been treated with insecticide.

But fraud like that was widespread and organised. He had seen it himself - double invoicing, false accounting, fictitious trading histories, tenders submitted before they were officially released. By three in the morning he had concluded that the businesses run by the man Moses - Rocki General Supplies, Sulima Construction and a whole list using the name Cherry had all the hallmarks of professional scam organisations. By four in the morning, Harding was at his computer researching fraud in charities and international aid and by Sunday morning he had found a company that, according to their website, specialised in advice on international aid - Walton Associates.

CHAPTER 53

"I'm going to Bristol tomorrow morning."

"Margaret?" Tom asked, hesitantly.

Jim nodded. They were having breakfast and, on advice from Tom that he needed to put on weight, Jim had tried a full English breakfast for the first time for years. The eggs, bacon, sausage, beans and fried tomatoes were already lying heavily.

"What about the paintings, Jim? Any thoughts?"

"Leave it with me." Jim grimaced.

"So," said Tom, getting up, "I'm off to Stockholm."

"And I'm off to be sick," said Jim, but he managed a faint smile.

"Go into Windsor," Tom suggested. "Buy some iced coconut juice and fresh bananas from the side of the road, Jim."

In north London, Jonathan was trying to be helpful around the house. He had a long list - fix a plug, replace a light bulb, sweep the dead leaves. He was sorting trash for recycling when he felt his mobile vibrating in his back pocket. It was Scott Evora.

"My apologies for calling so soon and on a Sunday, Jonathan, but we've got movement on what I spoke to you about yesterday. Can you talk?"

"Sure." Jonathan dumped the trash on the kitchen floor and leaned against the refrigerator as Claire washed dishes from the night before.

"Silvester Mendes. Yeh, him again. Our man got him talking last night. They were in a nightclub somewhere - don't ask, OK. Anyway, our man starts talking European aid money again. Mendes had clearly been giving the subject some thought because he brought the subject up. He then starts asking questions - the who, how, what, where and when. Our man does what he can but he's no expert, right? Admits it. 'Anyway,'

he says to Mendes, 'I know a guy who knows this stuff inside out.' He mentions no names, but Mendes is all ears again. His first question, 'Is this guy official or is he loose?' Know what that means, Jonathan?"

"I suppose he was asking if I'm really a crook," offered Jonathan, feeling Claire's eyes.

"Yep, that's right - means is he as honest as the day is long, is he already a clever, white collar crook like Mendes himself or, if not, could he be tempted to become one. Our man probably shrugs and smiles, says nothing. Let's the smile work. Mendes starts asking more questions - where's all this aid money go, what for, who decides etcetera. Our man mentions Afghanistan, Pakistan, West Africa 'cus he already knows that's just the sort of places Mendes likes.

"Anyway, cut to the chase, Mendes starts getting excited. We already know he's running a bit scared of the US at present - he knows we've been watching him, he's no fool. So, what should he do, he asks himself? Why not shelve the US operation for a while and start up over here, he thinks, after all, London looks OK from his perspective, nice hotels, good clubs, he speaks the language, there's plenty of life going on with people coming and going, immigration controls allow a bit of flexibility, lots of cash being given to far off places. And it's all nice and complicated, too, 'cus it's not just London, it's the whole of Europe and the bureaucracy is just one big beautiful mess - and that's his favourite scene. The messier it is, the better. Mendes works by hiding within a messy system because he uses others you see. He breaks cover sometimes - but only if necessary, because he generally tries operating through others - like when he was spotted in Islamabad.

"You still following me, Jonathan? Good man. Now, listen up. How about it if we give Mendes your phone number? We're not sure how long he's planning to stick around. If he phones you, see what you can do, give him all the shit about the boring daily routine of business advice and consultancy just so as to appear fully compliant etcetera, but then rub in the tastier side, the positives, the side that gets you excited - you know - the alternative ways and means to make a decent living. Suggest a few best places he could start. Give a few examples. Make them up if necessary. Just go with the flow. Go fishing, Jonathan. Help us hook him. Meet him if you feel comfortable but play him along. Keep us posted and we'll try fixing him up good and proper. And don't worry. I'll make sure your name is logged here as one of our team of local co-operatives. How does it sound?"

Jonathan thought about Jan, Jim and Tom and took a deep breath. If they could show the FBI was getting interested, might it help their case? Yes, probably, he decided. And he was sure Jim would agree. And what might Scott Evora think if he got to meet Jim and so know the extent of their own investigations. That part might need thinking about but they were in this thing up to their necks already. Yes, give it a day or so, he thought, and he'd fix it for Jim to get introduced to the FBI Legal Attaché's office.

"OK," Jonathan said. "Let's give it a go. I hate greed, fraud and corruption. We'd all be a lot better off if we could stamp at least some of it out." Jonathan saw Claire shake her head and take off her rubber gloves.

"Good man. OK, we'll do the rest. Let us know if he phones. Oh, and by the way - very important - if you talk to him or go along to meet him, he's Lucas Valdez, OK?"

We and you know he's actually Silvester Mendes but to you he's Lucas, OK? So, don't start calling him Silvester or we're all fucked." And then he laughed.

Jonathan joined in knowing he was bad at remembering names but it was a warning he'd not thought of. He retrieved the bag of recyclable trash and took it outside.

"Who was that, Jon?" Claire asked, following him.

"FBI," said Jonathan.

"Don't be stupid. Did you change that light bulb?"

Jonathan's mind, though, was not on light bulbs but on Jim. From behind the trash bins, he phoned him with another quick update.

CHAPTER 54

On Monday morning Jim took a taxi, a train to Bristol and another taxi to the hotel overlooking the Avon Gorge. Taking a seat by the window, he ordered coffee and told staff he was expecting to be joined by someone for lunch. Then he waited, looking at his watch and occasionally walking to the lobby and back. He felt nervous. But at ten minutes past one he looked, yet again, towards the doorway.

An elderly lady entered carrying a small handbag and wearing a navy-blue skirt cream coloured blouse and a matching blue silk scarf tied neatly at her neck. She wore low, heeled shoes, her hair was grey and she stood motionless in the doorway. Jim was sure it was Margaret. It was her height and slim build. So, he got up from his seat, knocking the glass table top and spilling his coffee as he did so. Then he walked towards her holding out his hands.

Margaret saw the movement but stayed where she was as Jim did his best to smile. And as he drew nearer, he saw that her eyes stared at him as though she was not sure who it was. There was no recognition, no sign of a welcome and no hint that she might at least walk, just a step forward, to greet him.

Jim's voice that spoke her name was far smaller and quieter than he wanted it to be, but his eyes stung and his throat hurt. It was still hurting when he arrived back in Windsor.

CHAPTER 55

Tuesday morning and Jim didn't feel well.

He put it down to the effect of seeing Margaret, but the morning headache had returned and when he left his room to find a newspaper to read, he felt dizzy. Worried that he was about to collapse again, he found a seat in the lobby and slumped into it. "Don't collapse here you old fool, not now, not yet. Why don't you just try some strong sweet coffee?"

He ordered some without getting up, drank three capfuls whilst reading some depressing news about terrorists in the Middle East, but felt better. "Fresh air is what you need now - blow the cobwebs away, clear the sinuses."

He left the newspapers and went to the door, but had hardly gone a few paces when a gust of cold, October wind caught his unbuttoned suit jacket and penetrated through his shirt to his skin. "Dear me, I'd forgotten how darned cold it gets here.

Perhaps I need to don my thick woolly jumper, mother. Except I don't have one. And what's that noise?"

The ringing coming from his jacket pocket was a call from Jonathan.

"I'm meeting this American guy Silvester Mendes tonight - he phoned me, just like Scott Evora thought he might. Very brief call, nothing discussed, just a meeting fixed. But he's not calling himself Silvester Mendes, he's Lucas Valdez."

"Are you comfortable doing that, Jonathan?"

"No, but we're in this so deep now that I'm starting to believe that fraud is my real business. But I think you should now talk to Scott Evora, Jim. Think about it. He's not UK political class or establishment and I think he'd be very interested in what you've got to say. But he knows nothing about what we're up to Jim - yet. Just remember that."

Jim had already decided. "Go ahead, Jonathan. Fix it."

"And another thing, Jim. Before meeting Mendes, Scott's fitting me up with what he calls, some security."

"What's that?"

"A device concealed upon my person. But it's given me an idea that might help Jan."

Still shivering, Jim turned and walked the few steps back to the hotel entrance where a London taxi was drawing up outside. It was Tom who was paying the driver. Seeing Jim, he grabbed the sleeve of his jacket.

"Success, Jim," he announced, "Come inside.... I've traced Pretty Polly, Jim."

"So quick?"

"Sure. I'm an investigative reporter, don't forget. With a wink and a nod from someone I used to know, it was so easy. I'm beginning to wish I'd gone solo years ago."

"Did they want to know why you wanted to find her?"

"I bullshitted, but my contact had spoken to Polly years ago. He told me there was a general view that it was a put-up job. After all, it is not unknown to lay traps for unwary politicians or others just for the story - a sex scandal or corruption. But this one, he said, looked more complicated and he agreed with me there was some muscle and big money behind it, not just someone on a tight budget. Let's have a beer, Jim, I've got more to tell you."

"I think a coffee would be far kinder on my stomach."

"Still suffering from last Sunday's breakfast, Jim? OK, let's sit..... Polly has come up trumps, Jim, and she's a nice girl.....And how was Margaret, Jim?"

There was a fired up look in Tom's eye that Jim had not seen before, but he wanted to avoid the subject of Margaret at all costs. "You actually met Polly, you Irish scoundrel?"

"Sure, I did. She's twenty-four, married to a Swede who has his own fashion business, which she helps run. I met her at their shop. But as soon as I told her just the smallest bit about you, she cried, Jim. That's not to say I didn't rub it in a bit strong you understand. I told her you had been forced to leave UK, which she

seemed to know. But she suddenly said to me she wanted to speak up now because things had prayed on her conscience for too long."

Jim listened but said nothing as Tom went on. "She made a thousand pounds, Jim, and all she had to say when asked was that the man she had entertained for a few nights was the one in a picture she was shown and then talk about her own life. She lied, Jim, lied for the sake of a thousand pounds."

Jim still said nothing. A waitress brought a tray of coffee and Tom was still talking.

"So last night, with her permission, I taped a full-length interview with her and she has promised to confirm it all independently but only if anyone asks. It was voluntary, Jim, and I believe her when she said she felt ashamed of what she had done. But a thousand pounds to a young, aspiring and attractive nineteen-year-old with the usual ambitions for fame and popularity, is a temptation - particularly if you never consider the implications for others."

"Who gave her the money?"

"A woman, she said."

"Did you get a name?"

"Someone called Anne." Tom stopped, looked at Jim. "That's all she knew - Anne. Are you feeling OK, Jim?"

"Yes," Jim said, "I am now. I felt a little lightheaded earlier on."

"Do you know anyone called Anne?"

"Oh, yes. It just confirms my suspicions." Jim made a deep, audible sigh and shivered.

"You feeling the cold, Jim?"

"I took a stroll to clear my head but the damned wind nearly ripped the jacket from my shoulders and I see it's raining now. I hate this damned suit, Tom. I think I'll buy myself what my mother used to call a nice woolly jumper."

"Then we must go shopping again. But you must take it easy Jim. Can't have you collapsing again just as we're getting somewhere."

"But we now need to fly to Brussels. I haven't been to Delft for years. Let's see what we can find out about Guido."

"Jim, why not leave that to me. I'll fly over this afternoon. You stay here and continue to act as head of whistle-blowing - the whistle-blowers co-ordinator-in-chief."

Jim smiled, scratched his head and felt the elastic band that held the long grey hair together at the back, snap. Hair fell across his shoulders.

"We'd better add elastic bands to the woolly jumper, Tom. I had no idea travelling abroad would be so expensive." He almost smiled. "OK, decision made. You go. I'm going to talk to the FBI. And that's my phone ringing if I'm not mistaken. It can only be Jonathan."

It was.

"Jim, more developments in the last half hour. I've had a phone call from a lawyer in Brighton - Cole Harding. He was fishing for views on fraud and corruption related to charities and international aid. What could I do but give him a few statistics,

percentages going astray etcetera? My part finished; I ask why his interest. He then mentions his West African links - he was born in Sierra Leone - and has some very strong views on fraud and corruption. He asked me how it all works and I thought I'd better not miss an opportunity to tell him about Walton Associates.

"Do you ever come across attempts at fraud, he asks. Sure, I say, but we're selective in who we work for. Then I said, listen, I'm a bit busy right now but do you want to chat further? I'd never said that to a lawyer before - it's usually them telling me to call back or make an appointment because they're tied up. He agreed but then, clever lawyer tactics, he asks if I've ever dealt with Sierra Leone or Liberia. I say, yes - as it happens, I'm dealing with one right now.

"Then Jim, he really throws one at me. Ever heard of a company called Cherry Investments or Sulima Construction, he asks. I think for a second then say yes. And are they perfectly law abiding would you say, he asks me. That, Mr Harding, I said, is not something I could possibly discuss on the phone because they have just become a client, but if you have any reasons to suspect them of anything then perhaps, you'd like to enlighten me. Then he suggests we meet. I've agreed."

"Interesting," Jim said.

"And I've also fixed it for you to meet Scott Evora," Jonathan continued. "I didn't say much to him except to suggest he checks politics of a few years ago and Googles James Edward Smith, MP. Jim Smith is a friend of mine, I said."

Jim glanced at Tom sitting across the table. "So, when is my appointment with the FBI?"

"Tomorrow morning, 11am, Alfredo's cafe bar, Brook Street, just off Grosvenor Square."

"Fine, I'll be there. And Tom's just got back from Stockholm, Jonathan with some good news. I'll brief him. He's sat here finishing a cup of coffee. Then he's going straight back to Heathrow Airport, getting a flight to Amsterdam or Brussels and then driving to Delft."

CHAPTER 56

"Yes, of course I spoke to Mr Eischmann. And I didn't like what he told me."

Guido, rotating his big office chair and chewing on a pen seemed ready to sob. He sniffed, swallowed hard, then mumbled like a child.

"Those Cherry-Picking bastards ignored us, Toni," he said between sniffs. "Even after I bought them pizza and paid for them to stay at the Park Hyatt Hotel - two single rooms with breakfast. - they have gone behind our backs. But they were so naive, Toni. They knew nothing. And after I told them to be more ambitious, what do they do? They stab us in the back by talking to a fucking Nigerian and now they've put in a bid for 35 million Euros. Imagine, Toni. 35 million Euros. That almost beats our record.

"And Mr Moses is very mad. He thinks it was me who caused him to receive two hundred boxes containing old copies of Corriere della Sera instead of his water purifiers."

He took a deep, audible breath as if trying to pull himself together. "So, Guido is very upset and angry this morning because he could not sleep last night. His head, it hurts. He is very stressed."

The sniffing stopped abruptly. Instead, he started to giggle.

"But I like being stressed," he chirped as if a lost toy had suddenly been returned. "Whenever a little failure looms, Guido strikes back. Guido will never allow a mark of disgrace to be written on his forehead. So, you too, my flower, must wash away the dirty stain left by a tiny loss and together we will now show that it is not we who are the incompetent fools. It is others who have made a serious error of judgement.

"Stress, my precious flower, led to another new idea and another clever solution. So, when I spoke to Mr Eischmann I proposed a very simple solution to the problem of the fucking Cherry Pick bastards. You will see. A big revenge is the cure for a little failure."

CHAPTER 57

The Tuesday meeting of the Economic Aid to West Africa (EAWA) committee was in Room 4/116 and, as always, Dirk Eischmann had settled himself alongside Katrine.

"I hope it's not a long agenda, Katrine. I have a flight booked at 6pm, so let's not encourage too much discussion."

"We have three new bids for stage one assessment. Mr Eischmann," Katrine said. "These have already been circulated and, as you know, committee members are required to be fully au fait with them before attending this meeting. So, minimal discussion followed by a straight vote I would think."

"Good, and how's the new committee member, Jan Kirkman doing now? Showing promise?"

"Yes, Mr Eischmann. He seems very knowledgeable."

"Seeing him socially?"

Katrine didn't look up, but she knew Eischmann was looking at her. "Our paths cross sometimes," she said, trying to hide her shock at the question. What, she wondered, was going on here?

"So," Eischmann said, now turning his attention to the pile of papers. "We'll be signing off the Ghana, Mali and Congo bids. That is what? Almost twenty-six million Euros. Then we'll move onto the three new ones."

It took an hour to come to the new bid written by Jonathan. Katrine, as usual, summarised it before opening it up for discussion. Jan, from his seat around the table, listened.

"This last project - it's the one titled 'Eco Tourism Project, Sulima, Sierra Leone' - you will all have seen it - is seeking some thirty-five million Euros. This has been submitted by Walton Associates in the UK. It looks ambitious, but they have provided three full pages of statistics ending with projections for tourist numbers - again you might consider the numbers ambitious - but they've also submitted estimates for the future value to the country's economy, evidence of local construction capability - a company called Sulima Construction - and three separate letters of official support

from local and national government including two letters signed by the Minister for Tourism and the Minister for Trade. These letters confirm the Sierra Leone Government's contribution of 3.5 million Euros. So, we have what looks like sound government support and a commitment to contribute. The project is to be managed by a company called Cherry Pick Investments, Freetown, Sierra Leone." She stopped. "Anyone have any initial questions or comments?"

It was Eischmann himself who jumped.

"Yes," he said without looking up. "Cherry Pick Investments. I've never heard of them. What do they do?"

"It's in the documentation, Mr Eischmann. Construction projects, consultants, advisers especially to hotels and the leisure industry. And, according to the references shown, they are well known to the Chinese Embassy. The information also shows they have offices in Lebanon, Lagos and Holland as well as Sierra Leone. We have names of the Lebanese directors."

"Yes, yes, but it's not enough. And Sulima Construction? Who are they? We need to ask for more information. The Chinese letter also needs translating. I would like to put this project on hold until we have more. Does everyone agree?"

As usual when Eischmann was the first to express an opinion, there were nods and murmurs of agreement. Jan, unwilling to stand out, also nodded his assent. But he already sensed that Eischmann was taking steps to stifle this one. Similar questions could have been asked of the previous two bids. So why this one? Jan couldn't help it. He looked at Katrine and caught her eye.

At five thirty, from outside in the street and on the designated mobile phone, Jan called Jonathan about Eischmann's decision on the Sierra Leone bid.

"For some reason, Jonathan, he took a dislike to the bid. No doubt you'll hear formally in due course, but you can expect a request for more information on both Cherry Pick Investments. and Sulima Construction. There were two other bids prior to that one and neither of them got any questions - both were passed. So why?"

"Could this be Guido's doing?" Jonathan surmised. "We know from Jacob Johnson that Guido was deliberately bypassed by the two Lebanese. They thought he was crazy. So, has Guido decided to get his own back, to get even, to take revenge by telling Eischmann to put the boot in and clobber the bid."

"That's exactly my thinking," replied Jan. "And I've had another message from the dog in the park. It seems my training in the art of hacking the treasury is not complete. I've got an evening rendezvous in Delft on Thursday."

"In that case, Tom needs to know." Jonathan suggested. "He's on his way to Delft right now. Perhaps he might get a look at Guido himself."

CHAPTER 58

Tom had taken a taxi straight back to Heathrow Airport, this time for Amsterdam. Jim walked into the town, purchased a thick brown sweater, a packet of elastic bands and returned to his room. But he couldn't settle. For a while he sat thinking, but then went to his bag of paintings, transferred some into a plastic laundry bag he

found in a drawer, pulled the sweater on, took a taxi to the station, a train to London and another taxi to an address in Kensington.

It was late afternoon when he arrived at the Ashton Art Gallery.

He remembered it with green window frames and green door, but everything was now white. He pushed the door and a buzzer sounded as he went inside, up two steps and on to a plush royal blue carpet. The pure white walls were covered, tastefully, with abstract oil paintings, one corner dominated by a large potted fern and another by a table with white, porcelain figures of ballet dancers. As he stood for a moment, the buzzing still in his ears, a woman appeared from a desk behind a screen at the rear. She had long black hair, light brown skin and wore a long, yellow silk skirt with a wide, black belt and black. Malaysian or Thai Jim thought.

"Good afternoon, sir. Can I help you?"

Jim looked at her and could not help but remember Noy. It was as if it was Noy standing there. Noy wearing expensive clothes.

"Good afternoon." He looked at her, up and down, and then glanced around the walls. "I used to know Hugh McAllister quite well," he said. "I was wondering if he would see me."

"Mr McAllister will be back very soon, sir. May I help you in the meantime?"

Jim's eyes were still roving around the walls. Abstracts. Big and small. Wall decorations. He walked over to examine one more closely as the woman watched him, nervously. Perhaps it was his beard and long hair, Jim thought, although he himself also felt a little apprehensive as if he was a poor and struggling artist desperate for someone to enthuse about his work as though his livelihood and the survival of a young family might depend upon a favourable response.

"Yes, perhaps," he said. "I have brought along a few pieces of my work for Hugh to see. Perhaps I can show them to you while we await his return."

"It would probably be best if you show Mr McAllister rather than me."

Jim couldn't help looking at her big brown eyes, long lashes and thick, black eyebrows, and he recognised the accent. She saw him looking at her and looked away. Her lips were full and pink and then he remembered her. "You are from Malaysia?"

"Yes," she said and looked back at him, smiling, pleased.

"But you have lived here for some time now?"

"Yes, my husband is English. He works in the city."

"Are you from Penang?"

"Yes, how did you know?"

"Did you once work at the Ambassador Hotel?"

"Yes. How do you know?"

"I stayed there once."

"Ah," she said, smiling. "I once worked in the restaurant."

"I remember," he said.

"You have a good memory."

"For some things."

"May I ask how long did you stay in Malaysia?" she said.

"In the hotel for just two days but I stayed in the area for longer. I returned on Thursday. I have been away since then."

Jim could remember her even more clearly now. It had been during the days of a Sunday newspaper interview given by Margaret. He had lain on his hotel bed reading it, over and over again. Then he had gone down to dinner.

In the restaurant, this woman was the waitress and he had ordered grilled fish. He was amazed how clearly that he could remember all this despite the effects of Tiger beer. He remembered looking at the fish, then at the tablecloth and trying to find his bottle, which was six inches from his plate. He had been fully aware of his condition and had looked at her, up and down, just like now. It was this same girl who had started him thinking about the point of continued faithfulness. He had not made any advances towards her, although he remembered, just, amidst the alcoholic haze, being sorely tempted. But it was she who had set his thoughts in motion. He could also remember something else.

"Your name is Melissa, am I right?"

"That is amazing. How did you remember that?"

Jim looked at her and tried to smile. "I have always been grateful to you, you see. You started me on a long process of readjustment in my life. It is still going on, but I am grateful for the small, perhaps unwitting, part you played."

"I am afraid I don't remember what I said, but if it was useful then I am very pleased."

Jim smiled at her, his poor teeth showing through the beard.

"So, do you have a business card or something, Mister uh?" she asked as if trying to change the subject.

"No. I am so sorry. My name is Jim Smith. Hugh's wife Anne worked for me once - for a short time. That is how we know each other."

"Oh, I see. You knew Anne?"

Jim did not answer this time. Instead he bent down to the plastic laundry bag and carefully withdrew a small bundle of his paintings. "I'm afraid I don't look after them too well."

He held one out to her. It was his old lady with the basket of eggs and fried bananas, a water colour of the woman's shoulders, the wooden yoke and her face looking directly out, the deep lines on her face drawn in sharp black ink, the wispy, grey hair falling across her dry and sunburned cheeks. But it was her eyes that mesmerized. The deepest brown and shining with an almost wicked, twinkle. And her mouth - open and toothless - it smiled back. He handed it to Melissa. She took it to the window. "It's so good," she smiled.

He handed her another. A lizard. Black and red. It's crested head aloft, its eyes looking sideways and its tail curved around towards its front legs, claws and scales drawn and painted in meticulous detail. He pulled out another. A large fruit, yellow, greenish, its surface pitted and rough. It lay on the ground apparently in bright

sunlight casting a dark shadow, its thick stalk angled towards the viewer. "Jackfruit," said Melissa.

The fighting cock - its head down, its feathers fluffed, its vicious eye glinting. "Amazing. Very good."

Jim watched her as she looked closely and then held each one out before her or went to the window for a better look. "Your colours are incredible." she said. "Feathers, scales, texture, the skin, wrinkles, the eyes. Especially the eyes."

Jim waited, quite happy to look at Melissa anyway. Then the door buzzer sounded and Melissa looked up. "It's Hugh, Mr McAllister," she said.

Hugh McAllister, now in his early forties, looked much the same as Jim remembered. He was slim, short and casually but smartly dressed in a blue denim shirt, but his hair was now visibly receding at the front. He came in carrying a brown bag and a flat box of pizza.

"This is Mr Smith, Mr McAllister. He came specially to see you." Hugh McAllister put everything down and came over. He looked at Jim, up and down.

"Well I'm damned. If I'm not seriously mistaken this is no simple Mr Smith, Melissa. This is James Smith, my favourite politician of all time, short and sweet though it was. Jim, how good to see you. It is you, isn't it?" He held out his hand.

"How are you, Hugh?"

"Well, thank you. And you're looking - what shall we say? Bronzed. Yes, bronzed - bronzed and bearded. What brings you here? Long time."

"Yes, it's been a while, Hugh. How's business?"

"Fine, fine. You know how it is, Jim. Up and down. We've gone into more abstract work these days. Seems more of a demand. It's the expensive, contemporary, riverside apartments. Not that they ever want to pay very much."

"How's Anne?" It was an unusual question for Jim. It was private and private questions were normally alien to him. He usually avoided them altogether. But this one had some significance. It was asked early on and it was deliberate.

"Anne? Divorced, Jim. It's ancient history."

"I'm sorry. I had no idea." But Jim was not surprised.

"You've been away. Why should you? Where've you been?"

"Thailand"

"Nice. Live there, do you?"

"Yes."

"Alone, Jim?"

"Yes. Are you and Anne hitched up again, Hugh?" Again, it was unusually personal and he never normally used the word hitched, but Jim got the answer he was seeking.

"Anne is. She married one of those high-ranking bureaucrats working out of Brussels and living a life of luxury that I could never have afforded. Speaking of luxury - would

you care to join us for a slice of pizza around the back? It's a very late lunch or early dinner, I'm not sure which. But when I smelled it along the road I couldn't resist it."

"Yes, thank you."

"Bring the box, Melissa, and there's a nice Italian white in the 'fridge. Let's celebrate."

So, Jim joined them in eating pizza and drinking wine. Conversation was amiable enough. Hugh, never one for deep conversation, chatted superficially about London, art, business. Jim steered clear of mentioning Anne again but planned to come back to it. At last Hugh appeared to wonder why Jim was paying him a visit. Melissa jumped in. "Mr Smith has brought some very good paintings. His own work."

Hugh looked at her and then at Jim. "You've taken up painting, Jim? Then let's have a look."

Melissa laid them on a table, switched on a desk lamp and stood back. Hugh looked over the top of his spectacles, silent for a while, picking them up, one by one. "Do you have more, Jim?"

"Just a few more are in there." Jim pointed to the plastic laundry bag. "Do you want to see them?"

Hugh nodded but continued to look at what was already laid out. He was now holding the one of the old lady. "I like it, Jim. Good. In fact, it's very good." He put it down and went to peer inside the bag. "You always keep them in a hotel laundry bag?"

He pulled them out, one by one, lay them on the table and took one of Jim's morning sky paintings - abstract, lines of orange, pink, purple and grey with a black silhouette of a coconut palm - to the window

"They're good, Jim. But this one." Hugh moved to one he had put down separately. "This one is brilliant." Jim stood up to see. It was Noy and Oy. They both looked back at him, Noy's mischievous eyes peering through Oy's black hair.

"That one would not be for sale, Hugh. It is rather special to me. I included it to show the type of thing I've been doing."

"So how many have you done, Jim?"

"There are about three hundred at home. I brought about fifty."

Hugh looked again at Noy and Oy. "You are good, Jim. I had no idea. More satisfying than bloody politics, eh? So, what do you want to do, Jim?"

"If you think they're good enough, I'd like to organise a quick exhibition - before I return. Can you arrange it?"

Hugh looked at him over his glasses again. "Where? How? Why? How much do you want to spend etcetera, my dear friend? And how quickly is quick?"

"Within a month? "

"That's very quick. Why so urgent? When are you going home?"

"In a month."

"Not sticking around to test reaction?"

"Can you do it, Hugh? A hotel? Somewhere central? Organise a few people to come along? Press? Publicity?"

"Why the urgency, Jim? I've never heard anything quite like it."

"I want to make some public comments about what happened three years ago. I guarantee some interest if you can get it organised."

"Are you serious, Jim?"

"Of course. I'll pay for a venue. But I'm open to suggestions. It's up to you to have a quick think on venue, promotion, organising it. Can you do it, Hugh?"

"I suppose it's possible, but you really mean one month?"

"Or earlier. I would be very grateful. You can take all the proceeds from sales or give it to charity. I'm really not interested in the money."

Hugh McAllister looked at him. "So, what's biting you, Jim? After all this time."

"I just want to prove something. It's very simple. Do you recall the nonsense that surrounded me before I went away? It was wrong, malicious, deliberate but I need to prove I was right in asking questions and demanding action. Someone tried to silence me - no, more than that, to destroy me."

"I remember, Jim. After all," he paused, "I had to listen to Anne every night." He looked away but then quickly back at Jim. Jim waited - waited for something he had suspected for four years. Melissa, obviously sensitive to something, walked away.

"You know something? I can say it now after so long because Anne has gone. Anne was involved somehow, Jim. I don't know how but I think she had something to do with your problems. I could only see the best in her at the time, but I now see things in a different light. I was not good enough for her. I was just a struggling, small gallery owner. She was ten years younger and thought I was something far bigger in the art world than I was. It was probably my fault, but offering a small, showroom for unknown artists in a side street is quite different than dealing in art masterpieces. I didn't exactly come up to her expectations with a life of exotic holidays, skiing, yachts moored off somewhere fancy, of rubbing shoulders with royalty and men of power and influence at dinner parties and such like. I'm a takeaway pizza man who doesn't even own a car let alone a yacht. It just didn't work. I can't say much more and I have no evidence except some comments she made, but I have certain nagging suspicions about her nowadays. She had her mind set on something - something that meant she'd do anything to get it. She was already having an affair with the guy she eventually went off with - all long before I got to know."

Jim listened. Hugh's preference for a simple life was something Jim understood and Hugh's description of Anne also fitted. The evidence was in a brown envelope - the one he'd picked up from the solicitors on his way to meet Douglas Creighton at the Cumberland Hotel. But he changed the subject.

"So, can I leave you to organise matters? I have a mobile number you can call me on. I will leave you the paintings in the bag - all except the one that belongs to me, that is - and bring more before the exhibition." He picked the special one up and slipped it back into the empty laundry bag. "And one last thing, Hugh. Only one or two people know I'm back in UK. I don't want every man and his dog finding out just yet."

As they shook hands, Melissa re-appeared. "I remember you now, Mr Smith. You ate grilled red snapper and drank Tiger beer."

Jim just smiled and nodded.

CHAPTER 59

"Oh yes, Mr Walton. Mr Valdez left a message for you, sir. Would you meet him in the basement bar at the King's Head."

Jonathan was standing at the reception desk at the Intercontinental Hotel on Park Lane. "The King's Head?" he checked.

"Yes, sir, it's just a few minutes' walk - Stafford Street, just up Piccadilly. You can't miss it."

Jonathan, now with a tiny, electronic device stuck by tape beneath his shirt, wondered if someone from the FBI was watching. He walked out slightly self-consciously, wondering if he was being followed.

The basement bar at the King's Head was dimly lit alcoves, archways, leather armchairs and sofas and Jonathan stood for a moment, his eyes adjusting to the light. It was full and noisy with a hum of conversation and laughter and no place to sit. He glanced around but no-one even looked at him. Unsure whether to order himself a drink and stand and wait, he turned. "You Jonathan?" Peering down at him was a big man with a round face and muscular arms with a neck and chest that filled a plain white tee shirt.

"Yes," said Jonathan. "You Lucas?"

"That's me. Bit busy here, eh? Wanna go upstairs?" He turned. "I found a quiet corner." He sidled up the narrow stairs, "You eaten, yet?"

"No."

"Nor me. You wanna eat something, Jonathan? I like London Shepherd's pie."

"Sounds good to me. I'll join you."

"Take a seat, I'll order. And a cold beer?" Jonathan, still settling himself, nodded. "Thanks."

Lucas Valdez aka Silvester Mendes fitted Scott Evora's description perfectly. Big, black and muscular with a strong New York accent. He returned carrying two full pint glasses, pulled up the small chair across the round wooden table where he'd clearly left a half empty glass and sat down heavily. "Beer," he said, "London pie coming." He held out his big hand. Jonathan took it and felt his own being shaken.

"You like London?" was Jonathan's opener as if on a first date.

"Sure, great place. Cosmopolitan, busy, multinational and you all speak American. Yeh, it's cosy here. I like it." Valdez downed the last of the first, half empty glass and pushed it aside. "You travel much, Jonathan?"

"No, used to, but no longer. I find I'm busy enough here."

"Business OK?"

"Could always cope with some more."

"I understand you do a lot with international aid." Valdez looked at Jonathan across the top of his full glass and took a mouthful. His eyes were big, black and serious but with an intelligent glint. There was a day or two's growth of black stubble on his cheeks as he wiped his mouth.

"Yes, there's not much I don't know about the way the system works - or doesn't work." Jonathan deliberately raised an eyebrow, smiled, took a swig of beer, tried hard to appear what he had been made out to be - a man with an eye for an opportunity or two.

"Lucrative is it?"

"Can be."

"What are we talking?"

"Figures?" Jonathan checked.

Valdez nodded. "Sure - give me a feel for this English game you play."

"Mmm," Jonathan paused as if unfazed by large amounts of money. "I've just finished one bid for 35 million Euros." It was true. "Another one is going in for a bit less." That was also true. "I like to spread it around a bit - one in West Africa, next one in the Middle East. So, yes, if we only make two percent it's worth it. Obviously, there are expenses that come out of it and that can vary - politicians, bureaucrats, paper shufflers especially - they need their palms greased. And we lobby the right people. It's hard work."

Valdez was staring at him. "Yeh, I know." He took another drink. "Ever make more than two percent?"

"Of course. That's the aim. But it depends how you deal with it and the value of the funds you bid for. Sometimes we bid on behalf of others - that way we make anything from two to ten percent. Other times we fix things and bid ourselves. That way we make more."

"You put in bids yourself?"

"Of course - it's now routine. We set up some sort a local organisation - a company or something - with partners. That way we have some control." Jonathan had never liked lying so he explained this particular lie away as just outlandish bullshit of the sort he'd recently practiced on Jacob Johnson.

"Is it in English pounds or Euros or whatever they are?"

"It depends - mostly Euros."

"Ever dealt with USAID?"

"No, never."

"Charities?"

"Not directly."

"Meaning what, Jonathan?" There was an edge to his voice, but he didn't give Jonathan time to reply. "Never mind. I checked your business." Perhaps he was hoping this would unnerve Jonathan.

"You mean you checked out Walton Associates?" Jonathan smiled the sort of smile used for suggesting Walton Associates was just a front, a front for more profitable, ventures run from somewhere foreign, hidden from the Inland Revenue. "I hope you found what you were looking for."

"Sure, I did. Looks a nice, honest business, accounts submitted timely, taxes paid, decent profits, dividends paid to the three directors, staff pension payments - nice. Ah, here's the London pie or whatever you call it. Tuck in. Let's talk." Valdez grabbed a fork and stuck it into the brown crust of the steaming hot pie.

By ten thirty Jonathan had drunk several pints of real ale. He was not used to it. Neither was he familiar with nightclubs with exotic dancers that Valdez was now suggesting. "Listen, Lucas, I can't," he said. "Not tonight anyway. I've got a call coming in from Sierra Leone later. I need to be ready."

"Sure, I understand. Sierra Leone a good place?"

Jonathan laughed. Laughing was becoming easier as the ale took effect but he was having to concentrate more. "Depends what you mean by a good place, Lucas. I wouldn't want to live there if you get my meaning. But the business is looking good. That's where this 35 million Euros bid is from."

"Tell me. How's that one working?"

Jonathan gave a quick summary - a tourism project, good for the economy, it hit all the right buttons for getting official support, a Nigerian was his main contact with a few Lebanese involved somewhere.

But Jonathan was sober enough to know he hadn't been getting much back from Valdez. If Scott Evora was listening in, he might be getting anxious. The pie was gone and Valdez had mentioned USAID a few times and Pakistan and Afghanistan. He'd rattled off a large sum of money to impress - two and a half million dollars in one hit - he'd mentioned links in Dubai, friends with Ministers, connections at a Central Bank. But it was mostly all one way - Jonathan telling things, not learning much. Suddenly it changed.

"You and me alone in this business, Jonathan?"

"Come on, Lucas. You know the answer to that. There are plenty of small time crooks out there," Jonathan said with the confidence the beer was giving. "Local politicians who get bright eyed at the sight of a few funds coming their way, a lot of greedy bureaucrats, some small businesses who usually get spotted before they get anywhere. But, if you're meaning big time professionals, then we're a rare breed."

Valdez grinned. "Ever met an Italian guy, name of Guido?"

Jonathan, inwardly alarmed, showed no signs. "No."

"Claims to be the best in our business."

"Well he's bloody stupid," said Jonathan who didn't normally swear, but it was the beer. "He needs to keep quiet about his very existence. Who's he bragging to?"

Valdez grinned again. "Me. Should I meet him, Jonathan? Or can you and me do something together? East Africa's appeals right now. Got a bit going in Somalia. Interested?"

"Depends what I'm required to do and the arrangements."

"I set up the local organisation. You do the bids. I grease the palms as you call it - I like that phrase - easy shit."

"And the rake off?"

"Share the takings, fifty-fifty."

"I'll think about it," said Jonathan, moving to get up. "Listen, Lucas. I've got to go. I can't talk to Sierra Leone sitting here and I need to get to some paperwork. Why don't we stay in touch? How long are you in London? But, yes, I'm interested. You call me, OK? When you're ready with something on the ground, we'll talk."

Then, probably because of the beer he'd drunk, he managed a joke. "And, as a true professional, I'd advise you to check this guy Guido out. Never make a decision to award a contract without getting at least two quotes from competitors."

Valdez laughed, so it must have been a good joke.

Jonathan was quite pleased with himself, felt he'd retained some initiative and he hadn't even slipped up and called Lucas Valdez Silvester. He left the King's Head, walked towards Piccadilly to look for a taxi to take him to where he'd left his car. But as he stood waiting by the kerb, someone tapped him on the shoulder. Scott Evora pulled him into a dark doorway. "Great stuff, Jonathan. We got it all on tape. Now, who the fuck is this guy Guido."

CHAPTER 60

Some eleven hours later, a dismal grey morning, and it was Jim's turn to meet Scott Evora in the Mayfair area of London. He was on the train when Jonathan phoned about his meeting the night before with Silvester Mendes.

"Scott still knows nothing about what we're up to Jim. So, play it by ear. You decide what to tell him. And remember, Jan is meeting Guido tonight."

"And Tom should already be there," Jim added. "The plan is he'll be lurking somewhere close by."

"Do you think we are getting somewhere at last, Jim?" Jonathan sounded almost excited.

"Yes," Jim said thoughtfully. "But we'll need something very special if we're to convince the powers that be to do something or even believe us. And somehow, we'll need to find a way of extricating Jan before he gets hurt. And, as for your big muscular friend Silvester, how do you feel about him discovering you are a part-time FBI agent?"

"Don't make me nervous, Jim. Let's just keep going for now. See where it all leads."

Jim had always enjoyed a cup or two of good Italian espresso mid-morning. He could now smell it as he rounded the corner. Despite the cold, grey drizzle, Alfredo's door was wide open and there was no mistaking Scott Evora. The blonde-haired six-footer was already sitting at a small metal table out of reach of drips of water from the red, white and green striped canopy. He clearly recognised Jim.

"Jim Smith?" He stood up, scraped the chair back on the stone pavement and held out a big hand. Jim shook it and sat down. "Coffee?" Jim nodded and Evora called

inside the open door to order another espresso. "They know me. It's the best coffee within a mile of the Embassy."

They looked at one another. Jim pushed his damp, straggling, grey hair back behind his ears, wiped rain drops from his face and then wiped his hand on his new brown jumper that was as wet as his hair. An umbrella, he had decided, was to be his next purchase.

"Call me Scott," Evora said. "It's great to meet you. It was Jonathan's suggestion. It was also his suggestion I did a bit of research before we met." He laughed. "A lot was written about you a few years back." He laughed. Jim nodded once more.

"You were sure riding low in the popularity stakes. Then all the mentions stopped just like you died or something."

"Some wished I really had died."

"You were very outspoken."

Jim loved questions like that. "And why not? People do not want self-interested politicians who pussy foot around and keep their heads down just to ensure their re-election. They elect politicians who they hope are brave enough to face up to problems and solve them. I agree I was a bit rough around the edges at the start but I had a lot to learn in a very short time. I was a successful businessman, not a career politician who'd never had a proper job."

Scott Evora laughed. "Jesus, you should come and live in the States - they'd love you. So why did they get so mad? Couldn't they take it?"

Jim did not know where to start. "How long have you got?" A toothy smile appeared from somewhere inside the wet beard. "You've read the reports. I started out with a long list of subjects I wanted to address as a politician. Perhaps I started with the wrong one. I was reminded of another one on the London underground just now - over population. Dear me, cattle trucks are less crowded. Cattle have minimum standards for their transportation that London Transport could do well to emulate for commuters. But please don't get me going on that."

The coffee arrived. Evora moved cups around. "But it was international aid that got you fired up," he said, spooning sugar into his cup.

"Yes. I started with the billions of Dollars and Euros given for international aid projects - the public's money, let's not forget - vast sums are lost through fraud and corruption and I wanted it recognised that the leading perpetrators are often the very people who decide where it should be spent and who are then entrusted to spend it. Is it not right to ask for action to investigate it and then find ways to stop it?"

"Yeh, I would have thought so," said Evora.

Jim took a breath, sipped his coffee, looked around at the wet and dreary London scene but didn't see it. There was so much he could say but, he reminded himself, he was sat with a man from the American establishment - the FBI. He changed tack. "But you're only interested in American aid money."

"Not necessarily, Jim. Fraudsters stealing USAID money also steal other countries aid money. One of my jobs is to put a finger on these people and bring them to justice. It ain't easy and it ain't made any easier by official attitudes as you've noticed. But at least in the USA there's a debate going about how fraud and

corruption undermines well-meaning projects. Here? I'm not so sure. You tried and they came gunning for you. No wonder people run scared shit of asking questions."

Jim already sensed he might enjoy this conversation. "But even in the USA little is actually done about it," he said. "Estimates are that twenty percent of aid is lost to corruption and mismanagement. In Europe it's probably more. Huge amounts are lost to fraud within Europe itself. Billions are utterly wasted. Why, for instance, even think about giving aid to a country for improving the skills of unemployed youths when that country doesn't have any jobs to offer. Surely you solve the first problem first - create some jobs."

"Politics?" suggested Evora, "Influence? You scratch my back, Ill scratch yours?"

"Correct. And re-election of course. Ensuring re-election takes absolute priority over solving problems. Here's some money, now go and vote for me. In a different situation they'd call it bribery, but it's not nice for politicians to have to admit that they've collectively managed to create deep seated problems that'll take more than money to solve.

"And much of the problem comes back to my other argument about overpopulation. Thousands of poverty--stricken, unemployed migrants pour into Europe and USA. from Africa and elsewhere every day. They come looking for jobs that don't exist. Result? Increased pressure and social tensions on economies already in trouble. Fundamental cause? Overpopulation. Too many people, too few jobs. So, face up to the fundamental cause not pussy foot around the edges for fear of upsetting people. Surely that's what leadership is. It's all so blindingly obvious."

"Jim," said Evora, "You're already making me depressed. No wonder nobody liked you."

"Ah, but depression can be a constructive emotion, Scott." said Jim.

"Really? I've never looked on it like that."

"Then think about it. Living alone as I do and feeling a little fed up now and again is not uncommon. The solution is not to sit and mope, but to sit and decide precisely why you're feeling that way. Then you define the exact cause in the clearest possible terms and then sit and work on a solution. It requires nothing more than quiet solitude and a decent brain. If the brain has undergone some decent scientific training in the past it'll help."

"Then I fear I'm lost. Jim."

Jim sighed. "So, if you're lost, how can I help?"

"Reading about you helped with the background. Jonathan has also been a big help and so, but I need a....."

Jim interrupted. "Listen, Scott, I asked you just now, how long you've got? I didn't expect an answer that time, so I'll ask you again and this time you can answer it? How long have you got?"

Evora glanced at his watch and grinned. "You got a lot, Jim? I wondered if you had. If so I'll stick around a bit. I'm all ears."

Jim hadn't noticed that the rain outside Alfredo's was now steady and heavy. He talked. At the end of it, Scott Evora knew about Jim's link with Jonathan and, without

mentioning their names, about Jan and Tom. He explained why he was back in England and what he wanted to do.

"This is all totally confidential, Scott. If the media get to know, I'm finished yet again. So, would Jonathan be, so would our mole be and so would our plan. And your own efforts might well be scuppered as well. We've got to keep it quiet."

"I understand, Jim, and, if it'll make you feel good, Jonathan was fantastic. We got everything on tape. He was like a pro. I couldn't have done it better myself - but, then I couldn't have done it anyway." He paused. "But who's your mole?"

"No names, Scott, because he's in a tricky enough spot already."

"And the other guy?"

"My health adviser and nurse? He's currently in Holland chasing the one called Guido."

"Hmm. So, you're not saying. And what's your feedback on this guy, Guido? Is he based in Holland?"

"Our mole knows him. He's Italian. We might know more in the next day or so."

"You must know more, Jim. Come on, spill the beans."

Jim took another deep breath.

"Scott. Listen. Nearly four years ago I asked for an official investigation. But, in retrospect, I think I was wrong. Why? Because even if one had been started, there would have been an elaborate cover up, it would have dragged on for years and years, the public would have lost interest and the prime suspects would have been long gone, retired or living it up overseas. An investigation might have found a few small issues but because of the high profile, all the big fish would have dived deeper leaving only a few small fry caught in the net. No, the only way to catch these people is to catch them with their hands in the till. And how do you do that? Undercover is the answer, but we'd still need evidence that would stand up in court. With four of us, all volunteers, how would you rate our chances?"

Scott Evora grunted. "We might have enough on Silvester Mendes. We've only just got wind of this guy, Guido. But we know almost nothing, Jim and I'm running for the US Government, not Europe or anywhere else. So, what can we do together? How can we help?"

"Dear me," Jim grinned behind the beard. "I never thought I'd hear that from a FBI agent. You really want to help? If so, here is the first way. Go back to the US Government. Demand that these massive frauds move up the political agenda. Start to frighten these characters. Make the public more aware of where their taxes are going. Get the public angry. And....." Jim paused. He pulled on his beard, scratched the back of his head and felt the new elastic band snap.

"And?" prompted Scott Evora.

"Give us some help and advice on technical surveillance. Even a few devices like you lent Jonathan."

Scott Evora grinned. "No problem," he said. "But....." It was his turn to pause.

"But what?"

"Keep us involved?" It was a question with a plea.

"You are already involved, Scott. Why am I here? But we need help to get some international arrest warrants - Interpol that sort of thing."

"Yep, that's something we can do, but only when we've got something to go on."

"And that is exactly what we're trying to get, so help us."

Shortly after that, they shook hands and Jim walked off into the pouring rain to buy an umbrella.

CHAPTER 61

Jan approached the shiny black door in the side street of Delft, pressed the buzzer, waited and looked around in case he was, as last time, prodded with the point of an umbrella.

He had no idea whether Tom Hanrahan was somewhere close-by, but the very thought that he might be somewhere near gave him a much more comfortable feeling than the last time he'd stood there. A street light cast shadows on the cobbled street and reflected off the door, but other than casual walkers, a few boys on bicycles and a tall woman in a dark coat standing at the railings overlooking the canal, he had seen no-one that resembled Guido.

Jan pressed the buzzer again, put his ear to the speaker. Nothing. Then he checked his watch. He was precisely on time and, by now, it was almost dark. He tried the buzzer again and, just as he did so, his mobile phone rang in his jacket pocket.

"Yes?" he said.

"Ah, Mr Kerkman." The voice was unmistakable. "I am not at home today. Instead, we will deal with matters by telephone. Please return to the canal, find a seat and make yourself comfortable. The seat will be wet after the rain so you may want to dry it first. I will call you in two minutes."

Jan did as he was told. He found an empty bench seat beneath a street light and next to the railings where he'd once stood to admire water lilies in the canal and the short skirts of summer. A bicycle was chained to the fence next to him, the tall woman he had seen was now gone, a couple, arm in arm strolled by laughing and two boys went noisily past on skateboards. On the other side of the canal it was busier and, at the Cafe de Oude Hans, people were checking menus at the window and a waiter was outside clearing wet tables beneath wet umbrellas. Then his phone rang again.

"Ah, Mr Kerkman. Are you sitting comfortably?"

"Yes, thank you," said Jan.

"That is good. Now listen to me. There is a small problem with Puff and Slush. It seems it is not quick enough and someone has become suspicious. It is not your problem, but we want to test our new, bigger, better, faster and more secure version of Puff and Slush. What is very clever is that it does not need the use of an internal computer, but can be done from a laptop. As you do not have one, someone will deliver one to you in approximately - ah - twenty seconds. Wait. Do not switch your mobile phone off. Do you understand?"

"Yes," said Jan.

With Guido, nothing surprised Jan any more. As if participating in some form of street magic he waited until someone tapped his shoulder. The tall, long coated woman he had seen earlier was now standing right behind him. A laptop computer was placed on the seat beside him as Jan caught a fleeting whiff of perfume. Then the tall woman in the knee length rain coat with a dark scarf covering her head, walked away towards the bridge. Jan was sure it was the same one who had given him the package in the car park in Brussels.

"Now," said Guido's voice from the phone. "Open it and switch it on.....There is an icon on the left that says Puff and Slush Version 2. Click it.....What you now see is the start-up screen.....Yes?"

"Yes."

"Enter the EAWA file and then the file covering the recent Tourism Project bid from Sierra Leone. This may take a few seconds. The speed is not Guido's fault but the equipment and server used by your employers. I will wait until you say yes."

Jan, sweating, did as he was told. Finally: "Yes," he said.

"Good. Now enter the file to show the details of the consultants who submitted the bid."

Fingers shaking because he knew this was Walton Associates, Jan clicked.."Yes."

Now, delete that file.

"Delete it?"

"Do not argue, Mr Kerkman. Delete it. It is easy. Just hit ctrl plus A as you normally would. Then hit delete."

Jonathan's covering letter for the Sierra Leone bid on behalf of Jacob Johnson disappeared.

"Now return to the main menu. Under documents you will find a file marked EAWA Consultant."

Jan quickly found the file - three pages with an introductory letter from a company called Freeways Consultants with an address in Luxemburg.

"Yes."

"Cut and paste it into the online EAWA file."

There was just time for Jan to read the introductory sentence of the document. "Freeways Consultants are the new agents appointed by the main contractors, Sulima Construction, for the 'Eco Tourism Project, Sulima, Sierra Leone'.

Jan, shocked, breathed out heavily. Guido clearly heard.

"You are surprised, Mr Kerkman? Thank you for remotely testing Puff and Slush Version 2 for us. Your bank balance has just been credited with five thousand Euros and a present of two thousand Euros sent to your father's bank account in Amsterdam with a note saying, 'Happy Birthday, Father.'

"But....."

"No buts, Mr Kerkman. Just say thank you very much Guido and then go very carefully. We keep digitalised records of all that you do for us in case of any repercussions. The system for recording such matters and member's bank credits is

called Flush because we use it for all our members who are flush with money. Puff, Slush and Flush - you see? it is very easy to remember."

On Jan's mobile, there was a squeal of high-pitched laughter. "Oh yes, Flush will show it was you who changed this bid from Sierra Leone. Why did you do it? I cannot imagine. Now shut down the computer in the proper way, close the lid and put it beside you on the seat. And, please Mr Kerkman, be polite and phone your father to check if he has received his present. Your father was a broker in Amsterdam, wasn't he? He will be so pleased that you are following in his footsteps by making money and not wasting your degree in Corporate and International Finance."

Sweating heavily, Jan did as he was told, looking straight ahead towards the Cafe de Oude Hans on the other side of the canal. He might have heard something, but when he looked the laptop was gone and the tall woman was walking away.

But Jan was now learning tricks of his own.

After Jonathan had phoned earlier to tell him about his meeting with Scott Evora and that he had been given a listening device, Jan had used his lunch break to buy himself a mini voice recorder that he taped just inside his shirt. It was a huge risk that had depended on Guido not turning up in person and not inviting him into the apartment. But having switched on the loudspeaker function on his mobile, Jan was now desperate to get back to Brussels to listen to whatever it had picked up. But where was Tom?

Tom Hanrahan was sitting with a Dutch beer at a wet table outside the Cafe de Oude Hans.

Wearing his driving glasses because, but for street lights, it was dark and too far for his fading eyesight, Tom had watched everything. As the tall woman left and walked towards the foot bridge carrying something, Tom quickly paid his bill and followed her to the nearest car park where he had parked his own small rental car. He watched her get into a big, black BMW with Belgian plates and within five minutes he was following it as it headed towards Rotterdam and then the E19 towards Antwerp in Belgium. It took the route around the city and then headed towards Brussels. Tom, checking his fuel gage, kept going, still following the red rear lights of the BMW in the distance.

CHAPTER 62

"I'll drive down to see you in Brighton, Mr Harding." Cole Harding had phoned Jonathan to fix a meeting for the following week, but Jonathan was far too impatient to wait for that.

The offices of Fitzgerald, Waterman & Harding were just a short walk from Brighton sea front. Once inside, Harding's own office was a typical English lawyer's room - walls of law books behind glass, an old, polished-oak table, four leather seated matching chairs and Harding's oak desk piled with files alongside a computer. What marked it out as different were the photographs that lined the walls - pictures of African families and a framed print of an old colonial style building fronted by palm trees.

Cole Harding noticed Jonathan looking at it.

"Fourah Bay College, Freetown," he said. "Founded in 1827 by the Church Missionary Society."

"I had no idea there was such an old College in Sierra Leone," admitted Jonathan.

"Even during World War two, the British colonial government took it over because of its strategic position."

Jonathan noticed his voice and English accent. It was uncannily similar to Jim's. "You were educated there?" he asked, although he already knew the answer because he'd checked.

"No, no," Harding replied. "I came to England with my parents when I was seven. I grew up here, but still have extended family back there - family that seems to grow larger every year. I'm forever discovering lost cousins." He laughed and sat back.

"So," he went on. "When I mentioned Cherry Investments and Sulima Construction, it clearly rang a bell with you, Mr Walton?"

Jonathan sensed just a touch of suspicion and quite right, too. They did not know each other. Harding needed to reassure himself and check Jonathan out. But Harding had seemed an impatient, no nonsense sort of man on the 'phone so Jonathan's strategy, decided on the drive down, was to jump straight in.

"I don't know either of them," he said. "I was asked to help with a funding bid by someone who claimed to represent them - a Nigerian. But I've been in this business a while, Mr Harding, and like to think I can smell a scam or an attempt at fraud a mile away."

"But you said they are a client."

"Mr Harding. I would like to ask that you treat this conversation with the utmost confidentiality."

Cole Harding raised his eyebrows. "As always," he said, toying with an expensive looking Mount Blanc fountain pen.

"And I've checked you out," said Jonathan unsmiling, but pleased to be saying that to a lawyer. "I have read about your attempts to stamp out fraud - especially that emanating from West Africa."

"A futile task, Mr Johnson. Nevertheless, I trust the checks met with your approval."

"It is why I asked that we meet far sooner than you suggested. I cannot wait even a week."

"I see. Desperate times, indeed."

Jonathan then sat with Cole Harding through several calls to his desk phone. Each time, he said "I'm running late, Carole. Please apologise and ask that they call back. I'm happy to stay later tonight to accommodate them if it is convenient."

At midday, it was Cole Harding who wound up their discussion.

"So, Jonathan, let me summarise if I may. You and your three colleagues, two of whom are mysterious and nameless and the other being ex independent member of parliament Jim Smith whom I remember only too well - admirable gentleman - they are pursuing the private investigations you have already instigated. Jim himself is temporarily back in UK but not willing for that fact to be publicised. Correct?"

Jonathan nodded.

"The Sierra Leone bid you have submitted with the connivance of the Nigerian man called Jacob Johnson is, you are certain, an attempt at the fraudulent transfer of millions of Euros of economic development aid funds to unknown hands - although we have some names - linked to a chain of companies going by the name Cherry - Cherry Investments, Cherry Picking etcetera."

Jonathan nodded again "And this Sierra Leone funding bid is just an example."

"Of course. But you are using this bid, knowing it is an attempt at fraud - a test case to try and pinpoint how it's done, where it's done and who does it.

"Exactly."

"You already suspect an organised criminal group that operates globally with international connections that include certain high-ranking bureaucrats who influence decision making processes. As a result, they have access to resources that can be, and have been, used to stifle attempts to uncover it - as poor Mr Smith found to his cost. Give him my best wishes, by the way. I wish there were more like him. Is my summary accurate?"

Jonathan smiled. "Yes."

Cole Harding sat back. "Fine, then what I will do now is the following. As a priority I will speak to my cousin who first brought this to my attention - Suleiman runs a road haulage company in Freetown. I will ask him to delve a little deeper with the additional information you have now provided. In due course, but only if necessary, I can call on the Inspector General of Police to act - he is a good friend. In the meantime, we will do nothing other than to immediately alert Suleiman. We will wait until the time is right, enough evidence is available and you and your small team are ready and in need of additional support. Is that how you understand it?"

"Perfectly," said Jonathan, "And we're hoping the FBI and Interpol might also be there when the time is right, Cole."

CHAPTER 63

"Ah. This is Guido, Signore Mendes. Guido from Italy. I am in London."

"How the fuck.....?" The mobile phone of Silvester Mendes, aka Lucas Valdez had just rung. Lounging in his underwear in his room at the Intercontinental Hotel in London, he hit the TV remote, switched off the Jeremy Kyle show and stood up.

"How the fuck, Signor Mendes? It was very easy. Is the Intercontinental Hotel a good hotel, Signore Mendes? Nice food? Nice bed?"

"What the fuck.....?"

"What the fuck, Signore Mendes? It is about Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, West Africa, East Africa, Central Africa. You cannot hide from Guido. You were in Dubai and you spoke to one of my friends who told my managing director who told me. So, welcome now to London, Mr Mendes. I think we should meet again."

"Why the fuck.....?"

"Why the fuck? Because you are looking to expand your business and there is only one partner good enough."

"And who the fuck is that?"

"Who the fuck? Why, me, Guido of course."

"And what if I don't want to see you, you little prick."

"Waaaah," Guido's soprano voice shrilled. "That's not nice. Of course, you do. Think about it, Silvester. Don't be so hasty. Think like a businessman not an ex New York cop. We are professionals on this side of the big pond. Things are sophisticated. Without sophistication, you might as well go back to America. Americans couldn't even point to Somalia on a map let alone make money out of it."

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"Work with me, Silvester. Invest in me and start living up to your name - Silvester the Investor."

"Why the fuck.....?"

"Meet me before I tell someone about your account with Dubai Asia Investment Bank and about Akram and Tahir and our mutual friend the Finance Minister. No-one will find me but everyone knows where to find you. I found you. You are in room 320 and you were at the Highwayman Club last night and if I was you I'd watch your back. The FBI are on your tail."

"The fucking FBI have been on my tail for years."

"Meet me, Silvester. I'm in the lobby right now."

Silvester Mendes heard the phone click. This was his third mobile phone and SIM card since his arrival in London, so how the hell did that little bastard, who he'd only met once before in a hotel lobby in Karachi, know his number. He stood, walked around the room, pulled on some clothes, picked up his key and took the lift downstairs.

The lobby was frantically busy with coming and going. All seats were taken, luggage was being wheeled about, an Arab with entourage - children, women clad from head to toe in black sat waiting but Mendes wandered around. There was no sign of the squat little man in a dark suit he'd met in Pakistan, but he knew if he talked, he'd hear him.

"Fucking, lying little prick." He turned to go back to the lifts where a tall, dark haired woman was peering into a brown leather handbag on a gilt chain hung off her shoulder. He pressed the button, waited and when the lift arrived and the door opened, he and the woman went inside. The woman stood behind him. He pressed for floor three, the woman for floor four. On the third floor Mendes got out. In his room he felt something in his pocket. It was a sheet of pink paper.

"My dear Silvester. We should be partners. Together we could exploit USAID's flaws because we have the technology. But we need someone on the ground. Invest in a professional partner, Silvester, or be doomed to detection and arrest. The choice is yours."

CHAPTER 64

Jan was also on the E19 heading towards Antwerp and home to Brussels. But, near Breda and unable to resist the temptation any longer, he pulled off, went into a

rest area and plugged the voice recorder into his own laptop on the passenger seat and listened. Not bad. He smiled to himself, then phoned Jonathan.

"The first piece of recorded evidence, Jon. Guido's voice in full soprano. Tell Jim. I'm now heading home. Any idea where Tom is?"

Tom Hanrahan was still driving south in his small rented Opel following the big BMW's red lights and wondering whether it was heading for Brussels - in which case he was worried he might lose it. But suddenly he saw its orange indicators come on and take the N16 into Mechelen. It was now ten o'clock, the traffic much lighter. At a junction, dominated by a tall, red and yellow MacDonald's sign, the BMW turned and headed straight for the MacDonald's car park. Tom followed. He parked behind a sign that said Family Combo Special and sat and watched the BMW. Nothing happened for twenty minutes. Then the driver's door opened and the tall woman emerged. In the street lighting, Tom saw that the headscarf was gone. Instead, long black hair hung below her shoulders. She was a smart looking woman in a dark suit and she wandered around her own car, speaking on a mobile phone. Tom got out, strolled past the 'Play Place', around a short hedge and stood in the shadow. He wrote down the BMW's registration number and returned to his own car to watch as the woman got back into hers.

The area was even quieter and darker now. A light drizzle was falling but a few cars were still using the drive-in. Then a big black Mercedes turned into the car park, circled around and parked a few spaces from the BMW. Tom watched a small, round man in a suit get out, open the rear passenger door and pull out an umbrella that seemed to sparkle in the lights. He put it up over his head and strutted quickly around to the passenger door of the BMW, shook the umbrella and got in. It could only have been a few metres but the man seemed determined not to get wet. Five minutes later, the rain had stopped and he emerged carrying the laptop that Jan had used and the rolled-up umbrella. He gave a delicate wave to the woman in the BMW, opened the rear door of the Mercedes, put the umbrella on the back shelf, shut the door and got into the front. Then he drove off.

Tom now followed the Mercedes at a safe distance, but too far to read its registration plate.

CHAPTER 65

In Sierra Leone, driver Mitchell was, as usual, the last to arrive back at the yard of Mambola Transport Enterprises. It had been another long, hot day and the sun was just setting in a red ball over the Atlantic Ocean beyond the fence and through a row of silhouetted coconut palm trees. He reversed the truck into his allocated space next to the concrete block building that was the company headquarters, switched his engine off and jumped down. Van drivers Samson, Big Saidu and George were sitting together, smoking on the wooden pallets in the lengthening shadows.

"What's up my man?" Mitchell called to the three.

"Mr Suleiman, he want to see you," said Big Saidu.

"Him very serious this day," added Sampson, grinning. "He tok about that bastad Moses, say he know now he big teef and skimmer. Say he have proof. Say he wanna speak to you, Mitchell. You must go, fast like. He's in the office."

"OK," said Mitchell. "But you got any watta, man? I gave all my watta to lady who sell banana but still not get any free banana."

Mitchell knocked on Mr Suleiman's office door and went in.

"Ah, Mitchell. We have a serious matter."

"Something I did, Mr Suleiman?"

"No, no. It's that bastard Moses. He is a criminal, Mitchell, a big time crook, a scammer and a thief."

"You see, Mr Suleiman? I told you."

"Yes, but my cousin Cole in England told me more."

"Sorry, Mr Suleiman."

"Now then, Mitchell. Tomorrow I need you to be like that big, fat lady from Botswana. You know who I mean? The lady detective - except you are not a lady."

Mitchell scratched his head.

"I have a plan, Mitchell. Tomorrow you must deliver some boxes to Rocki General Supplies."

"How many. Mr Suleiman?"

"I don't know, perhaps ten. The number is not important, Mitchell. Listen and do not interrupt. Tomorrow you will deliver some boxes to Rocki General Supplies. They are water purifiers that were lost at the airport but now found. It will be a nice surprise for Mr Moses so when you turn up, he will be very pleased to see you. Now - listen, Mitchell. Tell him you want him to check inside the boxes. When he is not looking and busy checking, you must do something. You must stick this little machine in his office near his telephone. It is a big mess, yes? His office?"

"A big mess, Mr Suleiman, but what is that?"

"It is a voice recorder."

"Where did you get it, Mr Suleiman?"

"From my cousin, Cole, in England. DHL delivery this morning. There is another little machine that belongs to the first one - they are like brother and sister. This one is for Mr Moses; this one is for you. You must sit outside in Sani Abacha Street for three days to listen to what Moses says. Then you must go back and retrieve the machine before he finds it."

CHAPTER 66

Jim had felt tired and exhausted all day and now he couldn't sleep.

"The time difference is catching up with you. You'll be OK." he reassured himself aloud to the walls of his hotel room. He was also rapidly losing track of what was going on and he didn't like it. Phone calls were all he had to go on. The mobile had rung constantly all evening.

"Action through my Brighton lawyer friend, Cole Harding, to find out what's going on in Sierra Leone, Jim," Jonathan had earlier reported with an energy that Jim wished he shared. "Let's see if we can prove a link with Guido. And Jan, under duress, is the one responsible for tampering with my bid for Jacob Johnson. Let's see how Eichmann deals with it at the next EAWA meeting tomorrow. And Scott Evora is phoning me tonight."

Then: "I'm on the tail of a black Mercedes, Jim," was the late evening call from Tom somewhere in Belgium. "The car contains a small fat man. Guess who?"

That morning, Jim had called Hugh McAllister for an update on the exhibition. "Anything remotely professional is going to take me at least three weeks to organise, Jim. And I'll need to start promoting it now if you want people to turn up. "

"Proceed, Hugh. I've decided to go off for a couple of days. I'll be in touch by phone."

Jim's plan to go off for a couple of days had been in the making for three years. The plan was for Margaret to go with him to a place he knew she loved as much as he did. That plan was now shelved, but he had decided he'd still go, but alone.

He had taken an early train to Derby and then a bus to Ashbourne. He bought a can of orange juice and a pack of fresh sandwiches and hired a bicycle to pedal in the autumn sunshine along the Tissington Trail that led into the Derbyshire Dales and Peak District of England.

At midday, he sat to eat his sandwiches on a damp, sunny bank of grass, brown leaves and some lingering but fading summer flowers and then crawled to the top of the bank where the wind blew fresher. With his hand shielding his eyes, he looked out towards the bright, sunlit hills that stretched into the far distance - a view he knew and had expected to share with Margaret.

Then he rode slowly on using the straight, flat cycle track that had once been a thriving railway line that linked the area's ancient industry and then onto a narrow road that led towards Dovedale and the tiny hamlet of Thorpe. Then, when his breath became short and his lungs began to hurt, he dismounted, and pushed the bike slowly up another slope until he could once again freewheel down into the spectacular, green valley of the River Dove.

He stopped at the bottom on the corner by the stone bridge, leaned over and looked into the water flowing beneath. It was crystal clear with long, flowing strands of green weed and he watched a water vole swim across and disappear into the shelter of dark, tree roots at the water's edge. He watched and he listened.

Just as at home up on his rock, nature was noisy. The water, tumbling over the black, stony, river-bottom, a robin in the branches of the trees, sheep on the hillside. And civilisation - a tractor, somewhere out in the fields. Then a kingfisher, like the ones at home, but smaller. It flew from under the bridge beneath his feet to disappear in a flash of fluorescent blue upstream. And Jim wanted to go the same way, to leave the bike and walk, to stroll along the stony pathway beside the river, to follow it upstream to where it opened into a wider valley of high, green, rocky hills, to the tiny village of Mill Dale and still further into the higher hills.

But there was someone missing.

And Jim was out of breath and his chest hurt him. He leaned heavily on the parapet of the stony bridge looking down. Then he looked at the bike. "Oh dear. Now what? How the hell are you going to get back?"

He stayed, leaning on the bridge wondering what to do. Here he was in a place he had always wanted to see again, a place he would sometimes dream about with such clarity. He took a deep breath, but his lungs and chest hurt and he felt dizzy. He leaned more heavily, his arms propping him up to make breathing easier and exhaled noisily through his mouth feeling hot and sticky. There was no doubt about it. Jim Smith was in a bit of a predicament again and there was no Tom around and only the sound of a tractor to suggest another human being close by.

"And you made another mistake over the month," he mumbled to himself. "Your plan was to come here in May not October. If you remember, you wanted to hear a cuckoo and perhaps tell Margaret a story."

Jim listened, but only heard the tractor and sheep.

"It was about a Tibetan cuckoo, Margaret - not an English one - but the story is the important part. I know I test your patience, but bear with me. That cuckoo could never settle down until all his jobs were done, you see. He was a perfectionist cuckoo and had been a very successful cuckoo in his odd, strange way. All the other cuckoos said so. He did not care much about himself; he was untidy and his feathers were a bit shabby. But, once he'd started a job, this cuckoo never stopped until it was finished. One day he decided to make a perfect nest for his wife and himself to sleep in. So, he left his wife to sit and wait and then spent hours and hours seeking the softest mosses and finest grasses. When he had finished the job to his own exacting standards, he looked around for his wife to show her what he had just built. But she had already flown away."

His breathing seemed easier now and as he looked at the steep hill that he had just, so easily, freewheeled down, he heard a tractor coming from the direction of Ilam. He pushed the bike up and over the cattle grid and sat down on the grass verge amongst the droppings of sheep and rabbits and waited. The tractor was towing a wooden trailer holding some old sacks and a black and white sheep dog. It came on slowly, passed the farm entrance towards the bridge. It was going up the hill. Jim waved and the driver slowed.

"Aye up," the driver said.

"Good afternoon," Jim panted. "I'm so sorry to trouble you but I wonder if you would give me a lift to the top. I've rather run out of steam."

"Aye, put bike on back and 'op oop."

"Thank you so much." Jim hauled himself and the bike up and sat there beside the dog, which wagged its tail and came to stand by him, its mouth open and a pink tongue hanging between white teeth. The dog, Jim was pleased to note, was also panting.

"Nice day," the driver called back above the engine noise.

"Splendid," said Jim breathing deeply.

"Aye, but autumn's on its way."

"Where are you going?" Jim inquired.

"Callow Hall."

"Could you take me there? I would be extremely grateful."

CHAPTER 67

"**Jim, I followed Guido to Antwerp.** How I managed to stay close I don't know. I could get a new job, Jim - police interceptors. I'm now in an underground car park right in the city. I think it has a hotel up above. But - what does Dirk Eischmann look like?"

Jim, now with a throbbing headache and worn out from his cycling, had fallen asleep at a small bed and breakfast establishment in the nearby market town of Ashbourne. He sat up, half got out of bed, put his bare feet on the cold floor. "Why?"

"Someone was there to meet him. As soon as Guido stopped, another car on the other side flashed its headlights and a man got out and went over. They are sat in Guido's car right now, as I speak."

Jim described Eischmann as best he could, but there was nothing noteworthy about Dirk Eischmann, He was average everything. Pass him in the street and he could have been on an errand to the shops for his wife.

"Jesus, Jim. That the best you can do?"

"What car did he get out of?"

"A black BMW, Belgian plate I think, though I'm not close enough."

"That fits. And Guido's Mercedes. Anything about it?"

"Big, black, Italian plate I think but I can't read it."

"What time is it?" Jim ruffled his own hair and scratched his chin beneath the beard.

"Here, it's nearly midnight. Hey, hang on Jim. Movement. Eischmann, if it's him, is getting out - shutting the door, walking over to his car. Guido's getting out as well. Jesus, he's a funny looking guy. He walks like he's got something stuck up his arse, Jim."

"Please, Tom, not now. It's late and I might start dreaming again."

"Eischmann's heading off. Guido's going to a lift. Yes, it's definitely a hotel above my head. It says 'Lobby'. You reckon he's staying the night?"

"Tom, I'm in England, was asleep five minutes ago. Your opinion counts, OK?"

"Yeh, I reckon he's checking in. He's lugging a bag half his size and the laptop's under his arm. He's in the lift. The BMW is moving off."

"What are you going to do?"

"Leave it a minute and see if I can get a room, but it looks pricey, Jim. Christ, I've just seen another sign - it's the bloody Hilton. I hope they don't put me in a room next to that fucking midget. I'll call you later."

Jim lay back and closed his eyes, but his mobile rang yet again. This time it was Jonathan.

"I thought you'd like to know; I've just had Scott Evora on. Seems like they've overheard Silvester Mendes talking to Guido and it seems Guido wants Mendes to

join him in the fraud and corruption business. But from what Scott just said, he's not exactly going about it in the right way. Meanwhile, Scott's trying to pick my brains about Guido. Should I say anything, Jim?"

"Not yet., Jon. Let me think. Anyway, Tom might be sharing a room with him tonight. We might get some pillow talk."

CHAPTER 68

Driver Mitchell had been knocking on the metal door of Rocki General Supplies warehouse for so long that his knuckles hurt.

"Shit, shit," he muttered, increasingly worried he'd have to return having failed to accomplish his mission. In his pocket was the little black box with a wire hanging from it and he knew exactly where he was going to stick it if he got inside. Then he shouted, "Mr Moses!" through the gap by the hinges.

"You looking for big boss Moses, my man?"

The voice came from behind - from a tall, thin man in jeans and tee shirt, a ring hanging from his left ear, a colourful, close fitting, hand-knitted hat and a burning cigarette fixed between his thumb and first finger. The dense blue smoke was blowing in Mitchell's direction. The man, it seemed, had just arrived in a rusting old Peugeot car, its passenger door hanging open, loud music blaring from inside. Another man was in the driver's seat, tapping his fingers and shaking his head in time with the heavy beat.

"Ah, yes," said Mitchell. "I have an urgent delivery."

"Moses, he's gone away, man."

"When is he coming back?"

The man shrugged and looked at Mitchell through the smoke but said nothing. Mitchell scratched his head and muttered half to himself. "I cannot leave these boxes outside. Come back later? Tomorrow?"

"You wanna open the door, my man? Go inside?"

Mitchell looked at the man who was now smiling broadly. He was also dangling a big bunch of keys. They rang like church bells in front of his beaming face and white teeth.

"You work here?" Mitchell enquired.

"That's so, my man. Today anyway. You wanna go in or you wanna stand outside all day? What the fuck's your business?"

"A delivery of water purifiers," said Mitchell.

"Them paid for already?"

Mitchell nodded.

"That's OK then. Let's do the business man." He jangled the keys once more, pulled a shiny one out, showed it to Mitchell. "That your truck?"

"Sure, mon." said Mitchell thinking he recognised a Nigerian and deciding to try speaking like one. "You like Fela Kuti, my mon?" Mitchell added and he nodded towards the blaring noise coming from the dilapidated car.

"Wotsa Leoni doing liking Fela?" The thin man laughed and puffed on his cigarette. "Unload your boxes my friend while I open this fucking old tin shop."

As the man in the hat disappeared inside the warehouse in a cloud of smoke, Mitchell went to his truck, piled up four boxes, carried them in, put them down and went back for the rest. Then he recovered the paperwork from where he'd stuffed it behind the steering wheel. "I need a signature," he shouted into the dusty darkness of the warehouse.

"I'ze in the office, driver."

The Nigerian was sat in Mr Moses' chair, surrounded by the usual piles of files, paperwork and boxes and rifling through the contents of a drawer. The air conditioning was on full. "So, what's to sign, my man? Give." He beckoned with his hand.

Mitchell handed over the paperwork. "Sign there please," he said and, as he did so, he felt in his back pocket for the little black box. Standing, looking around as if admiring the luxury, Mitchell stuck the device exactly where he'd intended if Mr Moses had been sitting there. Slid in the crack between the two halves of the desk and covered in files, it was already invisible.

The Nigerian didn't look up from whatever it was he was pulling from the drawer, but he scribbled something and handed it back to Mitchell.

"Is Mr Moses on holiday?" Mitchell asked as he stuffed the useless paper in his pocket.

"Yeh, long one."

"Coming back soon?"

"Nope."

"Aww. So, you the new boss?"

"Nope." He now looked straight at Mitchell with red, watery eyes but still puffed out more clouds of pungent smoke. "Moses is gone, my man. We took over his business."

"Gone? Gone where?"

"To visit the fucking angels."

"Waaah! Was he so sick?"

"No, someone shot him."

"Waaaah jeez" said Mitchell again, holding his hand to his mouth. "So sad. I liked Mr Moses. Would you like to negotiate a contract with Mambolo Transport Enterprises?"

"What's your terms my man?"

"Anything, anywhere, anyhow," said Mitchell rubbing his eyes because of the smoke.

"Come back tomorrow. I gotta go - my driver's outside."

"So, is it still called Rocki General Supplies?" asked Mitchell.

"No, no. It's now Freeways Investments."

"So, you the big boss of Freeways Investments?" laughed Mitchell, edging towards the door.

"No, man, they are in Switzerland. Big shots, big power, no nonsense. One big, white Dutchman arrive - make commands like big soldier - point finger here, point finger there - they took over everything - all the business and all the boats by the river - one same day. Same day someone shot Moses. Co-incidence huh? I work for Freeways in Nigeria. Freeways don't stand no messin' about, man. No what I mean?"

CHAPTER 69

Katrine was presenting the third bid of the afternoon to the EAWA steering group. Dirk Eischmann was on her right, Jan across the table.

"We now come to the resubmission of the Sierra Leone Tourism bid which you will recall was returned for further information," she said. "As you will see from sheet one, the changes and further information we requested have been received."

She paused during some paper shuffling and caught the eye of Jan. Eischmann was apparently engrossed in reading the changes.

"First," Katrine said, "Sulima Construction yesterday advised us of a change of consultant. The new company is Freeways Consultants in Zurich. We are all very familiar with Freeway. They have been consultants for several economic development projects over the last few years, but their details are attached if we need to refer to them."

Oh yes, Jan remembered Freeways. The name cropped up regularly - Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Somalia. But no-one had ever questioned them, least of all Eischmann. It was just paperwork. If the paperwork looked OK, then Freeway must be OK. Even Katrine appeared confident with them. Freeways were Swiss, so that made them automatically legitimate, viable, heavily resourced, experienced and with an enviable track record of delivery. But had anyone ever visited them, checked them out, delved into their resources and capability? Probably not. Everyone assumed someone else had.

And even if anyone had gone to Zurich to check, then they could probably expect a warm welcome at Zurich airport by someone in a suit before being whisked off to a plush office rented for a few days with a few Freeways logos and pictures stuck around. With their resources, anything could be made ready and waiting in the event of excuses being needed. Jan could imagine the dialogue now. "This is just the economic development consultancy office - our other offices are in Luxemburg, London, Frankfurt and Madrid". There would be a lot of bullshit, a long lunch with wine and a small or large gift would be offered if the visitors were suitable candidates. No wonder there were so many members in Guido's club. And if Guido was behind Freeways then so was Eischmann.

Jan watched Eischmann. There was not a flicker.

"We also asked for more information about Cherry Pick Investments," Katrine went on. "Fresh information from Freeways Consultants confirms that Cherry Pick Investments are in the process of being bought out by an unnamed company....."

It was then that Eischmann jumped in. "That is exactly why I suspected something was wrong here. Go on Katrine."

"So," Katrine continued, "Freeways advice is that the bid be put on hold until the takeover is complete and the situation clarified. This should not take long and then they will resubmit the bid."

That was it - stamped on, permanently, or at least until Guido and Eischmann had decided on a solution that suited them.

The meeting ended, Jan went outside into the street and phoned Jonathan with the news.

"No need for us to engineer something to prove our suspicions, then, " Jonathan said. "I'm just wondering how to break the news to Jacob Johnson."

"I'll leave that decision with you, Jon. But I've had another idea. Listen."

CHAPTER 70

"Ah, Jacob, I'm glad you've called," Jonathan was in his office.

"Big problem, Jon. You know already?"

"Yes, I heard last night, but I thought you were in Nigeria."

"Yeh, I'm in Lagos. What the fuck's going on, Jon? Any idea? My Lebanese associates phoned me last night. Cherry Pick and Cherry Trading have been attacked."

"What do you mean attacked?"

"Attacked by someone. They even shot our Sierra Leone man?"

"Shot him?"

"Yes, we think they persuaded him to sign his business over to them and then they shot him."

"Slow down, Jacob, I'm losing it. Who is your Sierra Leone man?"

"Messiah Moses. His business is Rocki General Supplies in Freetown, but he also runs Sulima Construction, Cherry Trading and Cherry Pick."

"Rocki General Supplies? Who are they? And I thought Cherry Picking was Lebanese. I am very confused Jacob. It sounds complicated."

"Me too, Jonathan. But since Farid and Hamid decided not to work with that Italian fella things have been complicated."

"Farid and Hamid are your Lebanese partners, right?" queried Jonathan.

"Yes, yes. They had the bad experience in Milan. Since then.....now I can't fucking think straight."

"I know the feeling, Jacob. And what is this about the man called Messiah being shot."

"Messiah Moses, Jon. Moses was Cherry Pick's key man. He signed his business over to a company called Freeways Investments and an hour later he was shot - found floating in the river down near Sulima."

"Freeways Investments, Jacob?" Jonathan was double-checking.

"Yes, you know them? They're consultants like you. Far away in Zurich, I heard. You're not linked to them are you Jon? If so, I warn you....."

"Calm it, Jacob. I only heard about them yesterday, believe me. But I suspect a link with that Italian guy you keep telling me about. What's his name?"

"Guido."

"That's it. He hates to be seen as a loser, Jacob. He lost the Cherry Picking business and he's as mad as hell. He's just trying to pick up pieces. This can be a dirty business sometimes."

"Thanks, Jonathan. I'll do some more investigation and let you know."

"And where is this Guido guy based?"

"Italy."

"Big place, Jacob. Any idea where?"

"I'll find out. I'll ask Farid and Hamid. They met him."

Jacob Johnson rang off. Jonathan phoned Cole Harding in Brighton. Cole Harding rang Suleiman in Freetown. Suleiman was in the middle of talking to Mitchell.

"So he's dead, Mr Suleiman. Moses has gone to visit the fucking angels."

"Do not speak of the dead like that, Mitchell. You must not listen to Nigerians. They are not all good Christians. Language like that is unhealthy. But there is something sinister going on. Did I not tell you?"

Suleiman's phone rang.

"Ah, Cole. I was just thinking of calling you.... You know already? What is going on here?.....Yes, Mitchell planted the special device but it is not that bastard Moses we will be listening to but a fucking Nigerian wearing a hat and smoking weeds."

Mitchell shook his head at the bad language.

"Is there anything more we can do, Cole?.....OK, Mitchell will still listen to the voices. Meanwhile, you are taking the matter further with others Good."

"So, Mitchell, you must sit outside Mr Moses' door and listen to the voices."

"For how long must I sit, Mr Suleiman."

Suleiman paused, thinking. "Between deliveries," he said.

CHAPTER 71

Jan was heading home, walking as usual. It was six thirty and dark. As he arrived at the entrance to the apartment block his mobile rang. It was Katrine. Twenty minutes later they were in the corner of the tapas bar.

"It's about that Sierra Leone bid, Jan. I think something's wrong."

Jan was already prepared. "Not just wrong, Kat, it's a well organised stitch up."

Katrine stared at him. "You know something?"

"I know the company who lodged the first bid, Walton Associates. Walton were testing the whole bidding system for any signs of corruption. Did they find any? Sure, they did. You witnessed it this afternoon."

"Jan, for God's sake, what's going on."

"I told you a while back what I thought about the whole stinking system and that I'd be willing to whistle-blow. Well, the evidence is gathering. The whole system, Kat, is open to abuse and fraud if certain people with the know-how and authority are put in charge and there is a sophisticated, well organised and corrupt organisation behind it. How many people work there, Kat?"

"Twenty-five thousand?" It was clearly a guess.

"Some say thirty-five thousand, Kat. But if you look deeper and add in part-timers you'll find it's nearer forty-five thousand. And then there are those who are, so called 'off the balance sheet'. I reckon it's around fifty-five thousand people. Do you think they all totally honest, Kat? How many have access to confidential data, log in and log out every day using passwords and how many think they are underpaid and couldn't care a fuck about the fact that it's taxpayers who pay their salaries and pensions. How many of those do you think might be tempted to take a small bribe or two if they knew how?" Jan waited for Kat's reaction.

"Plenty I suppose," she said, looking down at her glass of wine.

"And what might happen if, once hooked, they can't stop because they're threatened with repercussions if they say or do anything?"

Katrine shook her head. Jan took a breath, tried to stay calm. "So, what do you think happened today with that Sierra Leone bid?"

"We received an email confirming some changes. Then....." she paused.

"Then?"

"Someone logged into the system and changed the bidder details."

Jan was past caring. "It was me," he said.

"You, Jan? What the hell.....?"

"Evidence gathering, Kat. I've been working with Walton Associates." It was mostly true. That he had performed the act on a laptop whilst sitting on a wet seat in a street in Delft with instructions from an invisible Italian midget called Guido did not seem important at the moment.

"Oh God. You Jan? You're abusing the system just to prove a point? I can't.....How can.....?"

"Kat, listen. There is a hell of a lot going on that I could tell you, including that Eischmann is involved."

"Eischmann himself?"

"Surprised. Kat?"

"No, I suppose not."

"So, do you want to help?"

"I don't know. How far does it go? How widespread? How much is being lost? Are you sure? There are hundreds of questions."

"Eischmann recruited me."

"What do you mean, recruited?"

"My interview, remember? You fixed it. I bullshitted too well and he was so impressed I got invited to join the party. It was what I wanted all along but now I'm up to my neck and want out, but there are things still to be done - the proof, the evidence. If there's not enough evidence, they'll deny it, ignore it, blame others, pass the buck, do anything that'll stop the truth coming out. We need to keep going a while longer."

"We? Who's we."

"You remember a scandal three or four years ago when a British politician tried to raise the matter?"

"Jim Smith? He accused Eischmann. "

"You see?" Jan said, "You remember. Well, he went abroad to escape the threats and pressure. The story died down; the scandal was forgotten. But he's still trying to prove what he said was true and I'm helping. We've already got a lot, but not enough."

"My God, Jan. How deep does it go?"

"It's deep and its well organised."

"So, who else is involved? Walton Associates? Who else?"

"One other guy, an ex-newspaper man."

"Only four of you? You don't stand a chance."

"Yes, we do. All we need is some proof to instigate official investigations and a few arrests."

"You'll never arrest Eischmann."

"Don't be so sure, but it might be easier to get an arrest warrant for his main accomplice."

"And who's that?"

"The guy who runs Freeways."

"Freeways? But we've used them for years."

"Exactly. Did anyone ever check them out? Properly?"

"We did research. We've got the paperwork."

"Katrine. Listen. Did anyone actually go to Zurich? What do you know about them? Do you know the names of directors, for instance?"

"It's a group of companies."

"So, you, and everyone else, think it's a company like some of the big name international consultants and auditors."

"It's not my job to deal with that."

"So, whose job is it?"

Katrine looked uncertain. "I assumed they were once checked as part of due diligence. The pre-qualification process then avoids the necessity to do it every time."

"Due diligence failed, Kat. The system is cracked and now it's being hacked. What about the suspicions of interference in the money transfer process? Has anything more been said or done about that?"

"No."

"Another case of shrug and carry on? Sweep it under the carpet? Don't make a big scene in case the auditors notice? It's not my job. It's not my money. Why should I care? We are all guilty, Kat. You are at fault just as much as anyone else because you won't or you can't act. Why? Is it fear? What is it?"

Katrine nodded and a long silence followed.

Then: "We'd better not stay too long, Kat. Someone's watching us."

"Where? Who?"

"I don't know, but someone warned me not to see you. I'm under threat, you see, Kat. If I step out of line or don't do as I'm told, I actually fear for my life, just like Jim Smith did."

"Oh my God, Jan! Who are these people?"

"Eischmann is one. There are probably many others we don't know about and paid eyes and ears are everywhere. Someone, besides Eischmann, might be sat around that EAWA steering group for all you and I know. But there is that key figure we need to catch - the guy whose organisation creams off millions of Euros and dollars from international aid money and pays bribes to keep people sweet and too afraid to say anything. The guy who runs Freeways is Eischmann's partner."

"You know who he is?"

"We know his name. but it might not be his real name."

"Have you met him?"

"Yes, twice, once after I was recruited by Eischmann. And they are paying me. That's how serious it is. Money goes into my private account and....." Jan stopped, unsure how much more to say. "There's more, Kat, much more. I can even explain your treasury computer glitch."

"I had no idea you were so serious when you said you'd go undercover. How will you get out?"

"That, Kat, is the million Euro question."

CHAPTER 72

"You awake, Jim?"

It was five o'clock when Jim's phone rang. He had been half awake since three because the bad dream had recurred - not pigeons this time but cuckoos building nests in a tree somewhere.

"But cuckoos don't build nests," Margaret had shouted at him in the dream. "They steal nests of other birds. I don't believe a word you say." Margaret, in real life quiet and passive, was raging at him when the phone rang.

"Yes, who is it?"

"It's Tom."

"No need to shout, Tom. Did you get to share a bed with Guido?"

"I slept in the feckin' car. Have you ever slept in a box, Jim? If I was on expenses, I might have paid the 120 Euros they wanted. I now need a wash. Perhaps I'll go upstairs, visit the gents and watch Guido eating a 30 Euro breakfast. But do I keep following him? I can't pursue him across Europe, Jim and he's bound to soon realise a tiny white Opel has been following him half way across Europe."

"Fancy diverting and, instead, driving to Zurich to check on Freeways? If you start now, you'll be there by tonight." Jim tried laughing but his head hurt.

"If Guido's driving back to Italy he'd go via Zurich. Is that what you're saying?"

"It's a possibility but I'm not suggesting you tail him through three or four more countries. But driving around Europe even with a set of false driving documents is a far more secure way of hiding your ID than going everywhere by scheduled airline."

"But he's so short, Jim. He can barely see through the steering wheel. I was right behind him at one point and I could have sworn it was a driverless car. But, seriously, I could ditch the car and fly to Zurich. Then, if we find Guido's hide-out in Italy, I'll head on down there. I bought a camera in Delft and took some lovely photos of Guido and Eischmann - mostly of their backs."

Jim glanced out of the hotel window. It was still dark so he lay back on the pillow, but Margaret was on his mind as well as Tom in Antwerp. He talked to himself about Jan in Brussels, muttered about Jonathan in London and asked himself how Hugh might be getting on. "Do you think an art exhibition is premature, Hugh? Am I making a stupid mistake?"

Then his mind went back to Margaret again. The visit to see her had been an emotional disaster, at least for him. "She just walked away, out of my life, mother. What was it Douglas had said about pages being turned? Perhaps he is right. But Douglas has changed, too. He was nervous. He was hiding something."

Jim's mobile chimed again and made him jump. It was Jonathan - enthusiastic.

"Guido's based in Milan."

"And how do you know that?"

"Jacob Johnson. Not surprisingly, he's as mad as hell about what's happened to the Sierra Leone bid. I think he'd like to blame me, but he doesn't know what I've done or how. So, he's blaming Guido and so I asked him to find out more. He then spoke to the Lebanese guys. They met Guido in Milan and think he's based somewhere near Linate airport. They were taken to a restaurant in Milan - we don't have the name - and they stayed at the Park Hyatt at Guido's expense. A job for Tom?"

Jim agreed. "And explain it to me again, Jonathan. What happened in Sierra Leone?"

"Cherry Pick's plans unravelled because someone, presumably Guido's Nigerian friends, shot dead the local guy who was running Sulima Construction and one, or more, or all of the Cherry businesses. Cole Harding says the guy who was shot is someone called Messiah Moses who also runs a company called Rocki General Supplies. My head's buzzing trying to understand the links, but I'm not alone. Jacob Johnson seems to have the same problem - he's running around like a headless chicken."

"But we're making waves and causing problems," Jim said, "And no-one has yet noticed us. It can't last, but we all need to stay out of sight as long as we can."

CHAPTER 73

Jan's note, scribbled on a scrap of paper had been in his pocket all morning. Twice, he had walked along the corridor, past the open door of Katrine's office and looked in. On his third walk by she saw him. He stopped briefly, looked at her, nodded his head and walked on. Seconds later he walked back and, as she stood at the door, he passed her the note.

It was now evening and he was waiting, sheltering beneath an umbrella from rain that had been falling for most of the day. Behind him was the Bar a Tapas, but he had no wish to go in.

"We'll walk, Kat." he said when Katrine arrived. "There are too many eyes and ears and it's dangerous for us to be seen together." They walked under one umbrella, Katrine with her arm hooked in Jan's.

"I'm going to disappear, Kat," Jan said as they walked along the sodden footway that reflected the bright lights of shops, restaurants and bars.

"But where? What will you do?"

"Where? I'm not sure. But I'm going to continue where I left off and I'd like to leave behind a mess that someone will need to explain." He looked down at her. She was still holding his arm, tightly.

"Your friend in Treasury," he went on, "The one who noticed the mysterious cash movements." Katrine nodded. "She might notice something happening again. It would be useful if she was ready, waiting and watching."

Jan stopped walking, pulled Katrine towards the brightly lit window of a clothing shop where models stood, posing in long skirts, winter coats and scarves. He took out a slip of paper.

"This is how I get instructions, Kat - on a piece of paper from a dog that sits in the Warandepark with a blind Somali. I'm now a qualified fraudster who's able to move vast amounts of ring-fenced money to whoever and wherever someone tells me. All I need is a code and an amount."

Katrine stared at the slip of paper.

"You remember the Central Asia Humanitarian Aid Fund?" Jan continued. "Hundreds of millions for the refugee and natural disaster support facility in Pakistan that is supposed to be ready for the next disaster - an earthquake or a flood. If you recall, amounts are drawn down in phases from the central fund by the Ministry. Is anyone checking that the amounts drawn down are being properly accounted for? Who

checks invoices against materials supplied and jobs done? And who ultimately signs things off - a Minister? Who is it? Do we know? Could it be possible that many of those responsible are working together to defraud the system and so covering for one another?

"But that's not all, Kat. I can log onto the system in my own office, tap in a few codes and a sum of money and - as someone I have recently got to know says - like a puff of smoke, it'll disappear. Where? I won't know, but it's certainly not going where it should. But one thing is for sure. Dirk Eischmann is at the centre of it. He's probably making millions. The amount shown here - all 150,000 Euros of it - might well be going straight into his Cayman Islands bank account for all I know. On the other hand it might be going somewhere to spread amongst a hundred other small players. It's sophisticated, organised and almost undetectable international fraud."

The look on Katrine's face in the light from the window was incredulous. "I don't know what to say, Jan. It's unbelievable."

"Oh, no, it's totally believable, Kat. I know because I'm doing it. But I'm doing it because it's the only way to prove it happens." Jan pulled the sodden umbrella lower and looked straight into Katrine's eyes. "I need some help, Kat. I need the help of your friend in Treasury because I have an idea that'll prove that money that becomes hard cash goes out but is replaced almost instantly by worthless electronic money just to balance the account. The system has been hacked, but, worse than that, it isn't being fixed because certain people do not want it fixed. And it's such a sophisticated hack that it almost covers its tracks. This is not like someone stealing money from your private bank account or your credit card. Once that's gone it's gone but you notice it. This is so clever that when the auditors finally come to check, it will either not show up at all or it will appear as just another inexplicable loss that the powers that be will, when asked for an explanation, shrug and say, as they always do, that losses are inevitable. It's not good enough, Kat."

"What will you do?"

"Make the transfer as instructed and video what I'm doing."

"What can I do?"

"Talk to your friend in Treasury, but only if you are absolutely sure you can trust her. She must say or do nothing except through you. Can you trust her?"

"I think so."

"Be sure, Kat, be absolutely sure because by asking her to get involved you are both putting your careers at stake, perhaps more."

"What do you want her to do?"

"To set up some sort of recording of exactly what happens electronically on all aid funding movements and transactions, whether approved or not, between eight and nine o'clock on Monday morning."

At midnight, Jan phoned both Jim and Jonathan with the plan.

CHAPTER 74

"You sure you don't know anything more about this guy, Guido?"

When Scott Evora phoned, Jonathan had just arrived home and was still sat in his car on the driveway. "Why? Does he bother you?" Jonathan asked, remembering the agreement with Jim was to say nothing yet.

"Yeh, we can't place him. From his accent and name, he's obviously Italian but the name's cropped up a few times, not just with Silvester Mendes."

Jonathan thought about it for a moment and the silence must have been telling.

"Is Guido his real name?" Evora probed.

"Could be."

"Does Jim know him?"

"No."

"But your mole does, that right?"

"Yes."

"And where's the mole?"

"Burrowing in a hole."

"Jesus, Jon. Can't you help?"

"No. Why does Guido bother you, Scott? Come on, you tell me something."

"He sounds to us like a kingpin. Would I be right?"

"Yes, probably, with others."

"Fuck, come on Jon. Spill."

"Look, Scott, Jim's running this show with no resources. We're all volunteers. All four of us. How many staff does the FBI have? Help us a bit more and perhaps we'd help you."

"Yeh, Jim said the same thing, but how?"

"Jim asked for technical help, did he not?"

"Yes, but what and how?"

"The listening device you fixed me up with was a good idea so we bought one ourselves. It was useful. It's already given us some evidence. It would be very useful if you could take things a stage further and hack and then track financial movements in a complex public finance system that's not based in the USA. Can you do that?"

"Jesus. Can you imagine the fall out if we did that and got found out?"

"You see what I mean, Scott? Is the FBI that weak? Another thing - Jim also asked you to help push international aid fraud up the political agenda, didn't he? So, if you think you might need international arrest warrants at some time, which will be the only way to start to bring down the organisation we are slowly uncovering, then why not discuss your concerns - without breaking any confidentiality of course - with the UK and European governments? Prepare the ground so to speak. Be ready when the time comes."

"I'll ask again."

"And what happened to Silvester Mendes, Scott? You thought he might phone me after his phone call with Guido that you listened in to."

"Yeh, I know. He's gone quiet. We thought Guido would turn up to see him at his hotel - that was the gist of one call we picked up but couldn't trace - but he didn't. After he call It looked like Mendes came down to look for someone in the lobby but he, too, was disappointed. Guido didn't show. Meanwhile, Mendes is still sitting in London, spending money from what we can tell. We lost him one night but caught up with him next morning back at the Intercontinental. A woman turned up, they were talking business, but all we really got was the woman's name - Tony."

Jonathan flinched, his heart missed a beat and his imagination went into overdrive. Jan had mentioned someone called Tony - a phone call in the middle of his first meeting with Guido in Delft. "Oh Christ!"

"What's up, Jon?"

"Guido knows someone called Tony."

"Fuck me. So, did Guido send a deputy? A woman? Who the hell is she?"

"No idea, Scott, and that's no bullshit. It's just a name we picked up once. But.....you still got the recording of me and Silvester?"

"Sure. Oh fuck! You think you said too much? Silvester might have mentioned you to this woman Tony?"

Still sitting in the car on his own driveway, Jonathan felt heat spreading up from his neck.

"How do I know? I mentioned a few genuine deals including.... Oh God!... including the Sierra Leone one that Guido's so mad about losing. Will the FBI offer any protection if Guido turns up at my office?"

CHAPTER 75

Monday morning and Jan was at his desk early with the slip of paper in his hand. He had been given codes for two funds - the Central Asia Humanitarian Aid Fund and a fund for helping disabled and orphaned children in India - and two codes that triggered money transfers.

At eight fifteen precisely he logged into the CAHA Fund, ran through the procedure and three minutes later it was done. Where the money had gone was a mystery. At eight thirty precisely, Jan did the same with the Rural India fund. By eight forty-five, when a colleague arrived, Jan had put a tiny hidden camera that was pinned to his shirt away and was already busy on something else.

At eight fifteen in another building, less than five minutes' walk away from Jan, a member of the Treasury staff also logged into the CAHA two funds ostensibly as a routine check of the balance. At eight eighteen she noticed a sudden drop in the cash balance of 150,000 Euros. At eight nineteen, the balance restored itself.

At eight thirty-three the same thing happened with the Indian fund. A sudden drop in the balance by 185,000 Euros, but one minute later it was restored. In both cases nothing had been authorised and all encrypted security coding related to the release of funds bypassed. At nine o'clock, the staff member re-ran the process that had been recorded on a separate computer. At nine thirty, Katrine made an excuse to her own staff, left the building and met her friend outside, on the street outside a Costa

Coffee. There was no time for coffee, just a nervous hello and the handing over of a memory stick.

By ten thirty, Jan walked passed Katrine's office, once to check she was there and had seen him, the second time to pick up the memory stick. At eleven, he left the office altogether, picked up his car from his apartment and drove to Schiphol Airport, Amsterdam, parked his car in the long-term car park and took a flight to Zurich to meet Tom.

CHAPTER 76

Jim was already back in Windsor when Jonathan called with a summary of his conversation with Scott Evora. It was obvious that he was rattled, but Jim just listened.

"Scott wants another chat with you, Jim. Do you want to talk to him?"

"Yes. I could see him in London tomorrow. I'm trying to finalise the art exhibition."

There was a long pause. "You think we'll have enough evidence for you to go public by then?" Jonathan sounded unconvinced.

"I'm not sure," Jim replied thoughtfully. "Let's just keep going for now. But I can sense you're worried, Jonathan. What did you say to Silvester Mendes that he might then have told the woman called Tony?"

"I mentioned the Sierra Leone project. And Eischmann will have seen Walton Associates as the bidder. Eischmann will have told Guido. Guido will have told the woman called Tony. Silvester Mendes might then have confirmed what he knows. He might even have told her he had met me. On the other hand, perhaps he didn't. I just don't know, but Guido and Eischmann certainly know about Walton associates now."

"OK," Jim said after another pause. "I think, perhaps, we need to start dropping a few names again. Let's see who runs for cover or crawls out from under a stone this time. Firstly, can you fix it for me to meet Scott tomorrow afternoon? And another point. Did you make contact with the International Chamber of Commerce, Commercial Crime Services - the CCS?"

"I'm a member."

"Good. Does our mutual friend Colin Foreman have involvement with the CCS through his Federation of European Small Enterprises?"

"Yes."

"Then it might be worth us talking to Colin again - it's a while since he put us together. Certainly, I suggest approaching the CCS. Then, with Scott Evora and the FBI, we could get the UK Home Office interested and, who knows, some recognition and action at last."

"OK," agreed Jonathan. "Drawing a few friends around Walton Associates would make me feel a lot more comfortable. I'd hate to see a black Mercedes with Italian plates suddenly turn up in the office car park. You still want to stay hidden, Jim?"

"Yes, for a while, but I'd be happy to meet Colin and the CCS with you."

"I'll fix that. And Jan and Tom?"

"They are together in Zurich, checking on Freeways Investments and anything else called Freeways registered in Zurich, Luxemburg or elsewhere. Then, they'll probably head to Milan. Meanwhile I'm about to check my mail. Jan is uploading everything on the memory stick to a site he uses. How we'll use it is another question."

CHAPTER 77

Katrine's phone rang just as she sat down at her desk. It was Dirk Eischmann.

"Katrine - come to my office."

"But....." she began.

"Now." It was a command. There was no please and no thank you and an invitation to come to Eischmann's office was rare. As she walked to the lift she recalled it had only happened once before. Three other senior staff members had been present then and the problem had been about the competency of another. Katrine took a deep breath, walked along the carpeted corridor and tapped on the door at the end. "Come."

Dirk Eischmann had a long, dark coat on that was still wet from the rain outside. He was standing by the window looking down into the concourse below. He turned and beckoned to the chair opposite his big desk. "Sit"

Katrine, in her usual grey trouser suit, sat down, crossed her legs and put her hands together in her lap. Eischmann turned to the window again. "Do you know where Jan Kerkman is?"

So, it was about Jan. She needed to play it very carefully. "Is he not at his desk?"

"No. He left the building on Monday morning. He's not been seen since."

"Is he sick?"

Eischmann turned and, as he did so, pulled off his wet overcoat. He tried slinging it over the back of his chair, but it slid to the ground. Katrine watched but then looked at his face. Eischmann was such an ordinary looking middle-aged man. He was someone who, as Jan had once said, you'd walk past in the street as if he was out on a shopping errand for his wife wearing a suit. She could see drops of rain on his wide brimmed glasses and watched him take them off, wipe them on a white handkerchief he took from his pocket and replace them on his nose. He sniffed.

"He is not sick." He paused. "You know him well."

It was a statement that demanded an answer. Katrine, thinking, trying not to panic, found she was the one who now sniffed involuntarily.

"Yes, we sometimes meet socially with work colleagues."

"You see him alone?"

"We have met once or twice for a drink." She paused. "Is there anything wrong, Mr Eischmann?"

"We need to be careful," he said, turning back towards the window. "We deal with sensitive matters. All staff are warned about mixing with people who think they can be influenced."

What was he playing at, thought Katrine. Eischmann, probably the worst offender, looked worried. She decided to say nothing and Eischmann turned again.

"If Kerkman contacts you, ask him where he is and let me know."

"Do you think he's left his job, Mr Eischmann? Just walked out without giving notice?"

Eischmann wasn't looking at her, just standing, stroking his chin. Then: "If that is so, then it is not good to just walk away, Miss Nielsen. It is unprofessional. Matters of a confidential nature may be put at risk. We need to find him. It is very urgent."

Precisely what matters of a confidential nature he was referring to were uncertain, but an unnatural sign of panic sounded in Eischmann's voice. It quivered. "We need to resolve outstanding matters, uh, relating to his employment. You will tell me immediately if he contacts you. That is all." He turned his back.

Katrine stood up. "Yes, thank you Mr Eischmann." Five minutes later she was back at her desk.

CHAPTER 78

Jim was sitting upright, cross-legged on his bed in the Windsor hotel staring at the screen of his old lap top. "Where the hell can we take this? Who the hell will listen and who the hell will then do something? Sorry for the language, mother."

He fell back with his head on the pillow and spoke to the ceiling. "Should I have tried to forget about it? Let them carry on milking the system? Stayed where I was to paint just for the satisfaction and enjoyment? Moved somewhere else, a bit closer to civilisation perhaps?" He paused and his thoughts jumped. "I thought I was seeing blue sky for the very last time during that bicycle ride, mother."

He sniffed, tugged on his beard, shook his head and then, with his eyes closed, muttered aloud.

"Police stated that the unidentified elderly man, whose body was found on the moors of the Derbyshire Peak District has been identified as former Independent Member of Parliament, James William Smith. Despite severe criticism over his political naivety and the accusations he made of corruption in the corridors of power, Smith was well known for unrelenting stubbornness and his apparent disregard for personal hygiene and dress sense. Having been hounded from office and deserting his long-suffering wife, Margaret, Smith's body was found next to a rusting bicycle not far from where he is thought to have been living like a recluse in a cave. The coroner has been informed."

Jim's quick flight of fantasy was deliberate. It was a ploy to distract himself, just briefly, from what he thought he had just seen on Jan's video recordings. He had needed to look again. And, when he re-ran it, there it was again - an almost unnoticeable flash on the screen in the half second it took for the money transfer to happen.

He sat up again, ready to check it once more.

He'd first seen the screen flicker as Jan dealt with the CAHA Fund and ignored it. But it had happened again minutes later with the Rural India fund - a black flash that

would not have bothered anyone without a suspicious mind. What was it? He ran it through again and saw it once more.

"My eyes rarely deceive me, mother. I'm very observant. It's the artist in me. Other parts might be breaking down but the eyes still work. There it is. What did they used to call single pictures on a video - a frame? There it is, as if the computer suddenly went into safe mode. Black screen, white lettering."

He watched it yet again. What's more, if he stopped the video at the right frame he could actually read it. It was bank account details. The bank - the Dubai Asia Investment Bank, an account number, a few other letters, numbers and codes, an amount - 150,000 Euros - and then a name - Acosta Freeway Investment Holdings.

He tried the second transaction, the Rural India fund. Moving the video forward second by second, frame by frame, he again found one, perhaps two, frames showing a black background and white lettering. The bank - Banco de Credito de Milano, Panama, an account number, more letters, numbers and codes, an amount 185,000 Euros and then a name - P.U. Eischmann.

Jim left the screen on just at that frame, picked up his mobile and rang Jan at the hotel in Zurich where it was past midnight.

"Jan, sorry for the late call. When you researched Dirk Eischmann's background, what was his wife's name?"

"Paula. Why?"

"And her second name?"

"Ursula. Why?"

"Your video shows where the money went."

In Zurich, Jan was now wide awake. "How, the hell.....?"

Jim explained. Then: "Guido's newest version of Puff and Slush has an error, Jan. But it is only visible on the screen on the treasury computer, not on your computer. You might like to warn Guido when you catch up with him."

CHAPTER 79

"Yah, Toni. It is....."Ah, it is not Toni. Guten tag, Mr Eischmann. Wie geht es dir?"

Guido was in his Milan warehouse when Dirk Eischmann phoned. He listened, then stood up from his chair, a look on his face that would have curdled fresh milk.

"Verdammte Scheiye! When did that fucking blonde prick go? Where did he go?"

He listened again. "Yah, the money was transferred. It is in Panama. I checked.....There is no problem. Guido's new version of Puff and Slush works perfectly and the blonde prick Kerkman did his job on Monday morning as instructed. So why has he gone?"

A pause.

"Yah, yah. Of course. It is possible to check if he takes money from his account, but we will empty it first. He will have nothing. But it is not the money, it is whether he has decided to talk. I never liked that prick ever since you found him.....very sorry Mr E, but.... Yah, he was too... too serious... too big.... too much muscle, like a

policeman. But do not panic Mr E, we will find him.....How?.....I'm not sure, Mr E. I will need to think."

Another pause.

"We are checking on this Walton company, but they have a website so the world knows about them. They cannot be serious competitors." Guido now chuckled like a child. "I was upset with their Sierra Leone bid but that was because they were tempted by a Nigerian. They can do nothing, Mr E. We have stuffed them one hundred percent because you did your part and we bought the Cherry Picking business. Those two Lebanese bastards are also stuffed because.... what shall we say.....? their local management is gone."

Guido, strutting in circles around his desk, continued to listen to Dirk Eischmann talking, but he hated listening to anyone and Eischmann was talking far more than he had ever done before. It was continuous, without a break. With the phone tucked beneath his soft chin, Guido's strutting became heavier and heavier until he was stamping his feet. His hands flapped around his head desperately trying to cover his ears. And still Eischmann talked. Guido marched to his chair like a scolded boy, sat down heavily, sniffed, his hands trembling, now playing with the cap from the old can of blue spray paint on the desk. Finally, he took a deep breath.

"Si, si. I am still here," he said. "Mi scusi, Herr Eischmann, but why do you speak to Guido like that? It is not normal. We are amico del cuore, good friends. These little problems they come and they go. Problems are normal in business and we have good news as well, Herr Eischmann.....Yah, very good news.....Silvester the Investor." Guido tried to giggle again. "He is on our side now, you will see. The expansion plans are in place...."

But Eischmann interrupted again and Guido's pig-like eyes widened. He bit his trembling lower lip and was forced to listen for another half minute.

"Yah, I am here. How so many people, Herr Eischmann.... Mr Dirk? I did not know there were so many.....Ahhh, that is many too many..... too many staff are now Members of our club. How can we keep control over that many? Who pays them? It is not through Puff and Slush.....So it is cash from senior Members.....But that is very bad management, Herr Dirk.....not to say it is your bad management, but someone else, I cannot think who. But a good business is a simple business, Mr E.....Yah, very sorry, Herr Dirk."

Guido stood up again, listening, pounding noisily across the steel floor of his mezzanine office, the sound echoing through the warehouse. "The politicians? Yah, Guido deals with some of those, but in your organisation, how many are members?.....Wah! You don't know? How is this so? Why you not tell me so before. This is also not so good, Herr Dirk. "

He circled once, twice, still listening, his free hands clenched into tight little fists. Then he stopped, perfectly still and took a deep breath. "We must find Kerkman before he talks, Mr E, but.....but I do not know where to start."

Guido only just withstood another two minutes of Eischmann's voice. When he finally stopped, he slid the phone across his desk and screamed like a spoiled child. But then he retrieved it and pressed a single key.

"Yah, Toni. We have some problems, my flower. Where are you?.....Why are you still in London?.....Has Silvester agreed yet?.....Why not?.....Why don't you

like him? This is not a time for childish stupidity, but if you don't like him, leave him and come here immediately. We need to talk."

Guido was losing control.

CHAPTER 80

The door of Ashton Art Gallery was opened as Jim was still standing outside, shaking rain drops from his new umbrella. Melissa had seen him coming. She smiled. "Hello Mr Smith, Hugh is waiting for you. It is cold today, yes? Not at all like home."

"I'll be glad to get back to the sun, Melissa," Jim replied as he wiped his shoes on the mat.

Hugh McAllister was sitting in the small office where they had, on Jim's last visit, examined his paintings, eaten pizza and drank white wine. "Hello, Jim," he said, standing up, "You know, the more I look at your work, the more I like it."

Jim smiled, pushed the long, damp strands of grey hair away from his forehead and nodded. "So how are the arrangements going?"

"Everything is booked. We now need to decide where and how to promote it. You must advise me."

"No name, Hugh. That's the first advice. They'll find out soon enough. For a while I'll just be the unknown artist. There's nothing like creating a bit of mystery. "

"I've never heard anything quite like it before. I suppose Banksy manages it in his own unique way so a mystery element might enhance the marketing effort."

Twenty minutes later and the plan was taking shape. Ten days was not long. Was it long enough? Jim had no idea. Should he postpone it? No.

"I've got a few more questions, Hugh," Jim said as Melissa brought tea.

"Go ahead, Jim."

"You might find them personal."

"Try me."

"It's about Anne, your ex-wife."

Hugh shrugged. "Time has healed the wound."

"She was careless."

"And ruthless and ambitious, Jim."

Jim dug inside his jacket pocket, withdrew a brown envelope and pulled from it a single sheet of white paper. "This is an email that Anne was sent by someone in Brussels," he said. "It is an offer of a job with a salary three times as much as she was getting as a researcher. She was careless enough to leave it amongst some other papers on my desk. Whether she went in search of it afterwards I don't know, but within a week of the date on the email she'd left London. The job description was vague but enough for me to subsequently add two and two together and make four. The job was described as Media Co-ordinator." Jim paused. "Do you know who offered her the job?"

"Yes. Dirk Eischmann."

"You know that?" Jim wasn't too surprised.

"Oh yes. She deliberately edged close to him when she worked in Brussels. Dirk said this, Dirk said that. She was entranced. He already had a wife, but that didn't stop her forcing her way into his life and that of others who were already close to him. And that included the one she eventually set up with, Daniel Acosta - one of the richest guys in Spain. You know him? The newspaper owner, the director of the Spanish aid organisation and other high-profile jobs? Up until the divorce I had never heard of him but I soon did, along with a long list of others she was involved with. They were all the same type, Jim - businessmen, highly paid civil servants, some were politicians and others were ex government ministers who had pushed their dubious credentials and got themselves jobs as highly paid advisers. Of course, they all had their own circles of friends and contacts and all of them loved the lifestyle and were desperate to be seen as rich and successful. I hate that scene, but Anne loved it. The divorce came and I tried to forget about it."

"Daniel Acosta," Jim said thoughtfully. "Of course. That now makes perfect sense. And there's a recent co-incidence. Have you ever heard of a company called Acosta Freeway Investment Holdings, Hugh?"

"No - I steer clear of anything with words like investments or holdings in it, Jim." he laughed. Jim nodded.

The rain had stopped and a watery, autumn sun was drying the street as Jim hailed a taxi from outside Hugh's gallery in Kensington. His next stop was Alfredo's cafe bar, Brook Street. Scott Evora arrived ten minutes late and was full of apologies.

"You must excuse me, Jim," Evora panted. "There's a lot going on. I only just got out of a meeting. We've got Senator Colin Stafford over. Not sure if you saw it in the paper, Jim, but Stafford has an interest in international aid - the fraud side of it. He's just in from Pakistan. We knew it was rife but, hey, Jesus. You got coffee already, Jim? Getting to like the espresso here? Want another? Hang on." He shouted inside. "Marie - two more. Got it? OK. And a refill of sugar, OK?"

They were sat outside at the same rickety, metal table as last time but Jim had his own agenda this time. There were things he wanted to say and to ask and Pakistan seemed a good starting point. He began immediately.

"This chap Silvester Mendes," Jim said, "The one Jonathan met. Are you still monitoring him?"

"Nope. He flew back to the US yesterday. He's off our patch now."

"I understand he had a visitor before he left?"

"Yeh, someone representing that guy, Guido."

"Toni. Do you have a description? A photo?"

"Yeh, we got a photo."

"Could you share it?"

"Mmm," Scott Evora stroked his chin, smiled. "You got anything for us in return? Jonathan said you might."

"Evidence of sophisticated computer hacking that can cream off aid funding straight out of ring-fenced accounts," Jim announced. "Would that interest you?"

"Jesus. You got that?"

"Yes, but we could still do with some help. And what does Senator Stafford want?"

"Like all politicians, he needs to deliver something - a few big arrests would be useful."

"Did Silvester Mendes crop up as the likely target for an arrest?"

"Yep, because he's still our focus for checking US citizen involvement in international aid fraud. But he's slippery."

"But he seems to know Guido."

"Sure, but who the fuck is this guy Guido?"

"We're trying to track him down and that's where we need your help."

"What sort of help?"

Jim pulled on his beard. "Money laundering is a priority for the FBI, isn't it?"

"Sure."

"In that case a few discreet investigations of the Dubai Asia Investment Bank might be useful for us. We have an account number, a few other encrypted codes and a name - Acosta Freeway Investment Holdings. Secondly a check on Banco de Credito de Milano. They are in Panama. Again, we have an account number, more codes, evidence that 185,000 Euros was paid in a few days ago and we have a name - P.U. Eischmann."

"P.U. Eischmann," repeated Scott Evora. "Isn't that the guy you upset a few years back?"

"No - it's his wife."

"Phew! You getting that close?"

"Yes, but Eischmann is nothing without Guido. Guido is still the kingpin. So can we count on some urgent help to look into these accounts. Like by tomorrow?"

"I'll do what I can, Jim. Do we know what Guido looks like?"

"That's another problem. Our mole is the only one who has met him face to face. So we have a good description and a voice recording, but no photo. We've also had sight of a woman associated with Guido. This might be the one called Tony or Toni spelled with an i. Our mole thinks it's Toni with an i because of how Guido pronounces it. But we've got no photo except from the back which doesn't help a lot. She's tall, maybe five nine, five ten, maybe long black hair, that's all we know, but that's why your own photo would be useful. Is this the same person?"

Scott Evora had listened intently and scribbled notes. Then:

"OK, Jim. Listen. We've had our ears thoroughly burned this morning. Evidence is piling up about aid fraud. Let me give you some examples. The Majid dam project - the supplier of one item shipped via Dubai was a French company, the goods declaration states the value at 55,000 Euros but the receipt on the actual consignment showed 4,500 Euros - someone benefitted to the tune of over 50,000

Euros. But it's a drop in the ocean. Colin Stafford showed us total losses now into seven figures and we reckon Silvester Mendes knows a thing or two about some of that.

"Another one, Jim. The Pakistan Disabled Children's Fund - generous US taxpayers have given several million US dollars for specialised equipment. Who the fuck would feel OK about stealing from that? Well, someone has. Estimated losses are over two million dollars.

"The special anti-fraud hotline is red hot, Jim. It would help if the EU had one. We sometimes identify small time operators but even if they talk, they know so little and are so scared, we get nowhere. It's the organisation behind it that's hard to get a fix on - we're talking politicians, government ministers, gangsters - but you already know all that. But we'd definitely like to get a few characters like your friend Guido out of circulation. That would send a few very strong messages."

"Your Senator Colin Stafford," Jim said quietly. "Has he spoken to the UK or other European governments?"

Scott grinned. "I was coming to that, Jim, but understand this. I can't tell you everything. We've got our own sniffers out there and things happen behind closed doors, but Prime Ministers talk to Presidents, Senators talk to Ministers. The US is doing something about aid fraud, but we can't act alone. That, I understand, was the message Senator Stafford delivered to your own Home Office today and in Germany yesterday. They are, we think, now listening. And, trust me Jim, no-one knows you're back here and have dug up that dirty old bone to have another gnaw at. I've told no-one. Jonathan is known to a couple of my buddies but that's it."

Jim just listened intently. An idea had been simmering in his head for a day or so but he'd not even mentioned it to Jonathan, Jan or Tom. But with Scott Evora showing signs of a willingness to help, he went for it.

"So why not deliberately lift a few stones and watch what crawls out?"

Evora sniffed and smiled. "Hmm. What have you got in mind?"

"A few years ago, when I rattled a stone but failed to lift it, nothing crawled out. Nevertheless, all hell broke loose as if I'd seriously unsettled what was living underneath it. I'm just wondering if a few names whispered in ears - and since Senator Stafford has met the government here you could start with our Serious Fraud people - it might, this time around, tempt a few creatures to crawl out. Even a few tongues might loosen up. I don't really know how it all works but can't you bring a few people in for innocent questioning on the back of suspicions raised elsewhere. Failing that, mention a few names to national police forces through your FBI European offices and see what happens?"

"And ruin any chances of clean arrests?"

"Perhaps," Jim said, "So leave the key players in place. Aim wider and see if you find someone who'll talk. We could work on a short list of people to prod with a sharp stick if you like."

Jim knew he was pushing ideas that probably went way beyond what was possible, but time was running out. He had always wanted international law enforcement agencies to sit up, take notice and then act, and this was the best chance yet. They

chatted it through a while longer. In the end, Jim knew he had convinced Evora to give it a try.

"So, who would be on your short list of names to mention in high places?" Evora asked.

"Try Daniel Acosta," Jim replied knowing full well the name would mean nothing. "He's a media mogul, one of the richest guys in Spain and, not by coincidence, president of the Spanish aid agency HAED - the Humanitarian Aid and Economic Development organisation. He also touts himself around the globe as a very well connected private consultant. Then try his wife, Anne Acosta, nee Anne McAllister."

"You know this guy?"

"Not personally. I knew his wife and then found out about him. Just to remind you I ran a company that manufactured water purification and sanitation equipment. Many of my contracts depended on aid funding. The HAED had a particular interest in that business. It specialised in Latin America and the Caribbean, right on your door step. Acosta has some very powerful friends in the USA."

"Jesus Christ!". Scott Evora scribbled the names as Jim sat back. "Any others?"

Jim was not short of names. Some had been on his mental list for years. Some had moved on but others - he knew because he had checked - were still there. He gave the names as Evora scribbled.

"These are just a few, Scott - secretive but wealthy bureaucrats who enjoy their wealth but hate publicity. I suggest leaving the politicians and private sector alone at present. They both depend on the incompetence of the bureaucrats or their willing involvement in fraud and corruption.

"OK, let's take them one by one. Who's Dimitri Castellanos?" asked Evora.

"Director of Finance."

"Jesus! The top guy? You sure?"

Jim nodded. "Almost the top man. Directors also have bosses."

"And Pierre Augustin?"

"Humanitarian Aid - Head of Policy."

Scott raised another eyebrow. "And Ahmed Majoub?"

"Central Asia - Head of Policy."

"Joseph Campos?"

"Economic Development, West Africa, based in Luanda."

"Philippe Eijsackers?"

"Environmental Policy."

"You sure about these guys, Jim? This would be like opening a huge can of worms."

"Worms also live under stones, Scott."

CHAPTER 81

In Zurich, Tom and Jan were at breakfast in the hotel.

As Tom filled a glass with orange juice and brought it back to their table, his mobile phone rang. It was Jim, first checking that Jan had now joined him and then with an update on his meeting with Scott Evora. But it was his next piece of information which caused Tom to look at Jan, nod his head and point to the phone he was holding. "A possible lead from Jonathan on Guido," he whispered across the table. Jim was still talking.

"It's come on a tortuous route from Sierra Leone," Jim was saying. "According to Cole Harding, the two Lebanese who ran Cherry Picking met Guido in Milan. He met them off a plane from Amsterdam some months ago, picked them up in a black Mercedes, whisked them off to a restaurant in the centre of Milan and then dropped them at the Park Hyatt Hotel. Apparently, Guido seemed well known at both the restaurant and the hotel. It's only a thought, Tom, but maybe you should both head on down to Milan once you've done all you can in Zurich."

Tom and Jan agreed but, for now, their plan was to look at Zurich companies using the name Freeway. Over fresh coffee, they sat with Jan's laptop. On the screen was a long, long list of companies with that name.

"Cut and pasted from publicly accessible sites," Jan said.

Jim looked. The list went on for pages and pages - innocuous sounding companies like Freeway Car Washing (Panama), Freeway Electronics SA (Spain), Freeway Pharmaceuticals PLC, Freeway Management Ltd. Then there were others: Market Freeway (Gibraltar), Express Freeway and, the longest name of all, Atlantic and Pacific Ocean Freeway Finance SA (Mexico).

"Daunting, huh?" Jan said. "But I've already put in hours of work on it on this laptop which, by the way, I don't keep at home but in a locker at the gym I use."

Jim looked at Jan and shook his head. "Unbelievable."

"I'm just being careful," Jan answered, still scrolling down. "It's a long list but we can dismiss over ninety nine percent. I've marked the one percent in red. See? There's one interesting Freeway - the one Jim uncovered when looking at the video of my crime." Jan tried to laugh.

"The Puff and Slush money movement?" Tom asked.

"Correct. Using Puff and Slush I moved 150,000 Euros to a beneficiary called Acosta Freeway Investment Holdings. See it? There. Now, if we click on the internet link we can find more on Acosta. There. It's based in Panama and that figures because we've also got evidence that the money that I moved went to Banco de Credito de Milano in Panama and Jim has already asked Scott Evora if the FBI could check this out as well as a bank in Dubai. We're gathering evidence, Tom. We're doing OK."

He paused and scrolled down further as Tom watched.

"But what I'm particularly interested in is this batch here - six companies calling themselves Freeway Consultants or variations on that name. And why? Because I am, once again, feeling guilty about using Guido's system - this time to replace Walton Associates with Freeway Consultants as the consultants on Jonathan's Sierra Leone bid."

"And Freeway Consultants are based in Zurich?" Tom asked, checking his understanding.

"Yes, or so the paperwork said. And, if my suspicions are correct, both Dirk Eischmann and Guido have links with Freeway Consultants Zurich. But no-one has ever checked them out. I asked Katrine about it. You know what she said? Freeways were Swiss and they were 'prequalified'.

"That seemed to be enough as a measure of their legitimacy and ability to deliver. How they got prequalification status in the first place is unknown, but it automatically short cuts their approval rating and grants them legitimacy on the basis that they're seen as having performed OK in the past. The fact is the original paperwork was probably forged, but no-one - at least no-one with clean hands and a critical eye - has ever bothered to go to Zurich to check. But the name Freeway is well known to me and Katrine and others in the organisation. Freeway Consultants often crop up in bids in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Somalia and elsewhere. I know because I checked. So, let's make them our first target."

Tom interrupted. "But doesn't someone representing Freeway Consultants show his or her face from time to time? Surely a name is known to someone, somewhere. A figurehead to give it that continued legitimacy."

"I asked Katrine the same question. And yes, there is a sort of vetting team that grants prequalification certificates. When I mentioned this to Jim and offered some names, he recognised one. Did Jim ever tell you about meeting a Dutchman offering to guarantee successful bids from Jim's company in return for a commission?"

"Yes, and he also mentioned the tape recording. He was expecting to meet a guy called Philippe but another guy turned up."

"Yes. Philippe Eijsackers was the guy who we think failed to turn up. Instead, he sent a sidekick - perhaps so he himself could stay in the background and claim innocence if anything went wrong. At that time, Eijsackers was the head of the vetting team. He's now moved onwards and upwards into Environmental Policy, but Jim thinks he's still involved with Eischmann."

"So where do we start with Freeway Consultants?"

"With this one," Jan said, pointing at a company he'd highlighted in green."

"Why that one?"

"I dug out past correspondence and bid submissions. They all show the company registered in Luxemburg but with an address in Zurich. If we draw a blank with them, there are three others we can try with Zurich or Geneva connections."

"OK. So what about the other Freeway name we picked up - Freeways Freight Forwarding?"

"There we have a problem," Jan replied. "I found three possibilities - Freeway Freight Forwarding, Freeways Freight Forwarders and Freeway Shipping but there is nothing to connect them with Zurich or Milan."

"Mmm," Tom mumbled and sat back. "A pity.....but where did we get the name Freeways Freight Forwarding from?"

"Sierra Leone.....from Jonathan via Cole Harding again....it was just a name."

"Then let's see if Cole Harding can find out some more. I'll phone Jonathan to ask him. Meanwhile let's go in search of Freeway Consultants."

"Seeing a name plate on an office block in a side street will mean nothing, Tom."

"Yes, I know. So, we need a devilish plan and I thought of one on the plane down here. Do you have a copy of one of the letters from Freeway Consultants?"

"Yes."

"Who signed it?"

"It's an electronic signature and says Richard Muller - it means nothing. I checked."

"Then there's no harm in trying a bit of Irish skulduggery, subterfuge and jiggery-pokery?"

"What the hell's that?"

"It's how I could and should have been the biggest and shittiest investigative reporter in London. I'll be Richard Muller and you can be the finance director."

CHAPTER 82

Early morning in Milan and Guido was again pacing around the warehouse, this time in a pair of red socks but with the phone, as always, tucked inside the fold of his chin.

It was a cold and foggy morning in Milan but sweat drops had formed on his brow. He pushed strands of straight, black hair that had fallen over his forehead back into place.

"I am not panicking, Toni. Do not say that. But we need a plan. Mr E is very mad. His angry voice yesterday - oh mio dio - I dreamed about it last night. It is that asshole, that bastard, that faccia di merda. I hate him, Toni. I never liked him. He has a comportamento sospetto. I told Mr E he was a suspicious son of a bitch. But what can we do? Mr E thinks he is hiding somewhere, maybe to tell stories.....yah, what is it?.....OK, OK, I am talking about that fucking Dutch bastard Kerkman, Toni. Who the hell else?.....Yah, that's him. I trained him on Puff and Slush and he has run away. Yah - run away, gone.....I do not know where."

Guido scuffed his way around the office, kicking at a screwed-up scrap of paper that had missed the trash bin.

"My dream of Mr E was a nightmare, Toni. This Kerkman came to the warehouse and he shot me, Toni. Shot me with a gun. But it is impossible. No-one knows about us, Toni. It is Mr E who is nervous. But Mr E needs a plan to find himyah, yah, find Kerkman, not Eischmann.....I am not nervous, Toni. But what can we do?"

Guido was starting to panic.

CHAPTER 83

Mid-morning in England and Cole Harding's phone call to Jonathan provided another lead.

"Freeways Freight Forwarding, Jonathan."

"Yes, did you speak to Sierra Leone?"

"Not just Sierra Leone. I also spoke to Schools Aid Africa, an English charity that renovates old laptop computers and sends them to Africa. In Sierra Leone their

contact is an organisation called Daisy Children's Charity, but things get stolen and taken to Liberia and Nigeria. The shipper that Schools Aid are told to use is Freeways Freight Forwarding, Milan. So, I'm faxing you a copy of shipping documents for you to check details.

Jonathan scanned the fax, emailed it to Jim and Jan and then went straight to his car.

His next appointment was with the Financial Investigation Bureau. The FIB, a specialised office within the International Chamber of Commerce Crime Service, conducts enquiries and investigations into matters associated with money laundering, fraud and suspect documents. Walton Associates, at Jim's suggestion, had become a member. Membership meant joining a club of International banks, financial institutions, National Financial Intelligence Units, Regulatory bodies and, most importantly, law enforcement agencies.

As Jim had said weeks before, the FIB had status. It listened. And the FIB talked to the UK Government, the Home Office and could call on bodies like Interpol. And being a commercial body, it especially liked listening to suggestions of fraud and corruption within government circles.

That meeting over and Jonathan immediately phoned Jim from his car with an update.

"They listened, Jim, and I've still not mentioned names. It was just me providing evidence of tampering with bids, throwing in a few examples and saying I can't divulge much more due to the risks posed for a whistle-blower. Cole Harding had given me permission to mention his involvement with us and that went down very well as Cole was known to them from past fraud cases. At the end I said I needed guarantees of total confidentiality before going further and they want to meet again. But the dots are starting to join up, Jim. Do you want to tell Scott Evora or shall I?"

"You do it, Jonathan. And, while you're at it, tell him to hurry up dealing with the list of names I gave him."

CHAPTER 84

The copy of the letter from Freeway Consultants showed their office on Bahnhofplatz an easy walking distance from Tom and Jan's hotel on Zahringerstrasse in Zurich Old Town.

A quick internet check also showed it being promoted as a "most prestigious business address in the heart of the central business area." Most importantly, there was a phone number for anyone wishing to rent space. Tom made the call.

"Ah, yes. My name is Richard Muller. My company Freeway Consultants rent office space at Bahnhofplatz....."

"Ah yes, Mr Muller. Freeway Consultants, of course. How are you? Is everything to your satisfaction?"

"Yes, good, thank you. So good, in fact, we are looking to rent more space."

"Ah. We have some offices still available. You will be familiar with the facilities - meeting and interview rooms, the business lounge, the video-conferencing suite, the

high-speed internet, all supported by our multilingual team of on-site professionals....."

"Yes, thank you. Could we call to have another look?"

"Are you in Zurich?"

"Yes, we could be there in ten minutes. Is someone available to show us?"

"Of course. Shall we say midday. Do you have the entry security codes?"

"No, sorry, they're with my staff in Holland."

"No problem, someone will meet you outside."

It was now midday and as Tom and Jan stood on the pavement outside, the glass door opened and a young woman wearing a grey suit and with blonde hair came out. Jan immediately thought of Katrine.

"Mr Muller? My name is Sophie. You speak English or German?"

"English would be fine," said Tom trying to conceal his Irish accent. "This is John Gardener from our Dutch office." They shook hands.

"I think you already rent an office here?"

"Yes, Freeway Consultants."

"Ah yes, on the second floor," she said and led the way to a lift. No-one spoke as the lift ascended. When the door slid open, they walked out onto a carpeted corridor. "Do you have access to our current office?" asked Tom.

"Yes, it is an emergency code only but we can go in."

On the door outside it said Freeway Consultants S.A. but, as expected, it was empty inside except for a desk, two chairs and a small table.

"But it's empty," Tom said with forced surprise. "Where are the computers, the filing cabinets?" He started opening the drawers of the desk.

Sophie stared at them both. "But we have never seen anyone here."

"Then we need to report this," Tom said, "Our work is confidential. There were sensitive files here. Who is in charge of security?"

Sophie looked shocked. "It is the management company - Commercial Office Services - the company you spoke to earlier."

Tom took out his mobile phone. Jan and Sophie watched.

"Yes," he said, "It's Richard Muller again. I am now in the office at Bahnhofplatz. There has clearly been a security failure here. The office is empty - no computers, no files, nothing. "

The voice on the other end was clearly apologetic.

"Yes, I am also sorry." Tom said. "My staff only worked from here for short periods - perhaps for two weeks or so - before returning to our Dutch office, but we have had no-one here for two months. We've had a few issues with our local partners. Can you say if the rent has been paid?.....Yes, please check before I make other enquiries."

Tom waited, staring out of the window onto the street below. Jan sat in the chair looking and smiling at Sophie. Sophie looked down at her shoes then up at Jan. Then:

"Good. Well that's a relief. Can you tell me which of the companies paid the rent?.....Freeway Consultants? Yes, of course, that's us. From which account was it paid?..... Milan, you say?"

Tom, still looking out of the window, was thinking quickly.

"Would that be our Banco de Credito de Milano account? Yes. That bank is not in Milan, Italy, it is our Panama account but are there any more details on the bank transfer - the payee's name, perhaps?..... P.U Eischmann..... Yes, that's OK. I understand now."

Tom turned, looked at Jan, then at Sophie. He was still holding the phone so that the person on the other end could hear. "Well, that's a relief," he said. "Mr Eischmann has been paying, but I'm still worried about our computers and files."

He turned back to the phone and continued. "Who am I talking to? Olga. Listen, Olga, could you check something else for me? The rental agreement with Freeway. Who signed it? Was it our Milan office? Thank you, yes, of course, I'll wait."

Tom glanced at Jan. Jan was stroking his chin and smiling at Sophie who still reminded him of Katrine.

Tom again: "Yes, that would be it.....Antonia Goretti....Antonia - yes, we call her Toni. And the address?.....Yes, thank you, Olga. That's very helpful.... No, no, there is need to call the police. Everything is fine. Goodbye"

Tom switched off the phone, glanced at Jan and then at Sophie. "I'm sorry Sophie but I don't think we'll need a new office now. One will be enough."

Three minutes later, as Tom and Jan began the walk along Bahnofstrasse towards their hotel, Jan grabbed Tom's coat sleeve. "So, are you going to tell me the address?"

"Via Como, Civesio," Tom said, smiling. "Milan. Did you like my English accent, Jan?"

"Very good. Do you think that's Guido's address?"

"Well, I don't know, but it's another lead don't you think?"

"And do you think we've now got a real name for Toni?"

"Well," Tom said, resuming his English accent. "If not it's a jolly fine coincidence. Let's report this to Jim and then head on down to Milan."

CHAPTER 85

Katrine received the phone call from Dirk Eischmann at her morning coffee break.

"I have been called for another meeting. Please give my apologies and chair the EAWA steering group meeting this afternoon."

He had made the phone call from his office but left immediately and headed to Brussels airport and the Sheraton Hotel. Once inside, he walked direct to a corner.

Already sitting on a sofa beneath a large, contemporary print with white cups of coffee on the glass topped table in front of them, was a smart, greying, middle aged man in a dark suit, white shirt and red tie. Alongside him, sat a much younger woman with long, blonde hair, red lipstick, a white blouse and a short, flower-printed skirt. Around her neck was a gold necklace and, on her fingers, rings with several large stones. As she leaned towards the man, talked quietly and straightened his already immaculate tie, her skirt rose up to expose long, tanned legs and thighs.

As Eischmann approached the man placed a finger to his lips to put an end to the woman's attentions and stood up. The woman straightened her skirt, uncurled her legs and stayed sitting down, looking at her red nails. There was no handshake. Instead Eischmann beckoned him return to the sofa and then nodded at the woman who smiled. He then took the black, patterned upright chair opposite and leaned forward. But whatever their meeting was to be about, it was immediately interrupted.

Eischmann had barely opened his mouth when two men, both wearing dark suits and ties walked towards their corner. The woman saw them coming first, her partner then looked up and Eischmann turned around.

"Sorry to interrupt your meeting," said one of the suits. "Inspector Hendrickx, Belgian Federal Police. This is Inspector Verstraeten."

Eischmann stood up. "What is this?" The other man also stood.

"Sorry, sir, but we're just checking identities Could I have your names please? Are you staying at the hotel?"

"No. Why? What is this?" Eischmann asked again, his face turning red. "What is the problem?"

"No need to worry, sir. Do you have any ID? A passport? A driving licence?"

Eischmann just stood.

"You sir? You madam? Do you have any ID?"

The woman crossed her legs once again and fumbled in a tiny, brown leather handbag. Her partner touched her hand. "There is no need, mi amor. What do you want? This is my wife. We arrived here this morning from Nice." he said. The accent was Spanish.

"So, you will have your passports with you," said Inspector Hendrickx and he nodded to Verstraeten. Verstraeten moved forward, his hand outstretched. Eischmann moved back behind his chair, his hands rubbing his face nervously.

"I am Dirk Eischmann," he announced. "I am Director General at the Commission. There is no need for this fuss."

Hendrickx raised an eyebrow. "You have some proof of ID, sir?" he asked. "Just your driving licence will do. We're just doing our duty."

Eischmann, fumbled in an inside pocket, removed a wallet then a credit card sized driving licence and handed it over. Hendrickx glanced at it. "Thank you. No problem, sir." He handed it back.

"You sir?" he looked at the one with the Spanish accent.

"My passport." He handed it to Verstraeten. Verstraeten glanced at it. "Mr Daniel Acosta - Spanish passport. Thank you." He handed it back. "You madam?"

The woman fumbled in her bag once more, handed over a maroon passport. "Thank you. Anne Acosta - British passport. Thank you."

Both Verstraeten and Hendrickx stood back.

"Thank you, Messieurs, madam. That is all. Sorry to interrupt your meeting. Have a nice day."

It was Eischmann who spoke next. "I don't see you asking other guests for their ID. Why us?"

"Instructions, sir. We obey instructions," Hendrickx replied. He saluted casually and started to walk away with Verstraeten, but Eischmann followed.

"Instructions from where? In my position I have a right to know."

Hendrickx turned, looked at him straight in the eye. "In your position, sir, then you can know that it is part of a cross-border, international fraud investigation. Money laundering, that sort of thing, sir." Then he walked away.

In London, Scott Evora got the message that three more names on his list had been found and a small dent made in their normally untouchable self-confidence. Jim's stone was being lifted.

In Milan, Guido was standing naked in front of one of the four mirrors in the bathroom when he heard the phone vibrating on the shelf beside a vase of purple orchids. With white foam around his mouth and running down his arms, he continued brushing his teeth with one hand and picked the phone up.

"Ya. Toni?" he gurgled through the foam. Then he stopped brushing, ran to the white sink, rinsed his mouth from a glass of mineral water, gargled, spat, sat on the stool beside the bath and put his hand to his mouth. His eyes widened.

"It's that asshole, that piece of shit, that faccia di merda, Toni," he shouted, the shrill sound enhanced by the mirrors and white ceramic floor and walls. "How do you know this?"

There was a pause.

"Two people?.....Who was the second one? How do you know it was the asshole? Who said he was tall and handsome? A girl in the office?.....And the other man?.....Big? Red hair? What man can have such a colour?.....There is no-one called Richard Muller. It is only a name.... he is the impostore. And what did the crazy people in the office tell him?.....A bank? The Milan address? Mio Dio!"

The scream was almost enough to shatter the bathroom mirrors.

CHAPTER 86

Scott Evora phoned Jonathan and Jonathan then phoned Jim.

Jim had been sitting cross-legged in his underwear on the bed in his room at the Windsor Hotel for almost two hours. It had starting with his routine meditation - thinking, imagining he was sat high on the rocks of the hill behind his house and watching the sun rise but Margaret had been on his mind again. Was it all his fault as

she had claimed? Probably. Had she survived to make the best of the situation? Definitely. Jim had wondered if he should tell Tom. Tom would, he felt, understand. But Tom was in Zurich or on his way to Milan. It had to wait.

And Jim's chest hurt. Not constantly, but intermittently. It had hurt when, after his meagre breakfast, he had taken the hotel stairs rather than the lift. That's why he had decided to sit and calm himself. But, unlike at home in Thailand, a lot was happening. He wanted to paint again. Painting was, he now realised, not just a hobby but a release, a treatment for loneliness and probably his heart problem. But he had no materials and Tom, Jan and Jonathan were all out there busily dealing with the matter that was his responsibility. In a way he was beginning to feel superfluous.

The night before, he had spoken to Hugh McAlister about the exhibition. The venue, a hotel in the West End had been booked and Hugh and Melissa were busy framing selected pictures to show. Hugh still needed to know about the promotional side - who to invite etcetera - the exhibition was, after all, for only one single day, but Jim was still very uncertain about what to do.

He opened his eyes, realised where he was, heard the phone ringing and leaned over to grab it.

"Jim. Scott wants to meet again - urgently. There's some movement. The UK Government - the Home Office especially - are sitting up. Nothing's been said publicly but European and other Police forces have been briefed about possible joint action if enough evidence can be provided. The pressure's mounting, Jim. Senator Stafford has also been busy. He's in Brussels this morning. And they've arrested Silvester Mendes in New York initially on charges of money laundering."

Jonathan paused, waiting. "Jim? Are you there?"

"Yes," said Jim. "Sorry. I was miles away when you phoned. Good news. When does he want to meet?"

"This afternoon. The three of us. Alfredo's."

"OK," said Jim. "Anything from Tom or Jan?"

"They'd phone you first, Jim, not me. Where are they now?"

"They should be arriving in Milan soon." Jim paused. "I've been thinking, Jonathan. I think it's time to come clean with Scott about Jan and Tom. They now need us as much as we need them. We could certainly use their Legal Attache offices and if we are to get Interpol involved then the FBI will be crucial.

"And let's now meet the UK Serious Fraud Office. I was reluctant to talk to the SFO till now for obvious reasons, but I think we're gathering enough evidence to make a move. It's time for me to show my face once again, Jonathan."

"Jim - you've said it. Fantastic. Meet later?"

"Yes," said Jim and he immediately felt better.

CHAPTER 87

When Katrine arrived for work, an office rumour was rife. She had now chaired three meetings that Eischmann normally chaired and was actually enjoying it. Preparing herself for a fourth, she was sat at her computer when her phone rang.

"Kat?"

"Jan? Is that you?"

"Yes, listen. Can you do something for me? Please ask your friend in Treasury to continue to monitor all the international aid fund movements from now on. Tell her to do exactly what she did last time. It worked, Kat. We've been able to see what happens, where the money goes and to whom."

"Where are you?"

"I can't tell you, Kat. Not yet, anyway."

"Something's happened here, also," Katrine said. "Dirk Eischmann's disappeared. He has not been seen for three days and no-one knows where he is. The press, too, have got wind of something."

"Stay in there, Kat. I sense some career progression for you very soon." Jan laughed and rung off. He was sitting in Tom's room at the Holiday Inn hotel near Linate Airport, Milan. Tom was on the laptop checking maps.

"Via Como, Civesio," he said. It's not far away. It looks industrial. Shall we take a look?"

"Yes. Then, we'll head into central Milan and check the restaurants around the Park Hyatt hotel. And can we print off the photo you took of the back of Guido in Antwerp? I can describe him very well from the front, but any photo might help."

They hired a car through hotel reception and after it was delivered set off with a more detailed hard copy road map. It was a cool overcast early afternoon with no wind. Their car was a small, blue Fiat 500 that Jan drove as Tom sat hunched in the undersized passenger seat with the map on his lap. Via Como was, as he had noted, in the Civesio Industrial area, a triangular patch of older warehousing, small industrial units and repair shops. They drove around the triangle, noting a few names.

"How's your Italian?" Tom asked.

"Parlo un po' di Italiano," said Jan.

"I'm impressed," said Tom.

"Don't be. That's all there is. Stop a minute and I'll ask my mobile phone for help. We'll start with the Italian for 'do you know this man?'"

It took half an hour of driving, stopping and then walking around the area until Jan finally stopped a man on a fork lift truck. "Mi scusi. Parla inglese?"

"A little," said the driver.

Jan showed him the photo. "You know this man? It is not his face but he is a very small man."

"Si, certamente. I see him sometimes. He drives big Mercedes. Ometto."

"Ometto?"

"Si, very small."

"You know his office? Is it near here?"

"Si. I think so." He pointed to a narrow driveway between two buildings.

"Do you know his name?"

The man shrugged. "He comes and he goes."

Jan thanked him and, with Tom now talking to someone else, walked along the narrow road between two empty looking warehouse buildings. The road ended in a small, untidy concrete parking area littered with weeds and lumps of concrete, but no black Mercedes. In the far corner, though, was a double door with a smaller metal door cut into it that looked as if it was used regularly. The weeds were flattened down, the door itself freshly painted in black. Jan walked up to it, listened. There was silence, but the door handle was smooth, worn. He tried it. It was locked. There were no windows and no way of seeing inside. He retraced his steps to find Tom now talking to the same fork lift driver.

"I think this is it, Tom. He comes here sometimes."

The forklift driver listened. "The guy is crazy," he said, "One time I see him on car phone crying. Next minute he laughing."

"That sounds like him," said Jan.

"You polizia?"

"No," replied Tom, "But we need to find him. You know where he lives?"

"I think maybe in Como beside the lake on the road to Blevio and Torno. My boss, on vacanza, see him one time. See Mercedes. Tell me."

"He saw him driving the car?"

"No, no. Mercedes behind the cancello, the porta. It is a big villa with albero, many trees."

"And this is Via Como, Civesio," said Tom, "Does he like the name Como?"

The fork lift driver shrugged and grinned, "Maybe." Then he started to reverse his truck. "Small man, big money," he said and drove away.

Jan looked at Tom. "What do we do now? Drive to Como?"

"What would we do if we see him? What might he do if he sees you? And maybe he's not in Como at all. And don't forget we still need to check out restaurants around the Park Hyatt in Milan - and the hotel itself. Let's first update Jim and then head into the centre of Milan.

Jim was on the train to London to meet Jonathan and Scott Evora when Tom phoned with the latest news and it only re-enforced Jim's conviction that the time was now right to explain in detail what they were doing. He told Tom.

"But Jan's getting very nervous - and quite understandably." Tom warned him.

"Just try to keep out of harm's way until we know how we're going to deal with it. By all means go up to Como but don't do anything silly and just keep me posted."

"And there's another interesting development," Tom went on. "Eischmann's disappeared."

There was a momentary silence from Jim. "Are you sure? We knew where he was two days ago. He was in Brussels with Daniel Acosta and Acosta's wife Anne."

"Nee Anne McAllister, Jim?"

"Correct. And looking very well cared for apparently."

Tom and Jim headed into central Milan, found a place to drop the car and then walked to the Park Hyatt hotel.

"Well this is a fine place for the spending of money," was Tom's first comment as they went inside. "Do you think Guido also lives here?"

Showing the photograph and trying to describe Guido to reception, however, got nowhere.

"I am sorry. It is possible he is here but we have many guests, sir. But it is against our policy to divulge information on our guests. Are you police?.....No, you see sir, it is not possible. I am very sorry. But if you think your friend is staying here you can perhaps wait for him, take a coffee or something in the Cupola Lounge.....yes, that is it, sir, beneath the glass dome, the cupola.....perhaps some afternoon tea, a glass of champagne?"

Tom thanked the receptionist. "Perhaps another day"

Jan's mobile phone showed over fifty restaurants nearby. "We can miss out McDonalds and Burger King," said Tom. It looked a hopeless task but they started walking and an hour later at the expensive, Le Nuit, they got something.

"A table for two, sir," suggested the black suited man behind the desk inside already grabbing menus.

"No thank you. We're just looking for someone. His name is Guido. He looks like this." Tom produced the photo. The man stared; his eyes opened perhaps a little wide. "You know him?" pursued Tom.

"Ah, no sir, it is, ah, very small photo. It is not possible."

"Does he come here?" Tom pushed.

"Ah," the man looked away as if looking for support from somewhere. "Ah, no sir, I do not think so. Ah, let me think... ah.... si.... maybe."

"He comes here?"

"Yes, I think so. Sometimes. You are police?"

"Yes, Interpol," Tom said to Jan's surprise.

"Interpol? Ah, let me see, maybe you should speak to Giuseppe, but Giuseppe he is not here. He will arrive later. Is, ah, this, ah Signor Guido, is he a problem? "

Tom, with nothing official on his person to confirm he was working for Interpol replied, "Perhaps, sir, but thank you. We will return later."

Once outside, they both agreed, Guido was probably known there. If nothing else, if the real Interpol was asked to intervene at any stage, it might be a good lead. For now, they'd head towards Lake Como.

In London, Jim was the first to arrive at Alfredo's. It was cold and raining again, but he ordered coffee and sat at the usual outside table. Then his phone rang. This time it was Jonathan.

"Change of plan, Jim. We're to meet, instead, at the US Embassy. Scott wants us to meet someone who's just got back from Brussels."

"Senator Stafford?"

"This is it, Jim. Let's give it to them."

Jim drained his coffee cup, put down a note as payment and left.

CHAPTER 88

Katrine's fourth meeting deputising for the usual chairman, Dirk Eischmann, had just finished. Out of five economic development aid bids on the agenda, only one had been passed for final assessment and signing off, whilst the steering group had asked for more work and information on each of the remaining four. It was unprecedented. But without Eischmann's presence, Katrine felt the whole group had been more critical, outspoken and demanding. The meeting had also gone on far longer than normal. It was now nearly 5pm. She returned to her office with a smile to find staff already preparing to leave for the day. Computers were being shut down and files put away when her internal phone rang.

"Kat, it's Stephanie in Treasury. I'm sure we've been hacked again. A huge amount of money disappeared this afternoon from the Humanitarian Aid for Syrian Refugees Fund. Twenty million Euros. I've checked everything, but it's as if someone, somewhere knew all the codes necessary to instruct the transfer of the money. Despite all the encryption the fund now shows a twenty million shortfall, but I have no idea where it went. That part of the entire transfer has been wiped leaving no trace."

"Did you record everything like I suggested?" Katrine asked.

"Yes, but this time there was no rebalance after the money went out. The IT guys are looking at it, right now. But, Kat, there's something else. Financial Controller Castellanos, the head of my line management, has not been seen for two days."

"That makes six then, Stephanie."

"Six?"

"Eischmann, Philip Eijsackers, Pierre Augustin, Joseph Santos and Kamal Mahmoud from Central Asia Policy and now Dimitri Castellanos."

"And don't forget Jan Kerkman," said Stephanie.

"Yes, I suppose Jan makes it seven," said Katrine. "It looks like we've got a few internal problems on our hands."

CHAPTER 89

"Mr Smith? Jim? I'm truly honoured to meet you."

Senator Colin Stafford was a tall, well-groomed and smart-looking middle-aged American. His handshake was fierce, his eye-contact direct, and Jim wondered if he should have shaved and perhaps worn his suit jacket and tie instead of the damp

sweater. But he hadn't planned on finding himself in a plush office somewhere in the heart of the US Embassy with a Senator. Jonathan, Scott Evora and the man Scott reported to, the Legal Attaché Stephen Lockhart, were already present when Jim was shown in.

"Scott's given me the rundown," Stafford continued. "A short but painful experience of politics, huh? You were given a hard time, Jim - ridiculed you might say."

"Yes, indeed," Jim said, "That's why I went away to think, instead."

"But still with the bit held firmly between your teeth."

Jim now worried about his dentistry. Stafford's teeth glistened like white piano keys. He nodded with his mouth shut.

"And you've built yourself a small team, I understand," Stafford went on.

Jim took a deep breath. He had already decided that the so-called small team could not carry on much longer. It needed help and recognition for what it had already done. It needed immediate, top level action to support what Jan and Tom were doing right now in Italy. It was time to ask for it.

"Right now, Senator, we have two guys, one an ex newspaper reporter who so disliked what he saw happen to me that he tracked me down and offered to help, and someone who has been working undercover as a mole within the system. This guy is at particular risk because he is known to some powerful people, but both men are, as we sit here, putting themselves in acute danger."

Stafford nodded. "OK, Jim. Let me tell you where the US stands right now. It began with basic concerns about fraudulent use of USAID. Yeh, we've got hotlines and suchlike that pick up odd bits of petty fraud, but what we needed were the bigger fish. For me it started with my involvement in Central Asia. I've just got back from Islamabad and I can tell you that, only a few weeks ago, we listened in to a Government Minister with bank accounts scattered around from Dubai to the Caymans talking with a director of their Central Bank about how to steal millions from international aid donations. We know they have already used every trick in the book from tendering fraud to false invoicing. An American citizen was also involved. That's why I went and we've now arrested him. But our attention turned to the wider organisation. There were signs of sophistication creeping in - serious organisational crime, big players using small ones to do the dirty work. You'll know one name - Silvester Mendes - that's who we've just taken in, but we know darned well that even he was only living on the edge of the more organised crime. Through Mendes though, we've got wind of others - including this mysterious guy known as Guido. We've also got to understand a little more about European aid fraud. Jonathan has already helped a lot. We could usefully use everything you've now got, Jim."

"How long have you got, Senator?"

"I'm here till Sunday. It should have been Saturday but, hey, my wife is with me and she always wanted to see Windsor Castle. But let me tell you this before you have your say and because I know you spoke to Scott about this. Your government is starting to listen now, Jim. You got booted out of the country once. No-one wanted to hear what you were saying. Others decided they needed to silence you. But you were right all along and things are now starting to change. I met with your Home Secretary the day before yesterday, I was in Germany and Holland and this morning in Brussels. And tonight, after our discussion, I'm meeting the Director of your SFO -

Serious Fraud Office. OK, it's US stuff I'm stuck with as my remit, but we're all in this together. None of us can afford this amount of corruption and theft of tax payers money that's happening right under our noses. We want the SFO's co-operation to support action and anything I take to them tonight will be enhanced by what you tell me."

So, began Jim's long explanation with Jonathan adding bits from his own experiences. Jim, sure that the conversation was being recorded, ignored the likelihood. As he talked, Senator Stafford sat and listened.

Finally. "This guy Guido," Stafford said. "We still don't know who he is. Right? " Jim nodded. "But you've got a few leads now, addresses, some possible bank details and now a link with Lake Como. Correct?"

"And Tom and Jan are driving there as we speak"

All three Americans looked at one another but it was Scott Evora who spoke for the first time. "Jim, you mentioned you had some photos of Guido's Mercedes."

"Yes, taken by Tom on his mobile from a distance and at night in an underground car park in Antwerp."

"Does the registration number show?"

"It's impossible to read because they're on Tom's mobile phone but I can ask him to send them over."

Stephen Lockhart spoke. "Let's have a look at them, Jim. Urgently. You never know."

Stafford looked towards Stephen Lockhart. "And get onto Milan, will you Steve. Tell them we're now gonna need some local support - urgently - and tell them the Italian Government are about to issue some guidance."

Scott Evora seeing his cue, nodded at his superior and left.

Stafford continued. "Now. Explain Puff and Slush again, Jim. Is he for real this guy Guido?"

Jim did as best he could.

"It's clever," he concluded. "There's Puff and there's Slush but there's also Flush. One can only assume Guido developed it himself but it's not at all certain. One or more computer wizards might well be involved somewhere. But it has flaws, as we noticed when we looked at the video. That video will be strong evidence."

With that, as everyone watched, Jim edged forward in his seat, reached behind his damp jumper and struggled with something deep inside the tight back pocket of his trousers. He eventually extracted a crumpled envelope and then took out the memory stick inside. He handed it to Stafford.

"This is a copy," he said, pushing his hair back behind his ears and desperately wishing he could remove the jumper.

Stafford took the memory stick, exchanged glances with Stephen Lockhart and laughed. "You sure you aren't the magician, Jim. That looked like a real clever trick.

"I'm damp from the rain and it got stuck in my pocket," Jim apologised.

Jonathan then spoke. "Jim won't mind me telling you, Senator, that outward appearances disguise a highly successful businessman who could and should have

made a huge contribution to politics. He won't, however, thank me for saying he's not only an excellent magician but a brilliant artist."

Jim smiled and shook his head in embarrassment, but an idea had suddenly come to him.

"Yes.....uh, my first London exhibition is Friday, next week, Senator. Any chance you could come along? Introduce the artist, then the reasons behind the exhibition."

"And what are the reasons, Jim?"

"It's payback day, Senator. Let them see that Jim Smith was telling the truth all along, that he is not the politically incompetent old fool he was made out to be, that stories about a liaison with a nightclub hostess were fabrications designed to destroy both him and his marriage, that he never ever gives up if he believes something's wrong and needs to be put right, and that Jim Smith is also not a bad artist."

Stafford smiled. "OK, here's the deal, Jim. If we can find and arrest that weirdo Guido and get perhaps some Interpol action on Eischmann and a few others between now and a week Friday I'll be there. That's a promise."

CHAPTER 90

The little blue Fiat 500 driven by Jan and with Tom alongside as navigator was on the outskirts of Como at a fuel station.

"I'm almost out of cash," Jan admitted. He had earlier reminded Tom that Guido's technology might extend to tracking credit card use so he wasn't keen on using his card. He was also quite keen to check his current bank balance.

"No worries, Jan. I'll pay. We'll make a fortune selling a story if we catch Guido." He smiled and looked at Jan's face. The Dutchman seemed to have grown visibly more nervous the closer they got to Como. But, car refuelled, they set off again. As they passed the Ospedale Valduce, Tom's phone rang. It was Jim.

"I'm at the American Embassy, Tom. Did you ever get a clear shot of Guido's car registration number?"

"No, Jim. I wasn't feeling brave enough to get that close."

"But you photographed the Mercedes?"

"From a distance and in the dark."

Jim quickly explained his reasons and what he wanted.

They were now on Via Torno and had picked up the SS583 and, as Tom played around with his mobile phone pictures library, Jan stopped the car to look down to the Viale Geno and Lake Como. "Nice view, Tom."

"Yes," muttered Tom engrossed in the phone, "Guido's fat little backside and Eischmann's dark shadow. But there's the Mercedes and Eischmann's BMW. Jesus it's much too dark. I should have been braver, got out and taken a close-up. Anyway, let's send it."

They sat and waited. Fifteen minutes later, Jim phoned again.

"OK, Tom, we've got them. Let's see what the FBI's technical experts can make of that. I'll phone you as soon as we have anything."

The Fiat 500 moved away into growing darkness but the mood of the two men was also getting darker.

"It's all too vague, Tom, and it'll be dark soon. Remember what we're looking for - a big villa with trees on the lake road to Blevio and Torno. We could have passed it already. Shall we leave everything until morning? Find a hotel?"

"It's not a long road, Jan. Six miles? Let's drive slowly from here to Torno, then turn back. If nothing, we'll try again in the morning. Then, if still nothing, we give up. Leave it to Jim, Jonathan and the FBI or whoever."

"It's too dark already."

"Nah. Lights everywhere. It's like daylight."

"With fucking dark shadows. What is it you English say about clutching at straws?"

"I'm not bloody English, Jan, I'm Irish. The Irish are more optimistic. Anyway, turn off here," Tom said checking the map on his phone. "Via Roma. The road twists down towards the lake and heads into Torno."

Jan turned off. Jim continued to mutter. "What was it the forklift driver said? Beside the lake, he said. There's the lake. Boats. See the lights?"

"I'm fucking driving."

Tom was craning his neck. "And there's a Mercedes."

"We've passed a hundred today."

"But that's the first I've seen behind a gate. A big house with trees. Lights were on in the driveway. At least one other car."

Jan drove on. "Are you telling me it must be Guido's car?"

"No, but there was also what looked like a big BMW."

"So, Dirk Eischmann's paying a visit?" Jan was still driving, peering into the darkness.

"What car did that woman drive? The one called Antonia Goretti who we think might be Toni?"

"The lack of food is affecting you." Jan kept driving.

"I'm testing you to see if you're awake because I've got the registration number of Toni's BMW. "

"You're right," Jan admitted, "I saw her in the car park in Brussels. It was a black BMW like Eischmann's."

"Turn around."

"Co-incidence, Tom. Man and wife. His and hers - matching, big, black cars."

"Turn around, Jan. "

"You sure?"

"Didn't you hear me? I've got the registration number. It'll be easy to check."

"Straws, Tom."

"Fuck you. Turn around."

"OK, OK."

Jan stopped, reversed into a gap, started to retrace the route.

"Keep going, it's on my side now." As he said it, the phone on Tom's lap rang. "Yes?"

It was Jim. "Your photos, Tom. They're good enough. We've got a number and the Italian police are being asked to help. Where are you?"

"Near Torno. We're checking a car right now, but it's dark. We're relying on street lights and lights from houses - big houses - along this, ah.....slow down, Jan. There it is. That one. Pull in. You were saying Jim?"

"We've got a number for Guido's Mercedes. It's registered in the name of someone called Antonia Goretti, at an address in Monza, near Milan." Jim gave the number. Tom wrote it down.

"That's the woman we know as Toni, Jim."

Tom heard Jim relating that to someone else.

"Who you talking to Jim?"

"The FBI."

Tom nodded at Jan who stopped the car. "OK, then can you now ask the FBI to check another number?" He then gave Jim the number on the Belgian registered black BMW he had followed from Delft. "If I'm right," Tom said, "Then that number should also be registered in the name of Antonia Goretti."

CHAPTER 91

Guido, too, was on a mobile phone. Hot and bothered and arms waving, he was pacing up and down a thickly carpeted room lit by a glittering chandelier. Then he flopped down into a green, velvet arm chair, short legs tightly crossed and sighed.

"Yah, yah, five million Euros using Puff. The fucking Syrians won't miss it. They'll waste it."

There was a pause and he stood up again.

"OK, OK, seven million Euros. Yah, because I didn't know where you were, Herr Eischmann. You, you fucking disappeared.....Mi dispiace. I am very sorry, Dirk, but this business is too complicated now because you.....mi dispiace again.... I mean we, of course, we have been too, what shall I say, ambitious. I say many, many times, Herr Dirk, a good business is a simple business. You.....mi dispiace.... sorry, we, we recruited too many new people and now that fucking that, that asshole, that fucking piece of shit, that faccia di merda, Kerkman has gone. He's talking, I know he is. He was in Zurich. But I'll find him because he doesn't have any money. But you, Herr Dirk, you can live on five million Euros.... Sorry, seven million Euros. It is like a leaving present, the gold watch for good service. Retire, Dirk. Take your wife, Petra.....it is not Petra? OK, it is Paula.... it is the same letter P, Herr Dirk."

There was a pause as Guido stood and the frantic pacing continued.

"OK, I hear you, I hear you. They will hear you in Brussels. OK, OK, Ten million Euros.....yah, yah. That way you can pay the others and they will leave you alone. Tomorrow it will be transferred - Ciao, buonanotte, yah, yah....."

Guido screamed. Then he screamed again. "Toni. Where the fuck are you?"

CHAPTER 92

"I can't see anything, Tom. It's too dark. And if it is Guido in there - which is only your opinion, not mine - and he comes out and sees me there is no way that this Fiat 500 will outpace that Mercedes. Let's come back in the morning. At day break if you like, I don't care."

They were standing outside an iron gate in the shadow cast by a light from the winding driveway of a large house that overlooked the lake. Just visible were two big cars - a Mercedes and a BMW parked side by side, their registration plates hidden from view. Two lights were on inside the house.

"Did you hear that?" Tom asked.

"What?"

"Someone shouting."

"It was an owl. Let's go, find a hotel."

"But if I can get in there, close enough, I can check the number plates."

"By climbing over this gate? Or over the wall with the ivy growing on it. If it's Guido he's probably got guard dogs - bloody big Alsations or a Doberman."

"Ah, for God's sake. But perhaps you're right. I hate fucking dogs. Let's sleep in the car."

"Tom. Christ's sake. Do you not fancy a pizza or something? I tell you, Tom, I'm about to collapse of hunger. We've hardly eaten since yesterday."

"Ah, OK, I'm hearing what you say. Let's come back at daybreak."

CHAPTER 93

Jim had returned to the Windsor hotel. It was almost midnight. He had earlier given Scott Evora his mobile phone number and on the stroke of midnight it rang.

"We've got some petty politics, Jim, but it shouldn't take long to sort. We've asked the Italian police to help but I don't see anything happening until morning. Where are Tom and Jan?"

"At a hotel somewhere, near Como. Jan is not at all convinced Guido is anywhere near Como. Tom, for whatever Irish reason, is. But whatever the outcome Jan is now talking about what he should do once we hand things over. He's received serious threats before, now he's scared not just for himself but his family."

"OK, Jim. I'm listening. We'll do what we can."

In Torno, at a small bed and breakfast inn on the lakeside, Tom awoke, checked his watch and pulled the curtain. It was five thirty and still dark. He opened the

window onto a cool breeze coming in from the lake, then shuffled along to the next room and knocked on the door.

"Jan, are you awake in there? Time to move." He heard a murmur and returned to his room. By six, the two men had relocated the lakeside villa. Dawn was just breaking but the two cars were still inside. A single, head height light was still on in the driveway, but the house was in darkness.

"So, what's your plan, Tom? Walk in and ring the bell only to find it's not Guido or....."

"We need to check the number plates. Then, we either hope the Italian police now know something from the FBI or..... "

"Or what? You're still convinced then, Tom?"

"Yes," Tom said, "And you know why?"

"Tell me."

"There's something in the rear windscreen of the Mercedes that reflects the light in the driveway. When I followed Guido in Antwerp, I noticed the same thing. It's a sparkling umbrella. He keeps it on the rear shelf. For sure, I'd never seen anything like it in my life."

Jan stared at him. "You've seen that umbrella as well? He prodded me with it once. It's covered in giant red poppies. Jesus."

"Convinced now?"

"Perhaps it's something else that shines."

"Jan, you'd never make a good investigative reporter. Tell you what. You stay in the car, park a bit further along the road. I'm going to have a closer look."

"And what if there's a security system - bells going off? Why don't we wait for the Italian police? Or phone them."

"And spoil my big story? Anyway, they might be doing the ironing."

"Tom, what the fuck are you talking about? Who is ironing? Why are they ironing?"

"The Carabinieri. You know, the best way to burn a Carabinieri's ear off is to phone him when he's ironing. Have you not heard that one? Do as I say, Jan, for God's sake. Go and park over there. I'll be back as soon as I can. If I don't come back then you can phone the bloody FBI, the Carabinieri or anyone else."

Tom got out of the Fiat and went towards the high iron gate of the villa. The light in the driveway showed that it curved behind the two cars towards some steps up to the main entrance. The villa itself was in darkness. Tom had never been agile. He was overweight and had never been very fit. Going over the gate was not on. Instead, he followed the stone wall that bordered the villa around to a narrow alleyway that ran downhill towards the lake. From what he could now see, the grounds of the villa sloped right down onto the lake. But a few yards along the alleyway Tom found a ramshackle, wooden door built into the wall. He pushed it. It gave a little but seemed locked. He pushed a bit more and it flew open with a loud crack and hit the trunk of a tree behind. He waited a second or so to see if a light came on in the villa or an intruder alarm sounded but there was nothing.

Light was slowly creeping into the sky now and he could see the two cars parked together on the gravel driveway. Next to the BMW were wide stone steps leading up to a big front door. The villa itself was still in darkness as Tom crept forward towards the cars. He crouched down, quickly noted the registration numbers, then stood up to peer into the back window of the Mercedes. There was the umbrella.

At the same time, a light came on in an upstairs window. Tom ducked down and made his way back to the side door, the alleyway and the road. Back in the car he reported to Jan.

"That's Guido's car," he said. "Next to it is Toni's BMW."

"Jesus. They are in there?"

"Well yes, unless they've just parked there while on holiday. Anyway, someone's inside because a light is on upstairs."

"What next?"

"First we'll phone Jim. Then I'm going back there. There is a side gate and a lovely big bush that I can hide behind. Keep your phone ready. If I need anything I'll call you. But for Christ's don't phone me."

"And what if Guido catches you?"

Tom looked at Jan's nervous face. "Don't worry. You stay here, if you hear a shot being fired or any other commotion, drive off." He tried to smile but then phoned Jim.

"It's definitely them, Jim. We are already outside the villa. Where are the bloody police?"

"I'll check and phone you back, Tom."

"No, Jim. Don't phone me. Phone Jan. I don't want my phone going off when I'm sat behind a bush in Guido's garden - which, by the way, badly needs a gardener. If they catch me, perhaps I'll say I'm an unemployed Irishman checking it out before applying for the job. Speak later."

Jim had no sooner switched his phone off when it rang again. It was Scott Evora.

"Been up all night, Jim. We've got the Italian State police involved, but we're still waiting on the provincial police around Como. What news from Tom and Jan?"

Jim explained Tom's call of minutes before.

"Guido's cornered?" he exclaimed. "Well, we don't want to fuck that up."

Tom had settled himself on the wet grass behind a thick evergreen bush thirty yards from the front door. The sky was getting brighter and lights were now on in two upstairs rooms. Then a downstairs light behind green drapes came on. He checked his watch. Seven thirty. His thighs were already hurting and damp had seeped through the seat of his pants. He thought of Maeve and wondered what she'd think of him sitting in a wet garden in Italy. He looked at the sky for a sign of pink as Jim had once suggested, but it was grey. As he wriggled into a more comfortable position, another downstairs light came on.

A few early cars passed on the road, a dog barked somewhere, there was the sound of a boat on the lake and then a much closer mechanical, sliding sound. Tom glanced towards the gate. It was opening, automatically, as if remotely from inside the house.

Then he saw the lights of a taxi as it pulled onto the gravel driveway from the road, the headlight beam passing right over him. It was another BMW but a white one this time. It stopped alongside the Mercedes, reversed and then manoeuvred to face the gate once more. A man in a white shirt got out, walked to the rear, opened the car boot and returned to sit in the driver's seat with the door still open. Then the big door of the villa opened.

In the doorway, lit from behind by a bright ceiling light, stood a tall, slim woman in a dark trouser suit with long black hair tied sharply back into what may have been a pony tail. "Toni," Tom said to himself. She looked behind her, bent down and dragged out a shiny black holdall. With her foot she then pushed the bag nearer to the steps and spoke loudly in Italian something about "bagaglio a mano".

Her voice was deep and husky and as she turned to go back inside, the taxi driver got out, ran up the steps, picked up the bag and carried it to the boot of the car. He then stood, looking at his watch.

From within the house Tom heard the same husky voice speaking to someone else but for a while nothing happened. The taxi driver strolled around, kicking at the gravel and as he did so, the clouds cleared to reveal a bright pink sky over the lake. A low red sun then suddenly appeared. It lit the whole garden in a rosy light that shone directly onto the steps and door of the villa.

This was definitely Toni, Antonia Goretti, Tom decided. It was her BMW; it was her height and build and the way she walked fitted. So where was Guido?

Then he heard a high-pitched voice as if from upstairs.

"Rilassatevi e soprattutto non fatevi prendere dal panicoI am ready. Don't be so nervous, my flower. I hate scarpe col tacco."

The tall, lanky Toni re-emerged, checked her watch, came down the steps and walked towards the taxi driver. She spoke to him, too quietly for Tom to hear. But Tom's attention was now on the sunlit doorway. Standing there, holding a small case, was a short, fat woman in a dark, knee-length skirt, high heeled shoes and a white blouse printed with large red flowers. Poppies?

"Jesus Christ," Tom stared at her. "Guido's a woman."

He watched Guido, or whatever her name really was, potted awkwardly down the steps, walk across the gravel to the taxi and almost fall in the rear seat like someone totally unaccustomed to high heels. A minute later, the taxi drove away and the iron gate slowly closed after it.

Sure that they were gone, Tom tried to get up but his legs hurt him, he felt stiff and wet and when he eventually stood, his back hurt. Nevertheless, he went out through the side gate, pulled it shut, hobbled onto the road and looked for the blue Fiat. It was nowhere to be seen.

Tom walked up and down for a hundred yards or so then reached for his mobile phone.

"Where the hell are you?"

"I'm following a white BMW. I saw it come out of the gate."

"What about me?"

"I'll come back for you."

"For fuck's sake, Jan. You'll probably follow them to Milan."

"Are Guido and Toni inside the taxi?"

"Yes."

"Then call a taxi for yourself, Tom or walk into Torno. I'm already in Como."

"Jan, for Christ's sake. Listen. You should know something before you go any further."

"What? What?"

"Guido's not a man. He's a woman."

There was a sound of breaking. Tyres squealed. "What?" Jan yelled.

"Guido's a woman, did you hear me? Dressed to the nines. High heels, short skirt and a lovely shirt with red poppies. If I'm not mistaken his lipstick and finger nails are the same colour as the poppies. He's definitely not my sort, Jan, but for Christ's sake, stop right now and come and pick me up. I've got the taxi number. Let's call Jim to call the FBI to call the Italian police. Enough is enough, man."

"A woman?"

"You heard. Guido's not the fat, round little man you've been describing for the past weeks. He's a fat, round little woman and I think Toni is his husband.....or her husband. But then maybe Toni is a man because he talks like one and maybe they're both cross dressers. Just get back here."

Tom stood in the roadway and phoned Jim.

As he waited for Jim to answer, he heard a car approaching fast. He turned. It was a black Alfa Romeo. It pulled up yards from him just as Jim answered.

He just had time to say, "Guido's a woman, Jim." Then, "I'll call you back. The Italian police have arrived."

Two men in dark blue uniform with silver braid and a touch of scarlet jumped out of the Alfa and looked around. Tom went up to them.

"They've just left," he said pointing to the iron gate and hoping they understood English.

"Signor Kerkman?" one asked.

"No, I'm Tom Hanrahan."

"OK. ROS - Raggruppamento Operativo Speciale," one said as introduction and then looked at his colleague who was walking towards the iron gate.

CHAPTER 94

With Tom and Jan flying back from Milan on Sunday morning, it was Scott Evora who had organised the Sunday afternoon get together.

"A wrap up of the last few days before Senator Stafford returns home, Jim. And to discuss where we go with all this. It was Stafford's suggestion. He'd like to meet Tom and Jan, of course, and then we'll have dinner together afterwards."

Jim accepted, then asked that Jonathan be able to bring his wife, Claire, along. "His long-suffering wife, Scott," he explained, "She might then believe his stories about the FBI."

In the end, Claire joined Stafford's wife, Beth, for a tour of Windsor Castle, leaving Jim, Jan, Jonathan, Tom, Scott Evora, Stephen Lockhart and Senator Stafford for a round table meeting at the hotel.

"So, the deal is on, Jim. I'm not one to dishonour a promise. We've got Guido and his - or is it her - girlfriend, Toni. So, where's your exhibition next Saturday?"

Jim explained. "But your agreement required some movement on Dirk Eischmann as well," he added. "Where are we with that?"

Stephen Lockhart explained. "He may not know it yet but we know exactly where he is. He was followed after the Belgian police put the fear on him at Brussels airport. He was with Acosta and we know they're at Acosta's big place in the south of France - probably deciding on their next moves. But we'll find a way to stop him. We're gathering evidence right now and that's why Jan is key. We need you, Jan. Stick around with us, full protection guaranteed. Senator Stafford and I spoke to the SFO and the UK Home Office about this and we've also had it confirmed by the Dutch and Belgians. We'll do whatever is needed."

"But my bank account has been emptied," Jan said dismally.

Lockhart waved it away. "Yeh, we know," he said to Jan's surprise. "But we'll sort something. You've done us proud, Jan. We've had too many of the wrong sort of whistle-blower recently. I wish we could find a few more moles like you."

Lockhart went on: "As for Acosta himself - and his wife - we're waiting on Interpol notices, arrest warrants for suspected money laundering. Once we open up details of where the money's come from, the bigger fraud investigation will then start to roll."

"So, who is Guido?" asked Tom. "Any idea yet?"

"We're waiting on the Italian police. They're searching the Como villa and they raided the Milan warehouse yesterday. It was full of boxes marked with charity names, the Red Cross and even UNHCR.

"And the other names on my list?" Jim asked Scott Evora.

"We've asked the Commission to look into matters."

Jim shook his head. "That will take forever, Scott."

Scott shrugged and nodded, but Jan then interrupted. "Who was on your list, Jim?"

Jim started, but Jan immediately interrupted.

"OK. Here's something that's not yet public knowledge," he said, "Everything will be done to keep this quiet. If it becomes more widely known you can expect excuses, cover ups and dubious explanations to follow. But I spoke to Katrine this morning. Several others besides Eischmann have disappeared in the last few days. I don't know who was on Jim's list, but here's mine: Philip Eijsackers, Pierre Augustin, Joseph Santos and Kamal Mahmoud from Central Asia Policy and now Dimitri Castellanos. Castellanos, for your information, is a guy with huge responsibility in the treasury. He was also the one who decided to do nothing when the hacking was detected."

Jan waited to allow the information to sink in. Then: "So what do we do about a system that I guarantee will now close ranks and deny everything? Sick leave, personal circumstances, early retirement - anything will be used to explain absences and deter further questions being asked. In other words, a cover up is already being planned."

Jim nodded and looked at Senator Stafford.

"Jan's right," he said. "You can do so much, but the system is too big and surrounds itself in a bubble of self-protection. Eischmann's arrest might be brushed aside as an aberration. A naughty boy sorely tempted. He might even be sacrificed. Guido's use of Puff and Slush might be a thing of the past but they'll try anything to ensure everything's forgotten. Sadly, they could well succeed. And why? Because the system they've created is now bigger than democracy itself. It runs itself, monitors itself and protects itself."

Jonathan spoke. "Do you remember what you said when we first met, Jim? I will never forget it and neither, I know, will Jan."

"Remind me."

"You said that even if massive fraud was proven, they would not automatically lose their jobs, their status or their pensions. You said the entire system is designed in such a way that it will automatically cover up fraud. Even if it ever got as far as public enquiries - they would point fingers at those lower down the line and then hide without fear of prosecution behind the complexity of the organisation. You said that things could take years, if ever, to come to Court because the whole system is at fault."

Stafford looked shocked and Scott Evora shook his head, but Stephen Lockhart nodded.

"I think Jim's right," he said. "I've been here six years now. I've watched and learned a thing or two." Then his phone rang, he excused himself and went to a corner.

Jan then: "I agree. Jim's right. All we can do is prove the existence of the corruption and show the extent of it and the cost of it. Criminals like Guido can only operate where there are gross weaknesses and existing corruption in the public sector. We can only hope it's the public who pay their salaries who demand action."

"It's what I tried to do before and failed," Jim said. "Let's hope the evidence is better now. Without Acosta and all his money and media connections, it might well be easier this time. Someone able to stop proper criminal investigation by using their wealth to distort facts and make false accusations is an entirely different matter. It's one, I know, Tom wants to address. In fact, Tom might well be the answer to ensuring this topic is not allowed to be ignored. You will recall the politician's expenses scandals here? Publicity and thorough investigation dealt with that one. Well, corruption, fraud and incompetence are costing taxpayers far more than the fiddling of expenses."

Stephen Lockhart returned from the phone call, smiling.

"Here's something," he said, "The Italian police have found a whole load of computer hardware in a room at the house in Torno. Could this be where Guido or Toni or, perhaps even someone else, developed the technology? We'll just have to wait and see, but the fact is we're uncovering something highly sophisticated here."

"Looks like you were right about everything, Jim." said Jan. "Fraud, you said, was not just widespread but using more and more technology."

Jim just nodded.

"So what sort of message do you want me to deliver at your exhibition, Jim?" Senator Stafford asked.

"I don't want to influence you, Senator. You must say exactly what you want to say. All I want is a few minutes to say something about the distribution of wealth and the worship of money as the answer to happiness. Money has never meant much to me other than as a measure of my contribution to society. It is just wrong that people in positions of trust and already highly paid still feel it necessary to steal from the public's purse."

"And who have you invited?"

"No-one, Senator. I've had nothing to do with the arrangements. My presence in the UK is known only to a very few people and I have left all of the organisation to my old friend Hugh McAllister. Hugh, by the way, was once married to Anne Acosta, but that's another story."

"So, who should I target my introduction at?"

"Hugh will have invited some media people along, mostly arty types I suspect, but he now knows you'll be there so you can be sure he's rethought a few things. But feel free, Senator. I'm just grateful for your involvement."

"And your art, Jim?" Stafford asked.

"On that I will say nothing. Painting is a hobby. It has helped pass the time whilst I found a way to prove I was right all along. It is for others to judge and say if it is good or not."

The Senator smiled and nodded. "And do you intend to stay in the UK or return to Thailand?"

Tom looked intently at Jim, uncertain what he might now say. There was only the slightest pause. "I will return to Thailand," Jim said. "There is not a lot left here now and my heart is telling me I should go home."

Only Tom knew what that might mean.

CHAPTER 95

Jim slipped away unnoticed from his exhibition. He knew it had been a success not only because of Hugh McAllister's skill but also because of Senator Stafford's involvement, his introductory speech, for getting the US Ambassador along and for persuading several government Ministers to attend.

Back at his Windsor hotel, Jim went straight to the bar and ordered himself a draft Guinness. Then he sat in the corner to think. He was sure that his hotel location would become known within hours and he had no stomach to face a hungry mob of media people trying to extract from him things that he had no wish to say. In fact, there was no more left that he wanted to do or say. His ambition and determination seemed to have disappeared over night. His reputation as a businessman had been long and hard to establish, but so quick and easy to lose. Today it was as if he had

rediscovered something that he thought he'd lost forever. Certainly, the feeling of failure and incompetence had gone to be replaced, thanks to what Senator Colin Stafford had said, by respect and admiration.

Jim felt relaxed, but he had no wish to bask in any sort of glory.

So, what should he do now?

Sometimes he felt he had been driven to solitude as a result of his own perception of the public's opinion of him. But at other times, in his deeper, perhaps clearer and more honest moments, he felt that he had gravitated towards it, naturally, because he was, in so many ways, more comfortable that way. He wondered if he should have taken the route earlier, deliberately and at the peak of his career and perhaps taken with him the one person whom he missed and for whom things had come too late. But Margaret had gone. He knew that. He had watched her walk away, more confident, more at ease with herself than he could possibly have imagined. It had saddened him at the time. But now?

Well - Margaret had changed. But then, so had he. He had once lived on a mix of confidence, bluntness, enthusiasm, determination and energy and would steamroller things through in spite of rather than because of others. Perhaps Margaret had been right with what she had said. She had certainly been right with her warnings of going into politics.

Then there was his disinterest in the acquisition of possessions. Margaret was not like that. His definition of value was, it seemed, not the same as everyone else's. He had no real need or interest in the thick pile carpet on the floor, the cushions on the chairs, the elaborate drapes and sashes at the windows. He had no interest in popular television and the programs, which seemed to generate such devoted and passionate following amongst others. He respected technology and used a mobile phone and computer because it made things quicker and more efficient but had no desire to acquire gadgets to provide music, videos or simple directions from A to B.

"Just be content with what you've got, James." From his corner table, he said it aloud to the busy bar and someone looked at him. But it was his mother speaking to him. "Yes, mother. I am, but it doesn't make me easy to get on with."

Indeed, Jim was perfectly able to understand Margaret's frustration with him because she did not share his ways. She had borne them, stoically - for as long as was necessary.

"Get a haircut, Jim. When you were stood in the wind on the bridge I could 'ardly see yer face fer lookin'."

That's what she had said in her Bristol accent after they had walked a few yards across Brunel's Suspension Bridge in Clifton on the day they'd met.

Jim took a deep breath and downed the final dregs of the Guinness. Then he went up to his room, packed his small bag, making sure that the one painting he had kept back, the one of Noy and Oy, was better protected this time. Then he sat down to write a note to Tom who, with Jonathan and Jan, was still at the exhibition.

It took him a while but, that done, he picked up his things, went downstairs, checked out, left the note for Tom and ordered a taxi.

"Yes sir?" The taxi driver said, "Where do you want to go?"

"Holiday Inn, Heathrow airport," replied Jim.

"Going away, sir?"

"Yes."

Jim looked out of the taxi window, still deep in thought. It was a short drive but at the hotel he checked in and went to his room. It was just eight o'clock. Then he sat cross-legged on the bed and unwrapped his painting of Noy and Oy.

He remembered Noy so well. He could also still see Oy in his mind. Perhaps Margaret and he should have had children. Life would, undoubtedly, have taken a completely different route. He remembered one hot, sunny morning in the local market with Oy and Noy. They had taken the motorcycle to buy fish and walked around, trying to stay in the shade of the plastic sheeting spread across the wooden tables where traders swished at flies. The sun was very bright and Oy had wanted a pair of sunglasses because she had seen another little girl with a pair – just child's, inexpensive, multi-coloured plastic ones. They found a stall selling plastic toys and Oy had made up her mind very clearly which pair of glasses she wanted.

Jim had paid the small, crippled vendor and given the glasses to Oy. She had put them on, staring around in delighted amazement at how dark everything now looked. It had pleased him to see how happiness came for the cost of just a small value note. He had put the change in his pocket without checking and then looked at Noy. Noy was ignoring her daughter. He watched her go back to the vendor. She spoke to him and gave him some money, just a few coins. He had asked her why.

"Man very poor. He blind and he give you wrong money. You not see. You not check. You must check. You blind also I think." In a very short time, Noy had helped him to see many other things he might otherwise have missed.

Jim suddenly felt very drowsy. He quickly rewrapped the painting, slid it into his bag, fell back with his head on the pillow and closed his eyes.

"Are you keeping well, Jimmy? You've lost weight but you look fit and tanned. Plenty of exercise, I hope."

It was Margaret in the Bristol hotel where he had planned the lunch that never happened. Jim's eyes flickered behind the closed lids.

He could see Margaret as he held out his hands to her in the hotel. "Margaret, my love."

She had put forward just one hand - a delicate white one, lined with veins, bony and, when he held it with his own hot hand, dry and cold to the touch. He had led her towards his table clumsily holding her hand, seeing the thin, grey hair and smelling a delicate and flowery perfume. At the table where he had just spilt some coffee when getting up to greet her, she had crossed her legs and placed her handbag carefully on the next chair. He knew she had seen the coffee he had spilled, but she had said nothing, just looked out the window.

"Margaret. I don't know what to say," were his first real words.

"Then why did you suggest a meeting?" she had said and looked at him for the first time.

"I needed to see you."

"Why?"

"Because...."

He had been unable to say it. Instead, he was the one who now looked out of the window towards Brunel's famous suspension bridge with eyes that were hot and sore.

"You look terribly old, Jim. And why the long beard? It looks dreadful."

"I know," he had said, "I need a haircut."

"Then why don't you have one?" It was a good question and he had no answer.

"It doesn't seem important."

"So, what is important these days, Jim?"

He had felt strangely unsure and desperately sought the safety of self-confidence and composure. "It was important I saw you. I want to try to understand why things went so wrong. Don't you understand?"

"No - not anymore."

He had looked out of the window again and then back at Margaret. "Would you like to have lunch?" he asked as if they had been sitting there for an hour instead of less than five minutes.

"I don't want to keep you."

"That's a little unfair, Margaret."

"I'm sorry, Jim, but after all this time it's a bit difficult to know what the heck you want."

"But it was not me who decided that we should break up."

Jim now realized, in this half dream he was having, how childish that must have sounded - like a teenager, a tiff after a weeklong affair. But those were the words that had come to him.

"But it was you and your damned career and politics that made us grow apart, Jim. That, and your blindness towards me. Dragging me here there and everywhere. Trailing after you like a little dog. How you can fail to realize that after having so many years to ponder about it I cannot, for the life of me, understand."

"But Margaret...."

"And now you come back expecting me to drop everything and come to talk to you. No warning. No letters. Nothing. Just turn up. For lunch?"

She had almost shouted the word 'lunch'.

"Letters? I had no idea where you were."

"Don't be so foolish. You just disappeared - went off, without even a note left on the mantelpiece."

"And we are divorced, Margaret?"

"Of course. For the same reason. You disappeared. Without trace."

Even in his half sleep, Jim took a deep, trembling breath.

"But you know why I disappeared, surely?" It had been a question and a statement.

"No. No. Frankly I don't. Most men stay and fight, Jim."

That was what had annoyed him.

Jim's eyes opened, just briefly. Just momentarily he saw the ceiling and the darkness outside the hotel window.

"Fight whom, Margaret? The newspapers? The journalists? The TV? My fellow Members of Parliament? You? Who should I have stayed to fight? Which of the hundred and one should I have started with? Should I have tried to win you round again in front of the millions of households and pubs up and down the land who had been taught by their mentors, the tabloid press, to analyse and pick over our marriage for us. Complete strangers? Checking, prying, talking with neighbours and friends in the pub. Delving into our past, telling lies and dredging up nonsense. Is that what you would have wanted? I honestly thought that you had had enough of that.

"Did you want to see the gutter press and their faceless, wealthy backers making more money out of invented stories, special so-called investigations and lies about our domestic life in the, so-called, public interest? How we had been having problems for years? Inventing stories about affairs with miscellaneous secretaries, wives of politicians, more night club girls? About our arguments and my rough treatment of you? Did you want that Margaret? Because I can tell you with absolute certainty that I did not. But that is exactly what I think might have happened next if I hadn't gone away. But then to cap it all, Margaret I had the dubious pleasure of watching you on television making an appearance on prime-time television, for the first time I could ever remember without me appearing alongside you. I thought you harboured a particular distaste for that channel. But there you were. Suddenly, you were not short of words. I was called deceitful. I was apparently dishonest. You were apparently shocked by the so-called revelations in the papers. You believed them and you wanted nothing more to do with me. Do you remember that, Margaret? Do you remember saying those things to the TV cameras outside our house by the lilac tree? Do you recall saying you wanted to be left alone to come to terms with things in peace? Away from the press and the prying eyes? And do you remember, having apparently recovered from your terrible experience, giving an interview for a Sunday newspaper? 'Recovering' was the eye-catching headline, Margaret. I read it. I read it lying on my bed in a hotel room in Malaysia whilst someone sat downstairs in the lobby trying to scare me into never going back to England.

"Did you not realise what was going on, Margaret? They were trying to stop me by destroying everything I had achieved - our longstanding marriage, my career, my reputation, my integrity. They wanted to shut me up, Margaret. And why? Because I was the only one brave enough to stand up and say that there was something wrong, something flawed and something corrupt with the system.

"Were you recovering? Had you been trying to forget me by then? Have you succeeded, Margaret? Because I can tell you now that I have never forgotten. But reading that article made me do something I really had never done in my life before, Margaret. I drank too much. For a few days I drank so much bloody Tiger beer that I was sick of it. But it seemed to temporarily deaden the terrible feeling that I had lost all my self-respect and also the most important thing in my life. You, Margaret.

"I believed I had failed, you see. Failed you and failed myself. I was carrying a stigma of incompetence and failure, one that I really didn't think was warranted. And

then....and then, Margaret... I have to tell you because I have always been an honest man.....and then I did something that I had never, ever done before. I committed adultery. Can you believe that? I hope so because that is the one true piece of scandal they missed. Do you believe me or do you still believe what the tabloids said?"

After all that, Margaret had merely raised an eyebrow.

She had even looked away. But Jim had not yet finished.

"But do you know what happened Margaret? I found something, something I didn't even know was missing. I suppose I opted out so to speak. I found a completely new way of living and I learned so much more about life and about myself."

Margaret had then sighed, noisily as if bored.

"But I lost it, Margaret. Her name was Noy. Her beautiful daughter was Oy but they were both killed in a bus crash a few weeks after I met them. But I coped. I cope now. I may not shave or cut my hair but I cope. But I cannot forget you. Despite everything, and despite the passage of time. I never could and I never will. Yet you told me once, towards the end, to my face, that you were ashamed of me. Do you remember that Margaret? For me, it just compounded that deep sense of shame and incompetence I felt. It was another mark of disgrace, of shame, of dishonour, like a stain on my character.

"And what about the nonsense of that affair at the nightclub. Did you really believe that absolute trash? How could I live with the knowledge that you had lost so much trust and faith in me to that, most sordid, extent? Why Margaret? Why?"

Jim knew at that point that he had nearly cried.

"But I cannot think badly of you. I never will."

He had stopped then, exhausted, out of breath, flushed and sweating with eyes and a throat that hurt. And he had then apologised.

"Sorry, I'm so very sorry but.....".

He knew Margaret had begun to stare at him with eyes that never blinked. He had watched through his own unfocussed eyes as she twisted the cuff of her blouse and curled and uncurled the seam. But he had not been looking at her face. It was as if the only route through to her understanding was her hands and her fingers. And he also knew he was no longer in full control of himself. Once he'd started, the words had just flowed. At times he thought he had hissed them, noisily. Bottled and pickled for too long they had poured like a lava flow of sadness and love. And, already, he regretted it.

At last he looked at her face to find she was looking directly at him. Her face was lined and pale, perhaps a little make-up, the eyebrows thin, the eyes still that transparent blue. But it was her hair that affected him. It was so much greyer now.

"You look older, too, Margaret," he had told her with eyes that were red and wet.

Margaret had sighed again, then looked away as though mildly embarrassed. But she turned back. "But other than your face you haven't changed much as far as I can see. Still on your bandwagon."

"Bandwagon!"

Jim, his eyes firmly shut, lying on the bed in his room at the Holiday Inn shouted the word.

It was one of her old, familiar expressions and one he had not remembered. Bandwagon. He remembered it now. It was totally meaningless without a better explanation - but so full of suggestive innuendo.

"Bandwagon, Margaret?" he had exclaimed. "Is a man not allowed to express his feelings, his emotions?"

"What is the point, Jim? Don't you see things have gone on far too long now?"

"Yes, but can we not discuss things so that we understand one another at long last?"

"Discuss, Jim. Is that what you were doing just now?" She paused. "I understand you perfectly well, Jim. You have not changed one bit."

A long silence had then descended before: "Do you really want lunch, Jim? Before they shut the restaurant?"

He remembered looking at her, half hoping she might be smiling, but he was disappointed. Instead, she was looking at him as if to speed up their meeting.

"No," he had said, "my appetite has gone. I would much prefer to walk. Perhaps we could just walk across the bridge. Will you come with me?"

"Yes, alright, but I mustn't be long."

Jim struggled to remember the next few minutes. His memory started again when Margaret said: "And you Jim, do you receive your state pension out there, wherever you are?"

"No," he had admitted. "My needs are fairly rudimentary."

"Yes, I seem to remember that. But you always set such high standards for others."

"And I set them for myself. I was successful at what I did, Margaret. Appearances are unimportant. Setting high standards does not require money."

"It's a pity you failed to notice me, though, isn't it? Your standards let you down a bit there."

"Notice you, Margaret? You were always there. I know I kept myself busy but you were my life."

His memory stopped again there. He hazily remembered strolling slowly across the bridge. The wind that was blowing up the Avon Gorge was blowing his hair and he knew it probably looked untidy. And then Margaret turned and started to walk back. "I need to go now."

They had walked slowly back towards the hotel. To Jim it was a long, long walk. He still had so much he wanted to say, so many questions to ask, so many things to tell her and so much of his life that he still wanted to share. But there was too much and so he said nothing until they had almost arrived back at the hotel.

"Margaret. Please tell me something."

She had looked up at him but kept walking.

"The night club incident. You know I was in the flat all that night, don't you? You knew I was there after midnight. You called me, didn't you? It was you wasn't it?"

"Yes," she said.

"Why?"

"Sorry. They were out to fix you up good and proper, but you just could not see it, could you?"

"You knew about it?"

"A reporter told me."

"How could you let them do it and not tell me or warn me or do something?"

"Me, Jim? Tell you something? Advise you? At that time? With you at the height of one of your 'I know best' moods no-one could tell you anything. Least of all me."

Jim had stopped walking but Margaret hadn't. He had caught her up, then grabbed her arm and she had turned. "Why, Margaret? You could have tried. Why?"

"Because I was sick of it all. Sick to death of business and politics and your ways and... and everything. I was sick of you ignoring me. I wanted a life, Jim. I didn't want to follow you through all that nonsense. Visits to your few ghastly friends like George and his overbearing wife Catherine. Sick to death. But you just did not notice, did you?"

"You could have tried telling me, Margaret."

"Telling you, Jim? Impossible! I tried. I loved you once."

And then she had suddenly burst into tears. He held her hand and almost put his arm around her shoulders, but it was a busy pavement. He had not noticed until then but other people were using it. So, he did nothing, except hold her cold hand. And the outburst only lasted seconds anyway before she sniffed, took a deep breath and removed her hand. "I'm OK. Don't fuss. You must go now, Jim."

"Go, Margaret. Where?"

"Back where you have come from, wherever that is."

"But, I have so many things to say."

"Jim," she had said, calmly. The tears had already gone. "Go now. Try to live your life without me. I am sorry. So, should you be sorry. But we cannot live by being sorry. Go now and live your life the way you have chosen. I need to live mine. Try to find some peace of mind."

She looked up at him with a slight look of pity. "Are you keeping well, Jimmy? You've lost weight but you look fit and tanned. Plenty of exercise, I hope."

"Yes."

"Good. So, look after yourself. Take care. But have a haircut. When you were stood in the wind on the bridge, I could hardly see your face for looking."

On the hotel bed, Jim opened his weary eyes.

He had watched her go. He had watched her walk away, without turning and without hesitating. Her skirt, her pretty, billowing blouse, her grey hair, her gently swinging handbag, her short dark shadow. She had walked as she always did but perhaps more stiffly. He saw her move her free hand to her face. It stayed a moment. She seemed to shake her head just a little, almost imperceptibly and then the arm swung

down to her side. She seemed to shrug but she had been too far away for him to be certain.

He had watched until she reached the corner in case she turned around to return. He hoped, at least, she would cross, perhaps continue in a straight line so that he could continue just to watch, but she turned quickly. Perhaps she glanced back, he was not sure. But then she was gone. Out of his life.

Jim had stood, without moving, his eyes glistening and wet. He had felt weak and his arms ached as if he had been carrying heavy bags all afternoon. His heart was pounding and seemed to be struggling. Other people, strangers, walked past but he barely saw them. Then, still looking at the corner to his left he stepped off the kerb and started across the road.

It was the screech of tyres from a skidding car that frightened him out of his thoughts. The small, red car stopped just a yard from him and two yards into the road. He turned to look at the windscreen and its driver but the young woman driver was quicker. She stretched her blonde head from the open side window and waved an arm. "Watch it, old man. Yer wanna get killed or somethin'. Stupid bugger." She had glared at him, angry and impatient and then driven off as Jim stood sadly in the middle of the road, his mouth slightly open, his hair in his eyes. He had felt old and vulnerable.

He remembered, too, the slope of freshly mown grass that separated one road from the higher, busier road on the side that led to the Bridge. This was where he had then slumped down to recover. A sudden dizziness had overcome him, so he lay backwards looking up into the bright afternoon sky. He wiped his sticky forehead and then loosened the tie that he had worn to impress and stared upwards. The dizziness was intense. His eyes felt sore, his head throbbed and he covered his eyes with his arm and waited.

Slowly, inch by inch, he withdrew the arm and looked backwards and upwards where the sun was shining through the bare branches of a horse chestnut tree. Around him on the grass lay a cluster of spiky green conkers that had split ready to release the shiny brown nuts inside. The big tree might eventually die, but their continuity was ensured. New life from death.

Jim sat up, on the edge of the bed, his eyes open still remembering that day. He hadn't told anyone what happened, but who was there to tell. Tom, perhaps, but he'd only known Tom a few weeks. He thought about his rock up on the hillside behind the house. Did it matter if he was alone? Not at all. Was it not better that way? It was certainly less stressful. Alone, unencumbered, there was more time to think and contemplate. He supposed he had become a sort of hermit - a solitary monk who lived frugally and spent his time contemplating on life. The horse chestnut tree had reminded him he was like a leaf in autumn, hanging on. But the time would, eventually, come for him to fall off the tree, his function fulfilled. Life, his own included, was just a function of matter. But there were still a few functions left for this old and yellowing leaf to perform.

He stood up, went to the window to look out but it was dark with only a floodlit car park to inspire. "Come on Jim, buck up. Hang on to your twig for just a while longer."

He turned away.

"Yes, mother, I remember what you used to say. 'You're a long time dead.' You should know, mother, but I don't want to last too long. I can't see anyone helping this grumpy old farang to get up in the morning, to wash him, dress him, push him around in a wheelchair, help him to sit, see, hear, eat his rice and deal with his double incontinence. And if I can't see how can I paint? No, I don't want to last too long, mother. Better to go quietly, function fulfilled. Quality of life not longevity.

"Surely that is the only civilised choice. There are far too many of us anyway. But it needs saying, out loud - someone needs to spell it out, no beating about the bush, just say it as it is in black and white. That, surely, is the job of politicians and of religious leaders. But they are weak, mother. They are too scared. But I'd say it.

"You went when you were still at the top, mother. Job done; mission accomplished. I remember you as I know you would want me to remember you. You'd hate what happens here now, mother. You can almost live forever as long as you don't mind being incarcerated with other incapacitated old folks playing catch the beach ball every morning after your Weetabix and if you don't mind living with dozens of complete strangers. And many of these strangers are empty shells, sick, immobile, unthinking, contributing nothing, just sitting putting off the final day, delaying the inevitable, and all because the technology allows and the law insists."

Jim lay back on the bed once more and stared at the ceiling. Then his eyes closed, the drowsiness overcame him and he half dreamed of what had happened next as he lay on that grassy mound beneath the tree surrounded by roads and busy traffic in Bristol.

The dizziness had gone and he was starting to feel better so he had sat up and tucked his hair behind his ears. It was then he heard the voice.

"You, all righ', mate?"

He had turned around to see an elderly man wearing glasses and a cloth cap propped on a wooden stick. On a long lead hooked over the stick was a small black and white dog that was sniffing amongst the conkers in the grass a yard or so away. It then cocked its leg over a tuft of dock leaves that the municipal mowers had failed to remove from around the tree trunk. "Yes. Thank you," Jim had replied.

"Nice day."

"Yes. Indeed."

"You all righ'? Saw you lying ther'. Thought you might be dead or somethin' for a minute. Fair worried me for a sec."

"Thank you. I'm fine."

"Nice walking 'round yer. Specially this time o' yer. You from 'round yer?"

"No. But I know Bristol a little."

"Changed a lot, 't ave. Not like 't were. But round yer it don't seem to change." The small dog now moved to sniff Jim's shiny new shoes. "Bin on yer 'olidays?"

"Excuse me?"

"Bin on yer 'olidays? Only you look like you seen a bit o' sun like."

"No. But I suppose you might call my visit here a holiday of sorts."

"Wer you cum from?"

"I live in Thailand."

"By golly. Long way from 'ome you might say."

"Yes, I suppose so."

"Lived ther long 'ave 'ee?"

"A few years."

"By golly. Sor' of settled ther 'ave 'ee?"

"Yes. I like it."

"Peaceful ther now is it?"

"Yes."

"Wife ther too is she?"

"No. I regret that I am divorced. A divorcee I think is what I'm called."

"Oh, dear me. My wife passed away twenty years ago. I'm ninety-three now." The dog pulled on the lead and the old man coughed, heartily. "Well, I'll be getting along. Got to get back fer me tea."

Jim had nodded. "Yes. Thank you. Good bye."

The old man had slowly walked away, held upright by his stick and pulled along by his dog. But, after a few yards, he turned around.

"I knew Malaya, Singapore and Thailand, once upon a time," he called back. "That bridge in Kanchanaburi. The River Kwai. Prisoner o' war. Bloody Japs." Then he, too, had walked away and out of Jim's life.

CHAPTER 96

Jim woke up thirsty. He took a bottle of mineral water from the mini 'fridge and drank it all. Then he lay back on the bed again, checked the time and wondered if Tom had got the note yet. Tom, he knew, would be surprised, maybe even saddened but, by leaving for home, he knew he was doing the right thing. His mission was accomplished.

His thirst changed to hunger as he remembered he'd not eaten since breakfast the day before, so he went downstairs, took a quick coffee shop breakfast and returned to his room. His flight was at midday, so he checked out of the hotel, took the courtesy bus to the terminal and queued to check in. It was just as he was receiving his boarding pass that someone tapped him on the shoulder. It was Tom.

"Jim, I'm so sorry, but I had to see you before you went. I got your note last night. It was a bit of a shock to say the least, but I could not let you go without seeing you again. I guessed you might fly out this morning."

Tom looked flustered and stressed. "A shock you say?" Jim asked.

"Yes, Jim. Your note. The bit about Margaret. You never told me what happened when you met her."

"Two add two, Tom. It adds up to four."

"But how do you know for certain? Are you sure now?"

"I guessed. But I had no idea she had actually divorced me until I arrived."

"But for God's sake why, Tom?"

"I have to face the possibility that perhaps she became bored with me for the way I was. Anyway, I suspect my problems provided the excuse she needed."

"So, who was it, Jim?"

"None other than my old friend Douglas Creighton. It seems they had to keep it quiet for years. His wife was a problem for him. I was a problem for Margaret. Douglas's wife then suffered cancer for several years and eventually she died. Since then? ... I don't profess to understand."

"And how did you find out, Jim?"

"Douglas failed to turn up for the exhibition yesterday. He was the only person I'd invited. All the others were invited by Hugh or Senator Stafford. As he didn't come, I phoned him and asked why."

The two men walked slowly towards the departure gate but Jim stopped and took Tom's arm.

"Tom, may I ask another favour? Would you come out to see me again soon? I would be extremely grateful if you would collect the rest of my paintings and take them back with you. By then I should also have finished my book."

"A book, Jim?"

"Yes, it concerns the transience of life and the evil of accumulating vast personal wealth at the expense of others. I can finish it now I know the outcome, though I'm still not quite sure what to say or write about Guido. We still don't know enough about who he is - she is - yet."

Tom smiled; the stressful look gone. "I'd be delighted to come out, Jim. But....." he paused. "Did you get to see a doctor, a proper hospital, for a check-up? Like I told you?"

"No. I know what's wrong. Why spend money just to delay the inevitable. You'll need to read my book, Tom. But you'll come to see me? Soon?"

Tom took a deep breath. He already knew Jim well enough to know it would be pointless to argue with him. "Yes, I'll come," he said. "I could do some fishing this time."

"You could teach me."

"And we could watch the sun rise and set up on your hill."

"It's pink every morning and every evening, Tom."

"And I'll bring some cans of bloody fly spray this time."

"We can have a few beers at Lek's internet cafe."

"And drink fresh coconut juice."

"But don't tell anyone where I live, is that agreed? Otherwise we'll get hordes of reporters and visitors."

"Of course, Jim. In about a month's time? I've got a bit of writing to do for a while. I've just signed a contract."

"Good man."

"And Hugh gave me this for you."

Tom handed him an envelope and Jim opened it and read the note aloud.

"My Dear Jim,

"I heard with some regret from Tom that you had decided to leave before we had a chance to discuss the hugely successful exhibition. Senator Stafford was a superb choice and the US Ambassador wants one of your paintings for the Embassy.

"Tom will confirm that It is too early to judge the effects of Senator Stafford's talk about fraud and corruption - the subject you once, so valiantly, fought on - but that is not my real interest (politics leaves me quite cold as you know).

"The exhibition was very well received. I truly believe your art will be recognized in due course for its considerable skill. If I can pick on just one feature, it is your talent for depicting certain feelings through absolute mastery of the study of eyes. It may seem a small point, but you seem able to achieve something, which many artists find impossible. Your old lady, the cockerel, the hen and chicks, the old man with the beer bottle, the young girl with the black hair etc. I could list them. I also remember still with some clarity, despite only seeing it once, your special painting of the mother and child. It was extremely good.

"Suffice it to say, Jim, that I feel extremely honoured that you asked me to show your work. As we were unable to talk again before you departed I wanted to inform you that, with your permission, and because you said you wanted nothing for them, I would like to donate the paintings to a charitable foundation so that the proceeds will benefit others. My gallery will hold back just a nominal handling charge for the time and work we put in to the exhibition.

"My suggestion is that we donate them to the British Heart Foundation of which I have been an active fund raiser since my father died of a heart attack some years ago. Perhaps you could indicate your agreement to this suggestion in some way so that we can proceed.

"Best wishes and kindest regards, Hugh McAllister."

"Thank Hugh for me will you, Tom," Jim said. "He laid on an excellent exhibition and the choice of charity is perfect."

The two men shook hands warmly and Jim started to move away. But then he turned.

"Come as soon as you can Tom," he said. "If I'm not there, I'll leave everything with Lek. Time has a habit of running out rather more quickly than one might wish."

Then Jim Smith was gone.

EPILOGUE

Driver Mitchell's reward from Mr Suleiman for the new business he had acquired with the two Nigerians who had taken over Rocki General Supplies, was a bigger truck. But Mitchell's popularity with Dada and Sunday might have been soured if they knew that he often sat in the truck outside listening to their conversations on the

device he had planted amongst the rubble that still lay around the desk of the now dead Mr Moses.

"You can stop that job now," said Mr Suleiman when Mitchell announced he was still listening in if he happened to pass by. "All the bad fraudsters, crooks and skimmers have been caught. And we cannot afford to pay overtime."

"No problem, Mr Suleiman," Mitchell replied. "That thin boss man wiv hairy hat, he smoke too much, drink too much poyo and talk too much on phone. And Sunday he da fitta and drivah and sit wid ear to Nigerian music. But I like Fela Kuti music and learn new English."

"What are you saying, Mitchell? You are learning very bad English from them fucking Nigerians. They speak no good."

"Yes, Mr Suleiman, but. I learn a lot. Dada's business is very interesting. I shine mine eye"

"Shine mine eye? What sort of English is that?"

"I keep mine eye and ear open. Dada tell Sunday same ting every hour."

"And who is this fella Dada?" asked Mr Suleiman.

"Dada, the thin boss man. Smoke weed and take visitors to bah."

"Mitchell - please speak proper English not Nigerian. What is bah?"

"Bah, Mr Suleiman, bah. Where go drink beer and have lady."

"And what is their new business called?"

"Freeways Investments, Mr Suleiman, like I once told you. Come from Switzerland."

Mr Suleiman was ready to reach for his telephone, but he stopped, deciding instead to check Mitchell's knowledge with just a few more questions.

"So, what did you deliver to this fellow Dada today?"

"One parcel, Mr Suleiman."

"And what was inside the parcel?"

"Paper, Mr Suleiman."

"Paper?"

"Maybe not paper, maybe money."

"Why do you think it was money?"

"Because I heard them counting US dollars when I sat in my truck."

"And Mr Dada had a visitor there?"

"Oh, yes. Big man, fine suit and tie. Very rich but very fussy and speak like no good. Tell me to fok off. That's why I went to sit in my new truck to listen. But I need a new battery soon, Mr Suleiman."

"Who is this rude and badly spoken visitor?"

"Man in suit is Mr Johnson, from Nigeria."

"And what is Mr Johnson's business, Mitchell. Can you tell me without speaking like a Nigerian?"

Sorry, Mr Suleiman. He is Mr Jacob Johnson, from Lagos and London. There is a big business in Sulima now. Sulima Construction has big money. They will build a smart hotel on the beach."

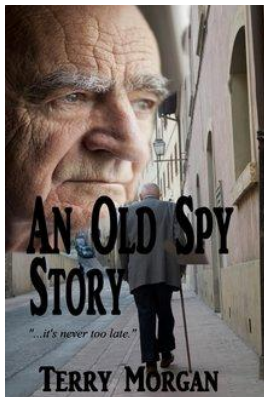
Mr Suleiman then reached for his telephone and called his cousin, the lawyer, Cole Harding.

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 Gaddafi 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.

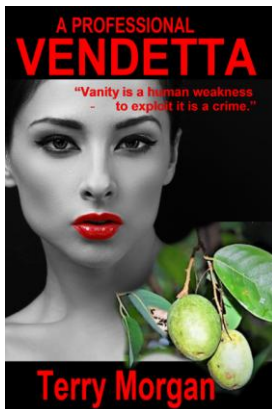
“A masterful tale by someone who knows exactly what he is writing about.”

“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.”

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.

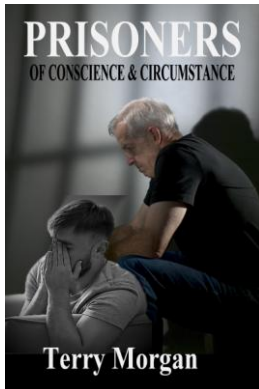
Ritchie, acting undercover as a street-wise racketeer Micky Parker, is sent to Thailand to infiltrate a Pattaya-based Chinese and Russian gang involved in counterfeiting, money-laundering, narcotics and credit card fraud.

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."

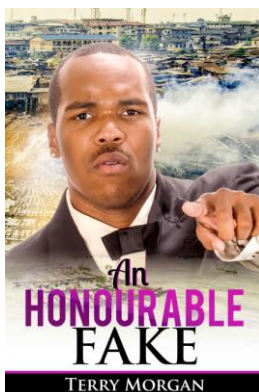
Prisoners of Conscience & Circumstance



The year is 2050 and human population has reached 10 billion. In a densely populated mega city, blighted by social problems, unemployment and declining living standards, a young man desperately seeks advice from his imprisoned uncle, an ex-politician and Professor of Biology and a man many still regard as an extremist for his views on human population control. Prisoners is a hard-hitting, well-researched and controversial short novel interspersed with illustrations and graphics.

"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.

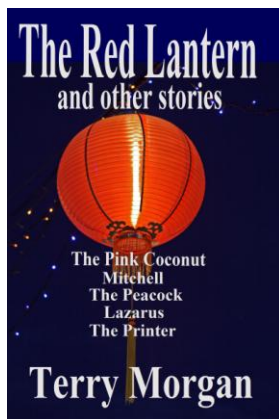
Gabriel wants changes but, in his way, lie big corporations, international politics and a group of wealthy but corrupt Nigerians financing a terrorist organisation, the COK, with one purpose in mind – the overthrow of the democratically elected Nigerian President and the establishment of a vast new West 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.

“A rare sort of political thriller – a black African hero.”

“Accomplished and knowledgeable – a class follow up to Whistleblower.”

The Red Lantern



The Red Lantern is a selection of six short stories about international crime, corruption and terrorism taken from five of the author's full-length novels – An Old Spy Story, Whistleblower, Vendetta, An Honourable Fake and Bad Boys.

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.

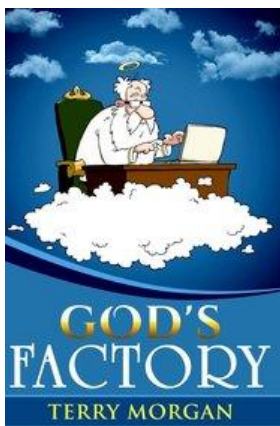
As the investigation deepens, he rapidly uncovers a sinister plot to deliberately spread a deadly new virus, the Malthus A virus, specifically created by Solomon. But Solomon needs funds and help to spread it. With sporadic outbreaks of the disease already in Thailand, Nigeria and Kenya, Capelli finds 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.

"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**'.