

PICKING UP STRANGERS

The road wound its way sleepily through the night and Julian's eyes drifted along with his weary travels. He was shaken back to his senses as the car suddenly veered off onto the gravel hard shoulder. He yanked the wheel hard and the vehicle whined in protest as it pulled reluctantly back into a straight line again. His heart thudded hard against his chest; he paused in the split second between knowing that he was going to panic and the adrenaline hitting him hard. His breath hitched and caught painfully in his throat; *shit*, he thought, that *was close, way too close*. The car straightened and the powerful headlights pierced the thin fog like a tiger's eyes. *At least that scare will wake me up again*, he thought before realizing that he was terrifyingly drifting off to sleep again. He plucked a nostril hair quickly; the pain was instant and eye-watering. He blinked furiously and fidgeted around in his seat, desperately trying to stay awake.

The illumination from the car's digital clock read 1:37am; he had been driving the rental car solidly for the last six hours since leaving Glasgow airport. He had flown in after a twelve hour delay because somewhere in central Europe someone had figured that they wanted to be paid extra for working after 10pm. His schedule had been razor tight as it was, and he was a man who believed wholeheartedly in schedules. His trip had been planned with military precision and it was literally a flying visit. He worked for a US manufacturing company that had recently purchased a UK arm for development. He had been due to fly into Heathrow in London. He was supposed to be picked up at the airport and whisked across the city to Dartford in order to tour the new facility. His plans had been unforgivably shattered due to the strike and the subsequent diversion; one that had meant he'd arrived in Glasgow instead of London. His mood had been further ruined when he'd realised that contrary to popular US belief, the UK wasn't actually as small as everyone seemed to think.

It had turned out that Glasgow was some 430 miles away from his destination. The woman at the car rental desk had attempted to explain to him that he would be better off waiting for a flight the next morning, but he had been too pig-headed and tired to listen. His schedule had been adjusted several times already and he wasn't about to alter his plans again. He had made the decision to hire a car and drive whilst still on the plane as it descended into the murky Glasgow weather. His structured mind would not stand yet another alteration.

Julian was a money man; an accountant who ran his whole life through the prism of structure and order. Every aspect of life had a column on a balance sheet and everything had to have balance. He was forty-seven; around five feet seven and always clean and shiny. He was lean and wiry with a balding head that was still ringed with a salt and pepper crown. His eyes were a pale washed out blue and were always hidden behind thick glasses. He favoured three piece suits of a dark blue nature and the cuts were always tailored and expensive. He knew only too well that his appearance only furthered the stereotype of his profession, but he didn't mind. He was currently single by choice as he had found that women offered too many variables, and he was often at a loss when it came to dealing with the fairer sex.

He glanced at the digital clock again; the time seemed to be accelerating faster than he was driving. The only car that he had been able to obtain had been of a lower class than he would have liked, and the on-board facilities were severely lacking. He had been forced to plot his route on a hand held paper map; to use a relic of a bygone age, mainly because the vehicle had not come with satellite navigation as he'd expected. He knew that despite the UK's reputation for its quaintness and lack of size, the road that he was currently driving on could not possibly be classed as a major one. The road lanes had shrunk from three to two, and then worryingly down to just a single. He had soon mastered driving on the opposite side of the road as it only took a slight adjustment to the rules of driving, and he was able to process the change swiftly and efficiently. The road that he was now driving on appeared deserted; the single lane traffic had all but evaporated leaving him as the sole traveler in either direction. He knew that he should pull over to inspect the map again and find out just where he had gone wrong, but his mind stubbornly resisted and he pressed forward regardless.

The urban sprawl had given way to open fields and grassland; now, however, the road was further encased

by dark woodland on both sides. The thick forest encroached overhead and cut the visibility even more. The car swayed again as his eyes drooped; he slapped the steering wheel hard in frustration. The night was ticking worryingly by and he was falling further and further behind schedule. His stomach knotted in revolt as he grew more and more impotent to prevent his plan from failing. The plan was all. The plan was everything and he had to stick to it. *Goddamn strikers*, he thought viciously. *Damn airplane, damn delays*; it seemed like everyone was conspiring against him. He thought of Jenkins back in the home office and a snarl crept across his face. Jenkins would love to see him fail; Jenkins hated him as much as he hated Jenkins. He was thinking of his smug colleague when the woman ran out in front of him.

It was a close thing as he only saw her the very last minute and only realised what he was seeing a split second after that. Time stood still as he jerked the wheel hard and the car spun away. The front bumper brushed through her long skirt and her terrified face whistled past the driver's window. He looked directly into her eyes as the car headlights bounced off of the deep blue crystal surface. Her skin was ivory pale and her long thick dark hair hung in matted waves. Her cheekbones were razor sharp and sculpted; her face was narrow and her figure was lithe with an almost feline grace. Then she was gone as the car passed within millimeters of her and skidded to a halt facing back the way he'd just come.

The twin headlights illuminated her as she stood rooted to the spot and for the first time he saw her clearly. She was around five feet five slim and athletic, toned and balanced; her ample chest heaved with stress and exhaustion. She stood staring at him; her deep blue eyes were almost feral and darted around with a nervous tension as her wild black hair tumbled around her pale face. She wore a white blouse that gaped loosely around her and billowed in the harsh wind. There were dark stains splattered across her front. Her long floral skirt was torn in several places and where her bare legs showed, they were scraped and bloody. Her feet were bare and she carried impractical shoes in a raw shaking hand. She stood shivering as he stared at her for what seemed like an eternity, their eyes locking across the short distance between them. Julian's mind struggled with a scene that was so far out of the ordinary and removed from the plan that he found himself unable to move. Suddenly the woman broke from her frozen moorings and ran towards him; her pretty face twisted into a mask of terror and panic. Julian automatically reached to lock the doors and prevent her access before he was momentarily mesmerized by bouncing cleavage that had sprung free as she failed to prevent the spillage. The passenger door was suddenly wrenched open and the woman leapt into the car.

"DRIVE, DRIVE!" She screamed hysterically, "QUICKLY THEY'RE COMING!"

"Now hold on Miss," Julian started, unwilling to have orders barked at him by a complete stranger.

She suddenly stamped hard on his foot and the accelerator roared into life. She reached over and hit the lever into drive and the car lurched drunkenly forward.

"Hey now!" Julian said striving to regain control as the car drove the wrong way.

"We have to go, we have to go," the woman yelled hysterically, "They're coming, they're coming."

"Who's coming? Just what exactly is going on here?" Julian snapped. Despite the woman's obvious distress, his own was greater as the plan wavered yet further and his stomach churned at this latest interruption.

He shoved the woman away from him and stopped the car in a skidding halt.

"I've just about had enough of this young lady. You run out in front of my car in the middle of the night half dressed, shouting and screaming at me; you leap into my car and attempt some sort of hijack. I won't have it, do you hear me? I just won't have it."

"Please," she sobbed, "Please."

"Now we are going to sit here and you are going to explain to me just what exactly is going on." He turned off the ignition and sat back pleased with his successful wrestle back of control. There was only one way to do things in this world as far as he was concerned, and that was his way.

Just then powerful spotlights burst from the woods and several dark silhouettes staggered out onto the road. The woman screamed as soon as she saw them.

"They're here, they've found me," she sobbed.

Julian flipped the headlights onto full beam and opened the car door. He stood out into the cold night and peered towards the now approaching figures. His ordered mind relaxed as the light picked up a dark uniform of some kind of British authority.

"Now perhaps we can get to the bottom of this," he said thankfully. "Over here officers," he waved.

He looked back into the car; the woman was mewling softly, shaking, and rocking gently as she hugged herself. *She must be a criminal on the run perhaps*, he thought, *although she does look like she has been through some terrible ordeal judging by the state of her*, he puzzled. No matter, the authorities would take over now and he could be on his way and back to the plan. He could even get some expert directions now, he cheered himself.

A crack and a flash of light exploded in the clear night and he was puzzled as a waft of air passed by his face. A second and a third noise echoed out and suddenly he felt a powerful punch to his shoulder; there was a split second before the monstrous pain exploded. *I've been shot*, he marveled, *they're shooting at me. Why are they shooting?* He tried to shout but his breath was taken from him. More small cracks lit up the night, and one clanged against the car's metal side leaving a nasty scratch along the trail. He was trying to remember if he had taken out the full insurance policy with the rental company when small claw-like hands were dragging him back into the car. The woman dragged him across into the passenger seat and climbed over him into the driver's. She started the engine just as the men were running towards them. The shots got closer and more accurate as the men closed the distance, and the car was suddenly peppered with gunfire. The back window blew out and she screamed. She stuck the car in reverse and floored it as the shots exploded around them. As the distance increased they began to drift out of range again.

Julian looked out of the front window as they reversed at great speed away from danger and the dark figures began to disappear into the gloom. "What the hell is going on?" He spluttered through gritted teeth against the pain from his shoulder wound.

The woman was still concentrating hard as she drove silently backwards; her face was a mask of sweaty effort.

"I asked you a question young lady," he snapped.

The woman stamped hard on the breaks and the car slid to a stop; she executed a clumsy three point turn around in the road. As soon as they were facing away from her pursuers she stepped hard on the accelerator again.

Julian sagged in his seat; he could feel blood seeping through his shoulder and into his expensive suit. His biggest current concern was suddenly just how he would ever manage to get his clothes cleaned properly. Tiredness and shock were on the march as the car ate up the road before them. His eyes drooped again and his mind drifted as the machine spluttered, unable to deal with the violent turn of events.

The explosion of pain woke him from his slumber; one minute he had been drifting warmly through a deep sleep and the next he was bolt upright, and a scream was vomiting from his mouth and scorching his lungs.

"Sorry," the woman mumbled as she cleaned his wound.

He found himself topless and blood soaked down one wounded arm. He risked a glance towards the small hole in his shoulder and his stomach lurched in protest.

"Don't look," the woman offered weakly.

She was pouring water into the injury and wiping the blood away with part of his now shredded shirt.

"There's a bottle of whisky in the trunk," he said through a pinched expression.

The woman only looked at him with a puzzled face.

"The boot," he said remembering the colloquialism. "The alcohol should help to disinfect the wound," he said hoping that the movies were right. The expensive bottle of whisky had been a gift for the new manager in Dartford. His mind was already wondering just how he was going to make the meeting on time to get back on plan.

The woman quickly retrieved the bottle and also brought a sweatshirt from his case in the rear of the rental.

"Who were those men?" He asked again, a little more gently.

"I don't know," the woman said quietly, "William, my husband and I were travelling through here when they stopped us," she began crying softly at the mention of her spouse.

"What did they do?" Julian asked, looking at her torn clothing and fearing the answer.

"They flagged us down with flares. One of the men said that there had been an accident up ahead so we pulled over. They were as nice as pie at first, chatting away all friendly enough. One of them, a big bastard, just kept staring at me; he was starting to give me the right creeps. Then some bloke who seemed to be in charge called William over; he went, and then they killed him." A great sob wrenched free from her chest, "They just shot him through the head at close range. So much blood, so much blood," she sobbed.

"But aren't they the police or something?" Julian asked incredulously.

"They're bastards, every last one of them," she spat.

"How did you get away?"

"Oh they had other plans for me," she sneered venomously, "I was..., I was assaulted."

Julian didn't need to ask in what manner; the look of her torn clothing made it evident enough.

He took a sharp intake of breath as the woman fashioned an awkward dressing from the car's first aid kit and stuck it onto his wounded shoulder. He quickly pulled on his sweatshirt; glad of the warmth against the cold night, but still slightly aggrieved and unsettled by his badly matching outfit.

"I don't know your name my dear," he suddenly thought to ask.

"Gemma, Gemma King," she said sadly as though the married surname was yet another reminder as to her loss.

"Look, I think that the best thing to do in these circumstances is for us to find some more appropriate help," Julian stated firmly. "Let me try my phone," he said as he searched the glove box for his mobile.

"It won't do any good; we were trying earlier this afternoon. There's no signal out here," Gemma said glumly.

"Well I'll try again and we'll see," Julian took his cell phone and was disappointed to find that the small illuminated screen mocked him with no signal bars. He cursed yet another object that could not fulfill its simple base function. "Do you know where we are?" He had to annoyingly ask.

"No, we were already lost when those bastards stopped us. They took me off somewhere in the woods, and since I managed to escape I could've been running in circles for all I know."

"How did you manage to escape?" he probed gently.

"They left me alone with just one guard, when he, you know..., finished," she looked at the floor embarrassed, "He fell asleep. I had to cuddle him and stroke his goddamned hair but eventually he started snoring," she spat angrily.

Julian watched the poor girl as she spoke of horrors endured and remembered.

"I managed to sneak his keys off of his belt and slip out. I had no idea where I was, or where I was going, but I just kept running. I kept running until I couldn't run anymore, and then I heard them coming. They were crashing through the woods like a herd of wild elephants, shouting and screaming after me. Suddenly by the grace of God I stumbled onto the road and you found me."

"Well, this is a road," he said looking ahead, "And all roads lead to somewhere. I'm sure that we will come to civilization sooner or later. We will be able to contact the authorities and I will be able to make some important calls of my own," he said thinking of the plan - always the plan.

The road stretching before them was pitch black; there was no lighting of any kind, no streetlights or even cat's eyes. There was just a faded white line along the centre of the lonely road. Julian looked depressingly into the thick woodland that surrounded them. He could see no building lights of any kind through the dark trees and despite his passenger, he had never felt quite so alone.

The darkness behind them suddenly exploded into life as full beam headlights rounded the bend.

"Oh good," Julian said relieved to find help.

"Oh God," moaned Gemma.

"It's help," Julian said hopefully.

"It's them," Gemma stated.

The flashing and rolling blue and red lights of the pursuing car proved Gemma right and the still night was suddenly shattered by the piercing wail of a siren.

Gemma fumbled with the car keys that thankfully and expediently still hung from the ignition. She started the rental at the second attempt and cranked the automatic transmission into drive.

Julian was flung back painfully into the passenger seat as the car leapt forward; gravel was flung furiously into the air as they roared away from their pursuers. He desperately fumbled with his seatbelt as Gemma drove feverishly; her face was a mask of terrified desperation and concentration. He risked a glance back over his shoulder; the powerful following car was closing the gap quickly. He ran a quick calculation in his head and could immediately tell that they were no match for the vastly superior vehicle. His mind rebelled at his predicament; he could already tell by looking at the digital clock that he would be unlikely to make his

appointment in Dartford. It wasn't death that he feared the most, it was slipping from the plan. He looked down at his scuffed and muddy shoes. His trousers were stained from his own dripping blood and his casual sweatshirt mocked him with its mismatched styling.

The car suddenly leapt on them. It accelerated, smashing into their rear; metal screeched in protest as they swerved dangerously. Gemma fought for control as they sashayed across both lanes of the narrow road. She managed through great effort and no little luck to get them straight again. The car lurched with one last defiant shot before obeying.

Julian glanced around desperately searching for inspiration. The road was long and direct and there were no buildings, cars or witnesses to be seen. There were no turnoffs that he could see anywhere; only the dark ominous woods.

The headlights behind them leapt again and Julian knew that their luck could not possibly hold a second time, his fears were founded. The rear corner of their rental was clipped as the vehicle behind attempted a "fishtail" stopping technique that Julian had once seen on a TV show. The car pulled up alongside the rear corner of their car; it then turned into them. The rental attempted to maintain its traction as the vehicle continued to steer into them but it was no match for their more powerful adversary. Julian felt them begin to spin and knew that they were lost. Gemma wrestled manfully with the steering wheel but the end was inevitable. The rental car spun and skidded around. Julian's stomach heaved with the motion. Metal screamed and crunched and Julian knew that they would eventually come to a controlled stop. For once he attempted to run from control and embrace the chaos.

"HOLD ON!" He yelled to Gemma and wrenched up the handbrake. The impact was instant and terrifying as the car shrieked and squealed. The odour of burnt rubber and failing brake disks filled the air and the car flipped over and rolled. Julian was dimly aware that he was tumbling through the air; all sense of control and order lost as his world spun madly. The headlights shattered under the crash and the black night invaded the car's interior as they eventually shuddered to a halt.

The next thing he knew was when he felt himself being pulled; the pain from his shoulder wound waking him from his unconscious slumber. He felt his back being shredded by broken glass as he was dragged free of the car. His sweatshirt had rucked up and exposed his flesh to the painful shards. His mind reached for a grip as to his whereabouts; he had been travelling to an important meeting, but he had been delayed by the incompetents of the world. He remembered driving through the night, and then..., and then the girl; he suddenly remembered the girl. He looked up through his spotty vision to see Gemma pulling him desperately through her own pain. Her face was a crimson mask as blood flowed from a scalp wound that looked serious. Her already battered body had gone another ten rounds in the crash.

"You alive?" She panted.

"I think so," he mumbled through a swollen mouth.

"Then get up, I can't drag you all the way," she snapped.

Julian heaved himself drunkenly back to his feet. He swayed unsteadily and his vision swam for a moment or two before kicking in. *Back on the clock*, he thought. *Back on the plan*, he demanded of himself.

He turned and looked back towards the twisted mess on the road; both cars were now twisted carcasses, joined together in an eternal burning embrace. He could see a blackened roasted arm sticking through the window of what had been the pursuing car. Scorched flesh hung loosely in flaps like fried chicken skin and his stomach lurched violently.

"Are they...?" He asked through a lump in his throat.

"No-one has left their car; I ventured a closer look while you were out and before the fire started. I could see two bodies in there. Both looked dead to me."

Julian looked towards her as the spite fell from her mouth; he could guess that she wished there had been more bloated and roasted bodies inside.

"Where do we...?" was as far as he got before the night was once again shattered by another approaching siren's wail.

"Quick," Gemma said as she grabbed his arm with adrenaline fuelled strength and pulled him towards the woods. "We have to go, they're still coming. There were more than two of them and they're going to be pissed when they find their fried buddies here."

Julian staggered after her as they crashed through the dark trees; wet dewy branches slapped him viciously across the face, blinding him with painful scratches. He ran clumsily with only her back for guidance. Thick undergrowth tore at his trousers and attempted to snag his feet and hinder. He ran with his head down and one hand up to protect his face. He ran until his lungs screamed in protest and his heart fluttered worryingly. He panted and sweated; his legs burned with the unusual effort and he thought that he would faint. Eventually Gemma stopped and he ran into the back of her. The impact was hard and sent him spinning to the muddy ground.

"Over there," she hissed pointing.

Julian dragged himself up to his feet and followed her arm. Through the trees he could see a clearing and a small wooden cabin sitting dark and seemingly deserted.

"Come on," she said without waiting for him.

He stumbled out into the clearing after her, "Wait," he whispered, hating to stumble around without a plan; his ordered mind still forcibly demanded structure. "We can't just wander blindly up to a stranger's door. What if they're like those guys who chased us? We don't even know who lives here."

"Oh I know all right," she said in a strange cold voice, "They do. This is where they brought me."

Julian stopped suddenly, "Then what the hell are we doing here? We should be running in the opposite direction," he snapped as quietly as he could.

"We are going to kill them all for what they did to me," she growled in a low and primal voice. "For what they did to William."

Julian wanted to turn and run but the woods were dark and he had no idea in what direction to flee. He turned to reason with Gemma but he was scared to find that she had already reached the cabin and was skulking around towards the side window. He hurried after her, not wanting to be left alone and vulnerable in the open. He quickly joined her and grabbed her arm. "What are you doing?" He hissed.

She turned to him and he felt a cold metallic object thrust into his hand. He looked down and saw a glinting smooth revolver.

"Where did you get this?" He whispered.

"From their car. I managed to reach in and take it before the fire."

"But I don't even know how to fire a gun."

"You're American aren't you?" She asked softly.

"That doesn't mean that I know anything about guns," he said realizing that stereotypes apparently worked both ways across the pond.

"It's simple," she said taking back the gun and showing him, "Safety off like this, cock it by pulling the hammer back like this, and now you're set," she handed him back the weapon.

Julian hefted the weight; somehow reassured by the solidness of the revolver. A simple piece of machinery; one function and one purpose. Point, shoot, kill. His rational mind finally felt something that it could get on-board with.

He followed Gemma as she slipped alongside the wooden walls; the cabin was dark inside and seemed empty. They both crept to the window at the side and peered inside with hands cupped. There was no movement; no tell-tale shadows, the lights were off, and the fireplace devoid of flame.

Gemma tugged his elbow gently and he followed her to the front door. His heart skipped a beat and he raised the gun with a trembling arm as she opened the door. There was no explosion of movement from inside; no cries of alarm or shouts of aggression and they both slipped quietly inside.

He had barely closed the door behind him when he heard the throaty roar of a car approaching; he ran to the front window and peered out into the darkness. Powerful headlights shone in the distance illuminating the gravel lane that Julian had missed in the dark. "They're coming," he shouted, panicking. He had not formed a plan. There was no time, no time.

"Here, quick," Gemma yelled.

Her voice was strong and clear and Julian responded to the authority, "How many will there be?" he asked.

"Three at the most. There were five and two are dead in the crash, so there should only be three left."

"What do we do?" Julian floundered.

"Get in that closet," she pointed to a door near the front of the cabin. "They'll come in and see me standing here. As soon as their attention is fully focused on me, you step out behind and shoot them. Don't you hesitate or we'll both be dead, or worse," she added ominously.

Julian ran for the closet as the car crunched to a halt outside. It may not be a good plan, but at least it was a plan and any plan was better than none. He wrenched open the closet door and jumped inside. The damp moldy smell was almost overpowering with the door closed, but he did not dare open it even a crack. Heavy winter coats tickled his neck from behind; the fur was pungent and ripe. He heard the cabin door suddenly fling open and heavy footsteps pounded in. Light flooded under the closet door as a generator rumbled and kicked in somewhere out back. He suddenly noticed that there was a knot hole in one of the planks that made up the closet door and he pushed one eye up against the vantage point. He could just make out three heavy set men; all three wore dark uniforms that upon this closer inspection seemed more military than police issue. The men were all burly and well built; powerful frames were augmented by gym honed muscle. Their faces wore identical heavy beards and their eyes were all deep set and cruel, as though devoid of compassion. They looked like what they were - dangerous men.

"Where the hell is she?" One of the men barked.

"I don't bloody know, we've searched everywhere, there's no trace," answered another.

"Maybe she got away with that guy?" Said the third.

"And who the hell was he?" Said the first.

"No idea. I thought that it was just the two of them and suddenly there are three. All we can do is wait for first light, we'll track the bitch then. We found her once, and we can find her again."

Julian waited for the shouts that hadn't come. Gemma had said that she would be in plain view when the men entered, and that would allow him to get the drop on them from behind. Wherever Gemma was she obviously wasn't in plain view; he began to feel uneasy as yet another plan faltered. His heart stopped as all he could do was watch as the largest of the three men approached the closet. The door handle turned and he took a step backwards and raised the gun, his hand shaking. The door opened. He stood there illuminated for all to see in the harsh generator infused lights of the cabin. His arm ached from the tension and his finger twitched on the trigger.

The large man was turned slightly; his attention focused towards his two companions and he threw a heavy coat into the closet without looking. The coat landed over Julian's outstretched trembling arm holding the gun and he gasped in silent disbelief as the door swung closed again leaving him undiscovered. He was ready to laugh in shock when a loud crash silenced the generator outside and the cabin was plunged back into darkness. Even from his secluded position he could smell the petrol as he heard it spill and splash. There was a soft whoosh and a couple of seconds later he felt the heat as flames licked hungrily at the wooden cabin's walls. The three men moved quickly.

"It's her," one of them shouted, "She's outside."

Julian heard the front door crash open and he saw through the knot hole that two of the men charged outside; their hands reaching inside their coats. The closet door suddenly swung open as the third man reached for his coat only to pause in shock as he saw Julian for the first time. Julian raised his arm holding the gun. His eyes locked with the much larger man. He opened his mouth to tell the cop or whatever he was not to move - maybe to freeze - but his finger trembled on the sensitive trigger and the gun went off. The explosion was monstrous in the small closet and Julian felt deafened by the blast. He watched in horror as the back of the large man's head exploded out into the cabin in a fine red mist. The man slumped to his knees with a look of bewilderment on his face before pitching forward, dead. Julian realised that he was holding his breath and struggled to expel the build-up of air in his lungs. He stumbled out over the body. The rear wall of the cabin was now fully on fire; the smoke and fumes were filling the small area fast.

"Bobby? Bobby?" One of the men outside yelled back into the cabin, "You get that bitch?"

Julian's senses revolted at the unforgivable rudeness of the man; despite everything that they had put her through, the man still spoke with such disrespect. He moved quickly to the side window. With a quick check around, he heaved himself up and out. He crept slowly around to the front of the cabin. Despite the growing heat he still felt more comfortable hugging the wooden logged walls.

He moved to the front and peered around the corner of the small building. The other two men were peering in through the front door, their hands shielding their faces against the smoke and the heat.

"Freeze," he said, stepping out and trying for an authoritative tone but falling some way short.

The two men turned towards him, their faces contorted with shock. "What the hell is this?" The first man said, "They're using guns now?"

"Don't you move," Julian stammered, "You just stay where you are, we're not going to have any more of this nonsense. We are going to set things straight and we are going to get back on the plan." His voice grew with strength at the thought of getting back on the plan. "We are going to get the authorities here and we are going to set things right," his wounded arm still trembled but the other holding the gun was now rock still.

"Look man," one of the men barked irritably, "Just who the hell are you?"

"It doesn't matter who I am, I am just the one telling you how we are going to do things. STAY WHERE YOU ARE!" He shouted, suddenly realizing that the two men were drifting apart. He now had to swing the gun between them to cover them both.

"Easy pal, just take it easy," one of the men said whilst still tiptoeing away from his partner.

"Yeah buddy," the other man said, drifting his own way, "Maybe you've just wandered into something that you don't understand. Maybe we made a mistake thinking that you were a part of this."

"STAND STILL!" Julian shouted, realizing that he was losing control again.

The man to his right suddenly reached inside his coat and whipped out a silver gun that glinted under the fires dancing light. "PUT IT DOWN!" The man yelled.

"YOU PUT IT DOWN!" Julian shouted back.

"DROP IT!" The other man shouted as he drew a weapon to match his partner's.

An explosion of movement suddenly whipped from behind the two men. Julian saw it coming and was transfixed by the vision. The figure was large and bounded across the clearing with tremendous speed. Powerful muscles bunched beneath the fur and sharp white fangs glistened in the firelight. The thing didn't slow down as it ran into the man to his right. Julian lowered his gun involuntarily as he stood mesmerized. Huge jaws clamped down on the man's head; a wet popping sound turned Julian's stomach as the bones crunched and shattered under the dominant assault. The man's legs shook violently in a death dance bop and the creature ripped its jaws free. Blood spewed over the clearing and the thing howled to the heavens. The creature turned to the last of the men.

The man raised his silver gun, but way too slowly. The monster covered the distance in a flash and slashed with a violent razor tipped claw. The blow shredded the man's thick coat with ease and he sank to his knees clutching to keep his insides in place.

The monstrous vision swiveled its head back to Julian and any thoughts that he had of a savior disappeared when he saw the hunger in its eyes. It began to pad towards him, slowly, as though savoring the moment. Julian locked his gaze with the beast; it walked on all fours but it was larger than any wolf or dog that he had ever seen before. It was around the size of a grizzly bear but sleeker and more nimble. Its powerful haunches shimmered with muscle in the dancing flame light and its snout was long with deep set yellow eyes. Julian could only stare as it approached. His mind struggling to comprehend what he was seeing; wanting him to just lie down and sleep.

He broke the locked gaze and suddenly realised that he was holding a weapon. He lifted the gun with difficulty. A simple piece of machinery with a simple purpose; he aimed the gun and pulled the trigger as many times as it would fire. There were five bullets left in the gun and three of them thudded into the animal leaving small red holes in its body. The animal staggered drunkenly at the impact and toppled over onto the ground.

The man who had been clawed was still moving and Julian could hear him trying to talk,. He circled gingerly around the animal and towards the man.

As he reached him he could see that the wounds were grievous and fatal; long bloody gouges were torn deeply in the man's chest. His breath hitched and struggled in the cold night air. Julian leant in closer as the man tried to speak.

“Take this, take it,” the man panted, holding out his silver gun. “We hunt them; this will kill it, only this.”

Julian took the gun, more to remove it from a potential threat than to shoot the already dead animal. A movement behind him startled him from that conclusion. He turned in disbelief to see the animal starting to move. He raised his own gun again and pulled the trigger only to have the hammer clack on empty chambers. He stared down at the weapon; his forehead crinkled in puzzled thought.

He turned his attention back towards the monster; incredibly the creature was in mid-air as he turned. Drooling fangs shone from foaming jaws as death flew through the air for him. He raised the other gun and pulled the trigger. A flash of lightning spat from the silver gun and the animal jerked violently from the impact and fell to the ground. Julian could only stare in wonder as the monster began to change. Its body shrunk and shortened; the thick fur receded and the snout and jaws retracted. The torso became lithe and supple, soft and feminine until he was looking down at Gemma.

The man behind him dredged up his last words, “We tracked her and her mate. We killed him but only wounded her; that’s why she couldn’t change until she was stronger.” He gasped for the energy to finish before he was. “We thought that you were one too. That’s why you picked her up and saved her. Never heard of them running in threes. Should’ve known, sorry,” he panted. “Sorry I shot you,” he whispered, and then he was gone.

Julian stood on the muddy ground; his mind had now locked the doors and given up the ghost. He clumsily attempted to straighten his hair and his clothes as the sun drifted slowly over the horizon welcoming the day. He checked his watch. It had been shattered during the night but it did not matter; there was time, still time to get back on the plan. All he had to do was find the schedule again. He could still make Dartford and he could still make his appointment. His face was frozen with a distant glaze and a strange crooked smile. He began to whistle a merry tune as he stepped over the bodies that he no longer saw, and walked off blindly into the woods.