



They gave him hell
He gave it back...

He was the butt of their jokes
He made them tea...

JIM'S REVENGE

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Chapter 1

Morgan Flechley prepares for a police raid

One of Morgan Flechley's mobiles rang and a muffled voice said, "You're going to be raided tomorrow."

Before Flechley had a chance to speak, the phone went dead.

Fearing the worst, Flechley picked up a tablet computer and flicked between the camera stations sited in his garden and the surrounding woods. Carrying out another sweep, he established there were no police in the immediate area, so he flicked through the internal cameras.

Finding Chloé, his girlfriend, and her daughter swimming in the in-door pool, Flechley connected to the audio system and said, "Al and me have a bit of business to attend to, you okay?"

Chloé called back, "No probs hun."

Satisfied they wouldn't be interrupted, Flechley glanced at Big Al, one of his minders, and said, "We're likely to have visitors tomorrow. So let's get set up. Plan A."

Big Al didn't need to ask questions; in Flechley speak *having visitors* meant a police raid was imminent. Knowing what was required, Big Al went to a large storage cupboard and pulled out second-hand computer equipment. He started to set up dummy computer stations at previously agreed locations before turning them on and making sure they were working.

Flechley said, "Okay. Get a large shopping bag and two dummy computers for upstairs."

Once Big Al had returned with a stout plastic carrier bag and had grabbed the two remaining dummy computers, Flechley led the way upstairs.

Once at the top, Flechley said, "So what d'you think?"

Big Al frowned; he hadn't entered Flechley's sanctum since Billy Hufton had finished working up there a few days before. He said, "What exactly is he supposed to have done?"

Flechley looked pleased, "You can't tell, can you?"

"Can't tell what?"

"What's been done," Flechley replied. He rapped on one of the partitions and it rang hollow. When he repeated the exercise on the other side, the walls didn't ring at all.

Taking pity on Big Al, Flechley said, "Billy stripped the plasterboard off these partitions, reinforced the floor and the partition framework and then lined both sides with plywood. As an added precaution, the outside has had steel sheets screwed to it and plasterboard fixed back on top."

When Big Al showed surprise, Flechley said, "Here's another nice feature," and pushed a button on the wall. A heavy fire door shot out of the slot behind them and sealed off the staircase. He pointed at the other doors in the reinforced partition.

"These are heavy duty and fitted with hook bolts. They've also been lined with steel sheet and then mouldings planted on to match the other doors. Even if someone came up here with a sledgehammer, they'd have a hard job getting through."

"Billy Hufton did this?"

Noticing the surprise in Big Al's tone, Flechley smiled, "He certainly did. I've told you, despite some of the nasty comments people make about him, he's a good craftsman."

"So, when the police come," Big Al said, "You're going to lock yourself in there?"

Flechley shook his head. "Don't be daft. They'd take that as an admission of guilt. I've reinforced the walls in case we're attacked by rivals."

He added, "I've no intention of locking myself away when the police come calling tomorrow. We're going to play smart. Like I said, we're going to instigate plan A."

Unlocking the door to his private office, Flechley walked over to a storage cupboard above the staircase and pushed a button. In response, the computer server turned around and disappeared into a fake chimney stack.

Big Al's eyebrows rose, "Did Billy Hufton make that as well?"

Flechley nodded, "Looks like a chimney, doesn't it?"

"It sure does," Big Al admitted.

"Even the police would think twice before smashing a hole in a chimney stack," Flechley said. He beckoned Big Al over to the other side of the room and opened another heavy door. "This is a new emergency staircase which goes down to the garage. If the opposition try to set the house on fire, we can escape."

After closing the door, Flechley pulled on a pair of white cotton gloves and tossed another pair to Big Al before beginning to disconnect a laptop on his desk. Once he'd finished, he told Big Al to fix up a dummy in its place.

Once the computer swap had been completed, Flechley packed away the laptop in a carry case. He said, "When you leave, take the computer with you, and take Brian's computer too."

Brian was Flechley's son.

Flechley pointed an electronic wand at a heavy cabinet. There was a distinct clunk as hook bolts disengaged, and he moved the cabinet to one side. Directly behind the cabinet was a hole in the wall and it was possible to see the hidden recess behind a pipe duct in the adjacent bathroom where there were sealed mason jars, each containing several small labelled parcels and a Walther PPK pistol.

Stooping down, Flechley grabbed the mason jars and the gun and dumped them into the carrier bag. Slamming the heavy cabinet back into position, he re-engaged the hook bolts and said, "Take my computers and this bag to Arundel Avenue but give Brian his computer. When you leave, make sure you go the back way. I can't see any, but there may be police watching the road; I don't want them stopping you and searching the car."

"What about Laurel and Hardy? They're due here tomorrow," Big Al queried.

"I'd forgotten about them," Flechley admitted.

"There's also Groucho," Big Al reminded him.

Most of Flechley's regular distributors had nicknames to protect their identity if anyone was listening in.

"Yeah, we need to make sure they get their supplies," Flechley said. He pointed to one of the mason jars, "Both Laurel and Hardy's and Groucho's orders are in there. Give 'em a call and make alternative arrangements for picking them up. They obviously can't come here if the place is crawling with cops. It's still cash up front. The rest goes to Arundel Avenue, including payments received. Got it?"

Big Al nodded.

Arundel Avenue was a cheap terraced house Morgan Flechley had bought with a false identity over a year ago. No one lived there; it was a dead drop, a place where

correspondence and small parcels could be pushed through the letter box and collected later by one of Flechley's associates.

"Any questions?"

"No boss."

"Good," Flechley said. "And make sure you're not followed."

"I always do, boss."

"Good. One last thing; when you've finished, pick Brian up from school and take him to Shirley's. Make sure you give him his computer."

Big Al nodded; Shirley was Flechley's wife, but they'd lived apart for years. "Okay boss, understood."

Once he'd been into Brian's room and swapped computers, Big Al went clattering down the stairs carrying everything with him. Leaving by the back door, he jogged along a covered way and left via a stout lockable gate before crunching his way over a wide gravelled security strip. He ran into the surrounding woods making sure he kept under cover all the way.

After covering fifty yards on foot, he came to a large, hidden carport. There was a battered all-terrain vehicle parked beneath it, one that had mottled camouflage paintwork. Jumping in, he swiftly ran a bug detector over the interior. Satisfied the car was clean, he started up and began racing down the dirt tracks running through the woods. Eventually, he joined a main road and set off towards Tiphram.

Once he arrived at Arundel Avenue, Big Al let himself in and disabled the alarm system. A moment later, a security camera whirled into life and pointed straight at him.

Flechley said, "I hope you weren't followed."

"I was careful, I wasn't followed," Big Al assured him. Opening one of the mason jars, he extracted Laurel and Hardy's and Groucho's orders and dropped them into his pocket. He sealed the jar again and dropped it back into the bag, before pulling up a loose floorboard and lowering the carrier bag into the void below. He then lowered the bag containing Flechley's portable computer into the same hole.

Pulling a storage crate over the floorboard, he glanced at his watch and looked at the surveillance camera.

"All done. I'm going to pick up Brian, boss."

"When you drop him off with Shirley," Flechley said, "make sure he's got his computer and don't say anything about the police raid to Shirley. Make sure Brian keeps stumm too."

Big Al nodded, re-activated the alarm and returned to the car, but instead of racing back the way he had come, he drove off at a far more sedate pace and made his way to the local school.

Ten minutes later, the school's external doors burst open and the first group of prisoners made a break for freedom. Eventually, Brian Flechley came out surrounded by a small group of friends.

Big Al climbed out of the car and walked around to the pavement, glancing in Brian's direction. When Brian walked through the main gates, he stepped forwards saying, "I'm afraid we've got a family crisis, **Brain. Brian** Your Dad has told me to take you to your Mum's."

Brian pulled a face but didn't argue. Over the last few years, there had been several *family crises*. Saying goodbye to his friends, he climbed into the car.

Once well away from the school, Brian said, "So what's happened?"

"We're expecting a police raid tomorrow," Big Al said. "Your computer is in the back, don't forget it."

“How d’you know there’s going to be a raid?”

“We were tipped off. Don’t worry, everything is under control; nothing to worry about but don’t tell your Mum about it.”

“What do I tell her then?”

“You don’t have to tell her anything,” Big Al said. “I’m just going to tell her your Dad’s been called away on business and he didn’t want to leave you alone in the house.”

Brian said, “What about my supplies for school?”

“Don’t worry,” Big Al assured him. “Everything will go back to normal in a couple of days. In the meantime, I’ll drop stuff off to you at Shirley’s but don’t go letting on. You know she doesn’t approve of your father’s trade.”

Brian snorted. “If we didn’t supply the demand for drugs, someone else would,” he said. “Mum might not approve but she’s quick enough to accept the money Dad pays her, isn’t she?”

~*~

Paul Tupal and Flin Rheingold walked into Cunningham Park around 5.30; they’d come directly from work.

Within seconds, Tupal’s nerves began to show. “I don’t like it. Why are we meeting here? Why aren’t we going to Morgan Flechley’s house as per?”

“Keep your voice down,” Rheingold said. “I’m sure there’s a good reason.”

He led the way to the agreed meeting place, a discreetly recessed arbour with picnic benches at the edge of the park.

He hissed, “Sit down and stop looking so furtive. We have as much right to be here as anyone else.”

They’d barely sat down before the lake erupted and ducks began leaping out of the water. Glancing sideways, Rheingold saw an old man throwing food to the birds. While he was watching, he heard another old man sitting on the same bench as the duck feeder say, “They’re going to ban people feeding the ducks y’know, Jim. They say it attracts rats.”

Rheingold didn’t go to the park that often but on hot sunny days it was well used by local office workers. Although he hadn’t known Jim’s name before, Rheingold remembered seeing him in the park before; he was a regular.

Taking advantage of the diversion caused by the quacking ducks, Big Al walked over to Tupal and Rheingold and sat down next to Rheingold. He said, “The boss has asked me to give you a parcel, Mr Laurel.”

He put his hand into one of his pockets and slipped it under the table.

Rheingold reached under the table and tried to take the parcel out of Big Al’s paw.

Instead of releasing it Big Al said, “Money first, Mr Laurel; under the table.”

When Rheingold did as instructed, Big Al growled, “It had better be right. If it’s light, I’ll pay you a visit at work. I know you work at Slobend, Fleecem and Skinnem, Mr Laurel.”

“The money’s all there.” Rheingold assured him. “I counted it myself.”

“It better be,” Big Al said and released his grip on the parcel. “Stay here for five minutes after I’ve gone.”

“Why?”

“Because I say so,” Big Al snapped.

When Rheingold frowned, Big Al added, "I have other people to see and I don't want you clowns following me. If I see you following me, I'll hammer you into the ground, understood?"

When both Tupal and Rheingold nodded, Big Al said, "Glad we understand one another."

~*~

Once five minutes had elapsed, Tupal and Rheingold stood up and began walking casually towards one of Cunningham Park's exits. They were level with Jim, the duck feeder, when the man sitting next to Jim turned in his seat and said loudly, "They're drug dealers, Jim. I saw them collecting a package from the other man who was over there."

Jim Godwin glanced around. Although he'd never met Tupal and Rheingold before, their faces became etched on his mind. He thought they looked guilty.

Jim's companion repeated his accusation, "They're drug dealers, Jim."

Tupal took to his heels but Rheingold stood his ground, "What did that silly old fart say?"

Jim said, "Don't mind him. He can't help it. He just says things; he doesn't mean them."

Rheingold gave Jim an icy stare, "Well, you need to keep him under control. I don't like people making accusations like that."

When Jim didn't answer, Rheingold took a step forwards and locked eyes with him, "I said you need to keep him under control."

Jim nodded meekly, "I do my best."

Once Rheingold had stalked off and joined Tupal by the park gate, Jim turned to Adrian Drinkwater and said, "I hope you realise you nearly caused us a lot of trouble."

Drinkwater frowned, "Did I? How?"

"You know how," Jim snapped. "You accused those two men of being drug dealers."

"Did I?"

Jim sighed, Adrian's Alzheimers was getting worse. Shaking his head, Jim went back to feeding the ducks.

~*~

Carl Bamforth was sitting in the snug of the Golden Lion when Big Al arrived. Declining a drink, Big Al slipped one hand under the table and gave Bamforth a nudge.

"The boss asked me to give you a parcel, Groucho."

The other man copied his example and slipped an envelope stuffed with used bank notes in Big Al's direction.

Big Al issued his usual threat, "It had better be right. If it's light, I'll pay you a visit at work."

"The money's all there." Bamforth assured him.

"Good," Big Al said. "Nice doing business with you. Stay here for five minutes after I've left."

Unlike Tupal and Rheingold, Bamforth nodded, "Okay."

~*~

Once Big Al had returned, Flechley said, "Get changed and wash your clothes. They'll come with sniffer dogs tomorrow. I don't want them picking up traces on your clothes. When you've finished we need to shift the cars round."

Once Big Al had freshened up, Flechley tossed him a smart key. Big Al nodded to Bennett, one of Flechley's other minders.

"You take the boss' car and I'll follow in the All-Terrain. We'll take the car to the compound at Blue Self-Storage and then I'll give you a lift back."

"Sure, Al."

"And when you get back," Flechley said, "you can steam clean it and stick it in the garage."

~*~

Moira Buckle heard a distinct ping from her bedroom window. It was swiftly followed by two more. Fighting her fears, Moira lifted the corner of a curtain and looked out. She was quick enough to catch a glimpse of someone running away. A few seconds later she heard a high-power car screech off into the night. Recognising the engine, she knew that Paul Tupal had just paid her a visit.

~*~

The following morning, Flechley heard a loud knocking on the front door followed by someone saying they had a search warrant. There were raised voices as Big Al let in the police raiding party. Hearing barks, Flechley knew the police had brought the expected sniffer dogs with them.

Once the search started in earnest, three police officers burst into Flechley's office with one of the dogs and Big Al following closely behind.

Barely bothering to explain what they were doing, one of the officers made a grab for the computer on Flechley's desk and carted it off downstairs. They then let the dog start sniffing; when it found nothing, it was removed from the room.

As anticipated, doors were opened. Finding the escape stair leading to the garage, several officers appeared and raced down the staircase. A minute later, one of the officers returned and demanded the keys to the All-Terrain. A few seconds later, it was driven off.

When the last remaining officer began opening filing cabinets and rifling through files, Flechley went into bluff mode, "I really don't know why you are here. But you won't find anything of interest in there."

The officer gave him sharp look and carried on searching. Eventually, he abandoned the filing cabinets and turned his attention to the moveable cupboard. Opening it, he started emptying the contents on the floor. Finding nothing of interest, he attempted to move the cupboard away from the wall, but the hook bolts held firm.

Two hours later, the hit squad left, obviously annoyed they hadn't found a scrap of evidence they could use against Flechley.

A senior officer appeared and gave Flechley a hard look. He hissed, "Sorry to have disturbed you, sir."

As the house finally emptied, Flechley picked up the phone and rang his solicitor, "Can you make a formal complaint please; police harassment."

Chapter 2

Jim and Moira

After searching for a pencil, Jim Godwin put a ring around an advertisement in the sit's vac page of the Tiphram Star. Reading further, he found another possible job and circled that too. By the time he'd finished, there were six rings on the page. He started re-reading. Within seconds, he put a line through four of the circles; he didn't want to work anti-social hours and he didn't want to travel far. Ideally, the job would be part-time.

He was just about to reach out and call one of the numbers when his mobile rang and startled the life out of him.

Answering it, a high-pitched voice shouted, "Hello Grandpa Godwin!"

Jim smiled, "Hello Sam."

Sam's voice was suddenly replaced by Amanda, his daughter-in-law, "I'm going shopping. D'you want anything?"

Jim raised his eyebrows at the brusque tone in Amanda's voice, but he ignored it because he had no desire to lock horns with her. Instead, he reached for his list of *special items* he'd written out the previous day and read them out.

"Is that all you want?" Amanda demanded.

"That'll do," Jim confirmed. "Thank you."

"Okay I'll get Tommy to bring them over later."

"That will be nice," Jim replied. "Will Sam be coming too?"

There was a silence but instead of the line being cut as it normally was, Jim heard Sam protesting, "I want to speak to Grandpa again."

A moment later, Sam came back on the phone, "Hello Grandpa!"

After talking to Sam and listening to his football exploits in the local junior team, Jim eventually terminated the conversation and went back to his paper, but swiftly grew bored with sit's vac and the local news. Eventually, he decided to visit Cunningham Park and feed the ducks; it was one of those rituals he did practically every day to waste away a few hours.

Picking up the specially bought bird food instead of the stale bread he'd given innocently for years but which he'd recently learned was potentially lethal for them, Jim left his flat and set off towards the park. He noticed that Adrian Drinkwater was already sitting in his normal position.

Moving towards the bench, Jim sat down beside Drinkwater and said, "I hope you're not going to accuse anyone of being a drug dealer today."

Drinkwater frowned, "And why would I do that?"

"You did yesterday."

"Did I?"

"You did," Jim replied opening the bag he was holding. The slight rustle was enough to spark the local wild fowl into a frenzy; the lake emptied, and the air filled with the sounds of quacking and honking.

After throwing some food to the thronging masses and watching them gobble it up, Jim glanced at Adrian and said, "So how's things today?"

Adrian shrugged and said what he normally said when Jim fed the birds. "They're going to ban people feeding the ducks y'know, Jim. They say it attracts rats."

Jim ignored the comment and responded with, "How's your family?"

"Never see 'em," Adrian replied dismissively. "How's yours?"

"Tommy's coming around with Sam to deliver my *special items* shortly," Jim replied.

Adrian frowned, "Special items?"

"I've told you about the *special items* before," Jim replied. "I ask for them every week so Tommy has an excuse to come around and see me."

Seeing the blank expression on Adrian's face, Jim concluded Adrian's Alzheimer's had robbed him of the information.

"Amanda and I fell out a few years back and she's not the sort to forget a grudge."

"Tommy," Adrian said. "Which one's that? Is he the one you said would regret marrying again?"

Jim only had one son but he didn't correct Adrian. "That's the one."

Adrian responded with, "Is he the one like Henry the Eighth?"

"That's the one."

Partially recalling one of their previous conversations on the subject, Adrian said, "Tell me how it goes again."

When Jim didn't respond, Adrian said, "Go on."

"Okay," Jim said. "Tommy, my son, has a typical English family. Like King Henry the Eighth, Tommy has gone through a number of wives and has children by most of them. Unlike Henry's spouses, none have been beheaded. In Tommy's case the sequence is divorced; bugged off with another man; died in car crash; remarried."

Amused by the description of Tommy's family, Adrian let out a cackle. He said, "So who is Tommy married to now?"

"Amanda. She's Tommy's fourth and *twenty years younger* wife. Sam is the fruit of her loins."

After talking about his family for a while longer, Jim was surprised when Adrian remembered something from a previous conversation.

"Have you found a job yet?"

Jim shook his head, "I've contacted a few firms but I've begun to realise no one wants to employ someone of my age. It's as if I have 'supplanted' tattooed on my forehead."

Adrian eyed him thoughtfully. "I'm surprised you want a job at your age."

"That's what Tommy keeps on saying," Jim replied tartly. "But there are times when I get really bored. Having a part time job, something light, would break up the day."

After giving the ducks the remainder of the food, Jim bid Adrian adieu and went back to his apartment.

~*~

Later that day, Tommy called and handed over Jim's *special items* and the noise in Jim's small flat immediately increased by two decibels because Tommy had brought Ian and Sam with him. Ian was Sam's half-brother, the offspring of *died in car crash*. Unlike Sam, who never stopped charging around, Ian was the archetypical computer nerd, pale from lack of sunshine and square eyed from being glued to a computer screen.

Tommy picked up the Tiphm Star and noticed the pencil rings. "You're *still* not trying to get yourself a job are you?"

"I just want a small job, part time," Jim told him. "I get bored just sitting around doing nothing."

Tommy was shocked. Having set his heart on early retirement and looking forward to spending every waking hour on the golf course, Tommy was offended his father should wish to go the other way and seek gainful employment.

“A job at your age? You should be getting your feet up, Dad.”

Instead of being deterred Tommy’s opinion made Jim all the more determined to get a job.

~*~

Moira Buckle’s phone rang around 11.00pm. She wasn’t surprised because she’d become used to the nuisance calls. They always came between 11 o’clock and 1.00 am, and they were all from an unknown caller. She suspected Paul Tupal had organised it; she couldn’t prove it but simple logic dictated Tupal or one of his toadies was behind the calls.

Like the stone throwing at her window the previous night, it was the sort of weird stunt some of them would play. Other than the calls, she had no regrets about dumping Tupal; when he took drugs or drank too much, he became violent and she’d had the bruises to prove it.

When the phone continued to ring, she gave in and answered it. “Yes?”

There was no response except for the sound of heavy breathing. Then a movement from outside caught her eye and a hideous luminous face appeared at the window. She screamed and ran out of the room. She was halfway down the hall when there was a rattle at the front door and someone started to come in.

She freaked again but swiftly calmed down when she realised it was Paula and her boyfriend who rented room 3.

Paula took one look at her and guessed, “Another heavy breather?”

“And a face at the kitchen window,” Moira gasped.

Paula’s boyfriend reacted immediately, running towards the back door. The door was heavily barred and locked to keep out would be burglars, so it took him at least a minute to get outside.

After briefly searching the rear yard, he came back and held up a mask, “Is this what you saw?”

When Moira nodded, Paula repeated her previous advice, “You should either go back to your parent’s place, call the police or change your phone number.”

Moira nodded but mentally put a line through the first two options. Coming from a highly dysfunctional family, going home wasn’t an option she wanted to take. It had taken her years of resolve to walk out and going back would be like a bad dream restarting.

The police were out too. In her younger years, the police had been regular visitors called in by adjoining neighbours to deal with her parent’s rows. The police had called that often that she now had an instinctive distrust of them. They weren’t custodians of the law; they were the enemy.

She thought about the third option. That might solve the problem but she knew she’d have to make sure that no one at Slobend, Fleecem & Skinnem found out her new number.

Chapter 3

Saturday: Three weeks later.

“He’s coming. Shall we grab him?”

When Brian Flechley nodded, his two accomplices stepped out, grabbed Gerry Fulstrum, pulled him off his pedal bike and dragged him, struggling, into a narrow alley to where four scrambler motor bikes were parked.

Once in front of Brian, Gerry attempted to show more resolve than he really felt,

“What d’you want?”

“Don’t be an arse Gerry, you know what I want.”

He pointed at the newspaper delivery bag Gerry was carrying, “While you’re delivering your papers, you may as well drop off our stuff as well.”

“No.”

One of Brian’s associates said, “I think he needs persuading, Bri.”

“I think you’re right,” Brian agreed.

Knowing he’d be given a beating if he didn’t back down, Gerry caved in. “There’s no need for violence. Okay. I’ll do it.”

“I thought you would,” Brian smirked, handing Gerry three packages. “Make sure they arrive. All losses are chargeable to you and it will take you twenty years of paper rounds to pay off your debt.”

Recovering slightly, Gerry said, “What’s stopping you delivering them yourself?”

“Why have a dog and bark yourself? Why the hell should we take the risk of being stopped by the police when you can take the risk for us, eh!”

Brian patted Gerry on the cheek, “Off you go. There’s a good boy.”

Making his escape, Gerry heard one of the thugs laughing at his expense. Cycling away, he cursed his own weakness and muttered under his breath, “One of these days, I’m going to get even with you, Brian Flechley.

As if he’d heard his name, Brian Flechley suddenly raced past on his motor bike. While Gerry’s pedal bike was still wobbling from the wind impact, the other three motor bikes followed suit, one of the riders turning back to shout, “See you loser.”

~*~

Other than a slight hangover from the night before, Paul Tupal felt on top of the world. Pulling up outside Flin Rheingold’s house he sounded the horn and waited.

Rheingold joined him two minutes later and Tupal drove off before he had a chance to fasten his seatbelt.

They were half a mile down the road before Tupal said, “I presume you’ve got the money.”

“Course I’ve got the money,” Rheingold snapped. “There’s no point in going to see Morgan Flechley unless we have, is there? You know it’s money up front with him.”

“I’m glad we’re back to normal,” Tupal said.

Recalling the accusation the bloke in the park had thrown at them, he added, “I didn’t like meeting up in Cunningham Park.”

After Tupal had jumped two red traffic lights, Rheingold said, “How much did you have to drink last night?”

“Not many.”

“D’you want me to drive?”

"I'm fine," Tupal snapped.

"One of these days the police are going to breathalyse you," Rheingold told him.

Tupal let out a slight cackle and began recounting a story he'd told many times before.

"I got breathalysed once. Years back. They took me in for a re-test at the police station. Luckily I had my old penny with me..."

"...and you sucked on the old penny and drank some water when you asked to use their toilet," Rheingold cut in, "and when they re-tested you, you passed."

"Correct," Tupal replied. "I never go anywhere without my lucky penny."

"Yeah... well one day your luck will run out," Rheingold sniped. "The breathalysers they use now are probably far more accurate than the ones they used back then."

Tupal said, "My luck is on the rise, mate. Best thing we ever did was hooking up with Morgan Flechley. Now all my money worries are a thing of the past. We should have done it months ago."

Leaving Tiphham, Tupal began heading across country, driving down back roads to avoid the congestion everywhere else. Two miles out of Tiphham, he turned down a narrow country lane leading to Morgan Flechley's house.

After travelling for the best part of a mile with only tall hedges for company, Tupal smiled and put his inner thoughts into words.

"If things keep going like they are, I'll be able to tell John Flinnett to stuff his job."

"Morgan Flechley wouldn't like that," Rheingold replied.

Tupal bridled, "Why not?"

"Flechley wanted us on board *because* we work for someone like Slobend, Fleecem and Skinnem," Rheingold said. "We have strong middle class and county set connections, people who are prepared to pay for quality, people with money who like to take coke, meth or weed now and again and don't want to be seen hanging around on street corners to get their fix."

Rheingold's lecture came to an abrupt halt when Tupal suddenly swerved to avoid hitting a farm tractor trying to emerge from a field. Despite Rheingold's pleas for him to slow down, Tupal continued racing down the narrow lanes at breakneck speed, taking blind bends without slowing down.

Realising he couldn't restrain Tupal, Rheingold did his best to ignore the risks his colleague was taking and called Flechley's second mobile number when they were getting close to his house.

Flechley just answered, "Yes."

"With you in five," Rheingold responded.

"Okay," Flechley said. "But when you get here, watch what you say. My builders are here. Don't get involved in a conversation."

"By your builders, do you mean Billy Hufton?"

"Yes."

Rheingold said, "Hufton hasn't a very good reputation."

"He wouldn't dare do a bad job for me," Flechley replied. "Besides, the outside is going to be rendered like the rest of the house."

When they arrived they found a lorry crane off-loading blocks onto the gravel drive at the front of Flechley's house so they were forced to park on a forest track and then flee from the swarms of mosquitoes that emerged from a drainage ditch as soon as they stepped out of the car.

Once clear of the wood, they had no choice but to walk past the blocks. John Urnwood, Hufton's labourer smiled in recognition. "What are you two doing here?"

Following Flechley's instructions, Rheingold tapped the side of his nose, "Private business' mate; high finance; can't discuss."

With that, both the newcomers crunched their way across the gravelled frontage. The noise alerted Big Al to their presence and the front door opened before they'd had a chance to ring the bell.

Once Big Al had taken them to the main lounge, Flechley nodded to Chloé and she left the room without saying a word. Big Al relieved Rheingold of the money he'd brought with him and started to count it.

Once done, Flechley gave Rheingold a labelled key.

Surprised, Rheingold said, "What's this for."

"I've changed our procedure," Flechley announced. "Until further notice your orders will be left in that locker at Blue Self-Storage. You will be able to pick them up tomorrow."

Tupal became slightly nervous, "Why all these changes?"

"Basic security," Flechley replied. "It's like changing passwords on a computer."

~*~

Billy Hufton glanced at the blocks being crane off-loaded and nodded at John Urnwood, his labourer, "Get 'em around the back as soon as you can. Although this place is in the middle of nowhere, we don't want some nosy farmer sniffing around asking awkward questions or contacting the council to see if we've got all the right paperwork."

"Cash job, eh Billy?"

"Might be," Hufton said defensively. "Remember this kid, cash is king. Getting cash means you don't pay tax or VAT. It also means I can *pay you cash*, so don't forget that. Cash makes the world go round."

"I know that," Urnwood replied. "You've told me enough times."

"Well don't forget it," Hufton lectured. "I do a few legit jobs so the snoopers have something to look at if they want to check my books. The rest I do for cash, VAT free. But when you're doing a cash job you don't shout about it because if you do, some bastard will report us and we'll have all the snoopers circling like vultures."

"No intentions of shouting my mouth off, Billy," Urnwood said as he slit one of the packs with his shovel and began loading some of the blocks into a battered wheelbarrow. Once he'd loaded, he began pushing the barrow across the gravel drive and down a sideways. As the wheel dug in, Urnwood cursed.

Realising he was struggling, Hufton went to his aid. They dumped the blocks behind the house and then made their way back, fighting the gravel all the way.

Chapter 4

Gary Gerry Fulstrum hatches a plan

Gerry Fulstrum heard a call from below, "Ian's here!"

Opening his bedroom door, Gerry shouted down, "Come on up."

Clumping his way upstairs, Ian Godwin entered Gerry's room.

Within seconds, Laura, Gerry's older sister looked in.

"If I hear any bonking sounds or other strange noises, I'll know you're watching porn and I'll tell Dad."

Annoyed by the intrusion into his private space, Gerry shouted, "Go away, will you? We're not watching porn."

As Laura's head disappeared, Ian did his best to find a suitable perch in the cramped room and then glanced at Gerry's computer screen.

"What are you doing?"

"Looking at the contents of someone else's hard drive," Gerry said.

Ian frowned, "How?"

"Several weeks of hard work," Gerry replied. "That's how."

"Let me rephrase that," Ian said. "How did you manage it?"

Gerry tapped the side of his nose. "If I told you that you'd be as wise as I am."

Ian's frown increased. "Okay let me rephrase the question yet again; why and who?"

"If I tell you," Gerry replied, "I'd have to kill you."

"I thought we were mates?"

Gerry relented, "If I tell you, it goes no further. Agreed?"

Ian nodded, "Agreed."

"I'm hacking Brian Flechley's computer," Gerry replied.

Ian let out a horrified gasp, "You're joking?"

"No," Gerry replied. "I've had enough."

"You do know Flechley's father is a nasty piece of work?" Ian said. "If Brian finds out and goes squealing to him, he'll probably send his heavies around."

"I know, but I'm determined to find a way of getting Brian Flechley off my case," Gerry said. "He's still forcing me to deliver some of his parcels."

Ian sighed. "It's a pity you didn't have Mick with you. They wouldn't have jumped you then."

Mick Ormrod was the third member of their informal gang and had already achieved the height of six foot six, liked weightlifting and had the shoulders of an ox.

Glancing at the screen again, Ian said, "So what are you going to do? Wipe his drive?"

Gerry shook his head, "I thought about it but that would be stupid. He's a thicko but I've no doubt his dad makes sure he has someone to look after his computer. If he has, he's probably got everything backed up to the cloud."

"So what are you going to do?"

"Wait and plan," Gerry said. "And then get even."

"How?"

"I'm not sure yet," Gerry admitted. "But I will, eventually."

Ian let out a nervous giggle. "As long as you're not going to hit him with a brick."

For the first time since Ian had entered his room, Gerry smiled and started laughing too, "I'd forgotten I'd told you about that."

"You told me a bit about it," Ian said. "So what's the full story?"

"It was years ago," Gerry replied. "We didn't live round here then. We lived in a real rough area."

"Go on. What happened?"

"I'm not proud of it," Gerry replied. "If I tell you, this goes no further, okay?"

"Sure," Ian said. "I won't say anything to anyone else."

"Like I said," Gerry said, "It was years back. I didn't even know the boy's name. He was bigger than me. All I know is he kept on beating me up for no reason. I was his punch bag. It used to happen virtually every week. The thing I really remember was he attacked me in broad daylight. He'd realised any watching adults were unlikely to get involved; it wasn't their problem, being beaten up was mine."

"That's bad."

"Yeah," Gerry replied. "Anyway, to cut a long story short, I got tired of being beaten up and came up with a plan."

"What plan?"

"I'm about to tell you," Gerry grumbled. "On the day in question, the bully appeared as usual. So I took to my heels but he was bigger and taller than me so he started to catch up. But on that day I didn't care because I had a plan."

"What plan?"

"Are you going to keep on interrupting?"

"Carry on."

"As I came level with a narrow alley with high walls, I shot down it. It was a dead end and I heard him laughing. But about twenty feet in, I stooped down and picked up a half brick. I knew the bricks were there, I'd seen them before. He ran up to me with this triumphant look on his face, so I swung around fast and smashed the brick into his face. In all, I hit him four times with it."

"Jeese!"

"Pretty drastic," Gerry admitted. "As he was staggering, clutching his broken nose, I dropped the brick and ran off. When I got home, I didn't tell anyone about it. For hours I expected to hear police sirens. Although I'd only fought back, I expected the bastard to say I'd attacked him. If the police came around, I knew they wouldn't be interested in my side of the story."

"So what happened?"

Gerry shrugged, "The police never came around and I never saw him again. I hurt him instead of the other way around; for once I won."

Ian frowned, "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because you asked," Gerry said. "And because I learned the only way to beat a bully is to have a plan and then follow it through."

When Gerry went to back to studying the computer files on the screen, Ian said, "Aren't you going to open some of them?"

Gerry shook his head, "Most of them seem to be encrypted. If I attempt to open them it might alert him to my presence."

"So what are you going to do?"

“Work out how to access them without alerting Brian Flechley,” Gerry said.
“Softly softly catchee monkey.”

Chapter 5

The Fleecem travel north.

Marjory Fleecem sniffed but her husband, Mark ignored her; his wife did a lot of sniffing. Marjory's sniff had a number of meanings. Apart from signifying the onset of a cold, one of Marjory's sniffs could indicate disapproval, condescension or just plain unadulterated hostility.

Catching a whiff of chemical engineering in the early morning air, Marjory glanced out at the array of lights and sprawling pipe work of the oil distillation plant their Jaguar was passing and sniffed twice more. Fluffy, her Pekingese dog sniffed as well.

Mark Fleecem glanced back at the small animal, giving it a hard look. "Pity you didn't buy a proper dog like an Alsatian or a Welsh sheepdog. People respect large dogs; that thing's just a snappy little rat."

"Don't say that," Marjory sniffed. "You'll upset her."

"Don't be silly," Fleecem replied. "She can't understand what I'm saying."

Instead of discussing her dog any further, Marjory went on the offensive, "Why did you bring me to this *terrible* place? You know I can't abide coming up north. It's so, so, so ..."

Fleecem simulated an extreme northern accent, one that even a Northerner wouldn't have recognised, "All flat cap, pigeons, clogs, brass bands and whippets, eh?"

"Now you're just making fun of me," Marjory complained.

Fleecem pointed out the obvious, "If I recall correctly, I was going to come up here on my own but you decided that I had an ulterior motive, seeing another woman, and you insisted on coming with me. You also said you wanted to see the horse you bought me. Or should I say the horse you bought shares in, for me."

Marjory ignored his reference to her obsession of him having a mistress in every port and let out another sniff. "I bought you the shares in Cornrun Gold because I know you like horse racing. To be honest, I couldn't think of anything else to get you. What do you buy a man who has a huge property portfolio, a massive pension fund and millions stashed away in stocks and shares? *You* like horse racing but *I don't*. I have *no interest* in seeing Cornrun Gold. *He's your horse*."

"I see."

"It's *you* that likes racing," she repeated. "I've *no interest whatsoever* in seeing huge sweating beasts charging around a racetrack. When I bought you the shares, I never imagined you would think a part ownership in Cornrun Gold was the best thing since sliced bread. Neither did I think you'd want to follow the mangy nag's progress online or start going to race meetings just to see him run. You've even been on Facebook and told everyone about the bloody beast."

When Marjory sniffed again, Fleecem said, "You said you wanted to see him. You also knew part of the share deal was a shareholder could inspect *the beast* and speak to the jockey and trainer from time to time. Well you did, didn't you?"

"I did what?"

"You knew about the share deal and you said you wanted to see Cornrun Gold."

Marjory sniffed again. "I may have done but I've changed my mind. It's a woman's prerogative to change her mind and I don't want to see the brute."

When Fleecem matched one of her sniffs, Marjory remembered one of Ian Fleming's quotations.

“Horses are dangerous at both ends and uncomfortable in the middle.” She added, “They’re also smelly things; they poo everywhere. So I’ll pass on the dubious pleasure of seeing Cornrun Gold in the flesh, if you don’t mind.”

Fleecem sighed, “*You said you wanted to come.*”

Knowing he was right, Marjory sniffed again and changed tack, “Once you’ve spoken to Sam Flinnett are you going to see the Urnwood tribe?”

Fleecem sighed again. “I do wish you wouldn’t refer to my relations as the Urnwood tribe; what a way to describe close relatives! You know I always see my sister when I visit our Tiphm office.”

Marjory sniffed. “As far as I am concerned, Sue and her family are just scroungers. They’ve always got their hands out; they only welcome you with open arms because you are a wealthy self-made man and usually come bearing gifts.”

Mark Fleecem shook his head, “Nonsense!”

“No it’s not,” Marjory insisted. “They just see you as a soft touch.”

Knowing from experience the conversation would swiftly lapse into even worse backbiting, Fleecem decided to defuse the situation by making suggestions of how his wife could occupy her time while he went to see Cornrun Gold, Flinnett and his sister.

Eventually Marjory forgot her fears that her husband was about to run off with another woman and opted for a visit to a large shopping and entertainment centre, one that contained a spa and shops with prices most people couldn’t afford. For the first time since setting off, Marjory smiled; a long large dose of pampering and retail therapy usually cured her sniffles.

After driving Marjory to the shopping centre, Fleecem set his satnav to go and see his horse. Fluffy gave out a yap reminding him that Marjory had left the creature in his care because she couldn’t take it with her. He thought about all the complications in the arrangement and sighed.

Arriving at the racing stables, he left the windows open a couple of inches. He wouldn’t stay alive for long if Marjory discovered he’d let her precious Peke overheat.

After spending the best part of an hour with a gaggle of other syndicate members, Fleecem left the yard with a handful of leaflets and headed for Tiphm. On the way, he used his car phone and called his sister.

“I’ll be in town shortly,” Fleecem said, “You said you needed to talk to me about John.”

“Yes I do,” Sue replied. “But don’t you normally go and see Sam Flinnett first?”

“Time to ring in the changes,” Fleecem replied. “I’ll come and see you first and let Sam sweat.”

~*~

“Get this place tidied up,” Sam Flinnett snapped. “Mr Fleecem will be here shortly, and I want him to get a good impression.”

Once his staff had set about clearing away all unnecessary clutter, Flinnett returned to his office and checked his spare mobile, the one he’d been using for staff recruitment. As a matter of policy, he never used a landline number for advertisements because if he was out there was a strong chance one of the office jokers would answer in his stead and play some sort of prank on the unsuspecting prospect. Happenings like that deterred good candidates from applying.

Discovering there were no messages, he went back to thinking about Mark Fleecem’s visit. He then thought about Lisa. He’d better tell her he wouldn’t be home

until late. Not wanting her number to appear on company phone records, he called out on the advertising mobile.

"Hi, 'fraid I'm likely to be late back tonight. Mark Fleecem has literally just called and told me he'll be in the area and he's going to drop in on us. I'll probably have to take him and Marjory, his battleaxe of a wife, out for dinner."

Lisa said, "Can't be helped. Don't be too late back though and don't drink too much. I don't want you ending up like Paul Tupal. If you lose your licence you'll be in trouble."

Flinnett regretted discussing Paul Tupal's excessive drug/drinking habits with Lisa. Obviously, she now assumed that everyone working at Slobend, Fleecem & Skinnem was either stoned out of their skull on exotic drugs or a rolling alcoholic.

"Don't worry, I'll stick to tonic water and no gin," Flinnett promised.

He'd barely finished the call before one of the landlines rang and Sandra, his PA said, "Your wife's on line one."

Knowing Sandra must have told her he was in; Flinnett accepted the call and went into the normal routine. "Hi Ellie, how's it going?"

She said, "Fine, and how's it going with you?"

"A bit hectic," Flinnett admitted. "Your brother has just called me to say he's going to pay us a visit."

Ellie said, "Does he usually do that, make surprise visits?"

Not wishing to create a family issue, one that could be repeated back with twist on it, Flinnett steered clear of the rocks, "It's not exactly a surprise visit. Mark told me he's in the area. Apparently, he's come up to see this horse he's got shares in, Cornrun Gold. It's being stabled and trained up here."

Changing tack, he said, "How's Michael?"

"He's fine," Ellie replied. "He's out on his bike at the moment."

"Isn't he at school?"

"It's school hols," Ellie replied. She couldn't resist a snipe, "If you came home more often, you'd know."

"Let's not start that again. You know I have to be here," Flinnett said. He changed the conversation back to their son. "I'm glad he likes the bike."

"He loves it," Ellie admitted.

Flinnett smiled. They'd bought Michael the bike for his birthday and it had become his pride and joy. Barely a day went by without him riding it.

"That's great," Flinnett said. Then a note of caution entered his voice. "He's not going on the main road, is he?"

"No," Ellie assured him. "He knows the rules and he only cycles around the park and the woods."

Flinnett let out a sigh of relief, "Make sure he does. You know what boys are like, easily led. We don't want him getting in with a bad crowd."

"Will you be coming home this weekend?" Ellie asked.

Flinnett inwardly sighed; his wife asked the same question with annoying regularity. He gave her the same stock answer, "Of course I'm *hoping* to get back, but you know how it is. Since your brother sent me back here, I've been fairly pulled out."

Ellie mounted her favourite hobby horse, "I wish we'd never moved from Tiphram in the first place."

"Neither do I," Flinnett admitted, "If Ellerby hadn't er,er,er."

"Committed suicide," Ellie completed.

"I was going to say, died unexpectedly," Flinnett replied. "I'd still be at the Milton Keynes office and at home with you."

“We could come and see you,” Ellie suggested.

“We’ve been through this before,” Flinnett said. “I’ve told you, the place I’m staying in wouldn’t accommodate everyone,” he lied.

“I need to know,” Ellie said. “Will you be home this weekend?”

Cornered, Flinnett capitulated, “Okay. I promise I’ll be home this weekend.”

As he hung up, he wondered how he was going to break the news to Lisa. He’d promised her he’d stay over.

Chapter 6

The Urnwood tribe

"Come on, give me a hand!"

John Urnwood gave his mother a hostile glance, "What's the panic?"

"Your Uncle Mark will be here shortly, and I don't want him walking into a pig sty," his mother snapped. "And in case you've forgotten I'm going to try and get you a job."

"I've got a job."

"Working for Billy Hufton is not a proper job," his mother replied. She gave him a worried look, "Are you sure that's all you're doing?"

"What's that meant to mean?"

"You seem to have a lot of money," his mother said. "More than Billy Hufton would pay."

Sensing where the conversation was going, Urnwood said, "I'm not selling drugs if that's what you're driving at."

"So the only person paying you is Billy Hufton."

"I've told you. Yeah!"

His mother sighed. "So you're just labouring for a pittance and nothing into a pension."

"I don't need a pension."

"You will do one day!"

"I get on great with Billy, what's the problem?" Urnwood countered. "And he pays me in cash so I don't have to pay tax. And despite what some nasty people say about him, I know he does great work."

"I'm sure he's very good but I want you to have a *real* job," she said. "What if Billy went off sick; you wouldn't have a job then. When your uncle gets here, I'm going to ask him to give you a job."

"Working for Uncle Mark! Not that again!"

"You know he has an office in Tiphram," she replied. (could take this out)

"Okay, if I do work for Uncle Mark, what will I be doing?"

As his mother only vaguely understood her brother's chosen profession, other than it made a lot of money, she had no idea what her son would do. Dodging the issue, she said, "I'm sure you'll get on the job training and be sent to college part time as well."

Urnwood cringed inwardly. His school days had been purgatory; dead-end school and dead-end teachers.

When her son gave her another hostile look, his mother played her trump card,

"Paul Tupal and Flin Rheingold work there."

"I saw them the other day," John replied. "They were driving a real flash car."

"Well there you go," his mother said, seizing the opportunity. "If you work for Uncle Mark maybe you'll get a flash car. But you'd have to knuckle down and work hard."

"D'you really think Uncle Mark would give me a car?"

"In time," his mother said.

"I like Paul Tupal and Flin Rheingold. It would be good working with them." He grinned.

"What's so funny?"

“When they were at the rugby club, they loved playing practical jokes on people,” Urnwood said. “It was funny.”

“You better not play too many jokes if you go to work for your uncle,” his mother cautioned.

“D’you think Uncle Mark *really* would give me a car?”

“I just told you, probably,” his mother said. “In time.”

While Urnwood was thinking about the girls he could pull if he drove a car like the one Tupal and Rheingold had been in, his mother said, “I need to know. If I get you a job, will you take it? I don’t want to pester Uncle Mark if you are going to make a fool of me.”

Wanting to test the water, Urnwood said, “I need to make a phone call.”

“Why?” she queried. “Who are you going to talk to?”

“Paul Tupal of course,” he said, bounding up the stairs.

A few seconds later his mother heard a muffled conversation from above. Eventually, her son re-appeared and floored her by saying, “Okay. If Uncle Mark offers me a job, I’ll take it, as long as I’m not working for minimum wage.”

“I’m sure he’ll treat you fairly,” his mother replied. “Now go back upstairs, take a shower and put some nice clothes on. And cover up those tattoos. You know your uncle doesn’t like tattoos.”

Urnwood reluctantly went back upstairs. Although his mother insisted he showered after he came back from labouring for Billy Hufton, it wasn’t something he enjoyed. For second or two he was tempted to fake the shower by turning it on and flicking water around with his hand: everyone knew that water weakened the skin. He then thought about working with Tupal and Rheingold. If he was going to get the job, he had to impress his uncle.

Stripping off his clothes, he climbed into the shower. He caught a glimpse of his body in the bathroom mirror. Large sections of his skin were decorated with elaborate tattoos, but he didn’t regret any of them. He then changed his mind. There *was one* he regretted. It was a Chinese tattoo. He’d thought the symbol had meant something else. It was only later he found out it meant *knob head* or *bell end*.

Completing his shower, Urnwood dressed in the most restrained clothing he could find and made sure his tattoos were well hidden.

~*~

When Mark Fleecem pulled up outside, John Urnwood’s mother said, “Now I want you on your best behaviour. Understood?”

For once, Urnwood did as instructed and before the visit was over, he was offered a job at his uncle’s office.

Once he’d accepted, Mark Fleecem said, “I hope you won’t play on the fact you have family connections.”

“Of course not,” Urnwood replied. “I wouldn’t think of it.”

Satisfied his nephew would behave himself, Fleecem changed tack and told his sister about his visit to see Cornrun Gold. He handed over some of the flyers he’d picked up during his visit.

Knowing that Marjory wouldn’t want to set foot on a racetrack, he offered to take his sister and nephew to a local meeting. When they looked excited, Fleecem consulted his diary and fixed a date.

Commented [DG1]: There has been quite a few comments and allusions to Billy Hufton’s bad workmanship, which made me think that something was going to come of this but it doesn’t so I think you need to tone this down.

I have put a few things in above

~*~

Flinnett was not amused. Fleecem might be his brother-in-law but Flinnett had made it a condition that he did all the hiring and firing at the Tiphram office and having Mark Fleecem's nephew foisted on him went against the grain. Added to which, Flinnett didn't want a possible spy in the camp, a spoilt brat telling tales to his uncle every time he didn't get his own way.

Sensing opposition, Fleecem said, "If you could take the lad on, I'd appreciate it. My sister wants him to have a career and not be in a dead end job. He would only be here on a trial period, of course. If you don't think him suitable you can let him go."

Still sensing reluctance, Fleecem added, "By the way, I'm very pleased with the way this office is performing. If it carries on the way it is, I shall make sure you receive a substantial bonus."

The incentive worked and Flinnett said, "Okay. I'll give the lad a try."

Mark Fleecem smiled; nepotism ruled, KO.

Chapter 7

Wednesday: A month later.

Jim Godwin saw someone slightly younger than him leaving the building. Although he had no proof, he assumed it was another applicant on his way out. Moving closer, he mounted the stone steps and glanced at a sign fixed to the artificial stone jamb. It said, Slobend, Fleecem & Skinnem. There used to be writing underneath, but a vandal had spray painted it away.

Jim eyed the sign thoughtfully. It was definitely the right address and he had no real interest in what the company did. All he wanted was a part time job to stop him dying of boredom. Slobend, Fleecem & Skinnem were advertising for part-time refreshment staff so why shouldn't he go for an interview?

Glancing back towards his second floor flat, Jim decided it wouldn't be a bad job. Slobend, Fleecem & Skinnem's office was only a hundred yards from where he lived so he wouldn't even have to get a bus.

Pushing his way into a small lobby, he stared through the sliding glass screen at the two young women busily working at word processors; both were wearing flashing Bluetooth headsets. He was later to learn their names were Moira Buckle and Sandra Welford.

Sandra was tall, well rounded with blonde hair and voluptuous. Most importantly, she wore an air of self-confidence.

Moira was dark haired, pretty and well-presented but she was shorter than Sandra, had the body of a stick insect and her features were slightly androgynous. One glance at Moira was enough for Jim to realise she played second fiddle to Sandra.

Once he'd pushed the bell, the glazed screen opened and Sandra said, "Can I help you?"

"I've come about the job; part-time refreshment staff," Jim explained. "I spoke to Mr Flinnett and he said to come down to see him."

"Ah! Yes. He's expecting you," Sandra said and opened a door into a reception area.

She knocked on a nearby door and after a brief conversation told Jim to go in. Moving towards the door, Jim saw that Flinnett's office contained a large mirror-stripe, glass internal window; Flinnett could see out but it was difficult to see him lurking around inside. He had a perfect surveillance point to check the comings and goings through the front door. The staff toilets were also within sight of the window; monitoring urinary habits would be easy.

Inside, Jim found Flinnett ensconced behind a large desk. It was the leather topped, heavy oak variety, the sort bank managers once sat behind before banking institutions had succumbed to the power of the internet.

Waving Jim to a small plastic collapsible chair, one designed to make the occupant feel as temporary as the seat they were occupying, Flinnett said, "Take a pew, Jim."

Doing as instructed, Jim swiftly weighed up his prospective boss. Flinnett had massive shoulders and a broken nose, all the hallmarks of a rugby player; he was obviously someone who could take a knock and hand one out when necessary.

Flinnett said, "If you don't mind me asking, how old are you, Jim?"

Jim did mind and was tempted to remind his prospective employer that such questions were now illegal. Instead, he answered evasively, "I've just retired Mr Flinnett but I'm not really ready to fully retire. Your job seemed ideal."

“What did you do before you retired, Jim?”

Jim ran through the number of jobs he’d had over his lifetime. His last one had been as a watchman. He omitted to add that nearly a year had elapsed since then and he’d been fired for falling asleep on the job.

Flinnett contemplated Jim’s answer before saying, “You do realise this job is only part time; a few hours a day.”

“Yes. It was in the advertisement. That suits me fine.”

Flinnett glanced at a notebook on his desk, “You don’t live far from here.”

Sensing proximity might be a key to securing the job, Jim said, “I can see your offices from my flat.”

When Flinnett’s expression indicated he’d scored a point, Jim added, “I’ve phoned the police a few times because young kids play around outside your building at night quite often.”

“Have you!” Flinnett replied.

“Oh, yes,” Jim replied. “They’re a rowdy mob.”

Flinnett said, “Yes, there is an unruly element around here. They spray graffiti and paintball our CCTV system. The company name plates also bear testimony to that. Having someone close at hand, someone keeping an eye on the building out of hours would be a real asset.”

Jim said, “If you gave me the job, I would make sure any rowdy behaviour was reported to the police straight away.”

“Well thank you Jim,” Flinnett replied. “That’s something for me to think about.”

Jim smiled, “It’s my civic duty, Mr Flinnett.”

Flinnett steepled his fingers, thoughtfully. “We have a drinks’ dispensing machine but as far as I am concerned it’s been an unmitigated disaster; it has been abused. My staff members are taking more tea and coffee breaks than they are entitled to. Some of them hang around at the tea point, gossiping instead of getting on with their work. As far as I am concerned, the dispensing machine has been an expensive experiment. Maybe someone like you, Jim, is the answer. The staff should only have a break at the agreed times.”

Flinnett shot a beady eye in Jim’s direction, “Now why do you want this job?”

Playing the old soldier, Jim said, “I’ve only got me pension to live on, Mr Flinnett. All I want is a part time job to earn some additional pin money.”

“Ideally I only need you four or so hours a day,” Flinnett said. “You’d make the morning brew and then do the same in the afternoon. You’d also run errands to make sure that my staff don’t find an excuse to go out without good reason. As you live close by, you could go home in between.”

Sensing the job was almost his, Jim asked to see where he’d be working. Flinnett took him into a medium-sized back room that served as a small kitchen, what Flinnett called the tea point.

Waving towards the sink unit, fridge and dishwasher, Flinnett he said, “We have all the basic facilities.”

Glancing around, Jim noticed a dirty area on one wall where something had been moved. Nearby, a large floor mounted drinks’ dispensing machine had been pulled to one side.

Pointing at it, Flinnett said, “That’s going back later on today.”

The door behind him opened and a young man came in. His face registered surprise but it wasn’t because he’d walked in on Jim and Flinnett unannounced; it was because the dispenser wasn’t in its normal position.

When Flinnett gave him a frosty look, instead of retreating, the young man moved towards the machine, placed a large mug under a nozzle, tapped in a code, waited until the mug had filled and then went out again, barely acknowledging Flinnett's presence.

Flinnett, barely concealing his distaste said, "That, by the way was, John Urnwood, Mr Fleecem's nephew. I wish I'd never agreed to give the bad mannered scrote a job. He walks around here as if he owns the place and hardly does a scrap of work."

Flinnett's jaw snapped shut as if he wished he hadn't expressed his inner thoughts in front of a newcomer.

Changing tack, he pointed at the dispensing machine accusingly, "Worst thing we ever did, getting that machine. They're in and out of here like a fiddler's elbow. The bloody machine is working non-stop. It's costing the company a fortune in refills. That's why it's going back." He paused for breath before continuing. "So, we're going back to basics. That's where you come in."

Jim's confidence grew. "So how often will I take refreshments around?"

"I've told you. Twice a day," Flinnett replied. "They will be able to come in here for lunch break but other than that, you'll be in charge and I'll let them know that."

He pointed to some newly installed shelves and a few battered looking mugs.

"I think we'll have to replace some of those."

Once Jim had looked around, they went back to Flinnett's office and began final negotiations. Half an hour later Jim's hourly rate had been agreed and Flinnett said, "I know it's nearly the end of the week but I don't suppose you'd like to start tomorrow would you?"

Jim was slightly surprised, "It's Thursday tomorrow."

"And the dispenser will be gone later today," Flinnett replied. "Rather bad planning on my part but it can't be changed. The whole idea of having someone like you around is that we don't want members of staff wandering in and out of the tea point whenever they feel like it, or worse, sending someone to the shops for a mid-morning sausage sandwich; time's money."

Sensing the pent-up impatience in Flinnett's tone, Jim guessed if he didn't co-operate, he might lose the job. "Don't worry, Mr Flinnett, you can rely on me. I'll start tomorrow."

"Good," Flinnett said. "I'll ask Sandra to let you have a float out of petty cash."

"A float?"

"Some money so you can buy tea, coffee and milk, and some replacement cups," Flinnett replied.

"Right ho," Jim said as he stood up, "Leave it to me. I'll have this place running like clockwork in no time."

Flinnett extended one of his huge paws and crushed Jim's hand, "Glad you're going to join us, Jim."

~*~

Shortly after Jim left, Sandra stuck her head around the door and handed Replan an A4 sheet of paper and told him to hang it on the notice board. Several of his team members called out, "What's that?"

Swiftly reading it, Replan said, "A new edict from der Fuhrrer. The drinks dispenser is being taken back and being replaced by a new can lad. As from tomorrow we only get two drinks per day."

John Urnwood was incensed. "He can't do that."

"Well he has," Replan said, "Are you going to ask your uncle to overrule him?"

Knowing that his uncle was unlikely to overrule Flinnett, Urnwood didn't answer so Replan said, "I didn't think so. So as from tomorrow, the tea point is out of bounds except at lunch time. We now have a go-fer who'll bring drinks around twice a day."

"Go-fer? What's a go-fer?"

"Go for this. Go for that."

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why do we need a go-fer?"

"I've just explained," Replan snapped, "Because Flinnett doesn't like people going in and out of the tea point all day. He's also said he doesn't like people disappearing down to the sandwich shop mid-morning."

Urnwood pulled a face. The comment was definitely directed at him. He was often late and skipped breakfast so going down to the local shop for a toasted sandwich with sausage and brown sauce had become a regular routine. Of course, Urnwood had been working on the assumption that being *the real boss's* nephew would make him immune to censure.

"So does this new go-fer have a name?"

"Jim Godwin," Replan replied. "Flinnett's said we can call him by his first name."

Urnwood said, "Was that the old guy I saw in the tea point?"

Replan shrugged, "I wasn't there, was I? But if you saw someone in the tea point, it probably was Jim."

"So, when does Jim start?"

"Tomorrow."

Urnwood contemplated the announcement and glanced across at Tupal, "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"Giving Jim a suitable initiation?" Tupal replied.

Urnwood nodded, "Like we did to the office cleaner."

When Tupal burst out laughing, Replan said, "What about the office cleaner?"

Before Tupal could answer, Urnwood said, "How come you don't know?"

"He was off sick," Tupal cut in.

"So, what happened?" Replan said.

Urnwood dived in again, "Michelle stupidly told someone she was scared of mice."

He glanced at Tupal, his mentor, and grinned, "Paul knows someone in a lab. They sometimes get rid of white rats; apparently, they don't want them unless they are in perfect condition. Paul got one. We checked Flinnett's diary and made sure he'd be out. When Michelle came in, we let the rat loose."

Tupal took over, "You've never seen anything like it. She screamed the house down and jumped on the desks. We videoed it and put it on social media."

He added, "She didn't have much of a sense of humour though. She left."

"Did she complain to Flinnett?"

Tupal grinned, "I believe so."

"What happened?"

"Nothing," Tupal replied.

When Replan looked surprised, Tupal added, "Flinnett's a paper tiger."

Colin Philain cut in, "Good job he is. I'm surprised you didn't get the sack after you put Moira's pictures on the company intranet."

Urnwood said, "Sandra saw them before Flinnett did, and removed them."

"It wouldn't have made any difference if he had," Tupal retorted. "He wouldn't have said anything. Like I said, he's a paper tiger."

Jimmy Ingermann said, "What's this about Moira?"

Without any warning, Tupal suddenly turned nasty, "One of these days that little bitch is going to get what's coming to her."

Realising he'd hit a raw nerve, Ingermann backed off, "Sorry. I didn't..."

Instead of listening, Tupal stalked out of the room, taking the door that led to a middle corridor.

Once the door had slammed shut, Ingermann looked around the room, "What was all that about?"

"I shouldn't worry," Philain cut in. "He's been drinking; he went out at lunch time with Flin Rheingold and they had a few; Paul Tupal can be very unpredictable after he's been drinking."

"Where does Moira fit into this?" Ingermann said.

"Tupal had a bet with Carl Bamforth," Philain replied.

"Who's Carl Bamforth?" Urnwood queried.

"He used to work here but he left," Ingermann said. "But he's still meets up with Paul Tupal and Flin Rheingold from time to time. They're still buddies. Bamforth bet Tupal that he couldn't go all the way with Moira. Tupal reckoned he could"

"What happened?"

Philain shrugged, "I don't know the exact details. Paul Tupal's version of events is fuzzy and Moira won't say anything. All I know is Tupal lost the bet. Bamforth told me. I gather it was for serious money too."

"How much is serious money?"

"A lot more than I'd bet," Philain replied icily. "What with his betting, drinking, wacky baccy and pill popping, Paul Tupal must spend a small fortune each month."

"You said he posted some of Moira's photographs on the company intranet?"

Ingermann said. "What's that about?"

Philain said, "Being a trusting soul, during the brief time they were dating, Moira gave Tupal the login details to her home computer. Incensed by the breakup, Tupal took his revenge by activating the webcam on her computer and got some juicy shots of her, half-naked. He then posted them on the office intranet. Luckily for Moira and Tupal, Sandra intervened and had them removed in case Flinnett found out."

"Tupal said he didn't care about Flinnett," Replan pointed out.

"So he says," Ingermann cut in. He glanced at John Urnwood, "Take my advice lad, don't make Paul Tupal your role model. He's got a nasty temper, a lot of bad habits and he's a bad loser."

Five minutes later, Tupal returned and looked around the room. His eyes locked onto Ingermann, "All had a good gossip at my expense, eh?"

Ingermann's backbone turned to jelly, "Course not, Paul; as if!"

With one down, Tupal locked eyes with Replan but his section leader swiftly glanced away. Philain gave him the same reaction.

Satisfied he'd intimidated them into submission, he glanced at Urnwood, "So are we going to give Jim a suitable baptism of fire when he arrives?"

Despite what he'd just heard, Urnwood nodded, "Yeah. Good idea."

"That's what I like to hear," Tupal replied and glanced at the flyer of Cornrun Gold that Urnwood had blue-tacked to the side of a filing cabinet alongside his desk.

"Is your uncle taking you to that?"

"Yeah, we're going to Chester to see Cornrun Gold run."

"Are you taking Ashley?"

Ashley was a girl Urnwood had met a few weeks earlier, but their relationship was far from certain, "I'm not sure."

Tupal grinned, “You should get your uncle to invite her. It’ll impress her; a boyfriend with a wealthy uncle who can afford to own a racehorse.”

He began arm pumping suggestively, “Have you been there?”

Although he hadn’t, Urnwood said, “Of course.”

Tupal patted him on the back, “Good boy. Always remember a woman’s place is on her back. Get your uncle to invite her to the races and you’ll be at it every night, believe me.”

Urnwood licked his lips and grinned, “You reckon?”

“Positive.”

~*~

Moirá’s phone rang just after midnight. She cursed. Following Paula’s advice, she had changed her number but the calls had started up again. Instead of answering she let it ring. Eventually it stopped but within ten seconds it started up again.

Thinking it might be a genuine caller; she answered and was greeted by heavy breathing. Then someone started banging on one of the windows.

Chapter 8

Thursday : Jim's first day.

"I'll stop here," Replan said.

Sandra gave him a sharp look., "Why here?"

"We've been through this before." Replan reminded her. "I can't drop you near the office. Someone might see us together and start talking."

Glancing around the back street where Replan had stopped, she said, "So I've got to walk the best part of two hundred yards because someone might start talking. Are you ashamed of being with me?"

"Of course not," Replan protested. "We just need to be careful."

Sandra was not impressed, "Careful of what?"

Replan sighed, "You know what."

Sandra gave him an icy look, "In case your precious family finds out about me?"

Cornered, Replan said, "I've told you my family is very religious. And I'm married. They would think very badly of me if they found out I was living with you. They might even decide that I have brought shame on them and do things to harm us."

Sandra's eyebrows shot up in alarm, "You're joking."

"No."

Sandra alarm increased, "All I can say is, your family must be positively medieval."

"They are. And so are my wife and her family. If she finds out about us, she could say I've brought shame on *her* family. Then I'd have everyone against me. In any case, I'm sure you don't want people in the office gossiping about us."

Sandra said, "Why should they?"

"They will," Replan insisted. "If the three musketeers find out, our lives won't be worth living? They will be making snide remarks every five minutes."

Sandra frowned again, "The three musketeers?"

"Tupal, Rheingold and Urnwood," Replan replied. "That's what they've started calling themselves. You also know what they're like. Everything's a joke to them."

"If we face them down," Sandra reasoned. "They will soon get bored with their games and leave us alone. I don't like sneaking around."

Replan said, "Neither do I, but I don't trust Tupal and Rheingold."

"Why not?"

Replan sighed. "I've heard whispers," he said.

"What whispers?"

"Rumour has it, they know some very shady characters. I've also heard they are into drugs."

"You're joking?"

"I'm not. They're never short of money, are they?"

"No," Sandra agreed, "But what's that got to do with us?"

"Tupal is a drunken dope head and liable to do anything," Replan replied. "He nearly went off the rails yesterday when someone started discussing Moira. And Rheingold's not much better. I've never worked out why Flinnett hasn't sacked the pair of them."

The frown returned to Sandra's brow, "I've often wondered that as well."

Replan added, "I know that Tupal doesn't like me. When I transferred from Milton-Keynes, I was promoted over his head. I can tell from the things he says that he's still sore about it; Tupal's the type who holds grudges. He's a loose cannon so I don't want to give him any ammunition to use against us. I wouldn't put it past Tupal or Rheingold to send our details to my friends, family and wife just to stir up trouble. You know what they're doing to Moira."

Sandra looked guilty. Everyone knew what was happening to Moira, but they were ignoring it. It wasn't their problem.

"Yeah," Sandra admitted. "They've have been giving her a hard time, haven't they? She told me she gets late night phone calls at home."

"No doubt Paul Tupal's behind it," Replan said. "He hates her. I think he's hoping if he gives her a hard enough time, she'll quit. He seems determined to get rid of her."

"That explains a lot," Sandra replied. "I know she's not happy working at Slobend, Fleecem & Skinnem. I have to confess, I'm expecting her to resign very shortly."

"Well there you go," Replan said, "Case proven. I don't want the three musketeers causing us problems."

"Okay," Sandra agreed, "We'll play it your way *for the time being*."

Picking up on the tail sting, Replan said, "Look, my wife is pushing for a divorce, which is great. When I'm divorced, we can get married, but I don't want to give her an opportunity of going around saying I'm an adulterer. If she does, it will damage my family ties and it could jeopardise our relationship."

Letting out another sigh of resignation, Sandra said, "Okay, you win." She climbed out of the car and began walking towards the office.

Once she had turned a corner, Replan set the car in motion again, working his way back to the main road and driving towards the company car park. Part way there, someone waved to him. Slowing and dropping the passenger window, Replan saw Tupal, fog in mouth, **smoking smoke** fogging over his head like steam train.

"Morning!"

"Why are you on foot?"

"Had to take the car in to have a dent removed. Had a bit of a shunt and I'm getting it repaired privately so don't say anything to Flinnett."

Replan tutted, "No doubt you'd been drinking and driving again."

"These days you have to be drunk to drive," Tupal said, winking. He put a finger over his lips, "This is between us okay? If Flinnett finds out I could be in trouble."

"I thought you weren't scared of Flinnett," Replan replied.

"No point in giving him ammunition. So mum's the word, eh!"

"Sure. I won't say anything to Flinnett. But you owe me one."

"Okay," Tupal replied, walking away. "I owe you one. See you in the sweat shop." He stopped and nodded towards the office where Sandra was struggling with the heavy lock on the front door, with Moira watching.

"The girls are early this morning. They're opening up so it looks as if we've beaten Flinnett for a change; no bollockings for being late this morning, eh!"

Replan continued towards the car park. As he drew closer, he ran his eyes over it. Unlike many municipal car parks, Slobend, Fleecem & Skinnem's car park wasn't open to public view. It had high, weather beaten brick walls surrounding it, the part-demolished remains of a building that had once stood there. The tops of the stump walls were covered by barbed wire entanglements and made the area look like a leftover from the First World War.

Bringing his car to a halt, Replan climbed out and inserted his key into a battleship padlock on the gate. He'd barely finished before Philain, Putman and Ingermann

arrived. After they'd parked, Ingermann pointed at the paint ball splashes covering the domed housings of the security cameras that were supposed to protect the area.

"I don't know who keeps doing that."

"Druggies," Philain said. "At night the area around the offices becomes the haunt of drug dealers and they didn't like having their activities recorded. Paint balling the cameras is an easy way of disabling them."

Replan lifted his eyes and saw that it hadn't just been the cameras that had been paint-balled, a small window that was supposed to ventilate Flinnett's office had also been splattered.

Tupal went steaming past on foot, "See you in there."

Locking the gate, Replan remembered something that Flinnett had told him, "I gather our offices were once part of an ex-government office block."

Philain nodded, "That's right. In its day, the building was home to hundreds of civil servants and was once one of the big employers in Tiphham. They sold it off and a developer converted it into smaller office units. That's why our offices are such a strange configuration."



Once inside, Replan glanced at Sandra and Moira and called out a cheery, "Morning all."

The tone of his greeting implied office friendliness; platonic and nothing more. Certainly nothing to imply that Sandra had spent the previous night in bed with him. He glanced at the mirror stripe window directly opposite Sandra's workstation as if fearing that Flinnett had come in the back door to catch them out.

"Calm down," Sandra hissed. "He's not in yet."

Replan gave Sandra a slight smile, moving towards his team office, thankful he hadn't earned a black mark for being late.

Throwing his brief case onto his desk, he walked towards an open fire door and glanced into the crowded offices beyond.

Turning towards Tupal, Replan said, "What's going on? Why's the door open?"

"Got the heating engineers and plumbers in," Tupal replied. "They're carrying out tests. They've been working in here since the early hours apparently. They've got real problems next door. Their drains are blocked, the kitchen's not working and the main boiler's fucked."

Replan glanced through the door at the huge office beyond. There had to be at least twenty-five people in there, and late comers were still drifting in.

Urnwood arrived, "What's going on? Why's the door open?"

"They're carrying out tests."

"Who are they?"

Replan shrugged. "I've been told it's some sort of education centre. They get grants for retraining people."

"There's a lot of 'em in there, isn't there?"

Replan nodded, "The education centre lease out most of the ground floor of this building. Slobend, Fleecem & Skinnem sublet from them."

As Urnwood slid behind his desk, he glanced at the photograph of Ashley he'd stuck onto the filing cabinet directly above the photograph of Cornrun Gold. Seeing that someone had defaced it by giving Ashley a curly moustache, he squealed, "Who's done this?"

"Done what?" the whole room responded.

Faced with a unanimous denial, Urnwood ripped the defaced image of his beloved from the side of the cabinet. He downloaded Ashley's image from his phone and ordered the office printer to make another colour image.

Once he'd reinstated the new image, he began issuing threats, "If anyone touches Ashley's photograph again, there will be trouble. I'll tell my uncle."

"Okay," Tupal said. "Ashley's photograph is out of bounds from now on, so keep your shirt on."

Satisfied with Tupal's assurances, Urnwood went back to the mind-numbing task he'd been set, but his thoughts soon wandered.

Glancing at Tupal, he said, "My uncle has invited Ashley along."

Tupal grinned and began arm pumping, "You're in there, lad."

Sandra popped her head around the door with some news, "Mr Flinnett has just called in. He's unlikely to be in today."

Replan said, "Why not?"

"Some sort of accident," Sandra replied. "He said he'd call me back shortly."

Urnwood's eyes lit up. Flinnett wasn't coming in. "Doesn't the new go-fer start today. It's joke time."

A snigger went around the room. If Flinnett wasn't coming in and Fleecem's nephew was involved in any japes, there was little likelihood of any comebacks.

~*~

Jim arrived at 10.15 carrying two bags clanking with the crockery he'd been instructed to buy. He'd also purchased tea bags, coffee, milk and some biscuits.

After exchanging greetings with Sandra and Moira, he went to the tea-point and began making preparations. As the market vender who'd sold him the new cups hadn't looked very salubrious, Jim put the new cups into the dishwasher and turned it on. He smiled to himself happily; gone was the boredom of retirement; he had a part time job and a purpose in life.

While the dishwasher chugged and the antiquated electric water boiler girded its loins, Jim began working his way around the offices taking orders, writing them down on a small notepad he'd bought.

Entering a rear office, Jim's eyes locked onto Rheingold's face. He knew him. He'd seen him before. A look of recognition also appeared on Rheingold's face.

Then Jim recalled where he'd seen Rheingold. He was one of the men Adrian Drinkwater had accused of being a drug dealer.

Rheingold recovered quickly, "Well, well, well; if it isn't the duck feeder. You must be Jim. I hope you aren't going to accuse me of being a drug dealer again."

"I never did," Jim replied. "That was my friend and he's going a bit doolally. I apologise for what he said."

"Apology accepted."

Jim swiftly moved on, "I'm taking orders. Tea or coffee?"

"White coffee," Rheingold said, "No sugar."

~*~

Once Jim had left the room, Rheingold depressed an intercom button. "I've just met Jim Godwin," He told Tupal.

"And?"

“He’s the guy who fingered us in the park,” Rheingold said, “The guy who accused us of being drug dealers.”

“He can’t prove anything,” Tupal replied.

“He could start spreading rumours,” Rheingold said. “We need to get rid of him, pronto.”

“Like we got rid of the cleaner who found our stash?” Tupal replied.

“Yeah,” Rheingold said.

As he’d just had a snort in the toilets, Tupal giggled, “Pity I’m out of white rats.”

Rheingold was not amused, “Forget white rats, you idiot. This is serious. Give him the run around. Make his life difficult. We need to get rid of Jim Godwin before he can start spreading rumours.”

~*~

After Rheingold had hung up, Tupal glanced in Urnwood’s direction and gestured for him to come over. Tupal lowered his voice to a whisper.

“You know how we agreed to play a joke on Jim?”

When Urnwood nodded, Tupal said, “As Mr Flinnett won’t be in today, it would be a good time and I’ve had an idea.”

After a hasty conversation, Tupal said, “Sure you can handle it?”

Urnwood grinned, “Ace. Leave it with me.”

~*~

By the time Jim entered Replan’s team office, he had at least eight drinks on his list.

After taking the Replan office order, he turned to leave. Urnwood cocked a thumb towards the open fire doors, “Hey Jim! Don’t forget them in there.”

Jim moved towards the door and gasped. He cursed Flinnett under his breath. His new boss had told him there weren’t many members of staff, but it was obvious there were shed loads.

Undeterred, Jim stepped over the threshold. As he proceeded to move around talking to the students, Urnwood began rolling around uncontrollably.

Fearful of intervening in case he was banded a bad sport but embarrassed and unable to watch, Replan left the group office and instinctively looked towards the mirror stripe window.

Sandra put him out of his misery, “Don’t worry he’s just rung in again; he’s had to go home, family crisis.”

“What sort of crisis?”

“Michael, one of his children, had an accident and has been taken to hospital. Knocked off his bike by a hit and run driver.”

Replan looked surprised; he didn’t know Flinnett was married. The only whiff of scandal Replan had ever heard about Flinnett was a rumour that he had a fancy woman tucked away somewhere on the edge of town.

“How is the boy?”

“As far as I can make out, a broken arm and badly bruised.”

“Is he likely to be off for long?”

Sandra said, “All he said to me was that you’re in charge while he’s off. He’ll give you a call later.”

She gave him a lustful wink and glanced towards the interview room. It was the only room at Slobend, Fleecem & Skinnem that didn't have a vision panel. In addition, it was the only room, other than the toilets with a lock on the door. She crossed and re-crossed her legs suggestively.

Fearing she might push the boundaries too far, Replan killed the moment by blurting out, "Urewood has sent Jim into the education centre."

"He's done what?"

"The door was open and Urewood told him they all worked for us. Jim's busily walking around taking orders."

Sex momentarily forgotten Sandra said, "Oh! I've got to see this."

"Got to see what?"

Both shot a glance at Rheingold; dubbed the brothel creeper because he managed to sneak up on people without being noticed.

"Got to see what?"

"Urewood has sent Jim, the new go-fer, into the education centre. He thinks they're staff members and he's going around taking orders. There must be at least thirty-five people in there."

Rheingold couldn't help but smile. He'd told Tupal to give Jim the run around and it was obvious he'd come up trumps. It wouldn't be long before Jim decided he couldn't handle the numbers and leave.

Grinning like a Cheshire cat, Rheingold disappeared as silently as he'd appeared and swiftly returned with five other members of staff. Crowding into Replan's group office, they peered through the door at Jim.

Urewood became annoyed. He was in charge of the practical joke and they were about to spoil it. "Don't stand there. He'll see you."

Despite his youth, the other members of staff took note of his annoyance and moved out of the doorway. The noise level also dropped as the Rheingold group retreated and began hiding behind filing cabinets waiting for Jim's return. But then the noise levels began to rise again.

Urewood hissed, "Shut up! I want to see if he actually makes them drinks."

A snigger ran around the room.

Urewood snapped, "I said, keep the noise down."

The sniggering stopped and everyone waited expectantly for Jim to return.

~*~

Jim moved between desks jotting down what the education centre people wanted to drink. Several gave him strange looks and declined his advances, but others didn't. When he came back, he'd taken additional orders for ten cups of tea and eight cups of coffee.

Being slightly deaf and pre-occupied by the momentous order he had to fill, he was oblivious to the hum of noise and amused faces in Replan's group office. He certainly didn't notice the members of staff who'd squeezed into tight corners so they wouldn't be seen.

Back in the tea point, Jim found three battered trays and began counting cups and mugs. Bringing the dishwasher to a halt, he opened it and flapped away the belching steam. He began counting again. Even with the new cups, he wouldn't have enough to go around. There was nothing for it; he'd have to do shifts. He'd have to take the drinks round and then bring back as many cups he could retrieve. As the dishwasher cycle was painfully slow, he'd have to wash up by hand.

Re-entering Replan's group office, Jim scurried into the education centre and began passing out cups. After waiting for the first drinkers to down their brew, he returned with a partially full tray of used cups, went back to the tea point and began washing the cups in a bowl of water.

Urnmwood let out a chortle. "Let's see how many times he does it before he finds out."

~*~

When Urmwood saw Jim returning to the tea point with the last load of cups, he glanced at Ashley's photograph again and moved away from his desk. He was pleased to note that no one in the room challenged him.

Knowing Flinnett was away, Urmwood pushed his way into the tea point and gave Jim a shy smile.

Being flustered, Jim was a bit short, "Yes. Can I help you?"

"I'm John," Urmwood said. "But it's a tradition in this company that male members of staff just get called by our surnames; so I'm just Urmwood."

Falling in with the convention, Jim said, "So what can I do for you, Urmwood?"

Urmwood became tongue tied. He knew what he wanted to say but it wouldn't come out. He started giggling.

Jim said, "Look I'm busy. Either tell me what you want or get back to work. I'm sure you've got things to do."

"I have but ..."

"But what?"

Urmwood went red and his tongue stumbled, "Is it right that part of your job is ...er er ... to go out for things?"

Jim glanced at sink, "If I have the time. What d'you want; a sandwich from the shop down the road? They do a great toastie - sausage with brown sauce."

Although Jim had nailed his eating habits, the colour on Urmwood's face increased.

"Well?"

"It's okay," Urmwood replied. "I'll leave it."

Jim turned sharply, "What's the matter with you? You want something or wouldn't be here."

Urmwood went even redder, "Could you get me some condoms?"

"Condoms?"

"Yeah," Urmwood agreed. "So I don't get my girlfriend pregnant."

Jim was tempted to smile but just said, "Of course; if you give me some money."

Urmwood swiftly thrust some money into Jim's hand, "You won't tell anyone will you?"

Jim tapped the side of his nose, "I understand. I'll be popping out shortly. I'll get you some. I'll only be a few minutes."

Urmwood became thoughtful, "You couldn't get me more in the future if I need 'em."

"If you pay me," Jim said. "No problem."

Urmwood gave Jim a grateful look and scurried away. Jim began talking to himself, "I wonder why he came to me? There are condom machines in most public toilets, and they are on display in supermarkets these days."

Thinking on the topic he added, "It just goes to show. All those sex education lessons they keep talking about haven't changed things that much."

Once he'd finished washing and drying, Jim was true to his word and went out to buy a few items. He'd barely had time to get back before Urnwood appeared again. Jim handed him a small brown paper bag.

Glancing inside it and realising Jim had done as he'd asked, he said, "You don't mind getting them for me in future?"

Jim opened one of the cupboard drawers, "If you leave me a note and the money in there, I'll get 'em for you."

"Thanks," Urnwood said, and scurried out of the room.

~*~

By the time the afternoon arrived, and Jim had started his second drinks' round, he was feeling exhausted. His years were catching up on him. In fact, he was ready to resign from his newly found job.

As he passed Sandra's desk carrying a large tray, he glanced at her and said, "Is Mr Flinnett in?"

"Fraid not. Why d'you want to see him?"

Moira Buckle cut in, "His son was knocked off his bike. He's gone back home. He's gone to the hospital."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Jim said.

"Was it important? Sandra asked, "Seeing Mr Flinnett?"

Sensing it was the wrong time to complain, Jim shook his head and carried the tray towards the Replan group office. Sandra sniggered but Jim didn't notice.

By the time he'd finished his second shift, Jim walked home slowly. Climbing the stairs to his first floor flat, he decided the new job was too much for him.

~*~

The moment Jim walked out of the office Sandra put a call through to Rheingold, "He's gone."

"How did he look?"

"How d'you think he looked?" Sandra snapped, "Shattered. He's been running around all day. That was a really mean joke to play on an old man."

"D'you think he'll come back in the morning?"

"Judging by the expression on his face, I doubt it."

"Good," Rheingold said.

"You didn't want him here, did you?" Sandra said. "Why?"

"Let's just say his face didn't fit," Rheingold replied.

"He's only just got here," Sandra protested.

"That's tough," Rheingold said. "Both Paul Tupal and I have met him before, and we don't want him here."

Buzzing Replan, she called him through. Once he'd entered the general office, she dropped her voice, "Did you know that Rheingold and Tupal don't like Jim and want to get rid of him?"

"No," Replan replied.

"I think sending Jim in the education centre was more than just a prank."

Replan let out a sigh, "He looked exhausted when he left. My guess he'll probably call in the morning and say he's not coming in."

Once Replan had gone back to the group office, Sandra turned to Moira and said, "You didn't hear any of that, understood?"

Moira nodded meekly.

Chapter 9

Thursday night

Once inside his flat, Jim began searching for a scrap of paper with a telephone number on it.

Finding it he dialled and Flinnett answered, "Hello. Can I help you?"

"It's Jim."

Flinnett's tone changed slightly, "Oh! Hello Jim. Sorry I wasn't in today, but my son was knocked off his bike."

Jim suddenly felt disloyal. Calling in to resign seemed inappropriate when Flinnett had more than enough on his plate.

He said, "Yes I heard. Is he okay, Mr Flinnett?"

"He's recovering," Flinnett replied. "How did your first day go? I hope they didn't play any practical jokes on you. I meant to warn you. We've got an office full of jokers."

"Practical jokes; what sort of practical jokes?"

"You know. Sending someone for a *long stand* or something like that."

"No," Jim assured him. "They've not played any jokes on me."

"Well that's good to know," Flinnett replied.

Flinnett had barely said the words before Jim's brain suddenly moved through the gears, "Can I just check something Mr Flinnett?"

"What's that Jim?"

"You know the big double doors," Jim said. "Is the big room beyond one of ours?"

"No," Flinnett said, "That's an education centre. Why d'you ask?"

Feeling an idiot, Jim said, "Just checking, Mr Flinnett. I don't want to do anything wrong."

Despite the words coming out of his mouth, Jim mind flashed with anger and he hissed, "Bastards."

"What was that Jim?"

"Nothing, Mr Flinnett," Jim said, covering his tracks by adding, "I just want to say that everyone in the office was sorry to hear about your son's accident."

"Well, thank you, Jim. Tell everyone I appreciated the call," Flinnett replied.

Once he'd disconnected, Jim's mood went back to being homicidal. Verbalising his thoughts he muttered, "Right you bastards! Like practical jokes, do you? I'll give you a few practical jokes."

Leaving the room, he began searching in the medicine cupboard in the bathroom. Jim had acquired a large stock of most tablets and potions over the years.

Finding what he was looking for, he smiled, "Two can play your game."

Slipping the bottle into a pocket, he said, "I'll have 'em; the whole lot of 'em. There's nothing to choose between any of them."

His homicidal mood would have continued for some time but his phone rang and Sam came on, "Hello Grandpa Godwin."

Jim realised Sam was being prompted because he heard a stage whisper and guessed Tommy was behind the call. "How did your first day in your new job go, Grandpa?"

Knowing that Tommy would feel vindicated if he admitted that his first day had been a total disaster, Jim lied, "It went very well, Sam. I've made a lot of new friends."

After they'd talked for a few minutes, Tommy came on, "I gather it went very well."

Jim carried on lying, "They're a great crowd."

Jim's temper began to simmer down. By the time he'd finished his call with Tommy, common sense had returned.

Talking to himself again, Jim thought about the bottle in his pocket and said, "Calm down man. If they all go ill at once, they will know you're responsible. They'll do tests and the police will come around."

Leaving the bottle in his pocket, Jim began pacing. "Don't do anything rash. Get yourself something to eat and calm down."

Going to the kitchen, Jim opened the fridge. Not being in the mood for cooking, he grabbed a hunk of Lancashire cheese and an apple and began chomping on them. Finished he said, "A walk and some fresh air will make you think straight."

Grabbing his coat, he went out and began stomping the streets for the best part of half an hour and then went to his local. He ordered half a mild and retreated to a seat facing the main door.

He'd been sitting on his own for nearly ten minutes when a man entered the bar who Jim thought he recognised.

It was obvious the newcomer also recognised Jim when he said, "I thought it was you."

Jim's mind began racing. He knew the face but couldn't put a name to it.

Extending a hand, the face said, "It's Jim isn't it?"

When Jim nodded and shook hands, the face said, "I'm Simon Rand. I saw you in our place today."

Jim suddenly realised where he'd seen Rand before; he'd been in the big office, the one that wasn't part of Slobend, Fleecem & Skinnem.

"Ah! Yes," Jim replied. "About that, I..."

Rand cut in, "I'd like to thank you. It was a very kind gesture. My students appreciated it."

Rand extended his hand again and said, "I really mean that. Thank you. I suppose you realised we had problems when you saw the doors open."

Taken by surprise, Jim just muttered, "Er, yes..."

"Well you were a life saver, Jim. Our kitchen has been out of action for several days and you coming around with refreshments made things a lot easier for us."

In too deep to retreat without looking a fool, Jim said, "Well, I'm glad to be of help."

Rand pointed at Jim's glass, "Like another as a token of my appreciation?"

Jim nodded. "Thank you."

Returning with Jim's second half, Rand said, "Look Jim, with our kitchen being out of commission, I don't suppose you'd be prepared to continue supplying us with drinks. I'd make it worth your while."

Realising his untruths were placing him in an awkward position, Jim vacillated. He began looking for excuses, "Mr Flinnett wasn't in today..."

"So you took it upon yourself to help us," Rand said. "That's very commendable, Jim."

"Er, yes," Jim replied. "Look I'd like to carry on, but I'd have to check with Mr Flinnett first."

"If you could do that, I'd appreciate it," Rand said.

"Mind you, it was quite an effort bringing all the drinks around," Jim replied.

"I know your offices. We sublet them to your company," Rand replied. "I can make life a lot easier for you than it was today. There's another fire door that opens into the lobby behind your tea point. Instead of you bringing the drinks around, we could set up a table on our side and my students could collect them. I'd pay you of course."

Rand made an offer. When Jim didn't react, the other man assumed it wasn't enough and doubled it. Jim's eyes lit up; if all he had to do was to put cups on a table, life would be far easier than it had been, but he still said, "I'll still have to square it with Mr Flinnett."

"Okay," Rand said. "Although Slobend, Fleecem & Skinnem have sublet from us for a number of years, I've never spoken to Mr Flinnett, otherwise I'd call him myself. If he says it's okay, you'll do it?"

Jim nodded, "Of course, leave it with me."

A few seconds later, another man approached their table. "Hello Simon, long time no see; mind if I grab a pew?"

"Please do," Rand replied; then, to Jim, "This is Tim Pearson; a neighbour of mine." Turning to Pearson, he said, "This is Jim. He works next door to me and I've just talked him into helping us out in our hour of need."

Pearson said, "So you're working at Slobend, Fleecem & Skinnem, eh, Jim?"

Jim nodded. "I'm retired. I'm just going there a few hours a day. I'm basically a tea boy."

Tim Pearson said, "Paul Tupal and Flin Rheingold work at your place, don't they?"

When Jim nodded, Pearson said, "Know 'em well?"

Jim shook his head, "No. I have only just started working there."

Pearson pointed at Jim's glass, "Like another?"

"I was about to go," Jim said.

"Are you driving?"

"No. My flat's not far. I walked here."

"Another half then," Pearson insisted and went back to the bar.

Once Pearson was out of earshot, Jim said, "Do I smell police?"

"You've got a very sensitive nose," Rand replied. "I believe he's in plain clothes; Detective Inspector or something like that."

"Why is he asking me about Paul Tupal and Flin Rheingold?"

Jim had barely asked the question before Pearson returned; it was obvious he'd overheard the question because he said, "You want to know why I was asking after Tupal and Rheingold?"

When Jim didn't answer, Pearson said, "You can usually tell a man by the company he keeps, and I've heard whispers that they're both friendly with Morgan Flechley."

"Who's he?"

Pearson said, "A local drugs baron."

"Why are you telling me this?"

Pearson went into his wallet and extracted a small card, "If you hear anything, I'd appreciate it if you'd let me know."

When Jim picked the card up and glanced at it, Pearson leaned over and lowered his voice, "A year or so ago, your office was run by a guy called Mike Ellerby. He died suddenly. Most people believe he committed suicide but there was an open verdict."

"And you think Morgan Flechley, Paul Tupal and Flin Rheingold were responsible?"

Pearson backed off, "I didn't say that." He tapped his card, "What I am saying is if you hear anything that might help my enquiries, let me know. Now I'm afraid I must go."

As Pearson left, Rand said, "Tim's genuine."

"Meaning you think I should help him?"

Rand nodded.

Jim was thoughtful for a while, "I'll do what I can. No promises."

"I hope you're not going to do anything dangerous," Rand cautioned. "These drug guys can be vicious."

"Of course not," Jim replied.

"Are you still okay for tomorrow?"

Jim said, "Yes, subject to Mr Flinnett's approval. Just one thing. If anyone from our firm starts asking questions I'd appreciate it if you, er,er."

"Yes?"

"Er, didn't tell them too much about our arrangement," Jim replied.

"Why not?"

"Let's just say, I want to play a little practical joke on some of them," Jim replied.

Rand's grinned, "What sort of joke?"

Jim tapped the side of his nose, "That would be telling."

Rand grin widened, "Fair enough, mum's the word."

As he walked back to his flat, Jim began muttering to himself again, "Revenge is a dish best served cold."

Chapter 10

Friday: Day two starts for Jim

When Jim turned up early the next day, Rheingold caught a glimpse of him and put a call through to Tupal, "Jim's back."

"So?"

"Is that all you've got to say," Rheingold snapped. "I told you to give him a hard time and make sure he resigned."

"We did," Tupal replied. "He was rushed off his feet."

"Well he's come in."

"I can't help that," Tupal griped.

"I can see I'll have to deal with this myself."

Rheingold emerged from his office and caught a glimpse of Tupal and Urnwood lurking in their office doorway and realised they'd decided to observe the coming confrontation.

Moving further into the general office, Rheingold heard Jim say, "I hadn't realised just how many people Slobend, Fleecem & Skinnem employed. My float's a bit light so I'll need more money for supplies. Particularly cups. We're very short on cups."

Sandra's hesitation made Jim realise that she was in on the joke, but he kept up the pretence. "I'm going to have to go shopping again. I need more cups and possibly more tea bags."

Moirra Buckle opened her mouth to explain but Rheingold interjected.

"When you went home last night, Jim you looked totally wrecked. Are you sure you're up to this job?"

Turning to face him, Jim visibly bristled, "You're not trying to get rid of me, are you?"

Jim's unexpected full-frontal attack startled Rheingold into a strategic withdrawal.

"Of course not, Jim. You did a great job yesterday. No one is faulting you at all."

"Good," Jim said. He turned back to Sandra, "Like I said, my float's a bit light so I'll need more money for supplies."

Rheingold challenged his request, "More money? Why d'you want more money?"

"Because I need more supplies; Mr Rand knows all about it," Jim said.

"Who's Mr Rand?"

"Surely you know who Mr Rand is," Jim replied, feigning surprise. "He's your manager next door. I spoke to him yesterday. I must admit I was surprised you had as many staff, but I need to cater for them. Why don't you check with Mr Flinnett?"

Urnwood moved into the general office, "I don't think we need to call Mr Flinnett, especially with his son being injured. He won't want to be disturbed, will he?"

Rheingold gave him a blinding look but Urnwood ignored it, "Go on give him the money, Sandra. We can't have Jim running short on supplies, can we?"

Sandra reluctantly parted with some more petty cash and Jim left for the shops.

Once Jim was out of the main door, Rheingold grabbed hold of Urnwood and dragged him into his office, "What the hell are you playing at?"

Unfazed by Rheingold's hostility and choosing to forget the favour Jim had done for him the day before, Urnwood gave Rheingold a lopsided grin.

"It's obvious Jim's got his wires crossed. He thinks this guy Rand is one of our office managers. It's obvious he still thinks the people next door work with us. The

silly old fart still doesn't realise we're winding him up. I bet he'll keep on serving drinks to the education centre guys for at least another day if we all keep stumm."

Tupal appeared, "We're having a bet on how long it will take for Jim to realise the people next door don't work here."

Rheingold gave them both a dagger's drawn look. "If Flinnett starts asking questions when he gets back, I'll tell him I know nothing about it, understood. You two started this and I'm having nothing to do with it."

~*~

Tupal noticed the expression on Moira's face and gave her hard look. "I hope you're not planning to tell Jim what's going on, or snitch to Flinnett when he gets back."

"Look. This is not fair," Moira objected. "A joke's a joke but this is getting nasty. Jim's an old man and he's partially deaf. If he turns his hearing aid off, he doesn't know what's going on."

Tupal gave her another sharp look, "I hope you're not planning on telling him. We've got a bet on."

He held up his mobile phone. "I've still got your naughty pictures on here. If you blab, I'll make sure they go viral."

Moira blushed and mumbled "Don't do that."

"Then be a good girl and keep your gob shut."

"Okay," Moira agreed, "I'll keep quiet."

Sandra couldn't resist saying, "Oh! What photos are these?"

"Real naughty ones of her," Tupal replied, grinning widely.

When Moira's blush increased, Sandra grinned, "And where did these come from? Let's have a look?"

In response, Tupal pretended to call up the images but Moira grabbed his arm. "Please don't."

Shaking her hand off, Tupal glared her down. "Then you know what to do then, don't you?" he said, putting his phone into his pocket.

Sandra said, "In all this, you seem to be forgetting something."

"What's that?"

"Jim has just been given some more money," she replied. "When Mr Flinnett gets back, he'll check the accounts and the petty cash and he'll start asking questions. He'll then hit the roof when he finds out I've given Jim money to fund your tomfoolery."

Tupal looked thoughtful and then grinned. "How much did you give him? He nodded his head at the surrounding offices. "Can't spoil a good jape for lack of funds. Let's have whip round and replace the money Jim took."

Urnwood took the hint and went around demanding donations for the *Jim fund*. Tupal ripped up Jim's chitty and gave Moira another hard look. "If you know what's good for you, you'll keep quiet."

~*~

Shortly after Jim had returned with more clinking cups and a huge box of tea bags, he entered the Replan group office with his normal order.

Once he had served everyone, Urnwood cocked a thumb at the fire door. "Don't forget that lot in there, Jim."

"They've already been served," Jim said brightly.

"How did you manage that?"

"I've been told not to use that door. So I'm using the one at the back."

"The one at the back?"

"It's something to do with fire regulations," Jim explained. "In the event of fire, the big office can escape through here."

"So there's another door at the back?"

"Yes," Jim said brightly. "And it's much quicker. Less walking."

As Jim left, a snigger ran around the room again and Urnwood said, "The old codger still doesn't realise he's being sent on a fool's errand."

~*~

When Jim came back for his second shift, the office seemed remarkably quiet, with only Moira in reception. After popping his head into all the rooms and seeing that every desk was empty, he came back.

"Where is everybody?"

"Gone to the pub," Moira said. "Or should I say, gone on a pub crawl. They don't normally stay in one pub for long. As they won't be back, you can go home if you like."

Noticing Jim's raised eyebrows, she said, "Flinnett's not in so they've had an early dart."

"An early what?"

"Bunking off," Moira replied. "They do it quite regularly when they get the chance."

"I've got to see to the big office," Jim replied. "Then I'll go."

Moira opened her mouth. She wanted to tell Jim about the prank but the words wouldn't come out. If the others found out she'd told him, they'd make her life even more of a misery.

Glancing around the silent offices, Jim said, "So you've been left here on your own."

"Yeah. I've been left here to defend the fort," Moira agreed. "They never take me with them. Mind you, I'm glad they don't. I'm not a heavy drinker."

"What happens if Flinnett or a client calls while they're out?" Jim said.

"Most of the staff can punch in a code on their office phones and their calls are automatically diverted to their mobiles. Unless they're somewhere noisy, no one can tell if they're sitting behind their desks or out and about."

She opened one of her desk drawers and pulled out a pad. "I've also got a standard list of excuses if anyone calls me or Sandra."

"Crafty."

Moira laughed, "Believe me, this lot are craftier than a cart load of monkeys."

Having nothing else to do, Jim went to his tea point, pushed open the rear door and began putting out cups on the table Simon Rand had provided. While he was setting up, Rand appeared.

Giving Jim some money, he said, "I might need you to do this for a while."

"Oh! Why?"

"We've had builders in," Rand replied. "They tried to rod the drains but they can't manage it. There's a collapsed pipe somewhere outside and they are going to have to dig the drains out and replace them."

He added, "Your place seems very quiet today."

"Remember I told you Mr Flinnett's away?" Jim said. "Well, they've all gone to the pub."

“While the cat’s away eh!”

“Exactly,” Jim replied.

“By the way,” Rand continued. “Tim Pearson rang me. He said he’d really appreciate your help.”

Jim straightened a cup that didn’t need straightening, then made a decision. He looked directly at Rand and told him about the confrontation he’d had with Flit Rheingold in Cunningham Park.

He continued, “You can tell Tim he’s probably right about Tupal and Rheingold. Tupal ran off when he was challenged, and Rheingold has been confrontational.”

“Thanks for the information, I’ll pass it on.”

Jim returned to the general office. Glancing at Moira, he said, “I’m going to carry out a cup search, we’re missing a few. Okay if I look around the offices?”

“Of course,” Moira said.

Entering Rheingold’s office, Jim began looking around. After making sure Moira wasn’t watching, he checked Rheingold’s desk drawers and cupboards. They were all locked.

Picking up an isolated cup he walked into the Rheingold group office and carried out the same checks, coming away with nothing other than a few more stray cups. He decided to try Flinnett’s office but it was locked.

He was about to move away when Moira said, “I’ve got a key to Mr Flinnett’s office, d’you want to go in?”

“Just to check for dirty cups,” he said.

Once inside, Jim swiftly checked all the cupboards and drawers. Everyone was locked except for one desk drawer. Glancing inside he found four or five old stethoscopes. A slight smile formed on his face as he tried one out by checking his heart.

Moira startled him by suddenly appearing at the door, “What are you up to?”

“I found this,” Jim said. “Why has Mr Flinnett got this?”

“He uses it to listen at the pipe ducts,” Moira said.

“What?”

“He can hear what’s being said in adjacent rooms,” Moira replied.

“How d’you know?”

“Sandra told me,” Moira replied. “She’s seen him doing it. He used to have a friend who had a medical practice. When it closed, Mr Flinnett acquired those.”

As Moira left, Jim eyed the drawer. There were four left.

Jim muttered, “He won’t miss one. Might come in useful,” stuffing the stethoscope he was holding in his pocket.

Once inside the Replan group office, the scene changed completely. Most of the desks had been left un-tidied and nothing cleared away. After trying a few desk drawers, he came to Tupal’s desk and began pulling drawers again. Although most were locked, one opened.

Inside, he found a set of colour photographs of Moira with very little on, and some external shots of rear of a large rambling house.

Unsure of what to do, he called Moira.

“What’s up now?” she asked. “Still snooping?” She laughed to show she didn’t really care what he did but stopped when she saw his face.

“What’s up?” she asked again.

“I’ve found these in Tupal’s drawer.”

Moira took one look at the photos, pulled them out of the drawer and fed them into a nearby shredder before storming out of the room.

After closing the drawer, Jim walked back into the general office and said, "I'm sorry if I embarrassed you. What's going on?"

Moira shook her head, "I don't want to talk about it."

~*~

Ellie and John Flinnett let out a simultaneous sigh of relief. Although Michael still looked pale, the doctors dealing with him had just given an upbeat assessment. Their son was on the mend.

Flinnett said, "Well thank God for that."

"No, you can't," Ellie said.

Flinnett looked startled, "No I can't what?"

"Head back north," she snapped. "Mark Fleecem said you could have time off while Michael's poorly and you're going to take it."

"Yes dear."

Ellie gave him an icy look, "I sometimes wonder if you've got a mistress hidden away somewhere."

Flinnett gave her a shocked look, "As if I would. How could you think such a thing?"

Chapter 11

Saturday

Saturday started as usual. Jim's phone rang and a high-pitched voice shouted, "Hello Grandpa Godwin!"

Jim smiled, "Hello Sam."

As per normal, Sam's voice was suddenly replaced by Amanda, his daughter-in-law. "I'm going shopping. D'you want anything?"

"Just my special items," Jim replied.

"Okay, I'll get Tommy to bring them over later."

He had expected Sam to come back on the phone, but this time Amanda disconnected before he could.

Having nothing much to do, Jim decided to go for a walk. Glancing out and seeing it was sunny with very little breeze, he decided to go to Cunningham Park as usual. Grabbing a bag of duck food he'd prepared from leftovers, he stepped out and began making his way towards the park, stopping at the local paper shop to buy a copy of the Tiphham Star.

As always, Adrian Drinkwater was sitting on the bench and as soon as he saw Jim's food bag, he made his usual speech about the impending ban on duck feeding and rats.

Ignoring the comment, Jim settled himself. It was a nice day, the sun was still shining and the fountain near the centre of the lake was creating a small rainbow. Once he started feeding, the commotion attracted an audience of adults and their young children.

A quiet voice said, "Hello Jim."

Glancing up, he saw Moira Buckle.

Jim smiled; of all the people working at Slobend, Fleecem & Skinnem, Moira seemed the most genuine; a mouse, not the type to elbow her way to the front like the others.

"What are you doing here?"

"I popped into the office to finish one or two things off," she replied. "I saw you when I came out, so I just came over to say hello."

"You've been into the office?"

"Yes."

"But it's Saturday," Jim replied. "I didn't think that Slobend, Fleecem & Skinnem opened on a Saturday."

"They don't, officially," Moira replied. "But I had things to finish off. Sandra texted me and said they were urgent. Rather than get into an argument it's easier to go in for a couple of hours."

"So you must have a key."

"Sandra gave me one."

"Do you get paid for going in?"

"No," Moira replied. "But I don't mind." She paused, then added, "Jim, I've got something to tell you, but you mustn't tell anyone else I told you."

Although the quacking ducks were playing havoc with his hearing aid, Jim understood and said, "Okay. Mum's the word."

"They're playing a joke on you," Moira said. "Those people in the big room don't work for Slobend, Fleecem & Skinnem. It's some sort of education centre."

"I know," Jim replied.

"You know?"

"I've known for some time."

"How?"

"I guessed," Jim said. "I spoke to Mr Flinnett and he warned me this branch of Slobend, Fleecem and Skinnem had a load of jokers working in it and they would probably play pranks on me. Then I realised what was going on."

"Then why are you still going into the education centre?"

"Because the joke's on them now," Jim replied.

"How d'you mean?"

"I met Mr Rand, the guy who runs the education centre," Jim explained. "They've been having all sorts of problems. For various reasons, they haven't been able to use their kitchen for weeks. When I came in with refreshments, he thought I'd heard about their problems and was offering a gesture of goodwill. We had a chat and he decided it was only fair if he bunged me a few quid each day to keep his students happy until their kitchen is up and running again."

Moira grinned, "So you're being paid twice."

Still feeding the ducks, Jim grinned back, "I'm being paid three times. Don't forget I'm getting more money out of the petty cash as well. So the joke really is on them."

"Not really three times," Moira said, "because you used that for more cups and stuff. And the money isn't coming out of petty cash. They're all chipping in to see how long you'll keep on going next door."

"Ah," Jim replied. "I'd suspected that."

"How?"

"I may be deaf but I'm not that deaf. I've heard them whispering about a *Jim Fund*." He laughed, "By the time I've finished with them they'll be well and truly out of pocket."

He handed Moira a fiver and threw some more feed to the ducks.

"What's that for?"

"Why should you pay?" Jim reasoned. "It's obvious you're not like the rest."

Sliding onto the bench alongside him, Moira ducked her head down low as if scared that someone would overhear. "Can I tell you something else? But you must promise not to spread it around."

"Okay. Go on."

She blushed. "You know those pictures you found of me? Paul Tupal has them on his phone and he keeps on threatening to send them to everyone he knows."

"How did he get them?"

"I think he got into my computer and took photograph of me via the webcam," Moira replied.

"What's a webcam?"

"It's a small camera that sits on top of a computer monitor," Moira replied.

"Why would someone have a camera on top of a computer monitor?"

"I use it for Skyping," she explained.

"For what?"

"I'll explain it another time," Moira laughed. "Paul Tupal was very nice to me at first. I thought he was serious. But..."

"But what?"

"When he takes drugs or gets drunk, he becomes violent. He hit me."

Jim frowned again, "So he's definitely into drugs and he hit you!"

"Yes."

Moira bit her lip. "When I first went out with him, I thought he was serious about me, but he wasn't. I think it was some sort of bet. You know an office joke. He wanted to sleep with me but I wouldn't let him because I thought he'd go around bragging to everyone in the office. He got angry when I wouldn't sleep with him and hit me. I told him I didn't want to be with him anymore because of his drug taking, drunkenness and violence."

She looked down at her hands before saying, "Now he's taking his revenge by threatening to use the pictures against me."

Jim said, "If you could somehow get hold of his phone could you wipe the photos off?"

"Yes," Moira said. "But he keeps his phone with him at all times."

"I'm sorry to hear you're being blackmailed," Jim replied. "He's a nasty piece of work. You should go to the police."

Moira shook her head. "I don't trust the police. Never have done. Never will."

"I can understand that," Jim replied. "I've got very little confidence in them either. I've been burgled twice but they never really investigated. Both times, someone called to see me, gave me a load of sympathetic tripe and a crime reference number. These days, break-ins are treated as insurance claims and nothing more."

Wiping the last of the duck food from his hands, he said, "So what are you doing today?"

Moira shrugged, "Until I saw you come into the park, I was going to go shopping. What about you?"

"I've got to go back home," Jim said, "I'm expecting my son to call over with my *special items*."

"And what are they?"

Jim laughed, "They're not that special but if I say I want them at least I'm guaranteed a visit from my son."

He explained that if Amanda had her way, no one would come around. He glanced at his watch, "I suppose I'd better get back."

Standing up, he started walking towards the park exit. As Moira seemed to be hovering, still wanting to continue their talk, Jim said, "You can come back for a cuppa if you want but I warn you, it'll get noisy when Sam arrives."

"That would be good," she replied, falling into step beside him. "I'm also getting phone calls late at night," she blurted.

Jim looked down, sideways at her. "What sort of calls?"

"Heavy breathing."

"You think Tupal's behind those too?"

"More than likely," Moira replied.

"Strikes me, Tupal is one nasty son of a bitch. I'd love to be able to sort him out."

"So would I," Moira agreed."

~*~

They had barely been back at Jim's flat for more than twenty minutes when there was a knock on the door. As Sam, Ian and Tommy entered, the noise level immediately increased.

Walking into the kitchen and despite their earlier conversation Tommy said, "So how's your new job going Dad?"

Jim lied again. "It's going okay. I'm enjoying it. It's nice to have some company too."

After Tommy had passed him his *special items*, Jim stowed them away and then led the way into the lounge.

"Tommy, this is a colleague, Moira. Moira, my son, Tommy."

Tommy's jaw dropped slightly when he saw Moira ensconced on the couch. Reading Tommy's face, Jim smiled to himself. It wouldn't hurt Tommy to think there was life in the old dog yet.

"Sit down, Tommy," he said. He turned to Ian. "Come on Ian, it's your turn to help me in the kitchen."

After leaving the room, Ian said, "What's all this *turns in the kitchen* business, Grandpa?"

Pushing him through the kitchen door, Jim said, "I wanted to speak to you on your own. I may need your help on a special top secret job."

Ian grinned, "What sort of top secret job?"

"It wouldn't be top secret if I told you about it now, would it?"

"I suppose it wouldn't," Ian admitted. "But if you don't tell me what it's about, I won't know if I can help you will I?"

"Smart Alec," Jim laughed. He swiftly outlined Moira's predicament and his own experiences at Slobend, Skinnem & Fleecem.

"I'm thinking of helping Moira by taking Tupal's phone and getting rid of all the photos. The only thing is I don't know how to. I thought you would help me."

Ian's eyes widened with alarm, "You're going to steal his phone?"

"Let's just say I was thinking of acquiring it for a short while," Jim replied.

Ian pointed out the obvious, "You could get sacked if you get caught, and they might call the police."

"You let me worry about that. If I needed your able services, are you free on Monday night?"

When Ian went quiet, Jim started wheedling, "Go on, it's for a damsel in distress."

"I dunno," Ian replied. "I could get into trouble."

"If anything goes wrong," Jim said. "I'll get the blame, not you."

"Okay, I'll see you on Monday night," Ian agreed. "Is it all right if I bring some pals of mine along to help me?"

"I don't see why not," Jim replied. Then he became suspicious. "How many is *some*?"

"I was thinking of Gerry and Mick."

"Okay Jim agreed. "As long as it is just Gerry and Mick."

When they returned to the lounge, Tommy had a smug, *I-told-you-so* look on his face and Jim guessed that Moira had told him about the pranks that the Slobend, Fleecem & Skinnem staff had been playing on him. He mentally cursed but deliberately ignored the expression.

Getting no reaction, Tommy changed tack, "Ralf Snare works for Slobend, Fleecem & Skinnem. He's a member of *my* golf club"

Jim noted the intonation in his son's voice; it was *his* golf club. The tone of his voice also suggested exclusivity; only people of status and deep pockets could join the Tiphram golf club.

Tommy started more name dropping, "Doesn't Jimmy Ingermann, Ian Rosserman and Fletch Springfield also work at Slobend, Fleecem & Skinnem? They're also members of *my* golf club."

As Jim had yet to learn everyone's name, he glanced at Moira.

She nodded, "Yes they are. Is Flit Rheingold a member too?"

Tommy's eyes lit up, "Ah! Yes, Flit Rheingold, the brothel creeper. He's a member."

Jim glanced at Moira, "This is interesting, I wonder if there is anyone else from the office who's a member."

Picking up on the prompt, Moira said, "Do you have anyone called Philain or Putman at your club?"

Tommy shook his head but added, "The names ring bells though. I think they're members of a Roman re-enactment society. I saw them once. They've made themselves genuine plastic Roman armour."

Tommy remembered another name, "Carl Bamforth, he's a member."

Moira said, "Carl Bamforth left Slobend, Fleecem & Skinnem a few weeks ago, but Mr Flinnett suspects he's still using the office car park."

"How could he do that?"

"He probably didn't give the keys back," Moira replied. "A lot of people do that. It drives Mr Flinnett mad. He calls them cuckoos."

Chapter 12

Sunday

Ian stared down the drive of Gerry Fulstrum's house and saw that David, Gerry's older brother was working in the garage tinkering with his motorbike. Going to the front door he knocked.

Gerry's mother opened the door and said, "He's upstairs."

Going up, Ian caught a glimpse of Laura combing her hair and smiled. It was a waste of time because Laura just gave him an icy stare, one designed to let him know he didn't even register on her radar.

Going to Gerry's room he poked his head around the door, "All right to come in?"

Gerry gave him a smile, cleared a small chair and told him to sit down. Ian did his best but as usual there was barely enough room to squeeze in.

There was an engine roar from outside. Gerry cursed, "David and his motorbike are a pain in the arse."

Without needing to be told, Ian leaned over and slammed the window shut.

The decibel count dropped but the room temperature immediately increased; Ian felt sweat starting to form on his forehead.

"So, what can I do for you?" Gerry asked. "Do you want to see the Thor browser in action?"

Ian had heard about Thor. Using it made internet connections virtually untraceable. When a user joined Thor, their computer ID and their location were automatically disguised. If someone joined Thor in the UK, their location would probably be declared as being somewhere in Russia or the Middle East.

The engine revved again.

Garry slapped his hands on his desktop and said, "Come on. This is a waste of time. Let's go out."

After they'd both raced down the stairs, Gerry said, "Let's go and see if Mick wants to come too."

Five minutes later they collected Mick and decided to walk up Tiphm Hill. Although he didn't mention it, Ian was pleased Mick had decided to tag along. Two nerds on their own presented an easy target for local gangs. Having Mick along made all the difference; he made a useful minder. Unless they ran into someone with a death wish or a very large gang, no one in their right mind was going to tangle with a knuckle-dragger like Mick.

Reaching the hill, they decided to take the middle path because it was more gentle than other routes and a person could walk and talk.

Turning to Gerry, Ian said, "I could do with your help."

"With what?"

Ian swiftly described Moira's predicament and the pranks the staff at Slobend, Fleecem & Skinnem had played on his Grandpa.

After covering less than a mile, Gerry began bristling like a warthog. "I hate bullies."

"So what d'you think?" Ian said. "Will you help Moira and my Grandpa?"

"It'll be a pleasure," Gerry replied.

"Yeah," Mick echoed, "It'll be our pleasure."

Ian saw a group of four heading their way. Without breaking his stride, Mick stooped and picked up a hefty fallen branch. After pulling off a few unwanted twigs, Mick brought the branch up to waist height.

Ian grinned, "Nice quarter-staff, Mick. Are you planning to audition for a part as Little John?"

Mick grinned and began performing tricks with his newly made weapon. Seeing Mick's antics, the four boys heading their way had a hurried conversation and decided to change course, turning down a rock-strewn gully that led down to one of the lower paths.

Although a possible conflict had been avoided, Mick kept hold of the branch in case they met any more marauders looking for aggro; sometimes they did.

Ian grinned, "They got the message."

"Yeah, they did," Gerry agreed. "Good work, Mick."

"Yeah, good work, Mick," Ian echoed. He brought the conversation back to Tupal's mobile.

Still walking, Mick said, "So what's the plan?"

"I think Grandpa is planning to take Paul Tupal's mobile when he's not looking," Ian said.

Gerry became thoughtful, "Risky. Most people are glued to their mobiles like limpets."

"Yeah," Ian admitted. "I told him there would be problems if he got caught."

"So how is your grandpa going to get hold of his phone?"

Ian shrugged, "I don't know. Like I said, I just hope he doesn't get caught. He's going to try and steal it on Monday. If he does get it, he's going to let me know and we'll go around to his flat. Assuming he does take it without getting caught, will you be able to get rid of the pictures and remove everything from the cloud?"

"I don't know," Gerry admitted. "But I'll have a go."

Chapter 13

Monday: While the cat's away

Rheingold had become suspicious. Surely Jim couldn't *still* be serving drinks to the education centre. He gave the rear fire door a push and silently moved through it. He saw Jim placing a large tea pot onto a table and arranging cups.

His jaw dropped. Obviously, Jim still hadn't worked out the truth. He retreated and began spreading the news, deciding he'd join in and have a bet on how long it would be before Jim finally realised the truth.

~*~

Tupal, Rheingold, Urnwood and several other members of staff left the office at twelve noon. Tupal made no secret of where they were going. As Flinnett was still away, the three musketeers and their close associates intended to take full advantage; they were going on another pub crawl.

As they left, Moira glanced at Jim and made a prediction. "Tupal will be as drunk as skunk by the time he gets back."

~*~

Moira's prediction was right; the three musketeers and their camp followers returned at half past two, all well-oiled.

Sensing the time was right, Jim made a decision and rang Ian, "Are you still available tonight?"

"For the top-secret job?"

"That's the one," Jim confirmed.

"Yeah," Ian replied. "My mates Gerry and Mick are coming along too."

"Right ho!" Jim replied. "If I get the phone, I'll confirm later."

"Don't do anything rash, Grandpa."

"I'll do my best," Jim replied. Hanging up, he left the room to collect cups.

Entering the Replan group office, Jim saw Tupal's phone on his desk.

He muttered, "Time for action."

Moving alongside Tupal's desk, Jim saw his victim's eyes were glazed. Collecting cups and biding his time, Jim waited until Tupal moved to speak to one of his colleagues before placing his tray over Tupal's phone and moving on.

Back in the tea point, Jim turned the phone off, wrapped it in paper towels and sealed it inside a small plastic box and dropped it into a plastic carrier bag along with other items he was taking home.

Five minutes later, Jim told Moira and Sandra his shift was over and said goodbye. He heard raised voices and glanced back.

In the few seconds it had taken Jim to reach the outer door, Tupal had appeared in the general office and was glowering at Moira.

Half turning, Jim squinted through the sliding hatch doors.

"Give it back you thieving bitch," Tupal shouted.

"Give what back?" Sandra snapped.

Tupal pointed at Moira, "Not *you*, *her*! Give it back you thieving bitch."

“Give what back?”

“You bloody well know what,” Tupal spat. “You’ve taken my mobile.”

When Moira gave him a blank look of disbelief, Tupal grabbed her handbag, emptied the contents onto the desktop and made a grab for her phone. Realising it wasn’t his, he began rifling through the rest of her belongings.

“Where is it?”

“I haven’t got it, and do you mind?”

“Of course you have,” Tupal growled, pulling open desk drawers.

As the row continued, Jim realised he had to intervene.

Re-entering the reception area, he said, “Have you lost your phone? I saw it in your room. Come on, I’ll show you where I saw it.”

Instead of reacting as anticipated, Tupal grabbed Jim by his collar and slammed him against a wall, “You’ve got it haven’t you, old man. Flit Rheingold said you were bad news and he was right. Because your loony friend accused us of being drug dealers, you’re trying to get information on us, aren’t you?”

The sudden assault and vitriolic language left Jim shocked. The smell of alcohol on Tupal’s breath was overwhelming; Jim realised if he admitted taking Tupal’s mobile he’d probably be beaten to a pulp.

He yelled, “I haven’t got your bloody phone.”

“God’s sake, man, have you gone mad?” Sandra shouted,

Replan and Putman banged through the door, grabbing at Tupal to pull him off.

Replan glanced at Moira and shouted, “Take Jim home and go home too.”

Moira didn’t wait to be told twice. Taking hold of one of Jim’s arms, she pulled him out into the street.

“I’m sorry I got you dragged into this.”

Jim was tempted to tell her that he’d been the cause of Tupal’s bad temper but decided not to. There was no point getting her hopes up.

Once he was back in his flat and Moira had left, Jim called Ian.

“It took a bit of doing but I’ve got the phone.”

~*~

At five thirty, there was a knock at the door. By then, Jim had recovered from Tupal’s assault. Opening the door, he found Ian, Gerry and Mick outside. Once they’d trooped in, Jim took Tupal’s phone out of the plastic box and handed it to Ian.

“That’s it. Can you delete all the photographs off that?”

Ian passed it to Gerry.

“Can you delete the pictures?” asked Jim.

“I might not be able to do anything,” Gerry admitted, “I might need the password.”

When Jim frowned, indicating he didn’t understand, Gerry began searching the mobile’s protective wallet.

He pulled out a small slip of paper with Tupal’s home address on it and a series of codes and said, “I think this is it.”

“So, can you delete the pictures?”

Gerry gave him a dubious look, “We could get into trouble doing this.”

Jim pulled out his wallet, extracted a note and waved it under Gerry’s nose, “Will this help ease your conscience?”

Gerry waved his hand at the money. “I don’t like bullying. If I can manage it, I’ll do this for free.”

Thinking about what Tim Pearson, the police officer, had told him, Jim said, "I was talking to a guy in the pub and he reckons Tupal is associated with a local drug baron."

Gerry's head shot up. "What's he called?" he demanded, "the drug baron?"

Jim frowned, "I can't remember."

"It wouldn't be Morgan Flechley by any chance?" Gerry quizzed.

"Yes," Jim said. "That's him. That's the guy."

Gerry glanced at Ian, "This could be the link I've been looking for."

"Link?"

"I've got issues with Morgan Flechley's son, Brian," Gerry replied.

Thinking about what Tim Pearson had told him, Jim said, "I don't suppose you could copy everything before you erase it?"

"My thoughts exactly," Gerry replied. "This phone could be a veritable gold mine."

Ian said, "If you copied all the telephone numbers, we might be able to play some pranks back on him."

"We're all agreed then," Gerry said. "I'll copy first and then delete."

After setting up his laptop, Gerry instigated copy. Part way though, the boy caught a glimpse of naked female bodies and gasped.

Jim intervened, "Stop gawping at them, delete 'em."

Once the process was complete, Gerry said, "Is that all you want?"

Sensing the boy could deliver more, Jim said, "What d'you have in mind?"

"I haven't deleted his phone numbers," Gerry said. "But I could."

Remembering the anger he'd experienced upon discovering he'd been the subject of a practical joke, Jim decided one final twist of the knife was appropriate.

"Go on then, delete them. And delete anything else you can find."

Once Gerry had finished, Ian said, "You *are* going to give the phone back aren't you Grandpa? A mobile like this one will have cost a lot of money."

"Of course," Jim assured him and began thinking of how he could return it without being caught. He picked up the piece of paper Gerry had found with an address on it. Posting the mobile back would ensure Tupal couldn't find out it was him who'd taken his precious phone.

"Well, thank you all for doing this for me," Jim said. He glanced at Gerry. "You're quite a wiz on phones and computers, aren't you?"

Being modest, Gerry said, "I don't know everything but if you want me to really get back at these people you work with, I will."

"And how could you do that?"

Gerry said, "I've got the information from the phone to work on but the more information you can find, the better."

"What sort of information?"

"Where they live, car registration numbers, telephone numbers, clubs they belong to, bank account details - that sort of thing," Gerry replied.

Jim considered and nodded, "I'll work on that."

~*~

Tupal was in a bad mood, "She's definitely taken my mobile."

"So you keep saying," Urnwood replied.

"She has. It's obvious," Tupal snapped. "Are you going to help me or not?"

When Urnwood just grimaced, Tupal changed tack, "You don't have to do anything bad."

He waved a large denomination note in Urnwood's direction.

"Just scare her," Tupal said and glanced at his watch. "We'll leave at closing time. I've **I'll** drive up there and drop you off. I'll wait until you come back and then I'll take you home. Job done."

When Urnwood hesitated, Tupal pulled out another note and placed it alongside the first one. "I'm feeling generous. Just think what you could buy your Ashley with this."

"Why don't you do it?" Urnwood said. "Why d'you need to involve me?"

"I'm the get-away driver," Tupal replied and waved the notes again. "Think of Ashley."

When Urnwood suddenly grabbed the notes, Tupal's mood changed. "Good man. With your help we'll pay the bitch back."

"What *exactly* has she done to offend you?" Urnwood asked.

He immediately regretted asking the question because Tupal's expression changed back to a scowl.

In an attempt to change the subject, Urnwood said, "Ashley's staying with some friends at the moment."

Tupal's mood swung again, "You've got it bad, haven't you?"

"Got what bad?"

Tupal grinned, "The love bug. It's written all over your face."

Urnwood changed the subject again "Why d'you keep looking around?"

"I said I'd meet someone," Tupal replied, glancing around the interior of the White Hart, "Just combining business with pleasure."

A moment later the door opened and a man with two large dogs walked in.

Tupal smiled. "That's my customer. I won't be long; I'll have to go to the dog friendly area."

Three minutes later he returned and smiled at Urnwood, "Business done. If you want to make sure you keep in with Ashley, you'll need a second income stream. I wouldn't manage without my part time job."

"My mother would kill me if I started selling drugs," Urnwood said.

"Then you don't tell her. What she doesn't know won't hurt her, will it? If you want to keep Ashley, you'll need some cash in your pockets. No cash, no Ashley. If you don't do it, someone else will. This world is dog-eat-dog."

"I'll think about it," Urnwood replied.

While Urnwood was churning over what Tupal had said, the bell was sounded for closing time and Tupal led the way back to his car. Once Urnwood had slammed his door shut, Tupal reached over to the back seat and picked up a CO2 powered air rifle and handed it over.

"You just keep pulling the trigger until the magazine is spent. There's an un-gated alley at the back of her flat."

He handed over a photograph and pointed out a window. "That's her room. You can't mistake it. It's the one with the big vase in it."

Tupal drove off and stopped in a back street. Once Urnwood had climbed out and had made his way to the alley, Tupal opened his glove box, pulled out a cheap burner phone and keyed in a number.

~*~

Moirá's mobile rang around 11.30, half an hour before midnight. Picking it up, she glanced at the screen: no caller ID.

Knowing it was going to be her heavy breather, she ignored the call.

The phone rang again at 11.32; another no caller ID. And again at 11.34. Realising it was going to be one of those nights, she ignored it and decided to go to bed.

While she was taking off her make-up, she heard a distinct ping. Then another, and something embedded itself in the curtain.

Two pings later, she worked up the courage to flip one corner of the curtain and saw star-shaped holes in the glass and a shadowy figure in the alley aiming what looked like a gun at her window.

Her phone started to ring again. Grabbing it, she answered, and the heavy breathing started.

“Oh God, oh God, oh God,” she muttered, throwing the phone onto the bed and pushing herself off it. Rushing downstairs, she hammered on Paula’s door.

A bleary-eyed Paula opened the door. “What’s on fire?”

“They’ve shot the window.”

Paula stopped mid-yawn. “What? Oh shit, Moira, you’ll have to call the police now.”

Moira nodded, “I’ll report it tomorrow, but I doubt if it will do much good. Any chance of staying with you tonight?”

“Course.”

Chapter 14

Tuesday: Jim goes to the post office and Flinnett pays a visit.

The next day, Jim, wearing gloves to prevent fingerprints, went to the post office and bought a padded envelope. He posted the mobile back to Tupal and set off to Slobend, Fleecem & Skinnem.

He'd only been in the tea-point for five minutes when Moira nervously pushed her way inside and said, "I'm scared."

"Of Tupal?"

When she nodded and told him about the shooting incident, Jim said, "This is entirely my fault..."

"No it's not," Moira cut in. "How can it be your fault? This harassment has been going on for weeks, months before you ever came here."

"It is my fault," Jim repeated.

She cut him off again, "I wasn't going to come in today. I was going to throw a sickie but then I remembered Tupal had to go to meet clients today. With any luck he'll be out all day."

"So you thought you'd risk coming in."

"I need my job," she said. "I've spoken to Mr Replan. He's in charge while Mr Flinnett's away. He's told Tupal he was out of order accusing me of pinching his phone. He's also suggested I go home early if Tupal does come back today so there isn't another scene."

Jim attempted upbeat, "Still the good news is, if he has lost his phone that gets you off the hook doesn't it? No mobile, no photographs."

Moira looked at Jim intently. "You took Tupal's phone, didn't you?"

When Jim didn't instantly deny it, Moira said, "Look, if Tupal does come in today, whatever he's promised Replan, he's sure to kick off again. Please, just give him his phone back."

Knowing it was in the post, Jim said, "I haven't got his phone."

"Tell me the truth, Jim," Moira pleaded. "If it wasn't you, if *someone else* stole his phone they could send my photographs all over the place."

She became accusing again, "It was you who took his phone, wasn't it? I told you about the photographs he took of me and then his mobile goes missing. It's too much of a co-incidence."

Jim relented, "Okay, yes. I took his phone, but I haven't got it now. He'll get it back shortly; I posted it back to him this morning. And I'm sorry he accused you, but the good news is, last night my grandson and his friends deleted all the photographs. They even deleted them from the cloud, whatever that is."

The worried look on her face changed slightly. "So all the photographs have gone?"

"The whole lot," Jim confirmed.

"Why did you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Get involved and steal his phone?"

"Because I could see it was causing you distress," Jim said. "It was also a way of hitting back at them for the jokes they've been playing on me."

As she left the room, Moira glanced back and said, "Thank you. I hope you're going to pay them *all* back. They deserve it."

As the door closed behind Moira, Jim muttered, "Yes, maybe I should get them all back."

In the time it took for the water heater to boil, Jim reached in his pocket and pulled out the bottle he'd had in his pocket. He read the attached flyer.

It said: *This product will clean you out! Make sure you are near a toilet and have several hours free because it will empty your system!!*

Jim smiled. "Okay, no time like the present. Now, who's my first victim? Urnwood!" he decided. "The cheeky little scrote asked me to buy him condoms even though he knew they were playing a joke on me."

Still thinking aloud, Jim said, "Rheingold. He probably is a drug dealer. He's also a nasty piece of work if there ever was one."

Making a note of which cups he'd laced, Jim began making his rounds. As he retreated from the Replan group office he heard Urnwood let out a sigh of contentment.

"I'll say this for Jim, he makes a good cuppa."

Twenty minutes later, Urnwood felt the urge to leave the room in a hurry. By the time he returned, Jim had cleared away his cup and had washed it. He'd done the same with Rheingold's cup. Then as a further precaution, he placed both cups into the dishwasher and set the machine going.

~*~

Tupal returned to the office just after 2 pm. As he parked, he misjudged the distance and rammed a wall.

His passenger, Jimmy Ingermann, tutted, "I told you to let me drive. I thought you'd had a few too many."

Jumping out, Ingermann inspected the damage. "Back up a bit."

Tupal obediently reversed two feet and climbed out. He looked at the damage and swore. "This is all I need. It's Moira's fault, y'know. If she hadn't wound me up by taking my mobile, this wouldn't have happened."

Ignoring the outburst, Ingermann nodded towards the dented bodywork and said, "It's not as bad as it looks."

"Agreed," Tupal said. "But if Flinnett sees it he'll give me grief,"

"I thought you weren't scared of Flinnett."

"I'm not," Tupal said defiantly. "If Flinnett tries to get clever all I have to do is threaten to tell his wife about Lisa."

Ingermann's eyebrows rose slightly, "Flinnett's got another woman?"

"Yeah," Tupal said. "But don't go shouting about it."

"Well, who'd have thought?" said Ingermann.

"I said, don't go shouting about it."

Ignoring the comment, Ingermann carried on, "But why should Flinnett be worried about his wife finding out? There are a lot of men who cheat, and their wives usually forgive them."

"Flinnett is married to Mark Fleecem's sister. I've met Flinnett's wife," Tupal said. "I don't think she's the forgiving type."

"So?"

"Don't you have a brain?"

Ingermann gave him a sharp look, "Now you're just being plain rude."

“Not without reason,” Tupal snapped back. “A simple company check would give you the reason for Flinnett being worried about his wife finding out.”

“How?”

“Years ago, Mark Fleecem’s father bought out the other partners in Slobend, Fleecem & Skinnem but kept the name. He fell out with his youngest daughter and when he died, Mark Fleecem and his older sister had the shareholding split between them. Since then, Fleecem has built the business up.”

“I still don’t understand,” Ingermann said.

“Flinnett married Fleecem’s sister because she has a big stake in the company. I also happen to know that there is a prenuptial agreement between them. If Fleecem’s sister ever decided to get a divorce, Sam Flinnett could wind up with a pittance and he could even lose his job.”

“If there was so much at risk,” Ingermann said. “Why would Flinnett take the chance?”

“Because he doesn’t think he’s going to get caught,” Tupal said. “And because his present lover isn’t the first. Put simply, Sam Flinnett has never been able to keep his dick in his trousers.”

“So this is why you don’t fear Flinnett.”

“Correct,” Tupal replied. He nodded to the damaged car. “Even so, I don’t want to give him ammunition to use against me if I don’t have to. I’ve got a dent and paint specialist. I’ll get them to touch it up and Flinnett will be none the wiser.”

He sighed. “This week’s not going well. First Moira steals my phone and now I’ve damaged the car again.”

“No point in crying over spilt milk,” Ingermann said. “Come on, time for work.”

Once inside, Tupal took one look at Moira and hit flash point.

~*~

Flinnett drove into the office car park as Tupal and Ingermann were walking towards the main entrance. He noticed Tupal’s car was oddly parked so he walked over to take a closer look. He saw the dent and car paint on the office wall. He tutted loudly and made a mental note to give his subordinate a dressing down. Even though he knew Tupal knew about Lisa, he couldn’t ignore the damage.

Moving away from Tupal’s car, he carried out his normal inspection, glancing around, mentally ticking off number plates. As his senior staff needed to make client visits sometimes, having somewhere to park was essential and ex-employees rarely returned the padlock key when they left the company; why pay for expensive parking in Tiphm town centre when they could park at Slobend, Fleecem & Skinnem for free?

A few seconds into his inspection, he found the cuckoo in the nest. After inspecting the car more closely to make sure he wasn’t mistaken, Flinnett walked towards a small shed, extracted a heavy-duty wheel clamp and fixed it to the offending vehicle. Locking the outer gate, he walked towards the office.

As he entered the lobby, he saw Tupal leaning over Moira’s desk in an obviously threatening manner.

“So, come on, what have you done with it?”

“I’ve told you, I haven’t taken your stupid mobile.”

“Expect me to believe that?” Tupal snapped. “I want it back or I’m reporting the theft to the police.”

Knowing the naked images of her body had been destroyed, Moira developed a backbone, “Yeah, great plan seeing as you’ve got my photographs on it.”

Emerging from the lobby, Flinnett made his presence felt, “What’s going on?”

Tupal backed off, “Just a misunderstanding, Mr Flinnett.”

“Glad to hear it,” Flinnett said and gave Tupal a get back to work look.

Once he’d gone, Flinnett glanced at Moira and nodded towards his office.

Once inside, Flinnett said, “So what was that all about?”

“He thinks I’ve stolen his mobile.”

“I presume you haven’t.”

“No, Mr Flinnett. I haven’t touched his phone, let alone stolen it,” she replied. Not wishing to implicate Jim she added, “You know what a load of jokers we have in this office. Any one of them could have taken it.”

There was a long pause, then Flinnett said, “I apologise for Mr Tupal’s behaviour. It’s most unlike him.”

“He’s always worse when he’s been drinking,” Moira muttered.

“Drinking?”

“He’s been with clients,” Moira reminded him. “The chances are he’s been drinking as well.”

“He’s also damaged his car,” Flinnett growled. “He’s been warned about drinking and driving before; I think I’ll have to have a word with Mr Sparrow about this.”

“Who?”

“He’s our HR consultant and he’s warned Mr Tupal about excessive drinking and drug taking before.”

Once Moira had left his office, Flinnett put a call through to Sparrow and explained what had happened.

Sparrow came straight to the point, “Do you want me to dismiss him?”

Flinnett vacillated. He’d known Tupal for years and knew he had good contacts. When he was on form, Tupal could charm fruit off trees. But, most importantly of all, Tupal also knew about Lisa and might go through with his threat.

“Well?”

“Let’s deal with the here and now,” Flinnett replied evasively, “He bashed in the front of a company car and he’s probably as drunk as a skunk. He’s also been involved in a heated argument with another member of staff. What do I do?”

“Have you a disposal breathalyser in the office?”

“Yes.”

“If it was me, I’d make sure of your facts. Breathalyse him.” Sparrow said, “If he is over the limit, I’d get the car keys off him and get someone to drive him home. If he’s likely to start any more arguments, you might have to consider suspending him for a few days, maybe a week, to let tempers simmer down.”

Flinnett said, “Supposing the breathalyser is positive, then what? Will you go and see him?”

“What, at home?”

Thinking of Lisa again and the effect it would have on his marriage if Tupal spilled the beans, Flinnett said, “I need this handled with a light touch.”

Sparrow thought about it; home visits were best avoided.

“Well?”

“Breathalyse him first.”

“And if he is over the limit?”

Because Slobend, Fleecem & Skinnem used his services in all their branches, Sparrow made an exception, “If he is over the limit, I could go and see him tomorrow

Commented [DG2]: You’ve just said that home visits are best avoided so I think that this should be changed to ‘I could speak to him tomorrow.’ I would have changed this myself, without this comment but I know that later on in the book, Sparrow does go to visit him so at that point, I’m wondering about the continuity. Maybe later on, because things have escalated, there should be some mention about Sparrow needing to see him at home.

Agreed

morning. If he is drunk, hopefully he will have dried out by then. I could talk to him like a Dutch uncle."

"Would you?"

"Check your facts and then call me back," Sparrow said. "Breathalyse him first."

"K."

Flinnett depressed an intercom and asked Sandra to send Tupal in.

Once Tupal had shambled into his office, Flinnett said, "So what was all that about with you and Moira?"

Still drunk, Tupal didn't bother with niceties, he just snapped, "She's taken my phone."

"That's a serious accusation," Flinnett replied. He sniffed the air distastefully, "Have you been drinking?"

"You know where I've been. I've been entertaining some important clients," Tupal replied. "Now what are you going to do about my phone?"

Flinnett gave him an icy smile, "And what are you going to do about the damage to the car?"

When Tupal made an attempt at a rambling apology and began muttering that he'd have it touched up at his own expense, Flinnett shook his head, opened one of his desk drawers and pulled out a small box and handed it over."

"What's this?"

"A disposable breathalyser," Flinnett replied.

When Tupal gave him a daggers drawn look, Flinnett said, "I am acting on Mr Sparrow's instructions. He told me to breathalyse you."

"Sparrow!"

"Yes," Flinnett replied. "I've just called him."

Tupal paled; when *Firem* Sparrow was called in, it was serious.

Sensing that Flinnett was preparing to call his bluff over exposing Lisa, Tupal said, "There's no need for that Mr Flinnett."

Flinnett gave him another icy look, "In case you haven't noticed, I've got enough problems to deal with at the moment; a deep breath and keep blowing. *Now!*"

Stung by the imperative, Tupal began to blow. Once he'd run out of breath, Flinnett grabbed hold of the breathalyser and checked its findings.

"You're well over the driving limit; at least three times."

He handed the breathalyser back to Tupal, waited for him to look at it and then snapped his fingers, "Keys."

"Aw, come on, sir."

"Mr Sparrow's instructions. You can't drive in that state."

Once Tupal had handed his car keys over, Flinnett depressed the intercom and spoke to Sandra, "Can you do me a favour and run Mr Tupal home please?"

He looked at Tupal. "I don't want you in again this week. You're being nothing but trouble. Take a few days out of your holiday allowance and sober up."

Tupal opened his mouth to quibble but before he could, Flinnett added, "Don't start, **or I will be asking** Mr Sparrow **will be calling to call** around to see you at home **tomorrow**. I've warned you about your drinking before."

Tupal paled but played his trump card, "Don't forget Lisa."

"I haven't," Flinnett said. "But if I fire you for habitual drunkenness and drug taking, no one is going to believe a word you say, are they? They'll say it's a case of sour grapes; anything you say will be put down to petty spite. No one is going to believe you."

"You can't fire me."

"I can, and if you carry on annoying me, I will," Flinnett promised. He revised the comment, "Or more exactly, Mr Sparrow will."

"There's no need for that Mr Flinnett."

"You will do as I say and take the rest of the week off out of your holiday allowance. I suggest you stay at home until Mr Sparrow has spoken to you, understood?"

Tupal nodded.

A few seconds later, Sandra knocked on the door and left with a deflated Tupal in tow. Once they'd left the building, Flinnett called Moira back into his office.

"Can you finish off what you are doing and then go home please."

Moira started to cry, "Are you sacking me?"

Flinnett's hard face softened, "I'm doing nothing of the sort, Moira. I've sent Mr Tupal home because you were right, he's drunk. I'm leaving shortly to go back and see my son. I'm suggesting you leave early too so you avoid being interrogated by the others. You won't lose any pay. Okay."

Once Moira had closed the door, Flinnett moved towards the small paint covered window to let in some fresh air.

He'd barely done so when he heard a sound similar to someone being disembowelled with a blunt knife. For the first time that day, he smiled.

Opening the window a little wider, he glanced down into the staff car park and his smile widened. The cuckoo had returned and had seen the wheel clamp.

Leaning out still further, Flinnett recognised the howler; it was Carl Bamforth.

The smile on Flinnett's lips became positively vampirish; he'd drawn blood. He'd always suspected that Bamforth was one of the trespassers.

He called out, "I'm coming down."

Bamforth looked around, uncertain as to where the disembodied voice had come from. He glanced up and swore under his breath. Flinnett had caught him red handed.

A few minutes later Flinnett let himself into the car park and instead of speaking, he held out his hand. Knowing what was required, Bamforth handed over the key he'd kept to the car park padlock.

Once Flinnett had pocketed the key, Bamforth pointed at the clamp. "Okay, I've given the key back. Now unclamp me."

Flinnett shook his head and pointed to a sign on the wall informing trespassers there was a wheel clamp release fee. He held his hand out again. Bamforth vaguely toyed with the idea of physical violence but placed it on ice. Flinnett wasn't tall but he was built like the side of a barn; no one with any sense took Flinnett on.

A long pause later, Bamforth pulled out his wallet and extracted the necessary. Once he'd handed it over, Flinnett released the wheel clamp, saying "Don't come back."

Chapter 15

Wednesday: Jim takes on car park duty.

Flinnett was not amused. With Tupal at home waiting for his interview with Sparrow and two members of staff off sick, was no laughing matter.

“What’s wrong with them?”

Replan relayed the messages he’d received from Urnwood and Rheingold before Flinnett had arrived.

“Apparently they’ve both got the galloping trots, boss.”

Flinnett flinched. He didn’t like being called boss. A simple “sir” followed by the tug of a forelock would have sufficed.

“Any idea when they are likely to be back?”

Replan said, “Hopefully tomorrow.”

Flinnett let out a sniff of displeasure, one that Marjory Fleecem would have approved of.

“They better be. You’re going to be in charge again tomorrow. Tell ‘em from me if they’re not back in, there’s going to be trouble.”

Replan showed surprise, “In charge again tomorrow?”

“In case you’ve forgotten,” Flinnett growled. “My son’s in hospital.”

“How is he?”

Flinnett gave him an icy look, “There are complications.”

“Sorry to hear that.”

Instead of accepting Replan’s trite comment, Flinnett drummed his fingers on his desktop, giving Replan an unspoken indication that he’d grown bored with his presence. He confirmed it by saying, “Are we done?”

“Sure.”

“Good,” Flinnett said. “Can you find Jim and send him in please?”

Jim knocked on Flinnett’s door two minutes later. “You wanted to see me, Mr Flinnett.”

“Yes,” Flinnett said. “If I recall correctly, you can see our car park from your flat?”

Jim nodded.

“How would you like to earn a little more money, Jim? Cash.”

“Doing what, Mr Flinnett?”

“Checking the car park and making sure only staff members park there.”

He explained how he’d caught Carl Bamforth illegally parking. When Jim looked dubious, Flinnett explained that illegal parkers were fined. He passed Jim a list of car numbers with each owner’s name alongside it.

“All you have to do is check the registration numbers.”

He placed a small camera on the desk, “Anyone not on that list gets clamped. This camera has been set to take timed and dated photographs. You take pictures of the illegally parked car from several angles to prove it was there and a photograph of the number plate as a record.”

Jim picked the camera up, “What about getting films?”

Flinnett grinned, “Films are bit out of date, Jim. It’s a digital camera. You don’t need films for this type. It will take thousands of shots as long as you keep the battery charged. The photographs can be downloaded onto a computer.”

He added, “I’m prepared to pay you half the clamping fee on each illegal parker.”

“How do I clamp them?”

Sensing Jim liked the idea of making more money, Flinnett tossed a small bunch of keys in the other man's direction. "One opens the padlock on the main gate. That one is the shed key and there are three sets of clamps in there."

Seeing the expression on Jim's face, Flinnett said, "Don't worry. You just clamp them. I'll collect the money and unclamp the cars."

~*~

Leaving the office, Jim unlocked the main car park gate and went to the shed. As Flinnett had promised, it contained three sets of stout wheel clamps.

Glancing around Jim started to laugh, "I could clamp a few and stop 'em going home."

He quickly changed his mind, "I'm the only one with keys. They'd know it was me. If I do something stupid, Flinnett will take the keys back."

After re-locking the shed, Jim pulled out the list Flinnett had given him and began checking. Tupal's car was badly parked and it was obvious that he'd dented the front of it in the car park.

Moving on, Jim noticed most of the cars contained personal possessions left inside, which made it easy to work out those who were married or with partners, and the ones who were single.

Coming upon Replan's car, he spotted an envelope on the back seat with Sandra's name on it. There was also a very feminine looking purple umbrella in one of the rear seat pockets.

Grinning, he said, "Looks like a bit of office scandal in the offing."

Pulling out the camera that Flinnett had given him, he took a few snaps, "Gerry said he wanted information."

Still moving around the parked cars, camera in hand, Jim glanced at the window stickers and realised they provided clues as to their owner's hobbies and pastimes. Snare's car had a sticker on it which indicated he was a member of the Tiphram Golf Club. Although Tommy had already named a number of golf club members, Jim still took a snap of it.

Philain's car had a Roman centurion in the window and the text underneath implied he belonged to a Roman re-enactment society. Once again, the sticker confirmed what Tommy had told him. As the sticker also had website details, Jim took another photograph.

Putman's car sticker was similar to Philain's. Obviously, Tommy was right; they shared a common interest in all things Roman.

Glancing inside Ingermann's car he saw an open Amazon box on the back seat. Inside, there were books bearing Ingermann's name. After staring at them for some time, Jim remembered overhearing a conversation that suggested Ingermann was an amateur writer. After taking a few more shots, Jim ran his eyes around the remainder of the car park.

There were a number of unoccupied bays. One of them had a sign proclaiming it to be Flinnett's. Jim presumed Flinnett had left early again so he could see his injured son. Urnwood and Rheingold's bays weren't occupied either.

Their missing presence brought a smile to his face and he laughed out loud.

"Serves 'em right."

Leaving the car park, Jim began to walk home. He was part way there when a voice called him. It was Moira Buckle.

Seeing the surprise on Jim's face, she said, "Mr Flinnett left early again to see his son. He said I could go too in case I had any hassle. He's been very good about everything."

She glanced around nervously, and Jim guessed that after being let out early she didn't want to hang around near the office.

She said, "Can I talk to you again?"

"What about?"

Remove Comma , "Can we go to your flat? I don't want them to see me."

Once inside, he waved her into the lounge and said, "I'll make some tea."

He returned a few minutes later with two large mugs and a slice of cake each.

"So what d'you want to talk about?"

"Everything," she said, "The late night calls, the heavy breathing and my windows being shot at. It's all really scary."

"How can I help?"

"I don't know," she admitted.

When he remained silent, Moira changed tack, "Urwood and Rheingold are off sick. Did you put something in their drinks?"

Jim gave her a shocked look, "Now why would I do that?"

"You did, didn't you I can tell when you're lying."

When Jim didn't answer, Moira said, "I wouldn't blame you if you did. They deserved it."

After a pause she continued, "I want to get even with all of them." She put a key on the table.

"What's that?"

"The front door key to the office," she replied. "I had a copy cut for you."

"Why?"

"I thought it might come in useful for you."

"Look, this could get nasty."

Apropos nothing, Moira said, "I saw Sandra getting out of Replan's car this morning."

"So?"

"He stopped well away from the office and let her walk to the front door. I think they're having an affair."

Remembering the letter and umbrella he'd seen in Replan's car, Jim said, "So what? Most young people nowadays dispense with marriage; living together has become acceptable. No one ever accuses other people of living over the brush anymore. Not getting married has its attractions."

"I never thought you'd think that way," she said.

"Why?" Jim challenged, "Because I'm old." Thinking about his own wedding day he said, "Not getting married has a number of benefits. It saves money and you don't have to go through the normal ritual jibes."

"Like what?"

Jim adopted a false voice, "Like getting married? I didn't know your girlfriend was pregnant. Then there are the family feuds. There's nothing like a wedding to re-open old wounds: *I'm not going if our Angie's going*. Then there's the competition between families and the snide comments: *They're not getting married in church you know; no honeymoon either; a real hole in the wall affair*."

"Wow, I can see you're a fan," said Moira. "The only reason for mentioning it is because Replan's married, and not to Sandra." Have inserted return

Commented [DG3]: This has just reminded me about another continuity issue – when Replan drops Sandra off and gives the long speech about how his and his wife's family will do all kinds of awful things to them if they find out that Sandra is living with him, I expected something to come of this but it doesn't. Better, I think, that they are having a straightforward affair – especially in light of Sandra having sex with Tuplan later on.

Sandra is payed back and gets sacked later when the videos come out. Replan is just another poor smutt

Jim shrugged, "Nowadays lots of people have affairs. Anyway, why are telling me? I thought Sandra was a friend of yours."

Moira spluttered, "She's certainly not."

"Why not?" Jim queried, "Two young women working together."

"For starters, she belittles me wherever she can, and I'm expected to work most Saturday mornings." Moira replied. "I'm the Plain Jane and she's Ms Glamorous."

"Nonsense, you're very attractive."

Moira looked slightly surprised by the comment, but she smiled.

"Are those the only reasons why you don't like Sandra?"

"No. She encourages the rest of staff to play jokes on me, even though she knew Tupal had gone too far with the photos. That's the only reason she took them down," Moira replied.

She added, "I'm not very happy working at Slobend, Fleecem & Skinnem. I'm thinking of leaving."

"So Sandra's on your hit list," Jim said.

"Hit list?"

"Isn't that what you were just talking about?" Jim said, "Getting even with all of them?"

"It was just an idea," Moira said. "I'd like to pay them back. But I don't suppose it will happen."

"Okay," Jim said, "Tell me more about Sandra and Replan."

"From things that Sandra has let slip, Replan doesn't want his wife to find out he's moved in with another woman."

As Jim took a tentative bite from his cake, Moira thrust a typed piece of paper in his direction.

"What's this?"

"It's the names, addresses, car registration numbers and telephone numbers of all the staff," Moira said, "Including Mr Flinnett and Mr Fleecem's details. I've also included the details of the company website and the website of Mr Fleecem's horse trainer."

Without thinking, Jim said, "I'll give these to Gerry."

"Who's Gerry?"

"Ah!"

"Who's Gerry?"

"A friend of my grandson," Jim replied. "Let's just say our minds have been working along similar lines."

"What! Getting even?"

"Maybe," Jim said evasively. (deleted line space)

When Moira finally left, Jim gave Ian a call and asked if Gerry could come and see him over the weekend. A few minutes later, Ian called back and confirmed they'd all come to see him on Saturday.

With that arranged, Jim glanced at his watch and thought about an idea he'd been toying with ever since Flinnett had given him the keys to the car park. After consulting a battered address book, he picked up his phone.

When it was answered, he said, "Is Tony still around?"

"Yeah."

"What time do you close?"

"Six o'clock."

He glanced at his watch. If he went now, he'd catch Tony.

~*~

Getting off the bus, Jim walked to a local motor factor he used to frequent when he had a car. Once inside, he spotted Tony and gave him a wave.

“Hello Jim. Not seen you for ages; how you doing?”

“Not bad.”

“What can I do for you, Jim?”

“Do you still do number plates?”

Tony shook his head, “Sorry; stopped doing those.”

When Jim’s face fell, Tony had a light bulb moment. “Mind you, I think we’ve still got some blanks in the back and the old jig is there too.”

“So you *could* make one?”

Tony looked uncertain, “I’m not sure we’re allowed to anymore.”

“It’s just for a joke,” Jim said defensively.

Tony’s face lit up. He liked a good joke. “What are you planning to do with it?”

“Screw it on a wall.”

“Eh?”

“Like as a name plate for a parking bay.”

“So you’re not going to use it on a car.”

“No.”

Tony’s smile returned, “Come this way.”

When Jim told him what he wanted to inscribe on the false number plate, Tony burst out laughing but made no attempt to dissuade him.

Ten minutes later, Jim emerged with the number plate in a bag, and as he was retired, and an old customer, Tony didn’t charge him for it.

After doing some shopping, Jim took the bus home. As he opened his front door, he started to have doubts and began muttering to himself.

“If I fix this number plate on Tupal’s bay it’s only a matter of time before the finger gets pointed in my direction.”

Glancing at the plate, Jim mumbled, “It was a good idea but you’re going in the bin.”

~*~

Moirá’s phone rang just after midnight. As usual, she ignored it. After cutting off, it began ringing again. Again, she ignored it, but it was relentless. She sat on the bed, knees tucked under her chin, staring at it fearfully. Eventually, she reached her hand out to take it, slowly as if she expected it to bite.

Instead of hearing the usual heavy breathing, a gruff voice said, “We know where you live. We’re coming to get you, bitch.”

Chapter 15

Thursday: Another early dart.

The post came early, just before 10 o'clock. Going to the door, Tupal found Jim's padded envelope lying on the front door mat. Ripping it open he discovered his phone. Someone had found it and sent it back! Hurrah!

He turned it on and began flicking. When nothing happened, he flicked again. Still nothing! All his photographs had been wiped! He tried to make a phone call but realised his contact list had gone too.

His anger burst like a fragmentation grenade, "Bloody Moira, I'll kill her!"

The words had barely left his lips when there was knock on the front door.

Still full of fury, he opened the door and snapped, "Yes. What d'you want?"

There were two men standing outside. Doing a double take, Tupal suddenly realised one of them was *Firem Sparrow*. Although Sparrow had made an appointment to pay him a home visit, Tupal had totally forgotten.

Sparrow gave him an icy smile, "May we come in, Mr Tupal?"

Having little choice, Tupal stepped back and let his two visitors in. Once in the living room of Tupal's four-bedroom detached house, Sparrow was surprised to discover how tidy it was. He then caught a glimpse of an older woman via an open door busily tidying up.

Seeing Sparrow's interest, Tupal said, "That's Mrs Bacon. She's my cleaning lady; she comes around three times a week."

Sparrow mentally filled in the gaps. Rumour had it that Tupal had once been married but his wife had left him because of his drinking habits and violent temper.

After suggesting that Tupal close the door, Sparrow said, "I don't think I need to explain why we're here."

~*~

Around the time Sparrow was calling on Tupal, Flinnett phoned Replan direct, "I'm afraid I won't be in today. You're in charge again, understood?"

Flinnett then contacted Sandra, asked if anything urgent had come in and then gave her the same message. He wouldn't be in.

The news travelled fast. Although Replan tried to exert his authority, the rest of the office decided if Flinnett was away, they were going to have another early dart. They'd do what they'd done on Monday, they'd work until 1.00 o'clock and then they'd go on a pub-crawl. Not wishing to go against the majority, Replan eventually caved in.

Moira frowned. Taking an early dart went against the grain; going twice in a week was a liberty.

Noticing the frown of disapproval, Sandra said, "Good. I'm glad you don't want to come along. You can hold the fort as usual. If anyone rings, say we're in a conference. If it's really urgent give out a mobile number but don't do it unless you have to; got that?"

When Moira didn't reply, anger flared in Sandra eyes. "I said have you got that?"

Moira nodded, "Yes, okay".

Commented [DG4]: This is where it needs to be matched with the earlier bit about Sparrow

I have tweaked earlier

Satisfied that Moira was prepared to play the role of office door mat once again, Sandra went to all the offices, calling out to each, "Moira says she'll stay here and take any phone calls."

When she returned, Moira found the courage to speak up for herself, "That's not very fair you know, leaving me behind."

"You wouldn't want to come anyway."

"Why not?"

"Tupal's joining us," Sandra replied. "And he's still pissed off with you. First you steal his phone, then you wipe off all his photos and phone numbers. Then you get him suspended."

"Suspended? What d'you mean?"

"Apparently, Mr Flinnett and *Firem* Sparrow suggested he took time off until the dust settles. Once he gets back, Mr Flinnett and Mr Sparrow intend to interview him again."

Moira's spirits rose.

Guessing at the thoughts going through Moira's mind, Sandra couldn't suppress a giggle. "Tupal won't get the push. The chances are *you* will."

"Me, sacked! But I haven't done anything!"

"So you say."

"I haven't," Moira snapped.

"Whether you have or you haven't, everyone else thinks you have," Sandra replied. "As far as they are concerned, it's guilty until proven innocent, you can't prove you didn't take Tupal's phone, so the fickle finger of Fate is pointing straight at you. Besides, you're less important than Tupal. He's a fee earner and you're not. No contest."

"That's not fair."

"No it's not," Sandra agreed. "And even if Mr Flinnett believes your story, I can guarantee that Tupal won't be sacked."

"Why not?"

"Because Tupal knows where the bodies are buried," Sandra replied.

Moira frowned, "What bodies?"

"It's a figure of speech," Sandra said. "Before he went down to the Milton Keynes office, Flinnett and his wife used to live in Tiphham and he worked here then. When the previous manager suddenly died, Mr Flinnett was sent back to take control. As he knew the area, he was the obvious choice."

"What's this got to do with Tupal?"

"Before he left, Mr Flinnett become involved with another woman. Her name's Lisa," Sandra said. "When he came back, he rekindled the relationship."

Moira was shocked, "You're joking?"

Sandra shook her head, "I was only told recently but it all makes sense. This Lisa is an unmarried mother with three kids in tow. If what Tupal says is true, Flinnett let her move into a house he used to rent out."

She then grinned, "My guess is, she pays the rent in kind."

"What's this got to do with Tupal?"

"He knows all about the affair," Sandra replied. "That's why Mr Flinnett lets him get away with so much. He wouldn't want his wife finding out about his hanky-panky, would he?"

~*~

Within minutes of Jim entering the office, Moira popped her head around the door. She said, "I've been told to tell you won't be needed this afternoon."

When Jim frowned, Moira said, "Don't worry, you'll get paid."

"What's going on?"

"Mr Flinnett is not coming in today, so *they* have decided to take another early dart."

"You say *they*. Who's *they*?"

"Everyone," Moira replied.

"Including you?"

Moira shook her head, "No, not me. As always, Sandra told me I have to stay behind and hold the fort. So I'll be all on my own."

"No you won't," Jim replied. "I still have to look after the education centre."

He then noticed the expression on her face, "Is something the matter?"

"Something happened last night."

"What?"

She told him about the last late-night phone call.

Jim looked alarmed, "The caller said what?"

"We know where you live. We're coming to get you, bitch," Moira repeated.

Jim's mind raced. "So, what are you going to do? Now you've *got* to go to the police."

Moira shook her head, "You've got to be joking."

"No, I'm serious."

Moira shook her head, "No police."

"Why not?"

After swiftly giving him a family background, Moira repeated, "No police."

Jim let out a sigh of exasperation, "Then what are you going to do?"

"I'm not sure yet," Moira admitted. "I've packed a bag. As a last resort, I'm thinking of going back to my mother's place for a few days."

Realising the theft of Tupal's phone had caused her a great deal of grief, Jim felt guilty. "Look, I'm sorry to have caused you so much trouble."

Moira shook her head again, "No you haven't. I've been getting these calls long before you became involved. In a way, I'm relieved actually."

"Relieved? How do you make that out?"

"You taking his phone brought everything to a head," Moira replied. "You've destroyed the photographs and the last few days have convinced me I need to get another job. I've had enough of this place."

Moira's headset began to flash. As she left to deal with the call, Nemesis entered Jim's mind.

"I think it is time to do something about these people."

He pulled out the camera that Flinnett had given him. "I think I'll follow 'em when they go out. A few timed and dated photographs wouldn't go amiss."

~*~

At 1 o'clock the office emptied and the entire staff of Slobend, Fleecem & Skinnem began walking to the closest watering hole, The Wellington public house, better known locally as "The Welly."

The only exceptions were Moira who'd stayed behind and Rheingold who went to collect Paul Tupal and Carl Bamforth. Even though Bamforth had left Slobend, Fleecem & Skinnem, he was usually included in office pub crawls.

After taking a timed and dated shot of Moira sitting at her desk fielding calls, Jim went around the offices photographing empty desks. Leaving the building, he caught a glimpse of James Ingermann, the budding writer. Jim began following at a discreet distance.

Part way to the Welly, he nearly bumped into Tupal and Rheingold who were on their way from the rear car park. Jim later found out that the stranger they had with them was Carl Bamforth.

Diving behind a gnarled silver birch growing in the pedestrianised area, Jim waited for them to pass and took a series of shots as they walked through the main door of the Welly.

As he didn't want to be seen, Jim wondered what to do next. He remembered that the Welly had a large conservatory at the back, which faced onto the main car park. Walking down a narrow alley that ran alongside the pub, Jim came to a fence, one made from vertical hit and miss palings. Glancing through a gap in them, he caught a glimpse of Sandra, Urnwood, Tupal, Bamforth and Rheingold. Although he'd also hoped to see other members of staff, he pushed the camera lens between the slats and began taking more timed and dated photographs.

He'd barely finished when the whole group moved off and he heard voices he recognised coming from the front of the pub.

Swiftly retracing his steps down the narrow alley, he saw the whole group moving off to the next pub. The pub crawl had started in earnest.

Keeping a safe distance, Jim followed them to The Albion and went through the same procedure as he'd done at the Welly. This time he photographed Ingermann with Sandra and Urnwood. Then Philain, Putman, Snare, Rosserman and Springfield walked into view.

Twenty minutes later, the whole group left The Albion and headed for one of the small squares not far from the centre of Tiphams. Still keeping his distance but using the zoom lens when needed, Jim took a few shots of the whole group when they began larking around in the square. Gratifyingly, Tupal was at his best and Jim was able to get a clear shot of him urinating in the doorway of a defunct bank building.

Eventually the whole group moved towards a statue of Edmundo J Cunningham astride a horse, one of Tiphams's most famous war heroes.

Jim heard someone shout, "Hey, Urnwood doesn't your uncle own a racehorse?"

"Yeah, Cornrun Gold."

Tupal called, "I double dog dare you to climb up there and show us how good a jockey you are."

Urnwood laughed. "You'll have to help me up."

With five or six people helping him to climb onto the bronze horse's back, Urnwood slid behind Edmundo J Cunningham and began making rude gestures. Not to be outdone, Tupal placed one of his hands on the bronze horse's nether regions, simulated masturbation and pulled an obscene face. Jim's camera missed nothing.

Hearing shouts of annoyance from passers-by and threats to call the police, Urnwood slid off the horse assisted by the whole group. Once down, they set off en-masse towards The King's Arms.

Jim had visited the King's on several occasions, so he knew the layout and quietly entered via a rear lobby. He made his way to the snug, a small private room at the rear. His luck was in; other than him, the small room was empty.

To cover his presence, he ordered his normal half a mild at the snug hatch but instead of sitting down, he moved towards a large tank of tropical fish strategically

placed in one of the filled arches between the snug and the main bar. Moving to one side of the tank, he had a clear view into the main bar area.

As Jim had been using the camera, he'd discovered it had video and sound settings and he became more ambitious. Within seconds of starting the recording, Tupal and Rheingold began sounding off about the inappropriate sanctions Tupal had suffered at the hands of Flinnett and Sparrow.

"The guy's a bastard," Tupal shouted. "They're both bastards but I don't care. I've got a second income stream. Very shortly I won't need to work for bloody Slobend, Skinnem & Fleecem. Very soon."

Rheingold looked alarmed and kicked Tupal on the shin.

"What did you do that for?" Tupal complained.

"Because you're making a show of us all; keep your voice down. You'll get us thrown out."

Undeterred, Tupal repeated, "Flinnett is a bastard and I'm going to sort him out. I'm going to tell his wife about Lisa."

Given the chance, Jim would have recorded more but Rheingold said, "Come on, let's get him out of here."

Within seconds, the whole group moved towards the exit door, intent on moving onto a new pub.

Ducking down to make sure he wasn't seen, Jim waited until they'd all left and set off in pursuit. Five minutes later, he took a series of shots of them entering The Brown Bull. Suddenly, someone called out his name. Swiftly hiding the camera in one of his coat's huge pockets, Jim swung around and realised it was Sandra who'd seen him.

Instead of challenging his presence, Sandra smiled and said, "Want to join us Jim?"

Realising she hadn't seen the camera, Jim smiled back and held up the bag he was holding, "I've got to do some shopping otherwise we'll run out of tea."

Sandra gave him a smile and moved off.

Jim cursed, "Why didn't I notice she wasn't with the rest of them?"

Realising he'd nearly been caught in flagrante delicto, Jim decided he had enough incriminating information and returned to the office to prepare drinks for the education centre.

While he was in the tea point, he placed the camera against the glass opening and took a shot of Moira still sitting at her desk taking calls.

Taking pity on her, he poured her a cup of tea and took it out to her.

As he put it down next to her, she said, "You followed them, didn't you?"

"Yes," he replied. He pulled the camera out of his pocket. "I've taken a few incriminating snaps."

"Show me."

Reminded of what had happened to Tupal's phone, Jim said, "You won't delete anything will you?"

When Moira shook her head, Jim reluctantly handed the camera over. After running through the collection, she said, "Are you going to put these on Facebook?"

"I don't do Facebook," Jim admitted.

"I bet Gerry does," Moira replied.

"I've no doubt he does," Jim replied, retrieving the camera. He walked around the office picking up stray cups and taking more snaps of empty offices and desks.

Coming alongside Urnwood's desk, he glanced at the photograph of Ashley and realised why Urnwood had wanted the condoms. He stared at the photograph of Cornrun Gold. As the flyer had the name of the stables clearly marked, he took out the camera again. He then took a snap of Ashley.

Satisfied, he took the cups to the kitchen and pulled his phone out of his pocket to call Ian.

"You know how Gerry said he would help if I decided to go ahead with the plan. D'you think he *really* would help us?"

"Of course," Ian replied. "He said he would."

"What about if you all come over at the weekend again," Jim said.

"I'll contact him and let you know," Ian said.

Jim had barely finished loading the dishwasher when Moira appeared again. She was wearing her coat and Jim realised she was ready to leave. When he glanced at his watch and realised it was only 3.45pm she reminded him that Mr Flinnett had told her to go home early to avoid possible confrontations with Tupal supporters.

Grabbing his own coat, Jim followed her towards the front door and noticed the small suitcase standing near the doorway. He recalled she was hoping to go to her mother's house.

With the door locked, Moira picked up her case and said, "Can I have another talk back at your flat again?"

"I'm afraid it's a bit of a mess," Jim replied.

"It doesn't matter."

After walking the short distance, Jim let them in and waved her towards a chair.

"What's on your mind?"

Moira suddenly looked worried. "You know I told you about the call I got last night. I'm scared."

"I'm not surprised."

"I could go back to my mother's place, but I don't really want to," Moira said.

"We're not on the best of terms."

Jim decided to throw her a lifeline, "Look, we hardly know one another except at work. But you can stay here for a few days if you want to."

When Moira's eyes showed slight alarm, Jim said, "I'm not trying anything on. There's a spare bedroom and there's a lock on the door."

"You'll let me stay for a few days?"

"I just said I would, didn't I?" Jim replied. He paused, "Just one thing. I've arranged for Ian to bring his mates around on Saturday."

"Does that matter?"

"No. I suppose it doesn't," Jim replied. "I'd better show you your room."

Once she'd had a look around, he said, "This okay?"

When she nodded, Jim went to the airing cupboard and dragged out some bed linen and handed it to her.

"You're very organised for a man."

"My wife was ill for some time before she died," Jim replied. "I've learned how to do things. Would like to watch TV?"

Moira shook her head, "Would it be okay if I had a lie down for a while?"

Guessing she hadn't had much sleep since the phone calls started, Jim nodded.

"No problem. Will you be okay on your own for a while?"

Her face showed alarm, "Are you going out?"

"I won't be long," Jim replied, "Promise."

Moira nodded and moved towards the bathroom. As the door shut, Jim glanced at his watch. It was only half four and Slobend, Skinnem & Fleecem's normal closing time was half five so there was still time to catch up with Tupal, Rheingold and the rest of the errant staff.

Slipping on his coat and picking up the camera, he let himself out and set off towards what the local planners had dubbed the *cultural centre*.

It took him ten minutes of prowling before he caught a glimpse of Rheingold sitting under a sun umbrella in the grounds of the Manor House. He then heard Tupal's loud voice still proclaiming what he was going to do to Flinnett. Guided by Tupal's voice, Jim began to move around them so he could get the best shots without being seen. Urnwood staggered into view. He bent double over a drainage gully and was violently sick.

Jim grinned, "That little scrote deserves everything he gets."

Once office closing hours had come and gone, Jim smiled and started talking to himself again, "I've now got proof they've not been working for most of the day."

Satisfied, he slipped the camera into his coat pocket and headed back.

When he entered the flat, he heard a slight snoring noise coming from the spare bedroom, so he made no attempt to speak to Moira. Instead he went into the kitchen and put the kettle on.

He'd been pottering around for about ten minutes when a quiet voice said, "So you're back then."

When Jim nodded, Moira added, "Where did you go?"

Jim passed her the camera, "Have a look."

Working her way through the latest images, she said, "Are you going to send them to Flinnett?"

Jim shrugged, "I've not decided yet but I'm sure Ian and Gerry will made good use of them."

~*~

Around 10.30 Moira said she was going back to bed.

Jim held his hand out and said, "Phone."

"Eh!"

"If they ring tonight, I have a little surprise in store for them."

"What sort of surprise?"

Jim held up an old penny whistle and blew it, "If they ring, they'll go away with burst eardrums."

Chapter 17

Friday: No show day.

When Moira woke, she felt momentarily disorientated. She wasn't in her own room. So where was she? A mild panic ran through her; had she finally succumbed and ended up in Tupal's bed?

She then realised where she was. Wanting to know the time, she put her hand out and tried to find her phone before remembering Jim had taken it. While she was wondering if he'd carried out his threat, she heard slight noises coming from the kitchen and realised that Jim was already up and about. Opening her overnight bag, she nipped into the bathroom to get dressed.

When she entered the lounge she said, "What time is it?"

"Time enough for you to have some breakfast," Jim replied.

"Can I have my phone back?"

"Sure. By the way, can you give me your number? The way things are it would be sensible if I had it."

He pushed a small address book and a pen in her direction. Once she'd made an entry, Jim handed her phone back. She immediately checked the time. It was only 7.45. She yawned. She could have had another half an hour's shut eye at least. Moira wondered why Jim was up.

Answering her unspoken question, Jim said, "I don't sleep well these days, so I normally get up early."

"Did you get anyone with your whistle?"

Jim shook his head, "Mind you, I didn't expect to get a call."

"Why not?"

Jim shrugged. "Judging by what I saw last night, if it is someone at Slobend, Skinnem & Fleecem who's calling you late at night, they'd have been too drunk to do anything."

He made a prediction, "I doubt if there will be many in today."

"What do we do if there aren't?" she asked.

Jim picked up the camera. "Then I'll photograph all the empty desks for part of my record." He paused. "What d'you want for breakfast?"

"I don't normally eat any breakfast."

"That's why you're so thin," Jim told her. "You need feeding up. You must eat something."

"Any corn flakes?"

Finding a packet, he made sure her bowl was full and passed it to her. As she added milk and tucked in, Jim smiled. She was eating; his good deed for the day.

While she was crunching, Moira began operating her phone with her thumb. Three or four flicks later, she said, "Look at this!"

Jim squinted at the small screen not really understanding what he was seeing.

Sensing his lack of understanding, Moira said, "It's the office WhatsApp. These must have been posted last night."

"Who's That? Never heard of it."

"WhatsApp," Moira corrected.

"The office has a closed group, and everyone posts things on it," Moira explained.

"Look at this!"

As Moira carried on flicking through the sequence, Jim caught a glimpse of a backside pumping away before catching a glimpse of the couple's faces. He realised Tupal was having sex with Sandra.

Jim looked shocked, "Didn't you say that Replan and Sandra were an item?"

"Yeah," Moira replied. "Or at least, I thought they were."

"Won't Replan see this?"

Moira shook her head, "I know he isn't in the group. He doesn't like his phone pinging all the time."

"Good job," Jim replied.

A moment later another sequence started, showing images of a lake and several members of Slobend, Skinnem & Fleecem's staff skinny dipping. Tupal emerged from the lake giving a full-frontal display.

"I'm sure Flinnett would have something to say if he saw these," Jim said.

He'd barely made the comment before Sandra came bounding into view also showing her assets.

Taking her phone back, Moira grinned, "We've got to get these onto Facebook." She began tapping furiously.

"What are you doing?"

"When Tupal and Sandra sees these, they'll make sure they're deleted," Moira predicted. "So I'm making a copy. When Ian and Gerry come over tomorrow, I'll show them this. I'm sure they could use it."

Jim said, "On Facebook?"

"That's what I'm thinking. They might get removed but it's worth trying."

Not for the first time, Jim began having misgivings, "Do you think that's wise?"

"It's poetic justice," Moira replied. "Tupal took pictures of me in the nude and made a show of me. Now we've got pictures of him and Sandra shagging one another."

As she finished tapping, Jim cleared away her breakfast bowl and placed it in his dishwasher along with his own breakfast things.

He repeated his misgivings, "If we use that stuff, we may regret it."

"Don't worry, I'm only saving it," Moira said. "I'll leave it to Ian and Gerry to decide what to do with it."

Moira told him about the conversation she'd had with Sandra the previous day. "It's obvious Tupal has been blackmailing Flinnett. He's pulling Flinnett's strings. More importantly, Tupal brings in work, I don't. I'm a no-mark. So it stands to reason that I'll get the push and Tupal will get off scot free."

"I thought you'd decided to leave, anyway."

"When I leave," Moira snapped. "I want to go on my own terms, not because Tupal has me fired. If Tupal is discredited, he won't be able to have me fired. With the photographs you've taken and the ones I've just saved, Tupal will be shown up for what he is: a totally irresponsible arsehole."

Jim thought about it. "I suppose you're right."

Glancing at his watch he changed the subject, "Come on, it's time to leave."

"But you're not due in until mid-morning," Moira said.

"Did you think I'd let you go down there on your own?" Jim replied. Slipping the camera into his pocket, he nodded towards the door.

~*~

Commented [DG5]: This is another thing that bothers me. If this was on the office WhatsApp, then Replan would see it but there is nothing to suggest he has or any consequences – in fact, later on in the novel, there is a scene where they are having sex.

Commented [DG6]: This implies that she puts them on FB, but, even if she did, they would be removed straight away, and further on in the novel it's clear that she hasn't because one of the boys suggests doing it.

I've tweaked it What do you think?

By the time 10 o'clock arrived, Jim was beginning to get bored. His prediction had come true; other than Moira and him, no one else had turned up for work.

Moira began to get nervous, "What do I say to Mr Flinnett if he calls?"

Jim shrugged, "Why cover for them? Tell him the truth. They took advantage, had an early dart and are now unfit for work. If he does call, tell him no one has come in other than us."

The words had barely tripped off his tongue when a phone rang.

Moira took the call with the tap of a button, "Good morning, Slobend, Fleecem & Skinnem, how may I help you?"

A few seconds later she said, "Thank you for letting us know Mrs Ingermann, I'll pass the message on."

When Jim glanced over, Moira said, "That was Ingermann's wife. She thinks her husband may have flu."

A few moments later, there was another call, "Good morning, Slobend, Fleecem and Skinnem, how may I help you?"

After listening for a second or two, Moira said, "Thank you for letting us know, Mrs Snare. I'll pass the message on."

To Jim, "That was Ralf Snare's wife. He's ricked his back and won't be in."

"Hum," Jim observed. "Painful but less life threatening than flu."

Another call, "Good morning, Slobend, Fleecem and Skinnem, how may I help you?"

A long pause then, "Mr Ellis, please accept my apologies, our Mr Philain has unfortunately been taken ill. I'll arrange for him to come and see you some other time."

As Moira continued to field a series of calls from staff relatives reporting the sudden onset of unexpected diseases, and angry client's enquiring the whereabouts of various representatives, Jim slipped out to the tea point and began making a brew for the education centre.

When he came back, he took another photograph of Moira at her desk and a series of photographs of rooms full of empty desks. Having nothing else to do, he was tempted to go back and talk to Moira but then remembered Simon Rand owed him some money.

Walking to Rand's office, Jim knocked on the door and a voice shouted, "Come in, Jim."

Without prompting, Rand passed Jim an envelope and said, "Did you know some of your people got themselves arrested last night?"

"Eh!"

Rand grinned, "Most nights I take my dog for a walk around Crummer's Lake. Last night there was a ruckus and the police were called."

He pulled out his mobile and began tapping. Finding the right file, he held it up and images similar to the ones on Moira's phone began to roll. The only major difference was, towards the end, a small group of police officers suddenly appeared and began making arrests.

Jim said, "I don't suppose I could have a copy of that please?"

"Sure, give me your number."

Jim thought fast. His phone was basic so if Rand sent him the videos they wouldn't show up. Remembering he had Moira's number, he pulled out his address book and told Rand to send them there. A few second later, Rand's phone made a slight whooping sound as the images flew through the ether.

~*~

When Jim rejoined Moira, she said, "I don't know who sent them, but I think Sandra and Tupal were arrested last night."

"They were," Jim confirmed, "More ammunition for Ian and Gerry."

Pulling the camera out of his pocket again he said, "You know that list of excuses you showed me?"

"Yeah."

"Could you photograph that too?"

She'd barely finished when another call came in, "Good morning, Slobend, Fleecem & Skinnem, how may I help you?"

Having little to do, Jim moved away from Moira's desk and slipped into the Replan group office. As some of the desks hadn't been tidied when the staff had left, he inspected some of the papers on them but didn't understand what he was looking at; they might as well have been written in Greek. He was on the point of leaving when he decided to have another look at the poster for Cornrun Gold.

Urnwood had tacked an email from his uncle next to the horse's picture. Cornrun Gold's next race was scheduled for next Friday.

"So the young scrote, his mother and his girlfriend have been invited along, eh! And they are joining Mark Fleecem on Thursday night and staying at a local hotel; all right for some."

After taking a photograph, Jim decided to inspect the car park but other than Tupal's damaged car, it was totally empty.

Chapter 18

Saturday morning

Flin Rheingold heard a hammering on the front door. Sensing trouble, he moved towards the window and moved the curtains so he could see out. Big Al was standing on the doorstep.

When he opened the door, Big Al strode in without bothering with any of the niceties. "He's not at his house so I assume he's here. Where is he?"

"Where's who?"

"Your brainless mate," Big Al snapped, striding down the hall. Glancing into the kitchen he saw Carly, Rheingold's girlfriend and repeated the question.

"Where is he?"

Carly was more co-operative. "He's in the conservatory. We dumped him there because he snores when he's drunk."

Finding Tupal sprawled on an inflatable bed in the conservatory, Big Al went back to the kitchen, grabbed a bottle of sparkling water, ripped the cap off and poured the contents of the bottle onto Tupal.

Tupal woke with a start, spluttering.

He looked at Big Al accusingly, "What did you do that for?"

Instead of answering, Big Al opened the French doors, grabbed Tupal and lifted him off his feet. He dragged the still-drunk Tupal over to a large fish pond and pushed his head below water. Thinking it was feeding time, Rheingold's golden carp moved in, mouths working.

After holding him underwater for fifteen seconds, Big Al pulled Tupal's head out.

Gasping for air, Tupal said, "What did you do that for?"

"Morgan Flechley's annoyed," Big Al said, and thrust Tupal's head under water again.

Fearing for Tupal's life, Rheingold rushed in, trying to pull Big Al off.

As Tupal emerged again, gasping for breath, Big Al stood up and locked eyes with Rheingold.

"Keep him under control, or else he's likely to end up like Mike Ellerby."

"What's he supposed to have done?"

Big Al pulled out his phone and showed Rheingold images of Tupal shouting his mouth off in one of the pubs and then of Tupal emerging naked from Crummer's Lake and the police moving in to arrest him.

"The boss doesn't like it when people make a display and get arrested. He's also doesn't like idiots shouting their mouths off all over the place. We don't like attracting interest from the cops."

Once Big Al had left, Tupal swore, "Who does he think he is? He's no right to go around doing that."

"Serves you right," Rheingold snapped, throwing him a towel. "Getting arrested wasn't exactly clever, was it?"

Ignoring the comments, Tupal came back with, "What did he mean about ending up like Mike Ellerby?"

Rheingold said, "Mike Ellerby's dead."

Tupal said, "So?"

"It was an open verdict," Rheingold replied. "Most people think it was suicide, but it could have been accidental. Drugs overdose. Or it could have been murder."

"So Morgan Flechley's ape is threatening to kill me then?" Tupal said.

"I think it was more of a warning," Rheingold said. "But I'd heed it if you've any sense. Low profile from now on and it will all blow over."

"What am I supposed to have done wrong?" Tupal griped.

"You saw the images. You were filmed skinny dipping," Rheingold said. "Added to which, like he just said, you've been shouting your mouth off in every pub we've gone in to for the last week. Flechley has spies everywhere."

Tupal snapped, "So what? What's it to him if I have a drink? Everybody gets legless from time to time. That's no excuse for sticking my head under water."

Rheingold sighed, "If you are not careful, you are really going to rub Flechley up the wrong way. The other day, I caught you openly trying to talk someone into buying drugs. You know we only supply to carefully vetted clientele. We don't do backstreet deals. We don't hang around on street corners or try to do unauthorised deals in pubs. It's not Morgan Flechley's business model. Added to which, Morgan Flechley doesn't like his associates attracting attention. You've been attracting attention to yourself big time."

"I wasn't attracting attention," Tupal protested.

"Well I'd take Morgan Flechley's warning seriously," Rheingold replied. "If you don't lower your profile, you could end up like Mike Ellerby."

"Did Flechley have him killed?"

Rheingold shrugged, "Like I just said, officially it was an open verdict, but most people think it was suicide."

"But you think Morgan Flechley was involved," Tupal replied.

"I don't think anything," Rheingold said. "And if you've any sense you wouldn't think anything either."

After wiping his face a few more times, Tupal said, "I want to pick up my car up."

"It's locked up," Rheingold reminded him, "in the company car park."

"Then I'll go and unlock it," Tupal replied. "I need you to run me there later on."

"I don't think that's wise," Rheingold said.

Tupal's chin jutted out aggressively, "I want my car. I've decided to go away for a few days."

"Where?"

Tupal said, "Somewhere away from here."

"Why?"

"Because I need space," Tupal said.

"So that's why you want your car?"

"Correct."

"If you disappear, Morgan Flechley won't like it. He'll assume the worst."

"Screw Morgan Flechley, he doesn't scare me," Tupal replied.

Rheingold shook his head disbelievingly, "You must have a screw loose."

Tupal's chin jutted out. "Why?"

"Big Al has just been around and baptised you," Rheingold said. "He's also warned you to keep a low profile. Instead of heeding the warning, you want to do a disappearing act. If you disappear, Morgan Flechley'll assume ..."

"... the worst," Tupal completed. "That I've flipped and am likely to go to the police. Well let him sweat. Morgan Flechley's the same as Flinnett, a paper tiger."

"You're mad."

"So you keep telling me," Tupal replied. "I'm going to get a shower."

Once he'd left, Carly said, "Has your friend got a death wish? If he carries on antagonising Morgan Flechley, he'll get himself into trouble."

"I've given up trying to work out how Paul's mind works," Rheingold said. "Most of the time he's totally normal and then he loses it without much warning."

"Don't you think it's time to distance yourself from him?" Carly said.

"Just what I was thinking," Rheingold said. "But I'll speak to Flechley first."

"Why?"

"If I just abandon Paul, he's likely to go totally off the rails," Rheingold replied.

Carly tutted, "He's trouble. Why's he gone this way?"

Rheingold shrugged. "He's smoked pot, skunk, taken crystal meth and anything else he can get his hands on for most of his life. They say it addles the brain eventually. I often wonder how he functions sometimes. They say it gives a long-term user mood swings, and some people become aggressive. That's why I stick to selling and not taking these days."

"He also drinks too much as well," Carly reminded him.

"And that," Rheingold agreed.

~*~

There was a knock on Jim's door. It was Ian, Gerry and Mick.

Ian said, "Where can we set up?"

Jim frowned. The last time they'd come around, Gerry had just plonked his laptop on the couch.

"Set up?"

"We could be here sometime," Ian said, "We could really do with a desk or something."

Jim scratched his head, "Sorry I haven't got a desk."

Moirra suddenly appeared from the spare room and pointed at the large dressing table Jim's deceased wife had once used.

"They can use this as a desk."

Ian's jaw dropped. Although he'd met Moira before, it now looked as if she'd moved in.

Sensing the unspoken question, Jim said, "Moira is staying with me for a few days because of the hassle she's been getting where she was living."

Ian gave his grandfather a slightly worried look.

Moirra repeated, "They could use the dressing table."

As Gerry and Mick pushed past, Ian whispered, "Is she your girlfriend, Grandpa?"

Jim couldn't help chuckling. "I think I'm a little past that. No. I said she could stay because she's still being bullied at work and getting nasty phone calls at home. The bullying seems to be getting worse. Someone called her and said they knew where she lived and were going to get her."

"That's bad."

Overhearing the comment, Gerry re-emerged from the spare room. "Tell me about it."

Jim dropped his voice to a near whisper and briefly described what had been going on, and the most recent telephone call Moira had had.

Catching her name being mentioned, Moira came back into the hall and heard Gerry say, "I don't like bullies. I don't like them at all."

"Neither do I," Moira cut in. She glanced at Jim, "Don't forget to tell Gerry about those photos of Tupal and Sandra being arrested." **Maybe he could put them on Facebook.**

Gerry's interest peaked. "I know who Tupal is; who's Sandra?"

Commented [DG7]: Continuity with my earlier comment

Omit – Not required.

"I'll tell you shortly," Jim replied and pulled Ian to one side, "Gerry's not going to do anything illegal is he?"

Ian shook his head, "Of course not Grandpa."

"Then what exactly are you lot planning to do?"

Overhearing once more, Gerry cut in, "Nothing specific at this stage. It's just fact finding. Good planning is everything. Ian tells me you have some lists; names and addresses?"

Giving Gerry a hard look, Jim said, "Are you sure you're not going to do anything illegal?"

"Of course not," Gerry cut in and gave Jim a winning smile.

Although he was still uncertain, Jim handed over the list that Moira had given him, and the car park list and then followed Gerry into the spare room. He glanced in Moira's direction and noticed a slight smile.

She said, "I'm beginning to feel a lot better now. I've got people fighting for me."

Studying the list, Gerry said, "Did you say you had some photos and videos? And what's this about someone being arrested?"

"I have some photographs on my camera," Jim replied. "Moira has some more on her phone."

Gerry held his hand out, "Let's have the camera and the phone then. I need to download the images."

Jim hesitated, "You won't damage the camera, will you? It's not mine."

"Nar!"

After reluctantly handing the camera over, Jim watched the images he'd taken appear on screen.

Once he'd studied the photographs Jim had taken in the car park, Gerry said, "What have you taken these for?"

Jim said, "My boss has given me keys to the office car park so I can check for visiting cuckoos."

Gerry frowned, "Cuckoos?"

"Illegally parked cars. I've taken photographs of the various badges because I thought they might be useful."

Opening the files taken during the *early dart*, Gerry and the other boys began laughing at the drunken antics of the Slobend, Fleecem & Skinnem staff.

Explaining why he'd taken them, Jim said, "They are time and date stamped."

Gerry zoomed in on the stamps, "These are dynamite."

"Moira has some more stuff that was posted on Who's That."

"WhatsApp," Moira corrected and then obliged by showing the images of Sandra and Tupal having sex.

Mick's eyes went out on stalks, "How did you get these? Jesus they're going at it like, like..."

"Rabbits."

"Donkeys!"

Jim intervened, "Turn that off."

Reacting to his order, Moira skimmed forward to where other members of staff skinny dipping in Crummer's Lake. She then showed the images of the police arrests.

Gerry laughed, "More dynamite."

Mick said, "Let's post 'em on Facebook."

Seeing the worried look on Jim's face, Gerry shook his head, "No point. They'll be deleted. No, we'll save 'em for now."

"Why?"

“Like I said. They will probably be deleted and because if we post them now, the people at Slobend, Fleecem & Skinnem will realise they’re being targeted and will be on their guard. More importantly, if we’re not careful we could get Moira and Jim into trouble; so it’s softly softly catchee monkey.”

When Mick showed disappointment, Gerry added, “Let’s start digging like we planned to do and see what we find, eh! No point in rushing things.”

Once Gerry had confirmed he’d downloaded all the photographs and videos, Ian said, “If I were you Grandpa, I’d wipe these photographs off your camera. Get rid of the incriminating evidence and all that.”

Jim was uncertain, “If you wipe them off, they will be lost, won’t they?”

Mick sniggered at Jim’s ignorance. “They’re stored on Gerry’s computer now, so you won’t lose them.”

“Are you sure they won’t be lost.”

Gerry said, “Stop worrying, we know what we’re doing. So, can I wipe the camera?”

Jim nodded reluctantly. “What happens now?”

Gerry smiled, “Don’t worry. Just sit back. We’ll take it from here.”

Jim began to have misgivings again; like the sorcerer’s apprentice, he’d cast the spell, but he didn’t know how to stop it working; he was no longer in control; anything could happen and probably would.

Sensing his grandfather’s fears, Ian tried to dispel them by saying, “Don’t worry Grandpa. I promise you we won’t do anything illegal.”

Jim relaxed, “Would you boys like a cup of tea?”

There was an immediate chorus of, “Any pop or something like that?”

Jim smiled. “Course.”

~*~

Once Jim and Moira were out of earshot, Gerry flipped the door shut with his foot and glanced at Ian.

“Well done.”

“What d’you mean?”

Gerry grinned, “For stretching the truth.”

“Eh?”

Gerry said, “Telling Jim we’d keep it legal. Believe me; everything we’re going to do from now on will be totally illegal.”

Mick sniggered and echoed, “Everything.”

Ian bridled, “I promised Grandad we wouldn’t do any thing illegal.”

“Don’t worry,” Gerry replied. “We won’t do anything too drastic.”

While Gerry was busily tapping his keyboard, Mick hit his boredom threshold and began looking around. Eventually he found the bag containing the fake number plate and a packet of condoms and started laughing. “Why has your Graddad got jonnies in his bag?”

“Jonnies?”

“You’re joking!”

The boys were He was still laughing when Jim and Moira returned with the drinks. Mick swiftly hid the plate and the condoms behind his back but carried on sniggering.

Jim said, “Okay, what have you been up to?”

Seeing that Mick had something behind his back, he moved around him and grabbed the number plate.

Commented [DG8]: I think Ian would say something here; some kind of objection.

Done

Commented [DG9]: Condoms make him laugh but the video of people having sex didn’t? I think you need to write some more of Jim’s reluctance into showing them those images and some more typical teen boy reaction.

Done

"You shouldn't go through other people's belongings," he said, and slid the number plate back in the bag.

Mick said, "Where did you get that?"

"A friend of mine made it but I was going to put it in the bin," Jim replied. "It was intended as a joke. Most senior staff at Slobend, Fleecem & Skinnem have a name plate over their parking bay so I had intended to fix it to the wall in Tupal's place, but I changed my mind."

"Why?"

"Like I said, it was just an idea," Jim replied. "But I've changed my mind because if I put it up, they'll guess it was me."

Mick sniggered again, "If you were going to throw it away, can we have it?"

Jim thought about it. It was obvious that Mick had devilment in mind. "What are you going to do with it?"

"Just show it around," he said. "It's a real laugh."

After a little more thought, Jim nodded. It hadn't cost him anything after all. What harm could it do?

Not waiting for Jim to change his mind, Mick pushed the fake number plate into his duffle bag.

"Thanks Jim."

Glancing at Moira, Jim said, "Why don't we go in the lounge and let the boys get on with what they're doing?"

Jim waited until Moira went through the door, then clicked his fingers at Mick.

"Give."

Realising that Jim knew he had the condoms in his hand, Mick handed them back, but he couldn't help sniggering again, "You're a bit old for that sort of thing aren't you, Jim?"

Grabbing the condoms and replacing them in the carrier bag, Jim said, "Just for your information they're not for me, they're for John Urnwood."

Ian said, "Urnwood? Isn't he one of the people who played jokes on you?"

"Yeah," Jim admitted. "But he's too shy to get them himself and if I don't get them for him, he'll probably get his girlfriend pregnant. I might not like him particularly, but I've got nothing against his girl. She's innocent in all this."

With that Jim left the room and joined Moira. Mick put his hand back in the bag and pulled the condoms out again.

"I know someone who stuck a pin in someone's jonnies once. They split when he used them, and his girlfriend got pregnant. It's the easy way to get back at Urnwood."

Ian intervened, "No. You heard what Grandpa said. John Urnwood's girlfriend is the innocent all this."

"Come on!" Mick replied. "If he gets his girlfriend up the spout, we'll have really paid him back."

"No" Gerry cut in, "Put 'em back. We don't play dirty, dirty."

"So what do we play?" Mick snapped.

Gerry grinned, "We play electronic dirty. It's much more fun."

Reluctantly, Mick put the condoms back and Gerry set to work.

After he had been tapping away for some time, Mick said, "So when does the fun begin?"

After flicking through the photographs and reading the names, addresses and phone numbers he'd been given, Gerry said, "The fun will begin very shortly."

Urquhart Crow pulled up at Morgan Flechley's house, saw that the front drive was partially obscured by a builder's skip and decided to pull onto the woodland track.

Being slightly early, he made a call, "I'm at Flechley's house now."

His partner, Gloria said, "How long will you be?"

"I've only just got here," Crow replied. He became apologetic, "Morgan Flechley's fast becoming one of my best clients. He's bought into a building company and he appears to be acquiring prime sites all over the place. I can't afford to offend him. If he wants me to call around on a Saturday, then I've got to do it. Hopefully I won't be too long. See you later."

Cutting Gloria off before she could say anything else, he climbed out of his car and was immediately surrounded by mosquitoes. Flapping them away, he crossed the road and stepped onto the wide gravel drive in front of Flechley's house.

Glancing at the skip, his antennae rose. Having been involved in planning major home extensions and housing estates for most of his adult life, he sensed that something was going on. Walking to the side of the house, Crow stared at the newly built extension and felt slightly annoyed. He suspected the extension was being built without local authority approval.

While he was crunching his way towards the front door, Big Al opened it and gestured him inside.

After being led into the lounge, Crow said, "One of these days a planning enforcement officer is going to descend on this place and cause you real problems."

"I really don't know what you mean," Flechley said, feigning innocence.

"Your new extension," Crow replied.

Flechley said, "New extension? What new extension?"

Realising that Flechley would continue to deny the obvious, Crow changed tack.

"Why did you want to see me, Morgan?"

When Flechley waved towards the plans he'd laid out on the table, Crow recognised them and let out a slight sigh. For as long as he could remember, Flechley had been wanting to develop the land he owned at the rear of his house but had been unable to because one of his neighbours had refused to sell him a strip of land that would give him access to a main road on the far side of the nearby wood.

Running his eyes over the outline plans once more, Crow was dismissive, "Not this again. You know your neighbour won't sell."

"We've made a lot of progress since your last assessment," Flechley said.

"What progress?"

Flechley pointed to the plan on the table and circled the only other house in the vicinity. "This belongs to the guy who refused to sell us the land we needed to open up our site."

"Yes, I remember."

"I've managed to do a deal with his relatives," Flechley said. He ran a finger down the long thin strip of land in question. "I'm expecting the land to be mine, or should I say in the hands of an associate, in a few weeks' time. I'll then have all the access I need. So I need you to get an application for planning submission into the local council as soon as possible."

Crow said, "An associate?"

"An overseas buyer who owes me a few favours," Flechley revealed.

"Why did you get someone else to buy it?"

"Mike Ellerby's relatives know that Ellerby never wanted to sell to me," Flechley said. "Getting someone to buy it for me and then re-selling it to me is an easy way around the problem."

“You said his relatives,” Crow said. “How come his relatives are selling?”

“Surely you know,” Flechley replied.

“Know what?”

“Mike Ellerby committed suicide about a year ago,” Flechley replied. “Since his relatives obtained probate, they’ve been only too keen to do a deal. They’re hungry for the money. Sad though it is, Mike Ellerby’s death was a real stroke of luck for me.”

“Why did he commit suicide?”

Flechley shrugged, “How would I know?”

~*~

Driving away from Flechley’s house, Crow glanced sideways and caught a glimpse of three scrambler motor bikes racing through the woods alongside the road. He rounded a bend and slammed on his brakes. There was a fourth scrambler bike slewed across the road.

Jumping out of his car, Crow ran towards him. The boy sitting on the bike removed his helmet. It was Brian Flechley. A few seconds later, the other three scramblers moved in and surrounded Crow.

Discounting the fact he was surrounded and outnumbered, Crow snapped, “You realise you could have been killed.”

Ignoring the comment, Brian Flechley said, “Tell me more about my Dad’s plans.”

“What plans?”

“The plans I saw on the table when you called.”

When Crow showed surprise, Brian smiled, “The house is full of cameras. I watched and listened in.”

“Then you know.”

“No, I don’t,” Brian said. “I couldn’t see the plans properly. Are you going to build on *our* land?”

“Your land.”

“We use it for scrambling,” Brian said. “We like it the way it is.”

Conscious of the animosity in the boy’s tone and the fact that he was still surrounded, Crow said, “I’ll let your Dad know what you think.”

“No you won’t,” Brian replied.

“So what d’you want me to do?” Crow said.

“When you put the plans into the council, do something to make them reject the application,” Brian instructed. “I’m sure you’ll find a way. You’d better, or we’ll come after you.”

With that, the four boys raced off. Crow frowned. He didn’t want to fall out with Morgan Flechley; he also didn’t want to antagonise his violent son.

Chapter 19

Saturday afternoon

Half an hour after speaking to Gerry, Jim and Moira were surprised to hear a gruff voice. They looked at each other.

"Have the boys invited someone else in?" asked Moira.

"Not a clue, but they better not have. The less people who know about this the better," said Jim, standing up to go and check. Moira followed him.

"What's going on?"

Mick replied in the same gruff voice they had heard. Jim looked startled.

Ian said, "Gerry's got this app that alters your voice."

Mick, in the gruff voice said, "Hello Jim."

Gerry took the microphone, tapped the keyboard and said, "Listen to this."

When he spoke, his voice had changed to a cultured woman's voice. They all laughed.

Jim said, "Very funny. But keep the noise down. You'll upset the neighbours."

Going back into the lounge again, Jim settled down with the latest edition of the Tiphham Star. Not wishing to be disturbed, he turned off his hearing aid.

Having nothing else to do, Moira turned on her phone and logged into her Facebook account but once she'd read a few nasty posts from Tupal's friends, she turned it off again. Leaving Jim to study his paper, she let herself out and went for a walk.

~*~

Mick heard the front door close and went to investigate. He realised that Moira had gone out and Jim was fully engrossed in his paper.

Going back, Mick pulled the number plate out of his bag and giggled, "D'you reckon you can get your Grandpa's keys to the car park?"

Ian looked unsure.

Mick said, "Come on, if the car park isn't far away, I'll only need them for twenty minutes."

"What are you going to do?"

"What d'you think I'm going to do?" Mick replied. Glancing at the plate, he added, "Seems too good to waste." He added, "Where is this car park anyway?"

"A hundred yards away," Ian said. "I'll find the keys and come with you."

Gerry glanced up, "Don't get caught."

Ian when into the hall and glanced into the lounge; his Grandpa had fallen asleep, mouth open and the Tiphham Star still in hand but threatening to fall onto the floor.

He had a small rack in the hall where he kept all his keys, so it was easy to find the set neatly labelled, Slobend, Fleecem & Skinem car park.

Mick said, "I don't suppose you've got a screwdriver, have you?"

Ian nodded. Jim kept a load of old tools in one of the kitchen drawers. Ian extracted a few screwdrivers of various sizes and handed them to Mick.

Mick grinned, "See you shortly."

"No you won't!" Ian objected. "I said, I was coming with you."

"Okay," Mick agreed, "If you really want to."

"I want to."

They let themselves out and quietly shut the front door behind them. Striding towards the car park, Ian glanced around. Other than a few window shoppers, the centre of Tiphham was very quiet but it wasn't surprising. Four superstores had opened on nearby retail parks so most of the available trade had been siphoned off. It had left the centre of Tiphham a virtual ghost town; the only parts of the old town fighting back were pubs and restaurants inhabiting the so-called cultural centre which had mainly been pedestrianised.

Tupal's car was the only one in the car park and the sign on the wall said, P Tupal; there could be little doubt about ownership.

Mick grinned. As the car wasn't parked hard against the wall, there was some access to the front but when he attempted to squeeze into the gap, he couldn't. He was too big.

Being slimmer, Ian managed to get in. Stooping down, Ian unscrewed the front number plate and handed it to Mick who put it in his duffle bag. Mick handed over the fake number plate and Ian screwed it home.

Job done, they left the car park and locked the gate behind them.

They'd just crossed the road, when a car screeched to a halt alongside the gate they'd just locked.

Fearing the worst, Ian was about to take to his heels but Mick grabbed him by the shoulder and checked him, "Don't run. It looks suspicious."

He nodded towards a recessed doorway and casually moved towards it. Ian followed him and they looked towards the car. There were two men inside and they appeared to be having a heated debate.

~*~

Rheingold turned the engine off and looked at Tupal. "I don't think this is a good idea, mate. Taking the car is bad enough, but if you do a bunk, Flechley will go ballistic."

Tupal's response was obstinate as usual, "I'm off on holiday. I'm going away. I need my car."

"You'll really wind up Morgan Flechley if you do a disappearing act," Rheingold snapped. "Have you forgotten that Big Al nearly killed you this morning?"

"Bugger Flechley," Tupal growled defiantly. "He doesn't scare me."

Rheingold tried another tack, "You're probably still drunk. You're in no fit state to drive."

Tupal gave him a glazed look, which confirmed Rheingold's worst fears.

"Be sensible!" Rheingold tried again. "You're in no fit state to drive and Flinnett will throw the book at you if you take the car."

Tupal shook his head, "He knows if he does, I'll let his wife know about his little love nest and his world will come crashing down around him. I've got him by the short and curlies."

Rheingold shook his head disbelievingly. "You're not listening to word I'm saying, are you?"

"Now you understand," Tupal said. "I've made my mind up and I'm not listening!" Clicking his fingers, he added, "Give me the key so I can get in."

"What's the point?" Rheingold quibbled. "Even if you get in, you can't drive your car. You said Flinnett took your keys."

Tupal felt in his pocket and waggled a set of keys in mid-air. "There's a spare set and I've got 'em."

Still concerned, Rheingold said, "D'you want me to hang around in case there's a problem."

"I only dented the front of the car," Tupal replied. "It'll start like a dream. It always does. You may as well head off, there *won't* be a problem."

Climbing out, he shouted out, "See you and the gang later on at the Red Lion."

Once Rheingold's car had disappeared from view, Tupal walked towards the car park gates but he made no attempt to open up because he caught a glimpse of his *bête noire*; Moira Buckle was only ten feet away, walking towards him with her eyes down, deep in thought. It was obvious she hadn't seen him.

Swiftly unlocking the car park gate, Tupal let it swing open and lunged at Moira as she passed, dragging her into the car park.

Kicking the gate shut with one foot, he gave her an evil grin. "Well, well, well. Isn't this a nice surprise?"

"Leave me alone," Moira squealed.

"You'll be pleased to know I've got my phone back," Tupal growled. "But as you posted it back to me, you know that, don't you?"

"I didn't take your phone," Moira said. "And I didn't post it back to you."

"Yes you did," Tupal contradicted. "And we both know you did. We also know why you did it, don't we? You wanted to destroy my pictures of you in the buff."

He grinned again, "I hope you realise I can't let your crime go unpunished, now can I?"

Moira reacted by struggling, but her attempts to escape were futile. She felt Tupal attempting to undo the belt on her jeans. Fearing the worst, she fought harder, but her efforts were rewarded by a punch to the side of her head.

Tupal said, "If you don't co-operate, I'll thrash the living daylights out of you. Understand?"

Tears leaked from Moira's eyes. She felt dizzy and sick from the blow and from fear. "Please don't hurt me. I didn't take your phone. I've not done anything wrong."

Ignoring her pleas, Tupal tugged at her belt again. When it came loose, he pushed at her jeans until they were round her thighs. Forcing her against the wall, he began pulling at her underwear.

Knowing what was about to happen, Moira squealed and began struggling again, oblivious of the rough edges of the wall scraping into her back.

"No, please don't, please don't, please don't," she whimpered.

Annoyed by her resistance, Tupal grabbed her throat and balled his other fist but before he made contact with Moira's face, something grabbed his hand.

Swivelling round, still holding Moira by the throat, Tupal saw Mick towering over him.

Instead of releasing his hold on Moira, he shouted, "Who the fuck are you and what d'you want?"

Mick let his huge fist reply.

Tupal hit the wall and slid to the ground. Moira, sobbing, swiftly pulled her jeans up, never taking her eyes off Tupal. She realised he wasn't moving.

"He's not dead, is he?"

Ian moved towards the fallen man and took a closer look.

Moira repeated, "He's not dead, is he?"

When Tupal groaned, Ian said, "He's not dead. D'you think we should call the police? He was trying to rape you."

Moira shook her head, "No police. I don't trust them."

"Are you sure?"

“Yes.”

Mick said, “Come on. Let’s get out of here before he recovers.”

Glancing back at Tupal, Mick decided to close the gate, but he didn’t lock it. He looked at his hand, it was bleeding.

Showing his injuries to Ian, he said, “I think I hit Tupal in the teeth.”

~*~

Jim woke when the Tiphram Star finally slid to the floor. Noticing that Moira had disappeared he glanced around but there was no sign of her. He was about to pick up his paper when he heard more strange voices coming from the spare room and went to investigate. He was surprised to find Gerry on his own.

“Where are the others?”

“They went out about a quarter of an hour ago and I haven’t seen them since,”

Gerry replied, eyes glued to the screen. “But I don’t mind because I work faster on my own.”

Jim’s old fears returned, “What *exactly* are you doing, Gerry?”

“I’ll tell you what I’m doing, if you level with me,” Gerry said. He placed Tim Pearson’s card on the dressing table.

“Where did you get that?”

“It was on the floor,” Gerry said. “I found it on Monday, the first time I came here. You must have dropped it.”

“Yes,” Jim agreed. “I must have dropped it.”

“It says he’s a detective inspector. So what’s going on?”

“I met him by chance,” Jim said, “In a pub. He came over while I was talking to Simon Rand who runs the training centre next to Slobend, Fleecem & Skinnem.”

“Is that it?” Gerry said.

“More or less,” Jim said.

“So a detective inspector you don’t know from Adam just walks up to you and gives you his card. Come on, d’you think I was born yesterday?” Gerry replied. “Why did he give you his card?”

“If it’s any of your business,” Jim snapped, “he heard me talking about the people I work with and came over. He mentioned that he suspected two of the people working at Slobend, Fleecem & Skinnem might be connected to a local drugs baron. He was hoping I might be able to find some evidence against them, I suppose.”

“What local drugs baron?”

“I don’t remember his name,” Jim said.

“It wasn’t Morgan Flechley by any chance?” Gerry said.

“Yes,” Jim said. “That’s him.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“You never asked,” Jim said. “And I’d almost forgotten meeting Tim Pearson until you showed me his card.”

When Gerry went silent, Jim repeated his own question, “So, what *exactly* are you doing, Gerry?”

“I’m going to help you get *your* revenge Jim,” Gerry said. He tapped Tim Pearson’s card. “In return, you are going to help me get my revenge.”

“What’s your revenge?”

“Getting Morgan Flechley’s son off my back and paying him back with interest,” Gerry replied and told Jim about being forced to deliver drugs for Brian Flechley.

"As you have a police officer who's hoping you'll feed him information, Tim Pearson could be very useful to me."

"What information can you give me to give to him?" Jim said.

In response, Gerry tapped a few keys and images appeared on the screen and a man started talking.

"We're likely to have visitors tomorrow. So let's get set up."

Jim frowned, "What are we watching?"

"This is Morgan Flechley's house just before a police raid," Gerry said. "The grey-haired guy with the pony tail is Morgan Flechley. The other guy is called Big Al. Morgan Flechley's just had a phone call. My guess, he's got a police informer on his payroll."

"What are they doing?"

"They are removing all the real computers and installing old ones for the police to take when the raid the house," Gerry explained.

"How did you get these images?" Jim asked.

Gerry gave him a slight smile, "Probably better you don't know. Can I continue?"

When Jim nodded, the on-screen image of Flechley said, "Okay. Get a large shopping bag and two dummy computers for upstairs."

"Now watch this," Gerry said and began tapping keys again. The images inside Flechley's house moved forwards. Flechley walked over to a storage cupboard and pushed a button. In response, the computer server turned around and disappeared into a fake chimney stack.

Big Al's eyebrows rose, "Did Billy Hufton make that as well?"

Flechley nodded, "Looks like a chimney, doesn't it?"

"It sure does," Big Al admitted.

Flechley said, "Even the police would think twice before smashing a hole in a chimney stack."

As Gerry froze the images, Jim frowned again, "So what happened then?"

"My guess is, that was Flechley's server," Gerry explained. "A special computer designed to take in information from other computers. There's no doubting that Flechley is big time. His builder, Billy Hufton, has put it on a turntable and it can disguise where the server is. When it's turned, the back looks like a chimney."

"Why has he done all that?" Jim queried.

"To throw the police off the scent if they raid his house," Gerry said, "Which they appear to have done recently."

Tapping keys again, he set the images rolling. He pointed to a date on the screen, "It would appear the police raided Morgan Flechley's house a few weeks ago."

They watched images of computers being loaded into a police van.

Gerry continued, "The police grabbed his computers but as Flechley called them dummies they were probably second-hand machines he'd bought up as a job lot. There are a lot of companies selling second-hand computers. You can buy them dirt cheap. Flechley probably guessed the police would just grab them because they were on display. It's unlikely the police will find anything incriminating on them."

"So the police raid was a waste of time," Jim said.

Gerry nodded and began tapping again. This time pornographic images came up. "As you saw, the server is hidden but I managed to gain access to Brian Flechley's real computer. As you can see, he likes his porn does our Brian."

"Who's Brian Flechley?"

"Morgan Flechley's son, the asshole who's bullying me into delivering his drugs," Gerry said.

“So the son’s in this too,” Jim said, “And peddling drugs at school.”

“Sure is,” Gerry confirmed. “Hook ‘em young and keep ‘em hooked is the family motto.”

Tapping a few more keys, Gerry began displaying domestic images. “It would seem that the whole of Morgan Flechley’s house has cameras installed. It would also seem that Brian has found a way to access the camera system and is watching what’s going on.”

“This Brian must be a bright kid then.”

“Correction,” Gerry replied. “He’s far from being bright. He’s just cunning. His father’s probably the same. I’ve no doubt Brian Flechley paid someone to hook him into the home security system and encrypt his files.”

Clicking keys again, Gerry flicked through a series of still photographs. “Tell me if there is anyone you recognise.”

Within a few seconds, Jim said, “That’s Tupal and Rheingold. The guys Tim Pearson think are working for Morgan Flechley.”

Clicking keys again, an image of keys being handed over came up on screen.

Gerry said, “My father has a storage room to keep all his old files in. I recognise the key fob. I think Morgan Flechley is using a local storage facility as a dead drop.”

“Dead drop?”

“Drugs are left by one person and picked up from the storage box by people like Tupal and Rheingold. No doubt the storage box is rented out under a false name.”

“Why is Brian Flechley spying on his own family?”

“Because he can,” Gerry surmised. “And because he’s obviously a voyeur. I’m not going to show you, but I’ve got images of his father in bed with a woman, either his wife or girlfriend.”

Tapping a few more keys, Gerry said, “Watch this. This only happened an hour or so ago.”

As Urquhart Crow came into view, Jim said. “Who’s that?”

Gerry said, “I don’t know for sure, but I think he’s called Urquhart Crow.”

“You think?”

Making the image on the screen enlarge and rotate, Gerry honed in on the title block on one of the plans on the table. In large letters, the title block was headed, Urquhart Crow Associates.

Gerry said, “I looked him up. The company does exist. Now watch and listen.”

~*~

Urquhart Crow walked into Morgan Flechley’s Living Room. “One of these days a planning enforcement officer is going to descend on this place and cause you real problems,” he said.

“I really don’t know what you mean,” Flechley replied.

“Your new extension,” Crow said.

“New extension?” Flechley replied. “What new extension?”

Crow let out a sigh. “Why did you want to see me Morgan?”

When Flechley waved towards the plans he’d laid out on the table, Crow said, “Not this again.”

“We’ve made a lot of progress since your last assessment,” Flechley replied.

“What progress?”

Flechley pointed to the plan on the table and circled the only other house in the vicinity. "This belongs to the guy who refused to sell us the land we needed to open up our site."

"Yes, I remember."

"I've managed to do a deal with his relatives," Flechley said. He ran a finger down the long thin strip of land in question. "I'm expecting the land to be mine, or should I say an associate's, in a few weeks' time. I'll then have all the access I need. So I need you to get a planning submission into the local council as soon as possible."

Crow said, "An associate?"

"An overseas buyer who owes me a few favours," Flechley revealed.

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"Mike Ellerby's relatives know that he never wanted to sell to me," Flechley said. "Getting someone to buy it for me and then re-sell it was a way around the problem."

"You said his relatives," Crow said. "How come his relatives are selling?"

"Surely you know," Flechley replied.

"Know what?"

"Mike Ellerby committed suicide about a year ago," Flechley replied. "Since his relatives obtained probate, they've been only too keen to do a deal. They're hungry for the money. Sad though it is, Mike Ellerby's death was a real stroke of luck for me."

"Why did he commit suicide?"

"How would I know?"

~*~

As the sequence came to an end, Jim frowned again, indicating he hadn't understood the significance of what he'd just seen and heard.

Gerry enlightened him, "There's a strong chance that Morgan Flechley had Mike Ellerby killed so he could acquire the land he wanted."

"My God. What are you going to do?" Jim asked. "Are you going to show this to Tim Pearson?"

Gerry laughed, "I can hardly do that. I'd probably land myself in serious trouble if I did. Hacking's illegal. Besides, I'm sure none of this stuff would be admissible in court."

"You said you weren't going to do anything illegal," Jim snapped.

"Sometimes you can't always win if you play strictly by the rules," Gerry said.

After a long pause, Jim said, "So what *are* you going to do?"

"I'm not going to do anything," Gerry said. "*You are.*"

"Eh! What I am I going to do?"

"Tim Pearson has asked you to keep your eyes and ears open," Gerry said. "So you make arrangements to see him, but when you do, you tell him what you know but you don't drop Ian, Mike or me in it."

"But I might say the wrong thing," Jim said.

In response, Gerry pushed a sheet of paper over, "You can either memorise this or just give it to Tim Pearson."

When Jim glanced at the paper, Gerry said, "As you can see, I have described in detail the information discovered from the recordings we've just watched, including the house in Arundel Avenue."

When Jim nodded, Gerry added, "I've also mentioned Tupal and Rheingold. I've confirmed they are distributing Flechley's drugs."

"So I see."

"I've even drawn a floor plan showing where the server is housed and a photograph of it; information concerning the key fob for the storage unit and the reason why we think Mike Ellerby was murdered, not a suicide. I've also warned Pearson that Morgan Flechley has someone who's tipping him off when raids are likely to take place."

"So basically," Jim said. "All I have to do, is give this to Tim Pearson?"

"That would be the easiest way," Gerry agreed.

When Jim looked uncertain, Gerry added, "There is an alternative. If you trust Simon Rand, you could always give it to him and ask him to act as a go between."

"When d'you want me to do this?"

"As soon as possible," Gerry replied.

"So once I pass this over," Jim said. "Flechley's house is likely to be raided again."

Gerry shrugged, "Hopefully. **Then again, maybe it won't be that easy.**"

"Why?"

Gerry shrugged again. "Morgan Flechley's house was raided recently. We know the last raid appears to have been abortive. As I'm sure Morgan Flechley is being tipped off by an insider and probably has flashy lawyers to protect his back, getting another search warrant may not be as easy as we think. It might lead to claims of police harassment."

When Jim went silent, Gerry said, "But we have to pass on what we know."

"The easiest way would be for me to give this to Simon Rand," Jim said.

"That's what I thought you'd say," Gerry replied and produced an envelope addressed to Tim Pearson. "If you want to play really safe, you can always say you were given the envelope but don't know what it contains."

Jim nodded, "Good idea. I'll give it to Simon Rand when I see him."

"Good," Gerry replied. "Now let's concentrate on *your* revenge. Let's work on *Jim's Revenge*."

Jim said, "Call me suspicious, but why did you agree to help me? Until Ian brought you around, we didn't know one another. So...?"

"I've told you," Gerry said. "I'm being forced into helping Brian Flechley and I don't want to. Added to which, I don't like bullies."

When Jim still looked uncertain, Gerry said, "It's an old British tradition, helping the underdog."

He tapped the envelope with Tim Pearson's name on it. "Once you hand that over, I'll owe you. I'll be returning a favour."

"I see," Jim said. "So what is *my* revenge?"

"Leave it to me, Jim," Gerry replied. "The less you know the better."

When Jim still looked uncertain and made no attempt to leave the room, Gerry said, "You know what Jim, my mouth is like the bottom of a parrot's cage. I could murder another drink."

"Right," Jim replied and went back to the kitchen.

Returning with a glass of lemonade, he was surprised to see he was watching an advertising segment about Cornrun Gold. As the sequence continued, Jim realised Kent's stabling and training facility was only a couple of miles from Tiphham.

"What are you up to now?" Jim asked, suspiciously.

"I just told you, I'm using my computer expertise to get *your* revenge," Gerry said. "And Moira's. She's suffered more than you have. It's time these people were taught a lesson."

"But why are you interested in Cornrun Gold?"

Commented [DG10]: I think I would get rid of this; it's superfluous because, as we know, Flechley's house does get raided again. A reader may see it as a 'plant' for forthcoming difficulties and then feel cheated when there isn't a payoff.

Agreed

“Because John Urnwood’s uncle owns Cornrun Gold,” Gerry replied. “He hasn’t done anything to help people like you and Moira, so he deserves to be punished along with the rest of them.”

Jim would have continued the conversation, but the front door opened, and Moira, Ian and Mick returned. Ian guided Moira into the living room and made sure she was comfortable before taking Mick into the bathroom to tend to his wound.

Poking his head around the bathroom door, Jim saw the blood. “What’s happened?”

“Mick hit that Tupal guy and he went down like a felled ox.”

“He hit Tupal! When and where was this?”

“In Slobend, Fleecem & Skinnem’s car park.”

“What were you doing there?”

“Tupal was in there and he grabbed Moira as she passed.”

Moira came to the door. “Tupal attacked me,” she said quietly. “He was planning to rape me. Mick was protecting me.”

“What!”

Jim looked at Moira properly for the first time since she had returned. “Oh my God, your face. Did he do that?”

Tears welled in her eyes. She rubbed her face furiously, gasping when she caught her temple.

Instead of answering Jim’s question, she whispered, “He pulled my jeans down.”

With shock showing on his face, Jim nodded Moira toward the lounge. “Come on, tell me what happened.”

“I’ve told you what happened,” Moira replied. “I was just minding my own business and Tupal grabbed me.”

When Jim nodded towards the lounge again, Moira finally complied. Ian moved towards the key rack and hung the car park keys where they’d originally been before returning the screw drivers to their home.

When he returned, Gerry nudged the door shut. “I heard all of that that. Will Tupal be able to recognise you or Mick if he saw you again?”

“I don’t know.”

Glancing at Mick’s bandaged hand, Gerry said, “So what happened?”

Before Mick could answer, Ian cut in, “I saw the whole thing. Tupal was attacking Moira. Mick was just protecting her.”

“Okay, sounds like a good alibi,” Gerry replied.

“It’s the truth,” Ian said.

“So I ask again, would he recognise you both?” Gerry repeated. “What if he goes to the police?”

“We caught him attacking Moira,” Ian snapped. “What were we supposed to do?”

Realising he wasn’t going to get a positive answer, Gerry changed tack, “What about the number plate? Did you swap it over?”

Mick sniggered, “I’d love to see Tupal’s face when he sees it.”

“You switched plates then?”

Ian nodded and to prove the point he pulled Tupal’s real number plate out of his duffle bag and held it up triumphantly. “How’s it going your end?”

Gerry returned the grin; he said, “It’s moving like a well-oiled piston.”

A few seconds later Gerry obtained his first real bite when a set of piercing eyes with arched eyebrows descended from nowhere and hovered in the middle of his screen. The text message underneath said, “We have the details. Name the horse.”

Without hesitation, Gerry typed, “Cornrun Gold.”

Five seconds later the piercing eyes returned with the simple message: "Quotation attached."

Knowing he might download a virus if he opened the quotation, Gerry hesitated.

Mick gave Ian a nudge, "What's he doing?"

"No idea," Ian replied.

Gerry half glanced in Ian's direction and said, "At the moment I'm having a real bad attack of the willies."

"Why?"

"Because it could be a trap," he replied. He then revised his answer, "In fact I'm sure it is."

"How d'you know?"

"Gut instinct," Gerry replied.

Ian frowned, "Are we getting in too deep?"

"Maybe," Gerry admitted.

"Okay," Ian said, "Can I ask what you're trying to do?"

"I'm trying to get bids over the dark net," Gerry replied. "The site I'm using is a bit like ebay, but it works in reverse."

"Bids for what?"

"Knobbling Cornrun Gold."

"Why do you want to do that?"

"He employs all the idiots who work at his Tiphram office," Gerry reasoned. "He should have sorted them out years ago. This is just as much his fault as anyone else's. So I'm going to make him pay. The best way to pick fruit without climbing the tree is to shake it."

"What's that meant to mean?"

"If Fleecem were to understand he was being punished for the wrong doings of others," Gerry said, "he might be tempted to put his house in order."

Ian let out a slight whistle, "I'm not sure about this."

Looking at the unopened attachment, Gerry admitted, "Neither am I."

He was on the point of breaking off contact when another message appeared: "This is Ivan. Call me to discuss."

A moment later a mobile number flashed up.

Ian said, "Are you going to call him?"

Gerry shook his head, "It's too risky."

He was just about to abandon his quest when another message flashed up.

"This is Ivan. Will knobble Cornrun Gold for \$50,000 paid in advance."

Bank account details appeared.

Ian laughed, "Well that settles that then. We haven't got \$50,000."

A slight smile formed on Gerry's lips, "No, but I know who has."

A few taps later and he leant back in his chair. "Look, that's Marjory Fleecem's bank account; there's more than enough money available."

"That's theft," Ian countered.

"You're right," Gerry replied. "It's a bad idea."

"Even if wasn't illegal," Ian continued, "if you pay this Ivan guy \$50,000, you've no guarantees he'll do anything. He'll take the money and run."

Gerry nodded, "Objection sustained. We'll dump the whole idea."

Ian let out a sigh of relief. "Thank God for that. I don't fancy winding up in prison."

~*~

When Gerry and the others finally left, Jim picked up Tim Pearson's card and began turning it over in his hands.

Moirra said, "A penny for them?"

Jim let out a sigh, "I'm worried."

"Why?"

"While you were out, I talked to Gerry. He's a nice lad but I get the feeling that there's something driving him," Jim said. "He's got his own agenda."

"I've lost you," Moira replied.

"He's really got the bit between his teeth," Jim said. "He's organising things that I don't know about."

"Like what?"

"He's called it Jim's Revenge. It's also supposed to be your revenge as well."

Moirra said, "I had a good share of my revenge when Mick slugged Paul Tupal. I'll never forget seeing the evil bastard hitting the wall like a sack of potatoes."

"Yes," Jim said. "But that might come back to bite us. Paul Tupal might go to the police and say he was attacked."

"If Paul Tupal goes to the police, I will say what really happened," Moira replied. "If Mick hadn't intervened, Paul Tupal would have raped me."

"Are you certain of that?"

"He had me by the throat and was pulling my jeans down," Moira replied, outraged. "If Mick hadn't slugged him when he did, he would have."

"Sorry," Jim said. "That came out wrong."

"Forget it," Moira said. "I can tell there are other things worrying you."

"Gerry showed me a recording that seems to suggest that a guy called Morgan Flechley, a local drugs baron had a man called Mike Ellerby murdered."

"Mike Ellerby!" Moira said, "He managed our office before Mr Flinnett came. I was told he committed suicide."

"The recording I watched suggested Morgan Flechley was involved. Flechley could have had Mike Ellerby killed," Jim said.

Moirra glanced at the card Jim was turning over in his hands. "What's that you're playing with?"

When Jim handed it over, Moira looked surprised, "Tim Pearson. He's a police officer. Where did you get this?"

"I met him in the pub quite by chance," Jim said. "He overheard me talking about Paul Tupal and he took an interest. He thinks that Morgan Flechley and Paul Tupal are in the drugs game."

"I know Paul Tupal takes drugs," Moira said. "He tried to get me to take some once. He said it would put me in the mood."

"In the mood for what?"

"For sex," Moira replied.

"I hope you refused," Jim said. "The drugs I mean."

"I most certainly did," Moira replied tartly, "The drugs and the sex."

Jim held up the envelope that Gerry had given him and said, "I've agreed to give this letter to Simon Rand and ask him to pass it over to Tim Pearson but request he doesn't say it came from me."

Moirra frowned, "What if Simon Rand doesn't do that? What if he says you gave him the information? Tim Pearson might want to come around and see you, and the boys could get into trouble."

"You really don't like dealing with the police, do you?" Jim said.

“No,” Moira replied. “When I lived at home, my mother and father used to have a lot of rows. We used to have the police around regularly. I can understand why. We must have been the neighbours from hell, a totally dysfunctional family but I’ve developed an inbuilt resistance to dealing with the police.”

“I’m going to have to,” Jim replied. “I’m going to have to trust Simon Rand.”

There was a long pause and then Moira said, “Okay, if that’s the only way. But why are you fretting? Is there something else worrying you?”

“Yeah,” Jim said.

“What?”

“It’s called the law of unexpected consequences,” Jim replied. “Once I hand this over, anything could happen.”

“Like what?”

“That’s what unexpected consequences means,” Jim retorted. “Anything could happen.”

There was another long pause and then Moira said, “I suppose you’re going to have to do something.”

“I’ll see Simon Rand tomorrow.”

Moira still detected procrastination. “There’s still something else the matter isn’t there?”

“If there is a police informer and it gets out that I’ve been helping the police,” Jim said, “Morgan Flechley might find out and send his thugs around.”

“Not if Simon Rand doesn’t mention your name,” Moira said.

Jim sighed, “Hopefully he won’t.”

“I’ve an idea. You could just post that letter through Simon Rand’s letter box.”

Jim shook his head, “I want to make sure he gets it.”

“Okay, you could call him and ask to meet somewhere. What about the pub you met him in?”

“Could do I suppose.”

“Do it,” Moira urged. “See if you can meet him tonight.”

“Just me?” Jim said. “You could come with me.”

Moira shuffled uneasily, “What if we bump into Tupal again?”

“I don’t think there’s much risk of that,” Jim said. “I’ve had a look from the window. The car park gates are shut. Tupal will be long gone.”

“I hope so.”

“You can’t hide away forever,” Jim said. “If you do, Tupal has won.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Moira replied. After a slight pause, she nodded, “Okay, I’ll come with you. The day I’ve had, I could do with a drink.”

~*~

Sitting in the quiet of his bedroom, Gerry logged into the dark web again, found Ivan’s message and typed in 50% up front and 50% on completion.”

Chapter 20

Saturday evening

When Jim and Moira arrived at Jim's local, Simon Rand was waiting. Once Jim had introduced Moira, Rand went to the bar.

Glancing around, Moira said, "It's a bit dingy in here, isn't it?"

Instead of agreeing, Jim said, "Have you got the letter?"

Moira patted her handbag. Seeing that Jim looked nervous, she said, "D'you want me to do the talking?"

Jim nodded, "I might get tongue tied."

When Rand returned, Moira took a sip of her drink and said, "Isn't Tim Pearson one of your neighbours?"

"Yes," Rand said.

Moira pulled out an envelope. It had a note on the front saying, "Please give to Tim Pearson."

"Where did this come from?"

"I normally go into work on Saturday mornings," Moira explained. "I found it in with the post. We don't know who left it there, but we thought it might be important."

When Rand frowned and looked as if he was about to start asking questions, Moira added, "We never gave you that by the way and we have no idea what's in it."

Rand's expression changed, "Ah! You don't want to get involved, is that it?"

"Yes"

"I don't blame you," Rand replied. "I suppose this has something to do with Morgan Flechley." He glanced at Jim and Moira, but their face gave nothing away.

"I told Jim not to do anything dangerous so it's better if you remain anonymous."

Moira nodded.

Rand said, "Understood. No one knows where it came from and I'll keep it that way. I'll just push it through Tim Pearson's letter box when I go home."

~*~

Ivan's return message was terse, "How do I know I'll be paid?"

Gerry returned, "What guarantees have we got that you'll do the job?"

A few seconds later Ivan's message read, "Assignment accepted. Transfer half the money immediately, half into Escrow."

Underneath, there was a form to complete which loosely described Ivan's involvement as veterinary services and bank details. Being unsure what Escrow was, Gerry checked with Google and realised the money would be paid to a third party to hold until the contract was complete.

Not wishing to incriminate himself, Gerry grabbed the list of names and addresses Jim had given him and entered Paul Tupal's details. He smiled; framing Paul Tupal was a nice twist.

Logging back onto Marjory Fleecem's computer, he checked for her credit card details. For reasons best known to her, six cards were listed on her computer, most of them with different companies. When he gained access to her online bank accounts he chose a deposit account that hadn't been accessed for several months but had a substantial sum in it. Gerry transferred some of it to Ivan's account. He then repeated the exercise, with one of her credit cards, all the time anticipating the bank or credit

card company to intervene. When there was no sign of a challenge, he moved to a current account and transferred more money.

He then set about transferring money to the Escrow account. Having other plans as well, he transferred a substantial sum of money from Marjory's account into Paul Tupal's saving's account.

Ivan's message came back within minutes, "Money received, will action this matter shortly."

~*~

The Red Lion was a large country pub; it also had an excellent restaurant attached. It was the haunt of the county set; the type of pub where only Range Rovers, Jaguars, Alfa Romeos, Porsches, BMWs and high-power sports cars met. It was one of the reasons why Rheingold had arranged to give Urnwood and his girlfriend, Ashley, a lift. If Urnwood had turned up at the Red Lion driving his mother's battered ten-year-old Ford, their arrival would have caused a few raised eyebrows; any car with an inferior price tag was guaranteed to meet with sniffs of the type Marjory Fleecem made.

Of course, there was also an ulterior motive for Rheingold offering Urnwood plus partner a lift. As both Rheingold and Carly liked a drink, being breathalysed was always a major hazard. As Ashley could drive but rarely drank, she made a very convenient nominated driver.

Pulling up in the huge car park at the rear of the Red Lion, Rheingold saw a police car half hidden behind a hedge. He immediately spoke to his hands free. A second or two later Ted answered.

"Hi Ted," Rheingold said, "This is Flit. You'll need a decoy later, so get him ready. Looks like we've got fuzz stationed outside."

"Right ho!" Ted replied.

Being an innocent, Ashley said, "What was that about decoys?"

"It doesn't apply to us tonight," Rheingold replied, "We have you to drive us home and women aren't required to be decoys."

"I still don't understand."

Carly answered instead, "It's an agreement we have amongst Red Lion regulars. We take it in turns. Or most of the regulars do. There are one or two that don't approve of decoys, but we think it's a real laugh."

"What agreement?"

"Anyone who's agreed to be a nominated driver has to do a turn as a decoy," Rheingold responded. "We have a vote and the best decoy wins a prize at the end of the month."

"But what do these decoys do?"

"They come out when required but mainly at closing time and stagger around the car park dropping their keys and pretending to be drunk before climbing into their car," Carly replied. "The local police only target the Red Lion occasionally. When they do, they usually only send one car out. Once the police have pounced on the decoy, it takes time to process them. The decoy always drives out of the front entrance. Once the police chase them down the road and are busily breathalysing the decoy, everyone else drives off using the rear exit."

"I still don't quite see how that works," Ashley said.

"As the decoys haven't been drinking the police can't touch 'em," Carly replied. "Once the police have breathalysed the decoy and got a negative, they have to let them

go. The decoy then comes back, picks up their passengers and takes them home. It's a no brainer."

Ashley went quiet for a while but as they climbed out of Rheingold's car and started walking towards the Red Lion, she said, "Surely using decoys must be illegal?"

Rheingold began belly laughing.

Carly said, "Oh you are a real hoot, Ashley. You really are."

~*~

When Tupal recovered consciousness, it was dusk. He groaned, clutching his head. He squinted at his watch, trying to work out what time it was. Cursing, he realised he couldn't account for several hours. Then again, that was nothing new.

Then one memory did return; he was supposed to be meeting Rheingold at the Red Lion.

Struggling to his feet, he vaguely wondered what had happened. Then, bit by bit, more of his memory returned. He'd grabbed Moira and dragged her into the car park. She'd screamed but after that his mind was a complete blank.

Leaning against the wall, he looked round. His car was there, and another memory flashed back. He was supposed to be picking it up. Walking like a drunk, Tupal reached it, dropping his keys as he tried to flash the car to unlock. Eventually, he climbed in and leaned back against the head rest, head aching.

"Sort yourself out, man," he muttered, starting the engine and making a clumsy attempt to reverse out of his space. Taking ten minutes to do what usually took two, he made it out of the gates and stopped to get out and lock them. A woman who was walking her Yorkshire Terrier past the gates, looked at him in horror, picked up her pooch and hurried off.

Tupal shook his head. "What the fuck's up with her?"

Climbing back into his car he pointed it in the direction of the Red Lion. Parking like he'd stole it, he went searching for Rheingold.

Finding him at the bar, he nudged him. "Get one in for me, mate," he slurred.

Rheingold turned and his welcoming smile turned to a look of horror, "What the hell have you been doing?"

"What d'you mean, what you talking about?"

"You're bleeding. Come on," Rheingold said, pushing him in the direction of the gents. A man who was in there gave Tupal a worried look and swiftly left.

Still unaware of what he looked like, Tupal said, "What's going on?"

He glanced in a mirror and was shocked by what he saw. He had blood down his shirt and a bruise was beginning to form on his chin. He opened his mouth and realised his front teeth were missing.

"What happened to you?"

"It was Moira," Tupal said, remembering.

Despite Tupal's injuries, Rheingold started to laugh. "Moira! She can only be six stone wet through. She couldn't knock the skin off a rice pudding."

"The bitch had a tame gorilla with her. He hit me."

"I think we better get you to A & E."

Tupal ignored him and grabbed a handful of paper towels. He wet them and rubbed at the blood stains on his shirt.

"Come on," Rheingold said. "You need medical attention."

"What I need right now is a stiff drink followed by several more."

They left the toilets and returned to Rheingold's table. Tupal slumped onto a bench seat and gulped down the whisky Rheingold bought him.

"The next time I see Moira, I'll strangle her."

"You're a head case," Rheingold snapped. "You've been warned not to cause ripples by Big Al and you still seem hell-bent on rocking the boat."

"This has nothing to do with Morgan Flechley or Big Al, this is between Moira and me."

Carly cut into the conversation, "So what happened? Who beat you up?"

Tupal repeated what he'd told Rheingold.

Carly said, "Would you recognise the man who attacked you?"

Tupal thought hard and shook his head, "I only got a glance at him. It all happened so fast."

She repeated Rheingold's suggestion, "I think we'd better get you to A & E."

Tupal shook his head, "I'm not sitting in A & E for hours. That bitch Moira had me suspended so I'll be able to go to the dentist next week. Then I'm off."

"Off where?"

"I haven't decided yet," Tupal replied. "But I'm going away for a while."

"Where?"

"That's my business," Tupal lisped.

"If you don't tell Flechley where you're going," Rheingold said, "he'll become paranoid. You know what he's like. He gets suspicious very easily."

"Bugger Flechley," Tupal replied. "I'm entitled to a holiday when I want one."

"All I'm saying is, clear it with him first," Rheingold said.

"I'll think about it," Tupal said obstinately.

~*~

Frank Smart had never been a decoy before but he'd watched several people do it, so he had a good idea of what was expected. Leaving by a side door, he attempted to walk along a white line between the parking bays but kept on staggering. Reaching his car, he dropped his keys and pretended to be sick on the ground as he bent down to retrieve them. He eventually opened the front passenger door and climbed in. Realising his mistake, he climbed out of the passenger side and worked his way around the car only keeping himself upright by clinging onto the bodywork.

Once he'd opened the driver's door, he climbed in and started the engine. As he set off, the car began lurching. Kangarooing onto the road, he drove off. The exhibition was like a red rag to a bull. Two seconds later the police car shot out of its hiding place, all lights flashing.

Rheingold gave Tupal a nudge, "The police have just gone after the decoy; time to go home."

Reaching his car, Tupal joined the convoy of cars leaving by the rear exit that led towards a rutted dirt track. The track then joined up with winding country lanes. Once he finally joined the main road, Tupal headed towards Tiphham. Arriving home, he walked into the lounge and slumped down into an armchair. After his intake of several pints of beer and at least five shorts, he fell asleep almost immediately.

~*~

"He's my best friend," Rheingold said.

"I thought I was your best friend," Carly retorted.

"You know what I mean," Rheingold replied. "I've known Paul Tupal for years."

“He was your best friend,” Carly said. “He’s now a liability. I bet you’re regretting introducing him to Morgan Flechley.”

“So what do I do?”

“You can’t control him,” Carly said. “Over the last few months he’s gone downhill fast. He’s losing his sanity.”

“So what do I do?”

“The only thing you can do is tell Flechley,” Carly reasoned.

Rheingold frowned, “I’ll think about it. Maybe I’ll speak to him tomorrow.”

~*~

Tupal awoke with a start at around two am when the alarm on his phone went off. After silencing it, he relieved his bladder and then remembered the reason why he’d set the alarm. Going to a drawer, he pulled out the burner phone he’d been using to call Moira and dialled out. As per normal no one picked up.

He rang again; this time the phone was answered. Tupal started to breathe heavily into the mouthpiece. He was just getting into his stride when a piercing blast hit his ear drum and sent him rolling around in pain.

~*~

Hearing the whistle, Moira shot out of bed, calling, “You okay Jim.”

She rushed into the lounge and found Jim leaning back in an armchair with a smug look on his face. The smug expression turned into a smile as he looked at her. “I got the bastard,” he said.

Chapter 21

Sunday: Jim's Revenge starts in earnest

Marjory Fleecem's phone went ping. Although Mark Fleecem wasn't in the habit of checking his wife's mobile, she could be absent minded and very often didn't respond to texts or emails, so he picked it up and looked at the message. As it was something innocuous, he was about to replace the phone on the coffee table when he noticed that Marjory's bank had sent her a message.

Scrolling down he saw there had been a series of high-value transactions made the previous day. Although Fleecem wasn't a poor man, some of his wife's frivolous expenditure annoyed him. Looking again at the phone, he saw a pattern emerging.

Starting yesterday, her accounts had several transactions made against her bank account and credit cards. They'd been flagged up, but it looked as if Marjory had ignored them all.

Walking into the rear conservatory, Fleecem brandished the phone menacingly. He stopped when he saw Dalisay, their home help. He jerked his head at her. Taking the hint, she retreated, closing the door behind her.

Waving the phone again, he said, "What's this?"

Marjory glanced at the screen and shrugged, "I've no idea. I didn't order anything, you must have done."

"No, I didn't," Fleecem snapped. "I don't even know what it is."

Marjory sniffed and Fluffy, her Pekingese, copied her example, "Well I've no idea either."

Fleecem gave her an icy look, "Maybe this will help you. I've found an email saying your order is on its way and will be delivered by a private courier in the next few days."

Marjory sniffed again, "Sorry. Don't know anything about it."

"Then cancel it," Fleecem ordered and thrust the phone in her direction.

She grabbed the mobile off him and began stabbing at the screen. Handing it back, she snapped, "I've cancelled it. Happy now?"

"Are you sure you've cancelled it?"

"Yes! Damn it."

Snatching the phone back, he looked at the small screen again and then thrust it back under her nose, "What are all these payments for?"

Marjory sniffed again, once more dismissive. As she'd been born into money, extravagance was her middle name.

"Why can't you be like Albert?" she snapped. "He never questioned my spending habits."

Fleecem half smiled. Albert had been Marjory's first husband and rumour had it he'd died of a heart attack shortly after being contacted by his bank manager.

Waving her phone in front of her again, he said, "What are all these other payments for?"

"What other payments?"

"The ones on your phone?"

"What about them?"

The comment lit the blue touch paper, "*Have you even looked at them?*"

"Don't shout at me."

Pushing her mobile into her hands, Fleecem waited for ten seconds and then said, "Have you looked at them?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"What are they for?"

"I've no idea," Marjory replied.

Grabbing her mobile back, Fleecem began flicking up and down the notifications. Eventually he said, stiffly, "Most of them are from your bank showing large sums of money have been taken out of your current and deposit accounts. There's also a number of charges against your credit cards."

Marjory and Fluffy sniffed in unison, "I know nothing about them."

"If you looked at them, you'd know."

"I've stopped looking," Marjory replied. "That phone pings all day long. It's highly annoying."

Exasperated, Fleecem said, "Come on, we need to check this out."

"Where?"

"In the office."

Grumbling, Marjory joined him in his large private office. Fleecem tried to log onto her computer but the password was rejected.

Marjory said, "Is there something wrong?"

"I can't log in."

"I've changed the password."

"Why?"

"Because I couldn't remember the great big long one that Farron gave me."

Farron was their computer specialist.

"So what's the new one?"

"Fluffy123," Marjory replied, stroking her Pekingese. "She loves the new password, don't you Fluff?"

Once into the system, Fleecem saw a small box on the desktop labelled, "Passwords etc."

"What's this?"

"I just told you," Marjory said. "I couldn't remember the great big passwords Farron gave me, so I changed them all to something shorter and then, so I couldn't forget, I made a list of them and put them on the computer where I could find them." Fleecem went pale.

Marjory said, "I do hope you're not going down with anything. There's a lot of flu going around."

"You put all your passwords in a box on the desktop," he stated, in a quiet voice.

"It seemed like a sensible idea," Marjory replied.

"What century are you living in woman?"

Marjory jumped, startled by the shout.

Fleecem, more quietly this time, said, "Please go away before I say something I'll regret."

"Have I done something wrong?"

Fleecem wanted to let her have both barrels but he controlled his temper. Instead he said, "Please go away, Marjory."

"I've said something to upset you, haven't I?"

"Please go away."

"Be like that. See if I care," Marjory snapped back. As she left the room, she added, "And I hope your horse falls over on Friday." As she flounced out of the room,

with Fluffy under her arm, she said, "And you can get rid of Dalisay. I know you're sleeping with her when my back's turned."

Ignoring her temper tantrum, Fleecem disconnected her computer from the internet and made a call.

"Farron, I know it's Sunday but I need you here fast."

He then logged into Marjory's bank account and began checking. His heart sank. In the hope of preventing any further raids, he contacted the bank's emergency number and reported the incidents. He then did the same thing with all Marjory's credit card companies.

~*~

Frindella Collins caught a glimpse of Connell and began to run. Her fears multiplied as Connell gave chase. In an attempt to throw him off, Collins dived down a side alley. She'd barely covered thirty feet before she tripped. As she went down, she caught a glimpse of Ivan's face and realised she'd fallen into a carefully prepared trap. Like lions hunting prey, Connell had driven her towards Ivan who'd pounced as she passed.

As Connell came steaming up, Ivan dragged Collins to her feet and said, "Why do I get the impression you're trying to avoid me, Frindella?"

"I'll pay you back shortly, I promise," Collins said.

Lifting Collins up until she was standing on her toes, Ivan sneered, "Which means I'll never see the money. Maybe I should beat it out of your hide."

"I will pay," Collins pleaded.

Ivan contemplated her answer, "Maybe beating you won't be enough. Maybe I'll have to come around and have a quiet chat to your partner."

"Leave Stephen out of it," Collins squealed.

"Why should I?" Ivan demanded. "If you haven't enough money, maybe he has."

"I said, leave Stephen out of it. Please."

Glancing at Connell, Ivan said, "Perhaps you need to know I mean business."

"No please, I'll sort things out," Collins bleated.

Raising his arm as if to strike, Connell said, "I'm sure Ivan would like to know how you're going to sort things out."

"I'll do anything you want," Collins whined.

"Anything?"

Knowing she'd opened himself to possible physical abuse, Collin's mouth began opening and closing like a goldfish.

Ivan nodded at Connell, who took up a less threatening stance. He moved in close, so close that Collins could smell the garlic on his breath.

"You work at Kent's training stables, don't you?"

A look of relief appeared on Collin's face. Her offer to do *anything* and Ivan's interest in her offer didn't appear to involve her body.

When she nodded, Ivan said, "Do you want to clear your debts?"

"Yes."

"Good," Ivan replied, passing her a small package. "Cornrun Gold is running on Friday at the Chester races. Feed him this, six hours before the race."

Glancing at the package, Collins said, "Will it harm him?"

Ivan shook his head. "It's a performance enhancer but it won't have any lasting effect. So, have you got it? Six hours before the race, no sooner no later, understood?"

"But I could get caught," Collins protested.

"If you're smart, you'll feed this to the horse and then go off sick," Ivan advised. "Make sure you have a good alibi."

As Ivan walked away, Connell whispered. "Your debts will only be cancelled if you do as you've been told. You will incur extra costs if you let Ivan down."

"If they drug test, Cornrun Gold I could be in trouble," Collins protested.

"Like Ivan said," Connell replied. "Get yourself a watertight alibi."

~*~

When Tupal woke up his face was throbbing and his ear still hurt from the blasting Jim had given it. Climbing out of bed, he relieved himself in the bathroom and began searching for pain killers. Finding none in the bathroom, he went to the kitchen. Eventually he unearthed a box of paracetamol and downed two.

Staggering into the lounge he glanced at the clock and realised it was nearly eleven o'clock. He wasn't surprised; after a good binge, he often woke up late. He barely had time to sit down before his mobile rang.

It was Rheingold. "How's the wounded soldier then?"

Tupal made no attempt at stoicism, "I feel like shit."

"Well I'm sorry to add to your troubles then," Rheingold said. "But I thought I'd better tell you the bad news. Flinnett's on his way back. He could already be back in Tiphram. Perhaps you should take your car back to the car park."

"How d'you know he's coming back?"

"Replan told me. And Fleecem's on the warpath. I'm not sure of the full details but apparently his wife has been running up major debts and it has put him in a foul mood; he's venting his spleen on everyone around him."

When Tupal didn't respond, Rheingold added, "He gave Flinnett time off because his son had been injured but he's changed his mind. If he'll turn on his brother -in-law, it's not a good time to rock the boat."

Still getting no response, Rheingold rephrased the message, "If Flinnett is on his way back and Fleecem has given him a hard time, he'll be liverish. Annoying Flinnett could backfire. Perhaps you should take the car back to the car park."

Being stubborn to the core, Tupal said, "I'll think about it, mate."

"Don't be stupid," Rheingold replied.

"I've got a better idea," Tupal said.

"What's that?"

"I'm going to pop around to Flinnett's love nest and take a few photographs of the happy couple," Tupal said.

"You're mad."

"No I'm not," Tupal replied. "The best form of defence is attack. With any luck, the next meeting with *Firem Sparrow* will be cancelled."

He hung up, dressed, pocketed a small camera similar to the one that had been issued to Jim and went out to his car. It took him less than twenty minutes to reach Flinnett's love nest, a discreet semi-detached house with a well-tended front garden.

Finding a quiet location, Tupal parked and walked down a side street. Flinnett's house had a wide right of way between the rear garden and what looked like well looked after allotments beyond, so he walked down it.

After walking a short distance down the right of way, he saw Flinnett's car. The way it was parked suggested that Flinnett had come in the back way so his presence at the property wouldn't be obvious from the main road. Moving to a safe location where

he was unlikely to be seen, Tupal took a series of timed and dated photographs. He ran his eyes over the house, hoping to dredge up more dirt to throw at Flinnett.

He didn't have to wait long. Flinnett walked out of the back door and went to his car. A moment later Lisa obligingly followed him out and helped him unload some items from the boot. Tupal switched to video and recorded the entire scenario, including the kiss Lisa planted on Flinnett's lips.

Despite his aching jaw, Tupal grinned; the kiss spoke for itself. If he sent it to Flinnett's wife, his boss would be in real trouble.

As Flinnett and Lisa went back into the house, Tupal beat a retreat. Twenty minutes later he downloaded all the images at home and emailed them to Flinnett using a Google email account, which gave virtually no indication of the sender.

Satisfied with his handiwork, he went back to the bathroom and inspected his missing teeth again. His mouth hurt like hell so he rolled himself a spliff and lit up. Although the pain eased, he took some more paracetamol washed down with a glass of Scotch.

~*~

Flinnett's phone let out a ping barely ten seconds after Tupal had sent the images. The email hinted the images might be sent to his wife. Flinnett immediately suspected Tupal's involvement but knew it would be difficult to prove.

When he swore, Lisa gave him a sharp look. "Watch what you're saying. There are impressionable children in the house."

~*~

Ian's phone rang ten minutes after Flinnett had received his text message.

Without preamble Gerry said, "Something interesting has just popped up."

"Stop being mysterious and tell me what it is," Ian replied.

"Tupal just emailed some images to Flinnett," Gerry replied. "Nothing exceptional but they seem to confirm Flinnett is having an affair. The photographs smell of blackmail."

"How did you hack into Tupal's computer?"

"Some way I hacked into all the others," Gerry replied.

"What are you going to do with the photographs?"

"I haven't decided yet," Gerry said. "But I'm sure they will come in useful."

Once Ian had hung up, Gerry activated Tupal's webcam and smiled. As Tupal had used the same technique to gain illicit photographs of Moira, he considered it to be a fair reprisal.

He'd only been watching for a short while when he caught a slight movement out of shot and realised that Tupal was no longer alone. Turning up the volume slightly he heard a female voice he recognised. If his hearing wasn't failing him, Sandra was visiting Tupal.

To check out the theory he switched to Replan's home and checked out the webcam images coming from there. As the whole place seemed quiet, he concluded he was right.

~*~

James Ingermann (or J Mainwaring Ingermann as he was known to his readers) was busily labouring on his latest sci-fi novel; it had a working title of Space Station 10. While he was playing with a possible scenario concerning a hybrid maintenance

worker, a human/chimpanzee crossbreed, there was a tap on the door and Norma, his wife came in with a steaming cup of pea soup.

Ingermann smiled at his wife, "Thank you dear. Do I take it I'm forgiven?"

Norma said, "I was very cross with you when you came back drunk on Thursday, but I've thought about it. You're not to blame. The horrible people you work with are really at fault. They plied you with drink and made you terribly drunk against your will."

After placing the cup of soup alongside him, she said, "Are you winning, dear?"

Ingermann was superstitious and didn't like to tempt Fate; if he bragged about the progress he'd made over the last few weeks, he might suddenly develop a mental block and his output would grind to a halt. To avoid the danger, he became non-committal.

"I seem to be getting there, dear."

Instead of leaving the room, Norma hovered, "There have been a few strange emails. Have you ordered anything from Barbie-Anne Winters recently?"

Ingermann gave her a blank look, "Who's Barbie-Anne Winters?"

"I don't know," Norma replied.

"What's been ordered?"

"It seems to be some sort of doll and it's going to be dispatched in discreet packaging with a private courier."

Ingermann shrugged, "Sorry. Don't know anything about it."

"I've also had this text message from the bank," she said and thrust her mobile phone under his nose.

It was a standard message that the bank sent out when an online debit had been made to their joint account.

"I haven't ordered anything," Ingermann said.

Concerned about the unexpected transaction, Ingermann logged into their emails on his own computer and ran his eyes over them.

He found one from Barbie-Anne Winters and said, "Whatever it is, it was ordered yesterday."

"Maybe you can cancel the order," Norma said hopefully.

"Hmm, I'll try." Ingermann pushed a link but instead of cancelling the order another email came back saying the parcel had been dispatched and was likely to arrive at any time.

With concern turning into mind panic, Ingermann logged onto his bank account but could see no evidence of any withdrawals. He looked at the text notifications again; the package was going to cost him the best part of a hundred and fifty pounds.

In panic he called a security number and explained his predicament. Part way through his conversation, his wife let out a screech and pointed at the computer screen. At first Ingermann couldn't understand why she was making a fuss and then he saw three or four letters sliding down the computer screen and forming a heap at the bottom; then more followed. His new novel was literally falling to pieces in front of his eyes.

Faced with a dilemma, Ingermann freaked; did he stay on the phone and sort out the illegal withdrawals or did he attempt to rescue his precious opus magnum? In total fear he pulled the cable out of the back of his computer, working on the principle that if he turned the machine off no more letters could drop down the screen.

He then spoke to the bank and explained there was an unexplained withdrawal on the account. Once he'd gone through the procedure and realised that his debit card would be frozen, he hung up and looked at his wife.

“What have I done to deserve this?”

~*~

Colin Philain’s phone beeped; an incoming message. Glancing at it his heart leapt. Being a member of his local Roman enactment society, he was keen to get involved in any suitable event. The message gave a date and asked if he would be available then. Philain frowned; the date in question was only next week. Texting back, he asked for more details.

A few seconds later his mobile rang but there was no caller ID. Philain’s frown increased. No caller IDs usually indicated it was a scam.

When he accepted the call, a voice said, “Hello, is that Mr Philain?”

Still suspicious, Philain said, “Yes.”

The voice on the other end responded with, “I don’t suppose you remember me, Mr Philain. I’m Felicity Fiddleleson-Farquhar. I’m just checking if you will be able to give a lecture to our Women’s Institute meeting. You know, on Roman Britain.”

Philain wavered, “It’s a bit short notice.”

“Yes I know that,” Felicity cooed. “I’m with the Tiphm WI and we’ve been let down for a speaker. I attended one of your talks in Under-Tiphm about two years ago and thought it was wonderful.”

The flattery started to work. “Well I’m glad you enjoyed it, er, er.”

“You can call me Felicity.”

“Well I’m glad you enjoyed it, Felicity.”

“If I recall correctly,” Felicity added, “Last time, our branch made a small donation to say thank you.”

Despite time passing, Philain’s mind dredged up vague images of a rather gushy but attractive woman presenting a cheque to help group funds.

“Ah! Yes, I remember.”

“You’d be rescuing a damsel in distress if you could step into the breach,” Felicity said.

She was interrupted by the sound of a revving engine.

“What’s that horrible noise?” Philain asked.

“It’s my son,” Felicity hastily explained. “I don’t really approve but he’s got a motorbike and he’s tuning it up. Please ignore the noise. Can you fit us in?”

The engine revved again.

“I’m sure we can put on some sort of talk for you,” Philain replied.

“Oh! Wonderful!” Felicity said, “I’ll text you all the details in the next five minutes,” she said and hung up.

~*~

Mick cringed as a new round of revving started up.

“Is it always like this at your house,” he asked.

Gerry glanced up from his computer and nodded, “That’s why I was glad we went to Jim’s place yesterday. At least Jim’s flat is quiet, not like this place. Still, my brother has his uses. If I smile at him nicely, I’m sure he’ll take me to my uncle’s place on Thursday.”

“Why your uncle’s place?”

“Because my uncle’s got a spare set of keys to the community hall,” Gerry replied.

“But will he let you have ’em?”

"I wasn't exactly planning on asking him," Gerry admitted.

Mick let out a cackle. "When are we going to put those photos and vids onto the internet Facebook?"

"Why are you in such a rush?" Gerry chided. "Let's get phase one underway first."

~*~

"You've got a virus," Peter said.

Ingermann was tempted to tell his next-door neighbour that he'd already worked that out. Instead, he said, "Can you fix it?"

Peter knew a lot more about computers than Ingermann did.

"I'll have a go," Peter said, "But no promises."

Ingermann watched intently. A few seconds later, as if by magic, the letters that had dropped to the bottom of the screen suddenly started going back to their correct position.

Ingermann was joyous. "Oh! Thank you so much."

After pumping Peter's hand and telling him he'd buy him a pint, he thanked him all the way down the stairs. On his return, he tapped the keyboard but before he could pick up where he'd left off, the computer let out a cough similar to a spitfire engine starting up and the text on screen formed itself into a propeller and began whizzing around.

Ingermann raced to the window, threw it open and shouted, "Peter!"

~*~

Ralf Snare was creature of habit and he liked to get in a few rounds of golf at the weekend. As he'd been a long-standing member of the Tiphams Golf Club, he was well known and most of the other members greeted him when he walked through the front door. When no one did, Snare sensed the hostility; you could cut it with a knife.

Glancing around, Snare attempted to make a joke of it, "What's the matter boys? Am I wearing the wrong aftershave today?"

One of the older members growled, "I'm surprised you've got the cheek to come in here."

"What's that meant to mean?"

"Well if you haven't got the sense to know what you've done wrong," the old curmudgeon said, "I'm not going to tell you."

Annoyed, Snare rounded on the old man, "That's very helpful. Tell me; what's the matter?"

"You really don't know?"

"If I did, I wouldn't be asking," he snapped.

"You've helped to defile the memory of Tiphams's greatest hero. That's what."

Snare was about to ask for more details, when the club secretary came steaming up. "Ah! Snare! I'm glad you've come in. I need to speak to you." He waved Snare towards his office.

As Snare walked down the corridor, he saw Flit Rheingold, Ian Rosserman and Fletch Springfield all sitting on *naughty seats* outside the club secretary's office.

Unlocking the door to his office, the club secretary said, "Right I may as well deal with you all at once."

As they entered, they saw a computer screen filled with an image of Edmundo J Cunningham's equestrian statue.

The secretary pointed at the people standing around it. "Things like this bring the club into disrepute. All the other members are livid."

Snare stared at the screen and couldn't deny he'd been one of the people helping Urnwood to climb onto the back of Edmundo J Cunningham's horse.

As Rheingold, Rosserman and Springfield's faces were also clearly visible, the secretary said, "I'm afraid I'm going to have to suspend you all until further notice."

As the four men stalked out of the clubhouse muttering, Rheingold put in a call to Tupal. He told him that four of them had been suspended from the golf club and he was likely to get the same treatment shortly.

He continued, "Someone filmed us during our last early dart. If they send it to Flinnett, we're in real trouble."

After telling Rheingold about the email he'd sent to Flinnett, Tupal said, "You worry too much. Like I told you before, Flinnett's a paper tiger."

"You're pushing your luck," Rheingold said.

Despite the pain being caused by his missing teeth, Tupal said. "Let me tell you a story. Once upon a time there were two sisters and they had a very rich brother who loved them both."

"I've heard it," Rheingold snapped. "I still say you're pushing your luck."

Tupal ignore the objection. "The first sister was stupid and married a waster call Urnwood. The second sister was unfortunate and married a social climber called Flinnett."

"Okay," Rheingold conceded. "If Flinnett's wife, née Fleecem, were to find out about Flinnett's bit on the side, there's a strong chance that Mark Fleecem would find a way of firing him. If Fleecem sacks Flinnett, he'll have to find a new job and I've no doubt his wife will divorce him. Divorces can be expensive."

"I've got him by the short and curlies," Tupal replied. "Flinnett has lot more to lose than I have."

Chapter 22

Another Monday.

Jim was busily preparing the drinks when Moira popped her head around the door.
“So what’s going on?”

Jim eyed her thoughtfully, “I’m not with you. Going on?”

“Something’s going on,” she replied. “Ingermann, Snare, Rheingold, Rosserman and Springfield are in a huddle and they look far from happy.”

“I’ll try and find out,” Jim replied.

When he returned, Moira said, “Well.”

Jim sniggered and danced a little jig. “Apparently Ingermann had bad problems with his computer. He’s got a virus and is having to consult a specialist to retrieve his manuscript. The others were suspended from the Tiphm Golf Club. Someone sent copies of my photographs to the club secretary. I smell Gerry’s handiwork in all this.”

Moira laughed, and said, “I’d wipe that smile off your face if I were you. It’s a dead giveaway.”

~*~

One of Morgan Flechley’s mobiles rang and a muffled voice said, “You’re in trouble.”

Before his caller could hang up, Flechley snapped, “What sort of trouble?”

“I don’t know exactly but someone has been indiscreet,” the caller said. “There are rumours of another raid. You need to tighten up your act.”

The phone went dead.

Flechley glanced at Big Al and said, “We’re likely to have visitors again. Plan B this time. Take everything to Erran Road.”

~*~

Tupal woke up with his face throbbing even worse than it had the day before. As he still hadn’t restored most of the numbers on his phone, he had to consult the internet to find his dentist’s number. When his call was finally answered, the receptionist offered him an appointment months ahead.

Dissatisfied, Tupal said, “But I’ve broken my front teef and it hurts.”

“I didn’t quite catch that.”

“I’ve damaged my teef,” he repeated. “I need to see someone today.”

“Mr Pulsum would be able see you at 1.30.”

“Can’t someone see me earlier?” Tupal bleated.

“I can give you an emergency appointment at 10.30,” the receptionist said.

Tupal accepted the appointment and then went to the kitchen and took some more paracetamol.

~*~

Urnwood sneaked into Jim’s tea point and said, “Have you got ‘em?”

Knowing what he meant, Jim passed over the bag that Mick had found.

As Urnwood turned to leave, Jim said, "I gather you're going to the Chester races on Friday."

Urnwood nodded, "My uncle's taking us all. We're going to meet him on Thursday night. I'm off on Thursday and Friday. We're going to stay at a hotel on Thursday and then we're going to see Cornrun Gold run on Friday. Do you want to come? I've been given some spare tickets. Flit Rheingold and Mr Flinnett are coming along. I'm also hoping Paul Tupal will come as well."

"Inviting Tupal might not be the best move," Jim said. "He's been suspended."

Urnwood shrugged, "I don't care what Flinnett thinks. D'you want to come along?"

Jim considered and then shook his head, "Thanks, but things are a bit up in the air at the moment."

"My uncle reckons we're going to win."

"Really? Have you got a bet on?"

"My uncle has. He's put quite a lot on," Urnwood replied. "My mother doesn't bet, and she won't let me either."

Jim said, "Wise woman. Betting is a mug's game."

~*~

When Tupal walked into the dentists, he did his best not to smile because the gap in his teeth seemed to alarm most people. Going to the desk he announced his presence, sat down and waited to be called.

He left the surgery with temporary crowns and although he left almost as gappy as he went in, the pain had receded.

Once back in his car, he smiled into the rear-view mirror and was disgusted by what he saw. It was unlikely that he'd *pull* with any women looking as he did.

Feeling his upper lip, he muttered, "Maybe I should grow a bushy moustache, one large enough to hide my teeth."

~*~

Flinnett was late into work but he still carried out his normal check on the car park. The absence stood out like a sore thumb. Although the car park was nearly full, Tupal's car was missing. Flinnett was tempted to put a call through to Tupal and demand an explanation but he checked the urge. It was likely that Tupal had been responsible for sending him the incriminating photographs so it would be foolish to go in bull-headed.

His mood improved slightly when he saw a wheel clamp. Jim had caught a cuckoo. He'd barely made the observation before a worried face appeared at the gate.

"Ah! Manley," Flinnett purred, "how are you getting on at the new firm?"

Instead of answering the question, Manley said, "My car's been clamped."

Flinnett went through the usual mime and held out one hand. Once Manley had handed over his key, Flinnett pointed at the clamping sign, extracted the release fee, undid the clamp and gave Manley a swift dressing down.

"If you've made a copy of the padlock key and come back again, I'll double the release fee. Understood?"

Once Manley had driven off, Flinnett locked the main gate and made his way to the front door.

He nodded at Jim, "I need to see you in my office."

Once Jim had stepped in, Flinnett closed the door and said, "I don't suppose you've found a stethoscope have you. A set seems to have gone missing."

After denying all knowledge of the missing stethoscope, Jim said, "If I find it, I'll let you have it, sir."

"Good," Flinnett replied. "Something more important; I noticed Tupal's car has gone."

Jim nodded, "I noticed that too."

"When did it go?"

"I'm not sure exactly," Jim replied. "Over the weekend; I can only presume Tupal came back for it, Mr Flinnett."

"Are you sure *he* took the car?"

"Unfortunately, I didn't see it go."

Flinnett developed 20/20 hindsight. "We should have clamped it to make sure he couldn't drive it away. If he does bring the car back, clamp it."

Jim was about to go but Flinnett said, "By the way, I owe you some money." He began flicking through bank notes.

After passing Jim a small wad he said, "I said half and half. You clamped Bamforth and Manley. Good work."

~*~

After Jim had left his office, Flinnett used his private phone. Three rings later, Tupal answered.

Without bothering with niceties, Flinnett snapped, "Have you taken your car?"

"Yes."

"Where are you?"

"Where d'you think I am?"

"Probably in a pub smashed out of your skull," Flinnett replied.

When Tupal just laughed, Flinnett gave up on location and said, "Was it you who sent me photos and the vids?"

Fearing that Flinnett might be trying to record the conversation, Tupal played dumb. "No but I *have* seen them. Very revealing; the love kiss was a nice touch. I'm sure your wife would hit the roof if she saw that."

Losing control, Flinnett snapped, "If you didn't take the pictures, who did?"

"I've no idea," Tupal lied, "Someone sent them to me."

When Flinnett went quiet, Tupal added, "May I suggest that the proposed meeting with *Firem* Sparrow is cancelled?"

When Flinnett begrudgingly agreed, Tupal said, "I also plan to take a couple of weeks off, additional to my normal holiday allowance and fully paid of course. I trust you don't have any objection with that."

Having little choice, Flinnett agreed to that as well.

"Oh," Tupal added, "I may see you on Friday at the races. Urnwood has invited me along."

Flinnett ground his teeth and cut the connection.

~*~

Frindella Collins glanced at Cornrun Gold and thought about the task Ivan had given her. It was a poisoned chalice for sure. If the horse was dope tested, questions would be asked. If there was an enquiry, her head was likely to be on the block.

Jane Mickelmach approached. Mickelmach was horse mad and had been enticed into becoming an apprentice because of her love of all things equine; more importantly, she wasn't the sharpest knife in the drawer.

Collins took a gamble. "I'm likely to be off work, Wednesday to Friday, maybe a bit longer."

"Why?"

"My mother's ill. I need to go and see her and look after her for a while," Collins replied.

"Oh! I'm sorry."

"As I won't be here, I need you to look after Cornrun Gold."

Mickelmach smiled from ear to ear. She'd been given an important job to do.

Realising she'd hooked a sucker, Collins said, "This is top secret."

Mickelmach was all ears, "What is?"

"I'm going to ask you to do something, but you don't tell anyone," Collins cautioned and handed Ivan's package over. "Six hours before the race you give this to Cornrun Gold."

"What is it?"

"It's a lucky pill, full of special vitamins," Collins told her. "I give them to all our horses but it's *my* trade secret. I don't want anyone else finding out my secret potion. So this is just between us, okay?"

When Mickelmach suddenly looked uncertain, Collins said, "What's the matter?"

"Are you sure it's just special vitamins?" Mickelmach queried. "You can get into serious trouble if a horse fails a drugs' test."

"Drugs' test! It's just my lucky pill, full of special vitamins," Collins replied. "Do you really think I'd ask you to do something illegal?"

"No, no, of course not."

"Well then," Collins said. "As I will be away, I'm relying on you. Will you do as I ask?"

"Okay."

Sensing Mickelmach was still uncertain, Collins said, "I promise you, the potion is not illegal. Okay."

Mickelmach nodded, "Okay."

"So you'll give him the pills?"

"Yes."

"Thank you," Collins said.

~*~

Rheingold's phone rang at work and Carly said, "Have you called Flechley?"

"Not yet," Rheingold admitted.

"You can't keep putting it off," Carly chided.

"You realise I'm probably signing Paul's death warrant," Rheingold jibbed.

"Don't be so melodramatic," Carly snapped, "Do it now!"

Once she'd hung up, Rheingold reluctantly picked up his mobile.

Eventually, Big Al answered.

Using his alias, Rheingold said, "This is Laurel."

"And what can I do for you?"

"Is the boss in?"

"He's busy," Big Al said. "Something's come up."

Undeterred, Rheingold said, "I need to speak to him."

"I'm afraid you'll have to make do with me," Big Al replied. "Is it urgent?"

“Hardy is acting up again. He’s ignored your warning. He’s talking about going away and I can’t stop him.” Rheingold said. “I don’t trust him; he could do anything. He’s become a loose cannon.”

“Where’s he going?”

“I don’t know,” Rheingold said. “He wouldn’t tell me.”

There was a long pause, before Big Al responded with, “Leave it with me.”

~*~

Hanging up, Rheingold phoned Carly, “Okay, it’s done.”

“Good,” Carly replied, “I never did like Paul Tupal. He’s a creep.”

Rheingold snapped, “He’s also been a friend for years.”

“A real creepy friend,” Carly sniped.

“Sorry you don’t like him,” Rheingold said. “The most important thing is you don’t start telling anyone about Paul, or my conversation with Flechley’s people. Understand?”

“I’m not stupid,” she snapped back.

“For the avoidance of doubt, we carry on as normal,” Rheingold told her. “It’s now in Flechley’s hands. If Paul comes around, we just act normal.”

“What will Flechley do?”

“I hate to think,” Rheingold admitted. “Can we change the subject?”

~*~

Big Al glanced at Morgan Flechley. “We’ve got another problem, boss. Hardy appears to have ignored his warning and Laurel thinks he’s about to do a bunk.”

“Do a bunk?”

“That’s what he told me.”

Flechley went quiet and then said, “I was told someone had been indiscreet. D’you think Hardy has gone to the police?”

When Big Al shrugged, Flechley said, “Call Heng and brief him. Mr Hardy is becoming a nuisance.”

“What about Plan B?”

“Get one of the others to run everything to Erran Road. Is Don Philips free?”

Big Al put a call through to Philips, “I’ve got a job for you; an urgent job. Get up here fast. Use the back way in.”

~*~

Twenty minutes later, Rheingold’s mobile rang. “Is that Laurel?”

Rheingold recognised Heng’s voice. “Yes.”

“I’m just checking Mr Hardy’s current address.”

Once Rheingold had confirmed where Tupal lived, Heng cut off without further discussion.

Fearing the worst, Rheingold rang Carly, “If anyone called Heng contacts you, co-operate with him.”

“Who’s Heng?”

Rheingold said, “I’ve only met him once. He’s Morgan Flechley’s chief enforcer. Things normally get messy when Heng gets involved.”

“Messy?”

“Do I have to spell it out?” Rheingold replied.

~*~

Tupal tossed his case into the boot of his car and then called Rheingold. He told him about Flinnett’s climb down and the additional two week holiday he’d secured.

Rheingold said, “You can’t go...”

“... because Mr Flechley won’t like it.” Tupal mocked. “I’m going, end of.”

“So where are you going?” Rheingold asked.

Tupal shrugged even though Rheingold couldn’t see him. “No idea at the moment.”

“You’re mad, going away,” Rheingold said.

“So you keep telling me,” Tupal said.

He cut the call and climbed into his car. Driving off, he used his hands free to call another number.

A moment later, a voice said, “Hi Paul.”

“Hi mate,” Tupal said. “You know how you said I could use the old warehouse flat if I wanted to.”

“Yeah.”

“Well something has come up.” Tupal replied, “Is the offer still open?”

“You know it’s still not finished?” the other man said. “I’m still working on all the flats.”

“Is one of them liveable?” Tupal asked.

“Flat 1 is not far off completion.”

“Can I use it then?”

“Sure.” He laughed. “If you’re entertaining a lady, it’s got a double bed, if that’s what you want it for. Clean sheets are in the airing cupboard.”

Ignoring the suggestion, Tupal said, “I’ll probably need it for a few days.”

“That’s okay.”

“Why have you got a bed in there?”

“I’ve been working on the flats at weekends,” his friend said. “I do long hours when I’m up there. If I can sleep there, it saves driving home.”

“Right,” Tupal replied, “So can I doss down there for a few nights then?”

“Sure. There’s a spare a key at the Canalside pub. The landlord is a pal of mine.”

The key is in a slot in the stone wall. You’ll find it.”

“Why d’you leve a key with the landlord? keep it there?” Tupal queried.

“So the various trades can get in,” the other man said. “I can’t always be there to let them in.” He added, “You’ll be pleased to know the Canalside there’s a good pub within is within walking distance to the flat.”

“Excellent,” Tupal said. “One other thing, if anyone contacts you and asks if you’ve spoken to me recently, don’t tell ‘em where I am.”

“Okay,” the other man said, “Are you in trouble?”

“Nothing I can’t handle,” Tupal replied.

Once he’d been given the full address of the flat, Tupal punched the post code into his sat-nav and began driving north.

~*~

Tim Pearson’s voice said, “Anything yet?”

Ellis, one of the constables sitting in an unmarked police car in Arundel Avenue said, “No sir. Pity we don’t know the exact address.”

Commented [DG11]: This also sounds like a plant that doesn’t payoff. I don’t think the readers will query why he keeps the key in the wall. Or, if you’re not happy with that, you could get the friend to suggest he gets the key from the site foreman.

Builders do leave keys in strange places but its now left at pub

“Well we don’t,” Pearson growled. “All I know is, Morgan Flechley owns one of the houses in the road and it’s being used as a dead drop. I’ve supplied you with photographs and car registration plates of his known associates. It’s the best I can do.”

“Yes, sir.”

Ellis sighed, wriggled uncomfortably, and glanced at the officer sitting next to him. “What’s the betting this is a total waste of time?”

~*~

The taxi pulled up outside 21 Erran Road. Paying the driver, Don Philips grabbed the bags and climbed out, waited until the taxi had pulled away and rounded a corner before walking to 15 Erran Road and letting himself in.

Once he’d disabled the alarm system, a security camera whirled into life and pointed straight at him.

Flechley said, “I hope you weren’t followed.”

“I took a taxi, as per Big Al’s instructions,” Philips said. “I didn’t see any police cars on the way, or any following the taxi.”

“Don’t forget Laurel and Hardy’s and Groucho’s orders,” Flechley prompted.

Philips opened one of the mason jars, extracted Laurel and Hardy’s and Groucho’s orders and slipped them into his jacket. After sealing the Mason jar again, he dropped it back into the bag, went to the under-stair cupboard and stored the bags out of view.

He glanced at his watch, “All done.”

“No you’re not,” Flechley snapped. “Go to the end of Erran Road and wait. You’ll shortly be picked up by another cab. I want you to take Groucho’s order to Blue Storage and drop it off straight away.”

“I’ll need a key and the entry codes,” Philips said.

“You’ll have them shortly,” Flechley promised. “I also want you to contact Laurel and arrange a meeting in the park today.”

Philips nodded, “Okay boss.”

“Good,” Flechley said. “Once you’ve finished with Laurel, get another taxi and come back and collect your car. Once you’ve done that, find yourself a watertight alibi. You’ve never been to my house or Erran Road. Understood?”

“Yes boss.”

~*~

A private cab appeared five minutes later. When Philips climbed in, he found Heng already inside.

Without bothering with niceties, Heng said, “Have you contacted Laurel?”

“Yes, I’m meeting him at 5.30 in Cunningham Park after he finishes work.”

Heng gave Philips a hard look. “Correction, I’m meeting him at 5.30.”

Glancing at his ostentatious watch, Heng handed Philips a locker key. “Time enough to go to Blue Storage before I meet him.”

Once the cab driver had been given his instructions and moved off, Philips said, “Two cabs in one day. I could get used to this.”

Heng shrugged. “The boss has recently acquired interests in a couple of local taxi companies and a driving school.”

Philips frowned. “Why?”

“I would have thought that was obvious,” Heng replied.

When Philips gave him a questioning look, Heng said, “If you say anything to anyone else, you’re dead man.”

"I won't say anything to anyone else," Philips replied.

"The boss is building himself a future by acquiring legitimate businesses in the area. So far, he's acquired interests in a development company and the ones I've just told you about.

"Why?" Philips asked.

"Everyone like Mr Flechley eventually acquires legitimate companies; it helps them launder money. Having cabs and driving school vehicles available also makes it easier to transport our wares."

When Philips opened his mouth again, Heng gave him a hard look. "You've asked enough questions for today. I don't like people who ask too many questions."

~*~

When Flin Rheingold walked into Cunningham Park, a sense of déjà vous settled on him. He looked around, half expecting to see Jim feeding the ducks. When there was no sign of him or his loopy mate, Rheingold let out a sigh of relief.

He walked over to the arbour and sat down, glancing around again but the park was empty; even the ducks were only noticeable by their absence.

He'd been sitting there for two minutes when the sound of footsteps alerted him to someone approaching. A moment later Heng sat down next to him, took his money and passed his package under the table.

Once the exchange was over, Heng said, "I've been to Hardy's house. His car has gone and he's obviously not there. Where is he?"

"I told you he was going away," Rheingold replied. "But he didn't tell me where he was going."

"Then you'll have to find out where he's gone won't you?" Heng replied. "You will ring everyone he knows and ask if they have seen him recently. If I don't find him, the boss is going to be annoyed and when he gets annoyed, I get very annoyed. Understood?"

~*~

Gerry knew he was chancing his arm, but he tried all the same. Glancing up from his evening meal, he spoke to his brother. "Can you take me to uncle's on Thursday and bring me back?"

In her role of style-cramper-general, Laura intervened. "I wouldn't if I were you, David. He's up to something."

Annoyed by the unnecessary intrusion, Gerry said, "I just want to see a mate. He lives not far from uncle's house, that's all."

David considered the two assertions and swiftly came to a decision. His younger sister always had been a pain in the proverbial; worse, she'd started dating someone he detested.

"What time do you want to get there, and when do you want to come back?"

Gerry told his brother what he had in mind but before he was given a response, Laura cut in.

"Who's been in my wardrobe?"

To wind her up, David said, "Which wardrobe?"

Laura was close to rivalling Imelda Marcos with her shoe collection and had clothing to match, so it was a fair question. She didn't just have one wardrobe, she had so many clothes she'd had to invest in several canvas zip ups too.

"My main one," Laura snapped.

“Are you accusing us of being secret cross dressers?”

Realising she was getting nowhere, Laura finished her meal and left the room. Once she was out of earshot, Gerry made final arrangements for Thursday and then went upstairs to send a message to Philain to confirm the WI arrangements.

Going back online he started to trawl for information. After activating Replan’s webcam he was rewarded with a shot of Sandra walking around with very little on. Then Replan came in and began making overtures.

Gerry hit record. Dynamite!

Hearing Laura outside, Gerry turned down the volume.

A moment later he heard David shout, “Ian’s here.”

A few seconds later, Ian squeezed around his door and found somewhere to sit.

He glanced at Gerry’s computer monitor. “I thought you didn’t watch porn?”

“This is Replan and Sandra,” Gerry replied, “Via their webcam.”

Ian giggled, “They’re certainly going at it aren’t they? Why are you interested in them?”

“According to Moira, Sandra is as bad as the rest,” Gerry replied. “And as we know, she’s bonking Tupal on the side.”

Ian sniggered, “I wonder if Replan has any idea she’s two timing him?”

Gerry shrugged, “Who knows.”

“Are you going to use this recording?”

Gerry shrugged again, “I’ve not decided yet.”

Ian became impatient, “Are you making *any* progress?”

In response, Gerry pulled out the list that Jim had given him and ran through them.

“Paul Tupal has lost his front teeth, knocked out courtesy of Mick, but he needs a lot more treatment. I’m working on that. Mark Fleecem, Putman, Philain, Ingermann, Rheingold, Rosserman and Fletch Springfield have either had jokes played on them, or they will have shortly.”

“Mick wants you to put some of the stuff on social media,” Ian said.

“And we will in due course,” Gerry promised him.

~*~

Tupal collected the key for the flat at the Canalside pub. Following the landlords directions, he pulled into an un-surfaced car park and nosed his car into a thicket of Japanese Knotweed busily colonising an embankment. Climbing out, he walked towards a nearby building. It was obvious it had originally been a canal-side warehouse. Briefly checking no one was in, he walked over to the old stone boundary wall and began looking in the crevices. Two minutes later, he found the key.

Once inside the apartment, Tupal glanced around. Although most of the walls were plastered, there was no decoration and some rooms still had taped up wires projecting from socket outlets.

Walking into the bedroom, he was pleased to find the floor had been covered in laminate and there was a king size bed. He heard the dull whump as a gas boiler came on. He smiled.

“This’ll do me for a few nights.”

After making the bed, he went outside and rolled a spliff from his special mix. Once he’d taken a few puffs, he looked towards his car; it appeared to change colour and the flowers on the Japanese Knotweed began to shimmer.

He stamped out the remains of the spliff, locked up and walked to the Canalside pub, running his eyes over the narrowboats moored up.

Commented [DG12]: If you do change where he gets the key from, this will need to be changed too.

Changed

Once inside the Canalside, he ordered two pints. While he was walking towards a corner table, he saw Moira Buckle and his jaw dropped. He was about to march over to her table and confront her, when someone at the bar called out, “No Tia Maria, Lizzy. They’ve run out.”

When the woman called out an alternative, her voice flipped a switch in Tupal’s mind and Moira Buckle’s face suddenly morphed into a woman he didn’t know.

Stunned by the experience, Tupal stood there open mouthed for a while and then took his drinks to the table. After tasting his first pint, he swiftly downed it and then set about the second.

On his return to the bar, he glanced at Lizzy again and shook his head. “How could I see Moira Buckle when she isn’t there? I must be going loopy.”

After eight pints, Tupal staggered back to the half-finished apartment and collapsed on the bed, fully clothed.

Chapter 23

Tuesday: delivery day

Norma Ingermann had been peeking out of the front window ever since her husband had gone to work. The mysterious parcel was due to arrive shortly. After curtain flipping for some time, she decided to sit down.

"A watched pot never boils."

An hour later there was a knock on the door. She rushed out and told the delivery man she thought they had been the subject of a prank but despite her pleas she wasn't forceful enough to prevent the parcel being unloaded and left in the hall.

He got her to sign for it and said, "You'll have to send it back, Mrs, if your partner doesn't want it."

"What d'you mean?" Norma queried, "If my partner doesn't want it?"

"Why don't you open it and see," he replied, smirking.

As soon as he left, Norma couldn't contain her curiosity. Whatever was inside the box was surrounded by another container, so she began pulling. On the way out, there was a hiss, and a life size inflatable woman emerged and shot across the hall. It settled on the floor with a look of sexual ecstasy on its face.

Norma was appalled, "Oh my God!"

She grabbed hold of the doll and pushed it into the dining room, slamming the door shut.

She muttered, "If the vicar comes around, I mustn't take him in there."

~*~

While Norma Ingermann was dealing with her unwanted gift, the doorbell of Marjory Fleecem's house rang but Marjory made no attempt to get up. Instead, she waited until Dalisay answered the door. Only then did she deign to see who it was. She walked into the hall and found Dalisay examining a large box.

Forgetting the order she was supposed to have cancelled, Marjory said, "What is it?"

Dalisay shrugged, "I do not know. It's addressed to you. Do you want me to open it? Your husband may have bought you a present."

Doing a good imitation of Lady Bracknell, Marjory said, "A present!"

"It could be," Dalisay replied. "Maybe we should wait until Mr Fleecem comes home. Maybe he bought it as a surprise."

Dalisay had been only too aware of the bickering going on, so she said, "Maybe it's an apology."

"A present," Marjory repeated.

"It's addressed to you," Dalisay said.

"Yes it is, isn't it? It's obviously for me." Marjory said. "Yes, open it."

Dalisay went to the kitchen and returned with a pair of large kitchen scissors and began cutting her way into the box. Once the tough cardboard casing had dropped away, Marjory moved in for a closer look. The object looked like a cross between an American horse saddle and a motorbike saddle. At the front, it had two pommels, one either side. The saddle section was mounted on a plinth and the electrical lead coming

out of the back suggested it contained a motor. On the side of the machine, there was a large label proclaiming it to be a Vybian 850.

Marjory stared at it for a full minute and then said, "What in God's name is that?"

Dalisay giggled.

Marjory was not amused, "What is it?"

"It's designed for er,er, ladies in need of er, er."

When Marjory still clearly didn't understand, Dalisay giggled again and said, "I will show you."

She plugged the machine in at the nearest socket and she moved back to the machine. She flung one leg over the Vybian 850 and settled herself on the saddle. She then flipped the top off the left-hand pommel and revealed the controls.

A moment later the machine began to vibrate under her, and a smile formed on her face. "It's quite a nice sensation. Do you want a go?"

When Marjory didn't answer, Dalisay flipped open the second pommel and exposed a selection of phallic looking objects. "If you want a bit more pleasure you can screw one of these into the saddle. Do you want a go?"

Comprehension dawned and a look of horror crossed Marjory's face. "Why has he bought me this? What's he trying to tell me?"

Realising Marjory was not impressed with her present, Dalisay said, "Maybe it's been delivered here by mistake."

"I don't think so," Marjory replied, sniffing. "Now he's got *you* in his bed, this is his way of telling me to look after myself."

Dalisay looked dismayed. "Me? In his bed?"

"That's what he's hinted," Marjory snapped. "I know he's been with other women."

Dalisay look of dismay increased. "*I am not sleeping with your husband.*"

"Then why does he keep making sly comments suggesting you are?" Marjory demanded.

"I am *not* sleeping with your husband," Dalisay repeated. "I don't even like him that much."

Fearing she might have caused offence, she added, "Besides, he's married to you and he's too old for me."

Ignoring her pleas of innocence, Marjory snapped. "Put that disgusting device where visitors can't see it. I don't want anyone thinking that *I* would use such a thing."

Once Dalisay had dismounted, she pulled the Vybian 850 towards a large under stair cupboard and eased it inside.

After ensuring the machine was well out of sight, Marjory snapped, "I'm going upstairs to pack and then I'm going."

"Going?"

"I'm going to stay with Angela. I have no doubt that will suit you and my feckless husband down to the ground. Once I'm gone, you'll be able to shag one another senseless."

"I am *not* sleeping with your husband," Dalisay repeated but her denials made no difference.

After packing a bag, Marjory collected her keys, and with Fluffy under her arm, slammed her way out of the front door, climbed into her car and drove off at high speed.

~*~

Angela Curlew-Pheasant was one of Marjory's oldest friends. They'd known one another from their schooldays when they'd both attended boarding school together. As Marjory only came to see her when something was wrong, Angela didn't have to ask the reason for the visit.

"Come in, it's lovely to see you."

"He's a pig," Marjory sniffed.

"Mark?"

"He's bought me a Vybian 850," Marjory complained.

Thinking a Vybian 850 was a make of car, Angela said, "That's kind of him, isn't it?"

"No, it isn't," Marjory stated and began describing the machine that had been delivered to her house.

Angela was all ears. "Oh, that sounds fun. Can I have a go?"

"You're not taking this seriously," Marjory complained, "I'm thinking of divorcing him and taking him for every penny he's got."

"Eh!"

"What d'you mean, eh?"

"A few years ago, you told me you signed a prenuptial agreement," Angela reminded her. "There are no children. If you divorce him, you'll probably wind up on a pittance."

Marjory's mind went into overdrive, "You're right. I did sign a pre-nup. If I instigate divorce proceedings, I'll end up like the Umwood tribe, living on hard tack."

Angela nodded. "You will."

"So I just have to accept the situation. Shit!"

Knowing Marjory would have made the assumption she could stay and would have packed a bag, Angela made the same offer as she always did when Marjory had a falling out with her husband.

"Would you like to stay here for a few nights?"

Marjory accepted with indecent haste, "That would be awfully kind if I could."

~*~

Mark Fleecem returned home and Dalisay immediately greeted him with, "Mrs Fleecem has gone."

"Gone where?"

"I don't know. She mentioned someone called Angela."

"Ah!" Mark Fleecem said. "She always does that when we've had a falling out. Did she say *why* she was going, by the way?"

Dalisay shrugged, "It is none of my business. I am leaving too." She pointed at a large suitcase near the front door, "I have packed my bags."

"Why?"

"This place is a madhouse. I only stayed to tell you she'd gone. I didn't want to just leave a note."

"But why?"

"Not only is your wife very rude, she has more or less accused me of sleeping with you," Dalisay replied. "It is time for me to go."

"Tell me what happened, please."

"She became annoyed when the machine arrived," Dalisay replied.

“What machine?”

Dalisay took him to the cupboard and showed him the Vybian 850.

“What in hell’s name is that?”

“It came this morning,” Dalisay explained. “Mrs Fleecem looked at it and became very cross and left.”

“But why was she cross? What is it?”

Dalisay frowned, “You don’t know?”

“I’ve absolutely no idea,” Fleecem replied.

Dalisay smiled. “You really don’t know?”

“It looks like a motorbike with no wheels.”

“It is not that,” Dalisay said.

“I still don’t understand,” Fleecem said. “Shall we pull it out and have a better look?”

Dalisay smiled again. This day was just getting better.

Once the Vybian 850 was back in the hall, Fleecem said, “So what is it then? How does it work?”

Although she’d jumped on the machine when Marjory had demanded to know what it was, Dalisay became reticent in male company. “It’s designed for er,er, ladies in need of er.”

Fleecem plugged it in. “So, it’s for ladies. Why don’t you show me what it does?”

Suspicion formed on Dalisay’s face, “You know what it does. You are playing games with me Mr Fleecem.”

Fleecem grinned, “Did you show Marjory how it worked?”

“Yes,” Dalisay said, “I sat on it and showed her. But I am not sitting on it for you. You will get ideas.”

Fleecem burst out laughing, “I wish I’d been here when you showed her.”

“Why did you tell your wife that I was sleeping with you?”

“I didn’t,” Fleecem replied. “She gets very worked up at times.”

“She accused me of sleeping with you,” Dalisay said. “Where did that come from?”

“She is a very strange woman,” Fleecem replied.

“I agree with that,” Dalisay said, “Which is why I’ve decided to leave.”

“No, no don’t leave,” Fleecem pleaded. “I thought you might come to Chester with me and watch Cornrun Gold in action.”

“Mrs Fleecem appears to have formed the opinion I’m sleeping with you. If I come to Chester with you, she will think it’s true.”

“I don’t know how she got that idea,” Fleecem repeated.

“I think you do,” Dalisay said, “You know she is a jealous woman, so you’ve been playing mind games with her making her think we are secret lovers.”

She pointed at the Vybian 850. “I’m not sure I’d be pleased if my partner bought me one of those unless I asked for it.”

“I didn’t buy it,” Fleecem said defensively. “Someone has played a joke on us.”

Dalisay gave him a wry smile, “It’s an expensive joke if they have.”

“They raided our bank account,” Fleecem said.

The wry smile changed to a disbelieving look. “I’m sure they did. I’m sorry but I’m leaving. This place is crazy.”

“But you said you’d come to see the races, to see Cornrun Gold.”

“You asked me,” Dalisay said. “And I said that I would think about it. I have thought about it and don’t think it is a good idea. If I come with you your wife really will think we are having an affair.”

“I’d really appreciate it if you did come with me.”

“Why?”

“Because it would look better if I was accompanied,” Fleecem replied.

“Your wife is right.” Dalisay said. “Although I have not slept with you, it is obvious you want me to. You have been making passes at me for weeks; you want me to sleep with you, but the answer is no. I am going now.”

As she left the house, case in hand, Fleecem cursed. He was losing his touch.

Chapter 24

Wednesday: Morgan Flechley smells a rat

Urquhart Crow arrived at his office and his PA said, "There are some people waiting to see you."

Crow frowned, "Have they made an appointment?"

"No," she replied. "But one of them is Morgan Flechley."

Crow made a slight harrumphing sound.

His PA responded with, "I put them in the conference room."

Entering the conference room, Crow saw that Big Al and someone he didn't recognise appeared to be checking for bugs.

Crow said, "What's going on?"

Flechley wasted no time. "The land we were discussing the other day; the land behind my house. The seller rang me and said the police had been around asking questions. So I ask myself, why are the police taking an interest? I then think about the conversation we had the other day and wondered if there might be a connection."

"All our discussions have been confidential and kept confidential," Crow assured him. "And I have been away on business since we spoke, so I haven't even re-examined your proposals."

"So why are the police sniffing around?"

Crow shrugged. "I haven't spoken to anyone about your land since we met."

"We have a leak," Flechley said. "If it's not you, who is it?"

"I know it's not me," Crow replied. "If you're going to accuse me of things I haven't done, I'm quite happy to withdraw and let someone else take over."

"No, no, no," Flechley said, holding up his hands as if surrendering. "I was just checking. Please carry on with your work." He added, "So you've no idea who might have talked to the police?"

"As I was leaving your house," Crow said, "your son and his mates ambushed me and ask me about the land."

Flechley's face hardened. "You're not suggesting my Brian is behind this, are you?"

When Crow told him exactly what Brian had said, Flechley's face hardened still further.

"So you think Brian has attempted to stop the development?"

"I'm not saying that, but it could be an answer," Crow said.

"How did he know about my plans?"

"He's using your CCTV system against you," Crow said.

"You're joking!"

"Look," Crow said. "I don't want to get dragged into this. Keep my name out of it. I can only tell you what Brian said. His scrambling mates don't seem very happy you are going to build on *their land*."

"Their land!"

"That's the way Brian sees it," Crow said. "But like I said, I don't want to be dragged into this. I don't want Brian to find out I've told you."

"Okay," Flechley agreed. "I won't mention your name, but you think Brian's been spying on me?"

"That's my reading of the situation," Crow replied.

Flechley turned and moved towards the door. "If the police get in touch, you know nothing, understood?"

"It goes without saying," Crow assured him.

Flechley half turned and added, "If the police do contact you, I expect you to tell me immediately."

"As I just said," Crow replied. "It goes without saying."

As a parting shot, Flechley said, "I need that planning application submitting as soon as possible."

"Sure."

Once in the taxi that was waiting outside for him, Flechley said, "Take me to Brian's school. I want to speak to that idiot son of mine."

"He'll probably be in lessons," Big Al said.

"Then we'll get him out of lessons," Flechley snapped. "When I've finished with him, he'll wish he hadn't been born."

Heng intervened, "Taking him out of lessons would be a bad move. It will create problems. People will ask questions."

"So I do nothing?" Flechley snapped.

"It would be sensible to have our computer and CCTV systems checked before accusations are bandied about," Heng replied.

Flechley nodded. "Okay." He looked at Big Al, "Get everything checked over. But if I find Brian is responsible, I'll kick his arse until it turns to jelly. Let's get back home."

He looked at Big Al, "What are you waiting for, God's sake? Get that computer consultant on the phone!"

Big Al fumbled with his phone in his haste not to anger Flechley anymore. He began to explain the situation to the consultant but Flechley tutted and sighed. He waved his hand at Big Al.

"Give me that fucking phone!"

Big Al passed it over.

"I want you to do a remote check on my system and see what's going on with it," he bellowed to the consultant. "And I want it done soon as."

He stabbed the hang-up button with his stubby forefinger and tossed the phone back to Big Al. "There's always fucking something," he grumbled.

Almost home, one of Flechley's mobiles rang; it was his computer consultant.

Flechley demanded, "Well? Have we got a problem?"

"I've remotod in," the consultant said. "And it looks as if someone has been hacking into Brian's computer."

"So Brian is responsible," Flechley snapped.

Wanting to avoid being embroiled in the blame game, the consultant said, "It might not be his fault. Then again..."

"Then again what?"

"It does look as if Brian has been accessing your main system," the consultant replied.

"What are you going to do about it?"

"Monitor your system and see if I can work out who's hacking in," the consultant added. "In the meantime it might be sensible not to say anything to your son."

"You mean you might be able to find out who is responsible?" Flechley snapped.

"Possibly; if we are lucky," the consultant replied.

As the taxi pulled up outside his house, Flechley had another call and a muffled voice said, "One of your houses is being watched."

Flechley's anger rose again. "Which one?"

"Arundel Avenue," The voice said, and hung up.

Glancing at Big Al, Flechley said, "Good job we adopted Plan B. The police are watching Arundel Avenue."

Still annoyed by the double shock, Flechley said to Heng, "Have you located Hardy?"

"No boss," Heng replied.

"Well I want him found. There are a lot of loose ends that need to be tidied up."

~*~

"Kent Training," Frindella Collins said into the phone.

"This is Mark Fleecem," the caller told her.

Getting no reaction, Fleecem added, "I have shares in Cornrun Gold."

Making the link, Frindella picked up a pen and made a note of the delivery address and requirements, glanced at Jane Mickelmach and passed the note over.

"Another job for you to sort out," she said. "Oh, and you won't forget to give Cornrun Gold his special pill on Friday, will you? I'm going to have to go shortly to catch my train."

Mickelmach nodded sympathetically, "I am sorry to hear your mother is unwell."

"I'm sure she'll be okay," Collins replied. "But I will need to stay with her for a few days. Promise you won't forget to give Cornrun Gold his special pill, will you?"

"Of course not," Mickelmach replied. "Trust me. I won't forget."

After Collins had left, Mickelmach glanced at Collins' note. Had she written ten tons or twenty tons?

After re-reading the note she decided it was twenty.

~*~

Putman came to Philain's house in the evening. As he was wearing an oversized raincoat and looked grossly overweight, Philain knew what Putman had done.

"You didn't have to put your uniform on."

"Thought I'd show you the modifications before Thursday," Putman explained.

"Where's your Pilum?"

"Ah!"

Swiftly returning to his car, Putman came back with the lethal looking javelin and they went upstairs.

Philain's wife called out, "Don't stamp on the floor. Last time you nearly brought the ceiling down."

Once upstairs, Putman removed his coat to display his Roman uniform, "What d'you think?"

Philain had seen Putman's uniform improve over time. Having limited finances, Philain had begged most of their material from his brother who worked at an interior design company; sprayed vinyl largely replaced genuine metal.

He nodded, "It looks a lot more authentic."

As Putman had brought a change of clothes in a bag, he climbed out of his armour and carefully placed it in a zip up clothes bag. "So you'll bring it tomorrow."

"As if I'd forget it," Philain replied. "Pity only two of us can go. Mind you, it was very short notice."

He pointed at the three popup banners his brother had recently made for him. One had a map of Britain before the Roman invasion, the second depicted Boudicca's revolt against the occupying forces of the Roman Empire in AD 60. The third showed major Roman towns, road and fortifications.

"What d'you think?"

Putman was blown away, "Your brother has done a really good job."

As Putman was leaving, he said, "So you're bringing your van in tomorrow?"

When Philain nodded, Putman added, "Don't forget to tell Jim or he'll probably wheel clamp you."

"Don't worry, I'll tell him."

"When are we leaving?"

"Flinnett is going to Chester early tomorrow to meet Mr Fleecem," Philain replied. "So we should be able to get an early start."

After exchanging Roman salutes, Putman left and went home.

~*~

Rheingold heard a thumping on his front door. Without needing to be told, he knew that Big Al had returned.

Opening the door, Rheingold expected him to barge his way in again but instead he just said, "Is Hardy here? He's not at home."

Rheingold shook his head, "I've already told you, he's gone on holiday. I don't know where he is."

Heng appeared, "I need to search your house."

When Rheingold objected, Heng ignored him and pushed his way past. After carrying out a thorough search of every room, Heng found the loft hatch, dropped the loft ladder and inspected the void. Eventually he came down.

By then, Big Al and Rheingold were standing in the hall and Carly was in the kitchen doorway, looking worried.

Heng said, "He's not here." He glanced at Rheingold. "We need to find him."

Looking at Big Al accusingly, Rheingold said, "If you hadn't attempted to drown him the other day maybe he wouldn't have gone away."

Heng cut in, "Why d'you think he's done a bunk?"

"I didn't say he'd done a bunk," Rheingold said. "He told my boss he was going on holiday."

"Where?"

"I've already told you, he wouldn't tell me."

"You'd better find out where he is," Heng snapped.

"I don't know where he is," Rheingold said. "I can't get in touch with him."

"Why not?"

"He's ignoring my calls."

Heng moved closer, "If you've got any sense, you'll find out where he is and tell Big Al or me." Glancing at Carly, he added, "If I don't find him and have to come back here, both you and your girlfriend will regret it."

"This is not *our* fault," Rheingold protested.

"Find out where your friend is," Heng hissed. With that, Big Al and Heng stepped out and walked away.

When Rheingold turned around, Carly was no longer standing behind him. He heard movements coming from upstairs.

Going up, he found Carly packing, "What are you doing?"

"What does it look like I'm doing?" Carly snapped. "I'm leaving."

"Why?"

"Are you for real? Anyway, I've been thinking about this some time; I'm scared. I didn't mind you selling drugs because most people I know use them but now it's getting heavy."

"Heavy?"

"Oh! Come on," Carly snapped. "First Paul Tupal gets beaten up by a thug and comes to the Red Lion covered in blood. He's also minus his front teeth; I'm surprised we didn't get thrown out."

"That had nothing to do with Big Al or Morgan Flechley," Rheingold countered.

"It's part of a general theme though isn't it? Don't forget, I was here when Big Al nearly drowned Paul. And now Heng, a real nasty bit of work, starts threatening me."

"It was your idea to tell Morgan Flechley that Paul Tupal was going to cause trouble," Rheingold said.

"Maybe it was," Carly replied. "So maybe I was wrong. But that doesn't change anything. I'm leaving."

"I don't want you to leave."

"Tough!"

"Look, what can I do?"

Carly zipped up her case. "I might think about coming back once you've given them what they want."

"And what's that?"

"Paul Tupal."

"I don't know where Paul's gone," Rheingold told her. "I've tried contacting him but he's ignoring my calls. You know what Paul's like. Because I've been trying to talk some sense into him, he's gone on the turn."

"Why don't you get John Urnwood to contact him," she suggested.

"Why?"

"They seem very friendly these days."

Ignoring her comment, Rheingold said, "Where are you going?"

"Somewhere that Morgan Flechley's thugs can't find me," Carly replied. She hauled her case towards the landing and began bumping it down the stairs.

A few moments later the front door slammed. Instead of chasing after her, Rheingold moved to the bedroom window and watched Carly throwing her suitcase into the boot of her sports car. A moment later, she climbed in and raced off.

As the car rounded a bend and disappeared from view, Rheingold cursed; things wouldn't be the same without Carly around.

Picking up his phone, he rang John Urnwood.

"I don't suppose you know where Paul Tupal is?"

"No," Urnwood replied, monosyllabically.

"No idea at all?"

Urnwood said, "He mentioned he was staying at a friend's place, but he didn't say where."

Rheingold was about to curse again when Urnwood said, "But I know where he'll be tomorrow."

"Where?"

"He's coming to Chester to meet me, and then on Friday he's coming to the races to see uncle's horse run," Urnwood said. "You know Paul, he's not going to miss the opportunity of free booze."

"Are you sure you're meeting up?"

Commented [DG13]: Would she know his name?

“Positive,” Urnwood replied. “I’ve just spoken to him.”

“Where’re you going to meet him?”

“Not sure yet,” Urnwood said. “He said he’d come back to me shortly. I’m also meeting up with my uncle on Thursday night. He’s booked us into a swanky hotel.”

“Where’s Paul staying when he comes to Chester?”

“I don’t know,” Urnwood replied. “Is there a problem?”

“No,” Rheingold said, “No problem. I’m just worried about him.”

“Yeah,” Urnwood admitted. “He didn’t look too good at the Red Lion. His face was really smashed up.”

Once he’d hung up on Urnwood, Rheingold rang Carly but her phone when straight to voice mail.

He said, “I’ve just been told that Paul Tupal will be in Chester on Thursday and going to the Chester races on Friday. Call me back.”

Five minutes later, he had a return call.

Carly said, “You’re telling me this, because?”

“Because I want you to come back,” Rheingold said.

“If you want me back, you’re going to have to sort this mess out first,” Carly replied icily. “It’s Morgan Flechley who wants Paul Tupal, not me.”

“So you want me to tell Flechley where Paul will be on Thursday and Friday?”

“It seems like the only solution to me,” Carly replied.

Hanging up, Rheingold sighed heavily. He hated doing this, but Carly was right. What other solution was there? He rang Big Al and relayed the message.

Within seconds, Heng came on, “So Paul Tupal will be meeting up with John Urnwood on Thursday, correct?”

“Yes,” Rheingold said.

“How is John Urnwood getting to Chester on Thursday?”

Sensing Heng wouldn’t appreciate an evasive answer, Rheingold said, “He works with me at Slobend, Fleecem & Skinnem. He will probably go in his mother’s car.”

Heng said, “Make, model, colour and number plate.”

Rheingold described Urnwood’s vehicle, then said, “I don’t know the number plate.”

“Pity! Anything else?”

“He’ll probably pick up his girlfriend on the way.”

“Have you a photograph of John Urnwood?”

Thirty seconds later, a photograph of John Urnwood appeared on Heng’s mobile.

“Okay,” Heng said, “My last question. Where does John Urnwood live?”

Rheingold had barely finished providing Urnwood’s address before Heng cut the connection.

Regretting what he’d done, Rheingold called Tupal’s number but not getting a reply, he left a message. “Morgan Flechley’s guys are coming after you. I’d lay low if I were you.”

~*~

Ten minutes later, Big Al and Heng drove past John Urnwood’s house.

Heng said, “Stop.”

He grabbed a pizza advertising flyer that Big Al had lying around in the car.

Big Al gave him a sharp look, “What are you taking that for?”

“I’m going to take a closer look at John Urnwood’s house. If anyone challenges me, I’ll just say I’m doing a leaflet drop.”

Climbing out, Heng walked back to the house. Mentally checking the details of the car Rheingold had given him, he made a note of the number plate.

Walking up Urnwood's drive, he planted a small magnetic tracker close to one of the light clusters on the car.

Returning to Big Al he handed him the flyer and said, "I didn't need it."

Grabbing the flyer and throwing it into the passenger footwell, Big Al said, "What now?"

"Move a bit closer to the house," Heng said. He pulled a small device out of his pocket and blue toothed it to the sound system in Big Al's car before aiming it at the bay window. A moment later, they could hear muffled voices.

Big Al shuffled in his seat, "Not exactly clear."

"You must learn patience," Heng replied.

Ten minutes later, they heard a distinct phone ring and a male voice said, "I've looked it up on the internet. The best place to meet would be on Chester walls near the Eastgate Clock, say 2 o'clock."

The same voice said, "My uncle has given me the day off, so we're going to set off around 10.30."

When Heng started to disconnect his equipment, Big Al perked up. "Are you done?"

Heng nodded. "We know when they are leaving, and we know the car they are using. We can follow their car easily and we know where John Urnwood is meeting Paul Tupal," he said. "As Chester is always crowded, dealing with Tupal should be easy. It's easy to escape in a crowd."

"Dealing with Tupal?"

"The boss has decided that Tupal is a liability," Heng revealed. "Dealing with him will also send out a message to the others; the boss won't be messed around."

Big Al shuffled uncomfortably. He had no objection to extreme violence, but he'd always avoided a deliberate killing.

Sensing Big Al's reaction, Heng said, "Do I detect a problem?"

"No," Big Al lied, "So can we go?"

"Yes," Heng replied. "You will pick me up tomorrow and bring me here for 10 am tomorrow morning."

Chapter 25

Thursday

Gerry's mobile pinged at 6 o'clock in the morning. Reaching out for it, he glanced at the message: "Sure you don't need my help?"

Gerry texted Ian back, "I can manage. There's no room for you on my brother's motorbike anyway."

There was another ping, "So when are you going?"

"My brother's picking me up from school and taking me there," Gerry replied.

Another ping, "So what's the plan?"

Gerry texted back, "Collect keys from my uncle's house without him seeing me; should be able to do that because he's as deaf as a post, open up the hall, get myself ready and then let the Romans in when they arrive. From then on, I'll play it by ear."

"Hope it works. Good luck."

Gerry was about to text back but was interrupted by a hammering on his bedroom wall.

Laura's voice echoed through, "Is that you pinging, Gerry? D'you know what time it is?"

Cursing under his breath, Gerry texted back, "Have to go. SOW - Sister on Warpath."

~*~

Big Al collected Heng as agreed, and they were parked fifty yards from John Urnwood's house by 10 am. Heng busied himself linking with the tracker he'd placed on Urnwood's car.

When the Urnwoods had not emerged by 10.30, Big Al glanced at his watch.

"Patience," Heng said.

Five minutes later, John Urnwood and his mother emerged and began loading their car. With the loading operation complete, the old car set off and Big Al followed at a discreet distance.

After a mile, Urnwood's car stopped and a good-looking girl climbed into the back.

Heng said, "I presume that's Ashley."

Big Al nodded and moved off as soon as Urnwood's car had pulled away from the kerb.

~*~

Philain's van rolled out of the Skinnem and Fleecem car park in good time. Moving off, Putman said, "Pity there are only two of us going."

"It'll be fine. Two of us will be enough," Philain said. "My only concern is heating. Our uniforms are only made from thin material."

Putman nodded, "If this hall is unheated, we could end up like brass monkeys."

~*~

Big Al was not a happy man. "I don't like guns."

Heng ignored him and carried on checking his pistol.

Big Al said, "Why can't we just rough him up and attempt to bash some sense into him?"

Heng was philosophical. "I gather you have already tried that, but it doesn't seem to have done much good. Mr Flechley has had several reports that Paul Tupal is still making an exhibition of himself. He's also been indiscreet in a number of places. If he's picked up by the police and decides to squeal, Mr Flechley could go to prison. Naturally enough, Mr Flechley would like to avoid that. I see my role as a damage limitation exercise."

"Must be a nice little earner, knocking people off," Big Al observed.

Heng ignored the comment. "I've just seen John Urnwood approaching." Glancing at his watch, he added, "He's early; time for you to make yourself scarce, Al. I don't like an audience."

As Big Al walked away, Heng looked at his watch again. It was a quarter to two. He then picked up another face he recognised; it was Paul Tupal and he was walking towards Urnwood.

Leaving his position near the clock, Heng ran down the adjacent stone stairs and began dodging around shoppers and sightseers. Catching a glimpse of both men talking, he continued to move towards them.

Pulling his gun, Heng moved in for the kill but before he could get close enough to Tupal for a clean shot, Tupal suddenly became aware of Heng's presence and realised he was going to be attacked.

Without a thought for Urnwood's safety, Tupal reacted by swinging his work colleague round and thrusting him at Heng. Urnwood cannoned into Heng and sent him flying. In the confusion that followed, Tupal took to his heels.

Realising his intended hit had escaped, Heng pushed Urnwood to one side, and gave chase, slipping his gun into his pocket so he didn't attract attention.

Sensing his quarry wasn't far away, Heng ran his eyes over the thronging crowds and quaint chocolate box frontages of the shops. He was about to move off when someone grabbed him from behind and pushed a knee into his back.

In an attempt to dislodge his assailant, Heng pulled out his gun, aimed it over his shoulder and fired twice in quick succession. Tupal responded by grabbing the gun with his free hand and pistol whipping Heng's head.

The smaller man collapsed in a heap and Tupal dropped the gun. Stepping over Heng, Tupal started to run. He had only covered ten feet before he saw Urnwood staring at him open mouthed but instead of stopping, Tupal carried on running.

Once he'd covered a hundred yards, Tupal deliberately slowed his pace and began mingling with the crowds.

A few seconds later, Urnwood caught him up, "What's going on?"

Urnwood gave him a gap-toothed grimace. "What d'you think was happening? That guy was trying to kill me."

"Why?"

"Let's just say I've offended the wrong people," Tupal said.

"Who?"

Tupal nodded to a nearby coffee shop, "Not here."

Once inside, Tupal ordered two drinks and nodded towards a table well away from the window.

Urnwood repeated his question, "Who's after you?"

"Morgan Flechley's people," Tupal revealed.

"Who's Morgan Flechley?"

"I'm one of his distributors," Tupal said. "He sells to Rheingold and me and we sell it on."

"It?"

"Drugs of course. What else?" Tupal snapped. He added, "I'll need your help."

"If I can."

"I used park and ride. My car is out of town. I could do with a lift back. With them still after me, I don't want to stand at a bus stop. I can't show my face on the street."

Urnwood showed surprise, "Why did you use a park and ride?"

"Flit Rheingold left a message and told me Morgan Flechley's people were after me. I thought it might be a sensible move," Tupal replied. "I know Morgan Flechley has police contacts. Someone tips Flechley off if anyone is going to move against him. I thought they might use number plate recognition to find me if I came right into town." He handed the race ticket back. "I think I'll be pushing my luck if I stick around here for the race."

"Where will you go?"

"I have somewhere to stay," Tupal said.

"Okay, I'll take you back to your car."

"Thanks."

"No problem," Urnwood said. He dipped his hand into his pocket and pulled out Heng's gun. "You might need this."

Tupal looked surprised. "Where d'you get that?"

"I grabbed it when the other guy went down," Urnwood replied. "Like I said, I thought you might need it."

Tupal gave him a gap-tooth smile. "Good thinking. Where's your car parked?"

"Not far from here," Urnwood said. "Come on."

~*~

Hearing police sirens, Big Al looked around. Seeing a large group of rubberneckers not far from where he was, he began walking. He then caught a glimpse of Heng's body lying on the pavement.

Staying long enough to watch an ambulance move in and take Heng away, Big Al turned and began walking back the way he'd come. On the way, he made a call to Flechley.

"Heng's fluffed it. Tupal got away."

"What d'you mean, fluffed it?"

"When I saw him," Big Al said, "He was lying on the pavement and there was no signs of Tupal. He must have run off."

"He took Heng out!"

"Looks like it," Big Al replied.

After allowing Flechley's invective to flow over him for nearly a minute, Big Al said, "Do you want me to come back or try to locate Tupal?"

"Is Heng dead?"

"I'm not sure," Big Al admitted.

"Okay, get back here."

Big Al went back to back to the car park he'd used. By chance, he lifted his head just in time to catch a glimpse of Urnwood's car leaving with Paul Tupal in the front passenger seat.

Big Al raced towards his own car, flicked on Heng's tracker and shot down the ramps like a maniac. Once he'd joined the external road system, Big Al glanced at the

locator screen and realised that Urnwood was only a few hundred yards away and began to follow.

After a short while he called Flechley again, "I've re-established contact with Hardy. What d'you want me to do?"

"You've found him!"

"Yeah," Big Al confirmed. "What d'you want me to do?"

"He's surplus to requirements," Flechley replied.

Big Al pursed his lips. "So, you want him..."

"I want you to dispose of the garbage," Flechley said.

Big Al gritted his teeth. Intimidation and extreme violence were his stock in trade, not murder.

Urnwood's car turned into another car park. After a few seconds, Tupal climbed out and walked over to his own car.

Although driving at Tupal and running him over would have been the quick and easy way of complying with Flechley's demands, Big Al screeched to a halt, jumping out of the car, leaving the door wide open. He ran towards Tupal.

Hearing running footsteps, Tupal turned. He pulled out the gun and fired twice. Big Al staggered. Tupal jumped into his car and drove off, burning tyre rubber as he left.

Seeing what had happened in his rear-view mirror, John Urnwood climbed out of his car and ran to where Big Al was holding one of his arms. He saw a chest wound and blood oozing out of Big Al's shirt.

Urnwood said stupidly, "You've been hit."

"Yeah," Big Al agreed. "Twice."

Urnwood said, "I'll call an ambulance."

When Big Al made no attempt to disagree, Urnwood put in a call for an ambulance. "And hurry up, there's blood everywhere! Oh, right, yeah, where is he?" Turning to Big Al he said, "Where are we? Oh shit, I don't know, oh yeah I do, the park and ride."

Big Al let out a half laugh, "I thought it was me who should be doing the panicking." He clutched his chest and groaned before saying, "I didn't realise he had a gun."

Urnwood lied, "Neither did I."

He moved away and rang Ashley, telling her where he was.

Within seconds his mother came on the line and demanded more information.

~*~

While Urnwood was busy, Big Al rang Flechley.

"You've been shot?" Flechley said, incredulously. "Where did he get a gun?"

"He must have picked up Heng's gun," Big Al said. "I'm waiting for an ambulance."

"A shooting," Flechley said, panic evident in his tone, "The police will be called."

"Don't worry, Boss," Big Al said. "I'll tell 'em I saw Hardy attacking someone, so I followed him and when I tried to grab him, he shot me."

Flechley let out an audible sigh of relief, "That sounds plausible."

"Should do," Big Al replied. "It's the truth."

~*~

The engine revved.

"Can I put this bag in one of your panniers?" Gerry asked.

David opened one up and as Gerry dropped the bag inside, he said, "What's in that?"

"Just a few odds and ends," Gerry told him, climbing onto the back of the motorbike. "You may as well drop me outside uncle's house. I can walk from there."

David eyed him thoughtfully, "I hope you're not up to mischief."

"Nar," Gerry replied. "I'm just seeing a mate."

"Okay," Get on."

He'd barely done as instructed before his brother's machine took off like a rocket. Twenty minutes later, David dropped Gerry off at their uncle's house, allowed him to reclaim his bag, arranged a likely pickup time, and raced off.

As there was no car on the drive, Gerry guessed his uncle was out. He slipped around the back, found the key his uncle always left under a mat, and opened the back door. Finding the key he wanted was easy so within a couple of minutes he was on his way to the community hall.

Not wishing to alert anyone to his presence, Gerry didn't turn the lights on. Instead, he went to a back room, opened his case, extracted his laptop, set it up and pulled out one of the long dresses he'd taken from his sister's wardrobe. After slipping it on, he glanced in a mirror and was pleased to see that it was long enough to cover his hairy legs and very male looking shoes. After putting on a pair of his sister's sun glasses he plonked a blonde wig on his head. He then pulled out one of his sister's lipsticks and attempted to apply it without turning himself into clown.

Glancing in the mirror again, he was pleased with the result. He now looked exactly as he imagined Felicity Fiddleson-Farquhar would look.

He left by the back door, walked around the side of the hall and opened up another door. Once back inside again, he glanced at his watch. So far, all was going to plan.

~*~

When Philain trundled up in his van, Felicity Fiddleson-Farquhar gave him a wave from a small window.

She called out, "We've had a slight mix-up with the keys; Mr Bainbridge will be back shortly with the main key. Can you go to the side door, and go upstairs and get changed? I'll be around to see you when Bainbridge comes back."

Philain nodded. "No worries!"

He dragged the pop-up banners and the uniform bags out of the van, and he and Putman went around to the side door and went upstairs.

As they reached the upper floor and dumped their load, Philain said, "You know, Felicity seems to have lost some weight since I last saw her."

Putman nodded. "Very attractive though."

Once they'd changed, they placed their normal clothes into duffle bags.

~*~

Gerry smiled. The hall had a number of security cameras and he could see what his Romans were doing. Waiting for them to move out of view, he went up a side staircase, opened a heavy fire door, carefully slid open a door and then removed the duffle bags. He locked the door and quietly went downstairs again. Slipping out of the back door, he quietly locked the side door.

Satisfied the Romans could not escape, he went back and changed into his own clothes, wiped the lipstick off and left the hall, locking the door behind him. He walked back to his uncle's house, returned the key and then called his brother.

He knew he'd have a slight wait so he walked back to the hall and was pleased to hear the side door being kicked and raised voices shouting, "Let us out. We're freezing our nuts off in here."

Twenty minutes later David returned. "All done?"

Gerry grinned. "Yeah, all done."

~*~

Gerry glanced at his phone when he arrived back and found a text message from Ian: How did it go?

There was another: Need to speak to you. Urgent."

Although he doubted the urgency, Gerry called back.

Before he could speak, Ian said, "Have you seen the news?"

"What news?"

"It's about that guy that Mick slugged, y'know Paul Tupal,"

"What about him?"

"The police are after him," Ian said. "He attacked a guy in Chester. He jumped him from behind and hit him with a gun. He's been recognised from CCTV in the city centre. He's also suspected to have been involved in a shooting. They are asking for information."

Realising his two Romans locked in a community hall paled into insignificance, Gerry said, "Has Mick still got Tupal's car number plate?"

"Probably."

"Might be an idea if you let the police know the details," Gerry replied.

"Er, how do we account for having the number plate?"

"You don't have to tell them that," Gerry said. "Just give them the details. They probably know already but it can't do any harm. Don't give them your name or address."

"Right!"

~*~

Tupal was nearing the flat when he remembered he was running short of money. He saw a petrol filling station with a free cash point. Pulling over, he went to the machine and withdrew as much cash as permitted.

Returning to his car, he flipped on the radio in time to catch the latest news. Although most of it was a rehash of what had been pushed out earlier, there was a report on the shooting. After suggesting there might be a link to a previous incident in the centre of Chester, Tupal heard his name mentioned. The reporter said the public should not attempt to apprehend him because he was armed and dangerous.

Swearing loudly, Tupal returned to the flat but didn't bother going in. Instead, he parked the car in its previous position, rolled himself a spliff and smoked it while he thought about his next move.

He thought about the cash withdrawal he'd just made. If the police had identified him, the withdrawal might betray his presence in the area.

With this in mind, he let himself into the flat, collected his possessions, dumped them in the boot of his car and drove away even though he had no idea where he would go.

After travelling several miles, he saw a pub and the prospect of alcohol drew him in. Parking, he went inside. Although there were several large TV screens dotted around, they were showing sport so there was little likelihood of someone switching to a news channel. He went to the bar, ordered two pints and sat down.

He'd barely started the first pint when his mobile rang. Glancing around to make sure no one was listening, he checked the display. It was John Urnwood.

Answering he just said, "Yep."

"Is that you Paul?"

"Yep. What d'you want?"

"The police are after you," Urnwood said. "You'd better turn yourself in."

Although he'd listened to the radio report, Tupal still said, "Why?"

"Don't be stupid," Urnwood snapped. "The guy you attacked in the city centre is still critical, and I've heard they know it was you who shot the guy in the car park. I've also seen the photographs they've been circulating. The only thing you can do is give yourself up."

"There is an alternative," Tupal said.

"What's that?"

"We could meet somewhere," Tupal said. "You could take me to a ferry port, and I'll sneak off to the Isle of Man or maybe Ireland."

"They'd catch you," Urnwood replied. "Even if you did escape, they'll track you down. Give yourself up while you can."

"I'm disappointed in you," Tupal replied.

"You're disappointed in me? After what you did today?" Urnwood snapped.

"I was just defending myself," Tupal replied.

"I didn't mean that," Urnwood said. "When I was giving you your ticket, you used me as a human shield. You pushed me towards that thug. He had a gun. Some mate you are. I could have been killed."

Annoyed by the response, Tupal hung up.

~*~

Ashley said, "Well?"

"You heard what I said to him," Urnwood replied, "So what now?"

"He may be a friend of yours, but he's wanted by the police. You'll have to tell them what you know."

"I gave him the gun," Urnwood replied.

Ashley thought about the matter and said, "That was stupid, but did anyone see you give Paul Tupal the gun?"

"I don't think so."

"Then tell the police you've just spoken to him but leave that bit out," she reasoned.

"He's a mate of mine," Urnwood whined.

"As you just said to him, he used you as a human shield," Ashley replied. "And for what it's worth, I don't like him. He's a creep. I think you should call the police."

"What good will that do?" Urnwood said. "I don't know where he is."

"If they find out you've called him and you don't tell them, you could be in trouble."

She handed him the phone number the police had broadcast, asking for witnesses. Urnwood took the number and called it.

~*~

Tupal had just finished his seventh pint when Urnwood called again.

“Yep!” Tupal replied. “Hope you haven’t called to tell me to give myself up again.”

“I was thinking about what you said,” Urnwood said. “I could meet you and take you to a ferry terminal.”

Tupal perked up, “Now you’re talking.”

“Where shall we meet then?” Urnwood asked. “Where are you?”

With drugs and alcohol affecting his judgement, Tupal revealed his location. Moments later, alarm bells sounded in his mind.

“You’ve been told to call me and keep me talking, haven’t you? You’re helping the police.”

“No I’m not,” Urnwood bleated.

“You’re lying, I can tell,” Tupal snapped back.

He cut the call, left the pub, raced towards his car and drove off, fast. Covering the next five miles at breakneck speed, Tupal slowed down and began verbalising his inner thoughts, “You bloody idiot telling John Urnwood where you were!”

A few seconds later, two police cars flashed past on the other carriageway, sirens sounding and lights flashing.

Tupal growled, “So he was dobbing me in. You’re a little shit, Urnwood.”

Turning off at the next junction to avoid meeting any more police cars, he began working his way down unlit country lanes. Once he found somewhere to stop, Tupal turned his mobile off; he suspected it could be used to track his location. He then drove off aimlessly again.

Ten miles further on, he began to lose heart, “Maybe I should hand myself in.”

The words had barely left his mouth before he came across an old house in the middle of nowhere with a for sale sign outside. Bringing his car to a halt, he ran his eyes over the farmhouse. It looked unoccupied. Not only was the estate agent’s sign showing signs of aging, it was leaning at a rakish angle, and there was only one light showing on the upper landing.

Pulling his car off the road, he went to investigate. Unable to gain entrance via the stout front door, he went to the rear of the property. All the curtains were drawn and there were no signs of life. Encouraged, he went to the back door and tried to force it open. Tupal eventually smashed a window, opened the casement and climbed in. After checking the house really was unoccupied, he opened the front door, went back to his car, took his case to the house and pulled off the road and onto a narrow drive. He closed a set of tall gates that had been left open.

Satisfied the car wouldn’t be seen by passing motorists, he went back inside and turned on a few lights. Although the house was empty, it was still fully furnished. He looked at the pile of post by the front door. As some had post marks that dated back at least a month, it implied the original owner had either died or had become infirm and had been dumped in an old people’s home. The mound of post also looked like whoever had inherited the property didn’t check it out very often.

He began checking cupboards and found cans of food stashed away. Opening a few, he cooked himself a simple meal.

"I could doss down here for a while until the heat dies down," he muttered to himself.

Once he'd finished eating, he searched more cupboards until he found some cans of beer and bottles of spirits.

"This gets better and better."

Turning the lights off, he went upstairs and flopped onto a double bed.

~*~

Big Al recognised Tim Pearson as soon as he entered the ward. He'd been present at the police raid at Morgan Flechley's house.

After flashing his ID, Pearson said, "So what happened?"

"I've already made a statement," Big Al replied. "A couple of local police have already seen me."

"I appreciate that," Pearson said, "But I'd still like to talk to you."

"Bit off your normal beat, aren't you?"

Pearson said, "I could say the same about you. Why are you in Chester?"

"Thought I'd do a bit of Christmas shopping before the rush started," Big Al replied.

Pearson smiled, "Christmas is months away, so I find that hard to believe."

"Okay," Big Al said. "I'll tell you what I told the others. I saw this guy attack another man and then run off. When I went back to the car park, I saw the same guy getting into a car and I followed him. When I tried to make a citizen's arrest, he shot me. That's it in nutshell."

"Why did you follow him?"

"So he didn't get away," Big Al replied, "Just doing my civic duty."

"Why didn't you call the police?"

"And break the law?"

"Eh?"

"I don't have hands free in my car," Big Al said.

"And you're a model citizen," Pearson replied.

"Like I just said," Big Al replied, "Just doing my civic duty."

Unimpressed, Pearson said, "How long have you worked for Morgan Flechley?"

"I don't work for Morgan Flechley," Big Al replied, reaching for his wallet. He extracted a card and passed it over. The card showed that Big Al worked for the Tiphham Cab Company.

"What were you doing at Morgan Flechley's house when it was raided?" Pearson said.

"Dropping off his shopping," Big Al replied. "Mr Flechley's a busy man. People from the taxi company very often drop off his shopping. Nothing illegal in that, is there?"

~*~

Flinnett was just about to leave Lisa's house when John Urnwood rang, "Have you seen the news, about Paul Tupal, sir?"

Taken by surprise at being addressed properly by Urnwood, Flinnett's voice softened, "What news about Tupal?"

"He shot a man."

"You're joking!"

"No," Urnwood said, "I saw him do it. The guy he shot was taken to hospital with two bullets in him."

"Where did he get the gun from?"

"No idea," Urnwood replied. "I thought you ought to know before we met Mr Fleecem."

There was a sudden change in Flinnett's tone, "This is not one of those silly jokes is it?"

"No sir," Urnwood gasped, "It's on all the news reports."

After finishing the call, Flinnett turned on his TV. Within a matter of seconds he found the news item and a face he vaguely recognised came up on screen. After screen freezing, he moved closer.

He re-ran the news item and moved even closer. Eventually, he came to the inevitable conclusion; it definitely was Paul Tupal. Letting out a whoop of delight, he rang *Firem* Sparrow and told him the news.

Hearing Flinnett's excited voice, Lisa came in part way through the conversation. Once he'd finished with Sparrow, she said, "What's made you so chirpy?"

Not wishing to admit that Tupal had been black mailing him for months, Flinnett glossed around the issue, "It looks as if Paul Tupal has finally gone too far. The police are looking for him."

"For doing what?"

"I've been told he's been involved in a shooting incident," Flinnett said. "I'll have to call Mark Fleecem."

Once he was through to Fleecem he deliberately started off gently. "I suppose you know Paul Tupal has been suspended by Sparrow."

"Ah! Yes," Fleecem replied. "Sparrow did notify me. I gather Tupal was drunk again and damaged his car."

"Correct," Flinnett replied. "Unfortunately, he took the car back without permission. And now I understand he's wanted by the police. It seems he shot someone."

"You're joking!"

"No," Flinnett replied. "Your nephew just called me and it's all over the media."

"You're joking!" Fleecem repeated.

"I wish I was."

"Why didn't you tell me about the car and the police before?" Fleecem snapped.

"It only happened yesterday, and I've literally just found out about the shooting a few moments ago." Flinnett replied. "If your nephew hadn't called me, I still probably wouldn't have known."

"I see."

"So, what do you suggest I do about Tupal?"

"Let me speak to Sparrow and I'll get back to you," Fleecem replied.

Five minutes later, Fleecem came back and said, "Sparrow has confirmed he instructed Tupal to leave the car in the car park, so he took it without permission. He's also been warned about drink driving before. He's become a liability. I've told Sparrow to dismiss him. We don't want Tupal's name linked with our company."

Once he'd finished the call, Flinnett grinned and threw his arms around Lisa, "That's a win for the good guys."

When he left the house, Flinnett went out whistling.

Chapter 26

Friday

“Bloody Felicity Fiddleson-Farquhar,” Philain said.

“What about her?”

“She set us up,” Putman snapped.

“She locked us in a community hall,” Philain added. “We were in there for hours.”

Jim was listening in using the stolen stethoscope when Moira popped her head around the door.

She said, “What’s up with Philain and Putman?”

Jim grinned. “Apparently someone called Felicity Fiddleson-Farquhar played a practical joke on them. She locked them in a community centre, and they couldn’t get out. They were locked in for hours without any heating.”

Moira giggled. “Sounds like another of Gerry’s doings.”

~*~

Tupal awoke just after eleven o’clock and vaguely wondered what had brought him out of his slumbers. Blinking a few times, he realised what had woken him. Daylight was streaming through the tattered curtains.

Rolling off the bed, he went to the bay, partially opened a curtain, slid a casement open and listened. Other than the sound of a tractor in the distance and tweeting birds, everywhere was quiet.

Tupal nodded, “Yes, I’ll hole up here for a while.”

Going downstairs, he opened some of the cans and made himself a breakfast of sorts. Once he’d finished, he went outside and began checking out the grounds surrounding the house. He swiftly discovered the house was entirely surrounded by fields.

As he had brought plenty of fill with him, he rolled a spliff and lit up. After a few puffs, the flowers in the garden and the dancing wheat heads developed a strange shimmer.

Satisfied he was safe, Tupal went inside and made straight for the drinks’ cupboard and helped himself. After knocking more than a few back, he decided to check his mobile. Urnwood had left several messages pleading for him to give himself up. A police officer advised him the same thing.

After reading the messages he turned his mobile off, fearful that his phone location could be traced.

With nothing to occupy his time, he began exploring and found a television set in one of the back rooms along with other furniture. It was obvious someone intended to return in the near future and start emptying the house.

Dragging the TV set back into the lounge, he plugged it in, turned it on and began listening to the news. Within minutes, Tupal saw a number of photographs of himself. For a split second, they sent shock waves through his system but then his concerns faded away. The images were so poor quality the police would find it difficult to bring a case against him.

Heartened, he lifted his glass and spoke out loud, “They haven’t any *real* evidence against you, pal. With a good lawyer you’ll get off.”

He then remembered the races that the Fleecem and Urnwood families would be attending; he’d placed a bet on Cornrun Gold.

~*~

Rheingold glanced at his watch. Their race, the one with Fleecem's horse, Cornrun Gold in it was about to start. The horse was obviously raring to go so Rheingold had placed a substantial wager on it.

While he was anticipating the start of the race, Flinnett appeared out of the crowd.

"Have you heard about Paul Tupal?"

"No," Rheingold replied. "What about him?"

Flinnett gave him a triumphal look. "Apparently he shot someone yesterday and the police are after him."

"You're joking!"

"No," Flinnett replied. "I'm not joking. And because he took the car without permission, has had several warnings for being drunk and now the shooting, he's about to be fired."

When Rheingold just remained there open mouthed, Flinnett said, "Might I suggest you think about leaving before you're pushed."

"Me?"

"You and Tupal have been bad news ever since you came to work for us," Flinnett said.

"If you cause me trouble, I could tell your wife about Lisa," Rheingold threatened.

"You could," Flinnett said, "But you might like to look at this first," and thrust his mobile in front of Rheingold's face.

Rheingold's mouth dropped open again as Jim's images appeared and showed him helping Umwood climb onto the back of Edmundo J Cunningham's horse.

"You may have noted," Flinnett added, "all these images are timed and dated. I can prove you weren't working for at least five hours that day. So, I repeat, I suggest you think about leaving before you're pushed. If I show these to Mark Fleecem, he's not going to be in a listening mood."

A moment later the race started, and Cornrun Gold swiftly took the lead. Once his horse took and crossed the finishing line well ahead of the rest, Mark Fleecem made his way towards the members of his consortium with a wide smile on his face.

Part way there, he realised no one else was smiling.

"Is there something the matter?"

~*~

Flinnett found Rheingold and held his hand out, "Car keys!"

"I thought you said I would be allowed to resign," Rheingold said.

"That's still your option but I'm still taking the car back," Flinnett replied. He added, "Mr Fleecem has just had some very bad news. If I were to show him the pictures on my camera, I'm sure he'd make your life very difficult. Like I said, he's not in a very good mood."

"His horse has just won," Rheingold said.

"That appears to be in doubt at the moment," Flinnett said. "Keys."

After handing the keys over, Rheingold said. "How am I going to get home?"

"That's your problem," Flinnett replied. "Tupal has stolen one company car. I'm not risking another."

Rheingold flared, "Okay you bastard, I resign."

~*~

“What’s happening?” John Urnwood said.

Instead of answering the question, Flinnett said, “Does your mother or Ashley drive?”

“Yes, why?”

“I suggest you go home.”

“Why, sir?”

“Cornrun God might be disqualified”, Flinnett said. “Your uncle is not in the best of moods at the moment.”

He handed Urnwood a set of keys. “Mr Rheingold has decided to resign, and I’ve accepted his resignation. I want you to take Rheingold’s car to the office car park. I’m going to ask Jim to meet you there and clamp it.”

“Why do we have to go home, sir?”

“I’ve just told you,” Flinnett said. “They’re doing tests. There’s a suggestion that Cornrun Gold might have been given illegal stimulants. Your uncle is stinking mad”

After Urnwood had explained the situation to Ashley and his mother, they went to collect the cars. On the way, they saw Rheingold.

Ashley intervened, “Don’t talk to him. He’s bad news too.”

Urnwood glanced at Ashley. “What d’you think will happen if uncle’s horse has been doped?”

Ashley shrugged, “We’ve got more important things to think about.”

“Like what?”

“I’m pregnant.”

“You can’t be. We took precautions.”

“I’m fairly certain I am,” Ashley said. “If you remember one of the condoms split.”

~*~

Angela Curlew-Pheasant put the phone down and turned to Marjory Fleecem.

“I don’t know if this is good news or bad news. I think you should sit down.”

“What’s happened?”

“Sit down.”

Reluctantly, Marjory did as instructed.

Angela said, “A friend of mine has just heard they think your husband’s horse has been doped.”

Marjory smiled, “He intended to bet on Cornrun Gold winning.”

“I think if it’s disqualified the bet is forfeit,” Angela said.

Marjory shrugged, “At least it didn’t fall over.”

~*~

When Urnwood pulled up outside the car park gates, Jim came down to meet them. Opening up, Jim let Urnwood drive in.

Going to the shed, Jim brought out two wheel clamps.

When Urnwood gave him a quizzical look, Jim said, “I’m going to make absolutely certain this one’s not driven away,” and fixed the clamps to the wheels.

Once Jim had finished, Urnwood glanced back at his mum’s waiting car and said, “Ashley’ pregnant. What am I going to do, Jim?”

“I hope you’re not blaming me,” Jim snapped. “I got you the condoms, I can’t do any more.”

“No. I’m not blaming you,” Urnwood replied. “But what am I going to do?”

Jim sighed and shook his head. "It's time to grow up lad. You got her that way, now she's your responsibility."

He glanced towards Urnwood's car and saw an older woman sitting behind the wheel.

"Is that your mother?"

When Urnwood nodded, Jim said, "I think you ought to tell her she's going to become a granny."

"She'll kill me."

"I gather the pregnancy is un-planned."

"Yes."

"You're lucky," Jim replied. "Times have changed. In the old days, girls like Ashley would be thrown out by their parents. I've no doubt your mother will quickly get used to the idea."

~*~

The short journey back home was quiet; everyone deep in thought. But as they drew closer, Urnwood's nose twitched.

His mother's did likewise. "What's that horrible smell?"

She noticed a pedestrian holding his nose. They rounded a corner and the cause of the smell became apparent. There was a huge mound of horse manure on the Urnwood drive, twenty tons in fact.

Jane Mickelmach hadn't forgotten to dispatch it from the training stables.

Urnwood's mother stared at the pile of manure in disbelief. Eventually she said, "This has to be the worst day of my life."

Glancing at her son accusingly, she said, "I discover you've got friends who peddle drugs and go around shooting people, then I have the humiliation of being told my brother has been caught cheating at racing, you tell me Ashley's pregnant and now this – a big pile of horse shit on the drive."

When Urnwood didn't reply, his mother pointed at the manure and said, "Your so-called friends have done this, haven't they?"

"It could have been Paul Tupal," Urnwood admitted. "It could be his way of getting back at me because I shopped him to the police."

His mother flared, "You know, you could be right. I could imagine the gun-happy maniac doing something like this."

There was a slight cough, Colin Shuttleworth, one of their neighbours moved in. Nodding towards the pile of manure he said, "You've got a lot of it haven't you? I don't suppose you've got any of that going spare?"

They all turned and stared at him, Urnwood with his mouth slightly agape.

"I could use it down at my allotment, Mrs Urnwood. I'm sure the rest of the allotment owners wouldn't mind some too. That's if, of course, you have too much."

For the first time since getting out of the car, Urnwood's mother smiled, "You can have the whole lot, Mr Shuttleworth. We think someone played a joke on us."

She glanced at her son, "If John can use your wheel-barrow, I'm sure he'll bring it around."

Shuttleworth looked slightly concerned, "It's a long way to my allotment."

"John doesn't mind, do you John?"

Urnwood blanched, "It'll take me hours."

Ashley pushed her way in and whispered, "Do it! Get this stuff shifted. It can't stay here."

When Urnwood looked at her in horror, she added, "We don't want to get on your mother's bad side, do we?"

The horror turned to despair. He sighed, "Okay. I'll shift it."

"You'll get changed first," his mother ordered. "You're not doing it in your best clothes."

Shuttleworth took pity on him, "Don't worry lad, I'll get a few of my friends to help you."

Once Urnwood had changed into his work clothes, his mother said, "And once you've shifted the muck, I want the whole drive hosed clean."

Urnwood protested, "This is not my fault."

His mother glared at him, "So whose fault is it then? It was one of your warped friends who sent it around, so you can clear it up."

"I only said it might be Paul Tupal who did it," Urnwood reminded her.

"Who else could it be?" she snapped back. "And in case you've forgotten, you might need my help now you've managed to get your girlfriend in the family way."

Leaving the house, Urnwood went to Shuttleworth's and collected his barrow. He had been digging, loading and wheeling for about an hour when two of Shuttleworth's gardening friends turned up and began digging into the heap as well.

As the mound of manure continued to shrink, Tim Pearson arrived in a police car, glanced at the stinking manure heap and wrinkled his nose. He nodded Urnwood to one side.

"Have you heard from Paul Tupal?"

When Urnwood shook his head, Pearson gave him a card, "Well if he does get in touch, you know what to do."

He nodded at the manure, "I'll leave you to your gardening party."

Chapter 27

Saturday

Tupal suddenly awoke but it wasn't the sun streaming through the windows that woke him this time. It was the sound of talking.

Then a voice said, "I can't get in. It seems to be bolted from the inside."

Realising the real owners had come back, Tupal rolled off the bed, lifted a corner of the curtain and looked out. There was a middle-aged couple outside.

He heard one of them say, "The side gates are locked. I think we've got squatters." "What are we going to do?"

There was a pause and then the male voice said, "I'm going to call the police. A few days ago, there was a dangerous gun man on the loose, he might be in there."

"Let's get away from here then," the female voice said. "Quickly! He might shoot us."

A few second later, car doors slammed, and a vehicle moved away. Checking at the window, to make sure they really had gone, Tupal dragged his clothes on, grabbed his belongings and raced downstairs.

~*~

Urquhart Crow was not a happy man. Morgan Flechley had once again eaten into his weekend.

"So, what d'you think?"

"Is that all you can get on the land?" Flechley griped. "I'd hoped to squeeze a few more on."

Crow drew breath and counted to ten, "I think we'll have real problems if we attempt to get any more on."

After thinking long and hard, Flechley nodded, "Okay, submit it."

He nodded to one of his men and a large bag landed on the table.

Crow frowned, "What's that?"

"Have a look," Flechley instructed.

Glancing inside, Crow found a large wad of money.

"That's an interim payment. Don't pay it into the bank; I don't need a receipt or an invoice, just get on with it."

When Flechley left, Crow locked the outer doors, closed the blinds and went back into the conference room to begin counting.

Once he'd finished, he shook his head in disbelief. There could be no doubting his client was a crook, but he paid well.

~*~

Flechley was three miles from his house when his phone sounded an emergency alert.

"Stop the car!"

Hooking into his CCTV system, he began flicking around his camera stations. Before long he picked up images of Brian and several of his men being led away. He switched to his office. The secret cabinet had been ripped away from the wall and the pipe ducts were exposed. Worse, two police officers were trying to hack their way into the false chimney housing the main server.

A moment later, he lost contact with the CCTV system.

Realising he'd been well and truly busted, he said to his driver, "Plan F. Get me out of here."

"What about Brian?"

"Fuck Brian," Flechley snapped. "It's his fault we're in this mess."

When the car changed direction, Flechley opened the glove compartment and extracted an Irish Passport that gave him a false identity.

"Time to leave the country."

~*~

Tupal was driving fast; he always did; speed limits didn't apply to him. He was in the process of overtaking when a car pulled out in front of him. He slammed on his brakes and then hit the horn. The other driver immediately pulled back and let him pass.

Glowing, Tupal raised the middle finger of one hand before racing off again. After covering the best part of five miles with his speedometer hitting ninety-five for most of the way, he became aware of a flashing blue light some way behind him.

He saw a service station coming up and more by reflex action than thought, he swerved across three lanes, cut his speed and swiftly lost himself in the car parking area. Parking, he stopped. If the police were after him for speeding, lying low for a while made sense.

After sitting in his car for the best part of fifteen minutes, he decided that he would use the facilities. He'd just walked through the outer doors when someone gave him a hard look, but he didn't think much about it. Since he'd lost his front teeth everyone gave him strange looks.

Leaving the service station, he walked back to his car. He was about to climb in when a police car pulled in front of him, totally boxing him in. Then armed police piled out, guns levelled.

After he'd been disarmed and cautioned, the man who given him the hard look appeared. Tupal suddenly realised it was the guy he'd flicked the finger to a few miles back.

While he was being led away, a uniform officer burst out laughing and pointed to the front of Tupal's car, "Have you seen this, sir?"

Tim Pearson glanced at the front number plate. Someone had removed his real number plate and replaced it with D1K HED.

Pearson permitted himself a wry smile and glanced at Tupal, "That just about sums him up, doesn't it?"

~*~

Mark Fleecem rarely used Facebook. As far as he was concerned, social media was a waste of time unless it could be harnessed to serve his business interests. However, he had good reasons for going online. As the doping of his horse had become common knowledge, he wanted to know what people were saying.

It was then that he found the dated photographs showing his Tiphm office staff helping Urnwood to climb onto the back of Edmundo J Cunningham's horse. As Tupal's, Rheingold's, Rosserman's, Sandra's and Springfield's faces were clearly visible, there could be no disputing they were there.

He then found the images of Sandra and several other staff members gallivanting around naked and the police dragging them off.

After watching and re-watching in disbelief, he picked up the phone to *Firem Sparrow*. "I think there are a few more dismissals for you to handle," he said.

He then rang Flinnett and told him about the images he'd just found.

He snarled, "I've told Sparrow, so if you want to keep your bloody job, you'll make sure it never happens again. Oh, one other thing. I've also received some very interesting images of you with another woman."

"Me with another woman?" Flinnett echoed.

"Don't give me the innocent," Fleecem snapped. "I'm giving you a choice. End it with this other woman or you'll be fired too. I don't like you messing my sister around."

"Okay," Flinnett said. "I'll finish it."

"You better had," Fleecem growled. "And one last thing. Who's the thin woman who works in your office?"

"Moir."

"As she seems to be the only one who does any work at that place, I want her promoted."

"Right," Flinnett replied. "Will do."

Chapter 28

Saturday

Tommy came around with Jim's special items about two o'clock.

Coming through the door he said, "Sorry I couldn't make it yesterday. There are all sorts of rumours going around the golf club. I gather a number of staff at Slobend, Skinnem and Fleecem's Tiphams northern office have been given the push."

When Jim nodded, Tommy looked smug. "So you're out of a job, eh, Dad?"

"No, he's not," Moira cut in.

Tommy looked surprised; he hadn't expected her still to be there.

"I heard they were closing the Tiphams branch."

Moira shook her head. "Mr Fleecem and Mr Sparrow said I was trustworthy. I've been promoted. So Jim still has a job if he wants it."

"But I heard they were closing everything down," Tommy repeated.

"Most of the existing staff has been fired and they are now recruiting," Moira said.

"So who got the chop?"

"Rheingold, Sandra and several more," she replied. She grinned, "I don't know what's going to happen to Tupal, but my guess is he'll get a long prison sentence."