

SLAVES

Crime programmes cause us both to smile. The plots and the villainy are so complex, and the sleuthing ever so ingenious. But hold on a minute. Just read your local gazette. Most crimes are not meticulously planned. They happen like a sudden shower. Somebody stupid gets drunk, or somebody stupid loses their temper. Take the other week. A man with a history of alcoholism and mental illness came home one afternoon to find himself locked out by his mother. Having knocked and shouted until his knuckles and larynx were raw, and having nowhere else to stay, he went into the town's Army and Navy store and picked up a little red tent. He made no attempt to be clever and sly - he just walked out with it, punching the retailer as he began to protest. We found him at twenty to five in the flower gardens, pitching it under a weeping willow. He confessed but said he'd had no choice. It was, of course, his way of getting into a cell for a night, and getting a hot meal. He created a crime and considerably helped us to solve it on the spot. Good for the statistics. In many cases a jealous ex-partner will get drunk (the drunkenness being the main reason he is an ex-partner) and go back "home" to commit assault and criminal damage or use threatening behaviour. What criminal mastermind would damage a car, a door or a nose in front of a streetful of witnesses? Detection? Easy-peasy. We go down, have a look, get the culprit's address and nick him. He doesn't usually deny the offence - on the contrary he admits it - but with justification. Hadn't he been socked himself? - or hadn't he been provoked, insulted, cheated on - blah, blah, blah - and had nasty messages sent to his mobile, his property damaged and stolen?? These tales remind me of children arguing in the playground. The average "criminal" (I think that is too harsh - I prefer non-coper) is unable to go beyond the playground stage. Hungry drug addicts steal from supermarkets and wave at the security cameras. Young drunks battle it out on CCTV and in front of officers who look on until they are exhausted and docile enough to bundle into the meat-wagon. It's a doddle. We had a good laugh last week over a young bloke who was stopped and searched outside a night spot by my bouncer friend Harry. He was a bit the worse for wear - tottering on the borderline and Harry was in two minds - but when he found a knife and fork in his inside jacket pocket and got sworn at for taking them, that swung it against him. *Totally unfair!* - he argued - *they belonged to his mother!* When Harry could not be persuaded, the lad produced a dessert spoon from his back pocket and bonked him on the bonce. In court he argued that he had a phobia about eating Indian food with cutlery Indians had handled and washed up. He never explained why he would eat the *food* Indians had cooked. He'd had a curry that very evening and that's why he had them on his person. The magistrate, a Mrs Maskie-Green, told him he was a very silly young man and discharged him conditionally, and even managed to keep a straight face amongst the laughter when she ordered that the cutlery be destroyed. Destroyed? The instruction was even more ridiculous than the offence. Should they not simply have been put back in the knife and fork drawer? How would their destruction prevent him from taking another pair, or buying knives and forks from Wilko? Most of what happens at the magistrate's court is low farce and pretty pointless. It costs a colossal amount of money of course and lots of middle class people, including yours truly and others coppers, thrive on the delinquency of the non-copers, on both this side of the law and on the other. There is a private estate in Earlstone - site of an old mansion, latterly hotel, demolished - where a millionaire solicitor lives next door to a bloke rumoured to be a drugs dealer. He is a

clever Romanian whose business interests lie miles and miles away, so we have no evidence and no interest in him. Both men flourish from the inadequacy of the same people, and they probably even play golf together. Do I get depressed? If I think about it too long, yes. Am I doing a worthwhile job? I shrug. Most trouble in the town is confined to five or six residential streets, and in the town centre late on. And most victims have been culprits and vice-versa. Keeping it in the family is the way our Chief likes it, and things tick along pretty well. The problem is of course that many, many Law- and God-fearing neighbours are affected by the troublemakers and their offspring. Generally the nuisance lessens as they grow old enough to get a girlfriend and a car but just occasionally it turns out very bad - as happened on the next patch when a much tormented mother set herself and her helpless daughter alight. It made the Chief think again and we turn out smartly now if a neighbour complains more than twice. The thing is, everybody thinks their problem should have priority. We can't win. I digress.

So do we have no criminal masterminds in Earlstone? Well, there are the benefit cheats of course, but they are not on our radar. But eventually they also do pretty stupid things - such as all-in wrestling or laying patios having declared themselves suffering with a crippled back. No, we rarely come across cunning and if we do it is generally of the low strain. One case from a year ago stands out. It started when a milkman heard cries for help one early morning coming from a semi-detached house on quite a respectable road. When we attended we found a middle-class, middle-aged man lying on the lounge carpet trussed up like a joint of prime pork. Two masked men, he gasped, had walked in before eleven and demanded to know the combination of the safe in the building society where he worked as a teller. Frustrated by his assurances that he had no idea and no key to get in, they had abducted his wife and left him to think it over. He had lain on that carpet for over seven and a half hours. My very first thought was *why hasn't he pissed himself?* I was about his age and have to get up at least once in the night to go. And he didn't rush off to the toilet as soon as he was freed. I saw Moxie stare at his dry crotch and raise her eyebrows for me to notice. And his story - unlike him - did not hold water. The lounge was a chaos of upturned armchairs, vases and lamps. Even the television lay on its back staring at the ceiling. There had been an almighty rumpus - but the neighbours had heard nothing. While the victim was looking out a pair of shoes to put on, Moxie nipped back round to next-door and politely asked if she could bang on the dividing wall and turn on their telly loud. The noise was as clear as a bell. On the victim there was not a scratch, and he seemed to be less bothered about his wife than my Sandra is when our cat fails to come in for her breakfast. And the abduction itself made no sense: what for? How would her disappearance benefit her abductors? But it was the absence of urine which set the ball rolling, if you'll pardon the expression. Back at the station I made sure we all had a large mug of tea, then helped myself to a refill and persuaded our friend to as well when he hesitated, saying how dry he must be after lying there for so long. He realized he ought to agree and in the end we both drank about a pint. Half-way through his debriefing as he was describing what he could of his assailants I excused myself. When I returned I gave him directions to the lav, and he stood up and went.

"How on earth did you manage to hold out for so long?" I asked with a genial smile when he sat back down. Moxie had joined me and sat with her arms folded and draped across her head, and eyes half-closed like a sunbather - as is her strange wont. To more stubborn villains this pose is disarming, as is her Sheffield accent of long, dark vowels which makes her sound soft in the head. I swear her drawl gets broader and slower when she has a target. And she's quite small and elfin at five foot four or five. A lovely child. Not seeing the danger he was in, Mr Baines, the

victim, snorted with good humour, like a pig in deep mud - or quicksand. Moxie grinned back at him with her pretty little shark's teeth.

"I couldn't last a night without going" I added, wheezing like an old fellow, and dangling out more bait. "I have to get up at least once!"

"Me too!" he stupidly said.

"Well how come your crotch was dry? Did you untie yourself, change your wet trousers and then come back down?" growled Moxie leaning forward without a grain of pity. "This is all.....moonshine."

The transformation in him was immediate and spectacular. He saw he was no longer amongst friends and his face fell - well, collapsed - and turned a bright crimson. We took it in turns to hurl the other stuff at him but he clung desperately to the rope story. How could he have managed to tie himself up?

"Because you had an accomplice.....Your *lover*?" said Moxie with a wince, possibly imagining our fat man in full sweaty swing. At once his pretence burst like a balloon on a nail. By mid-afternoon we had his full sobbing confession, a big lady in a night dress, strangled, dragged from a reservoir and a protesting fellow-conspirator, his male colleague and lover, on the same bottom rung of the career ladder as he, as well as an insurance policy taken out on the life of an unaware Mrs Baines in the sum of half a million pounds.

"We need the occasional criminal superbrain to keep us on our toes and our eye in" said Moxie that evening over a celebratory half pint of dry cider.

"Absolutely. He very nearly had us foxed, didn't he Moxie?" said I over my bitter. "Moxie and Box almost foxed, but not quite."

"Moxie and Boxie..... Holmes and Watson?"

"Cagney and Lacey?"

"Starsky and Hutch?"

"Forget 'em. Who are they?"

I'm Paul Box, forty-six, happily married to Sandra without the usual police baggage. I sleep soundly. I have a clever son and an even cleverer younger daughter. Interests? Leaving the job at work, and coaching the young lads' footy. I like fishing, but I reckon the fishes in the gravel pit are much wiler than our local villains. I'm bright but no intellectual. John Lennon is my philosopher. My partner Gemma Moxon is thirty-two or three, a very pale strawberry blonde and as clever as she is lovely. Private life? She hardly says and I never ask. I know she is *in a long-term relationship* with Andy, a jack of all trades and as far as I can make out a master of them all. Gemma is officially my number two but unofficially we're equals. At work we exist fully for each other. We've recently gotten into the habit of having a swift drink, me and her, after work. It's nice. We review a little and plan a little, we say goodbye, go our ways and never give ourselves a second thought. You know, if it was a guessing game, of all the things you might guess Gemma is, police detective would come way down your list. She's quiet and even diffident. This and her loveliness has caused many a villain who has been beguiled - or convinced that she is a dumb blonde, to be lured onto the rocks by her soothing ways, her accent and whispering voice. She can give the impression of existing in a vacuum, beyond the reach and resonance of the world, in a chilly, silent place. I sense there is a very unhappy history there, but I would rather die than ask her. Often, she becomes so remote I am convinced she has not been paying attention. Then, she can be at her most perceptive, awaking suddenly and putting her

finger on the key point. I reckon she trades shamelessly on being under-estimated and on her looks, but I would never accuse her. She is like a thinner Marilyn Monroe without the curls and the pout. I hate to make sexist comments - but I made the mistake early on of asking her, with too much astonishment in my voice, why she had chosen a police career (trying to imply that her looks had the potential to earn her a fortune in some celebrity walk of life). But she took this wrong and even came close to anger.

“To catch the bad guys! Why? Don’t you think I’m up to it? - cut out for it?”

Apologies and explanations were useless. My well-meant backstairs compliment had gone sprawling and she had hissed at me like a gorgeous swan. I have not attempted a compliment since. She even seems unaware of her beauty - which makes it even more attractive. A few days after my faux-pas she got a black eye and a concussion in a hooligan melee. Most *men* would have gone on the sick, but she was in the next day to show it off. I said nothing and only nodded my head to show how much I admired her. After that we got on well and developed a kind of telepathy. People say we were made for each other. I don’t know what Sandra would say to that, but I’m proud to have her as my partner. She doesn’t know I know, but last Christmas she gave a fifteen-year-old girl twenty quid out of her own pocket for a taxi back to Leicester after her boyfriend failed the breathalyser. Her gran phoned to say thank you and I took the call - “*A blonde angel - very pretty.*” Very.

A few months after the Baines case, I told her - as dead-eyed as I could and in a monotone to do the dullest Dalek credit - that she ought to put in for promotion, leaving it for her to add to herself *because she was under promoted as a DS*. But she shrugged and said nothing. She went so quiet I thought I had upset her again. In the Union two hours later she gave her reply: *she would rather wait four years or so for my empty shoes*. It occurred to me as I drove home that she was just as proud to be my partner as I was to be hers. Leave it at that.

As I said, her bloke Andy is a master of all trades, and I asked Moxie once if he could pop round to put us a new socket in. She said he would eventually but he was far too busy working on a house renovation. In her spare time she helps him. I deliberately drove her way home one Saturday and there she was, sleeves rolled up, wind in her hair, mixing concrete. She didn’t see us.

“That’s Gemma Moxon.” I said “My new partner.”

Sandra whipped her head round and gasped.

“She’s *gorgeous!* What’s she labouring for? And wasting her time in the police?”

“God’s sake - don’t let her ever hear you say that! She takes it deadly serious.”

“How do you concentrate with her around?”

“We’re professionals. And besides, I’m too knackered after a weekend at home....”

Sandra is only twenty-nine, you see, and has a libido which secretly frightens me, a forty-six year old.

Moxie is so quiet, it’s hard to know how she feels and thinks, but one Monday she comes in and I know she’s upset. It’s in her eyes.

“You OK?... You’re not, are you?”

“No. Not really.”

Later, just after we have raided a notorious shoplifter’s flat, I coax it all out of her. Andy had spent all week plastering the walls of an old garage sold to a retailer of mobility scooters - the coming thing in podgy, arthritic Earlstone - and he had taken exception to some of his

workmanship

“He’d only pay him half of what they’d agreed. So Andy told him to stick it. He’d sue him. There’s a patch in the corner that won’t dry. Andy had already told him there was damp coming up, but he told him to get on with it. It was all a ploy not to pay him.”

Earlier I mentioned Harry Ormonroyd, who is a useful man to know. He works part-time as a bouncer at The King George and gives me some helpful tip-offs as to where certain people can be found and when. He is good at handling drunks and heading them off on the outside before they can do themselves and others a mischief inside. He has a knack of differentiating happy, pleasant, tipsy people from the nasty bastards, which is worth a fortune to the landlord who is happy to take the money from the former while avoiding the trouble and damage to his property and reputation from the latter. Harry is a regular chapel-goer with a heart of pure gold. He brings flasks of tea for the street pastors on Saturday nights. He is also nearly seven feet tall by four wide. I did him a big favour once after a vile job - quite a big one - he had sat on for twenty minutes until we arrived, made a complaint about his cuts and bruises. I buried the file under B for bin, and Harry became my friend for life. He has a heart of gold but hates injustice. He’s like me - corrupt in a Robin Hood kind of way - my Little John. His golden heart can get quite a sharp edge to it and when I mentioned Andy’s problem he told me to leave it with him. Harry would never hurt anyone on purpose and like my burly old English teacher, who never had to hit anybody because he looked as if he just might, he can persuade people to do the right thing. On the Thursday Moxie came in actually smiling. The man at the new showroom had had a change of heart and paid her Andy in full. People hire Harry for a fair fee to persuade the stubborn and the awkward to come round to their way of thinking. You might call it intimidation, but I see it as unofficial policing - I’ve deputised him - and he definitely helps to keep the Earlstone peace, not to mention relieving the workload of the Citizens Advice Bureau and the civil courts.

One evening at the Grand Union, Moxie says “What precisely was the point of raiding that crack house on the Eskdale this morning?”

“Because we had to. It’s against the law.....and that’s who we are.”

“Pointless. They’ll get a supervision order and disappear. No fine - because they can’t pay. Waste of time and effort and money.”

“Gemma, most of what we do is. It’s just to appease the good burghers who read the Mail and Express. You can’t change the world or the system...Best legalise drugs...”

“No. Legalising something that’s wrong doesn’t make it right. We need to get at the big people, protected by those in high places...who *are* the people in high places. They should be targeted.”

“But Gemma, the people in high places are the ones who select the targets. Why do you think it’s illegal? It makes billions - for *them*.”

“That’s too cynical.”

I tell her she has to get used to the way things are and relax.

“Look, I do my best, I work hard, bring my salary home, close the door and look after Sandra and the kiddiwinks. I don’t worry because there’s no point. You and Andy have a lovely place. You work hard. You can’t cure the incurable. Powerful people are selfish and wicked. That’s how they got to power.”

“Think about this then” she says after a while “What if you found out by accident that somebody powerful in the town was up to something really wicked? And he lived behind ramparts ten foot thick. Someone like Brierley that time? Would you take him on? Like Derek Miller did?”

“On my own? Him and all his army?”

“Who would you tell then? The Chief? How would you know your boss hasn’t got that powerful man as *his* boss, - if you really believe the Establishment is one gigantic conspiracy against Joe Public??”

“I don’t *really* believe everything I say.....Mmm, I’m not sure what I’d do. Is that why you’ve been quieter than usual?.....You found something out?”

“No. But there must be somebody here quietly raking it in. Certainly not them poor sods on the Eskdale. Derek Miller was my hero. That’s one of the reasons I came here.”

“Him? Arrogant and stuck up. And lucky. He should have gone to the CPS. Thought he had a God-given right to go it alone.”

She says she’s coming to the conclusion she’s wasting her time.

“The same faces keep appearing in the custody suite, keep going up before that Maskie-Green woman or that posh pooftah Cyril Whoosit for a slap on the wrist - and off it all starts again, like a creaky old merry-go-round.”

I tell her to look at it from a different angle. Earlstone isn’t the prettiest place to live but if you know the trouble-spots to avoid there’s little danger.

“Even our regular villains are quite nice people and harmless enough under the hardened skin when they dry out. I told you - if you want a bigger challenge you need to apply out...Fraud Squad...anti-terrorist branch....Vice....You could do some real good there and catch bigger fishes. But you’d have to move. So, could you bear to leave these fair precincts behind you?”

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I’ve just had a phone call from Harry about somebody he didn’t like the look of.

“Some foreigner. I just had a feeling he was trouble, so I refused him entry last night. He said he’d get me sorted. He knew people. Thought at first he was one of those Travellers we had so much trouble with in the summer. But he didn’t quite fit the bill. Eastern Europe I’d say - dripping in gold. And well spoken. Tatoos on his knuckles, first three letters S-A-C...Couldn’t see the rest.”

“Cheers Harry. If he shows again, let me know. Was he on his own?”

“No. It gets worse.”

It turns out he had been with a woman, who, Harry remembered had been bad trouble years before.

“Remember Zoe Wright-Gooding, Paul? Be about 27, 28 now. Zoe was always trouble in town.” Oh great. Zoe Wright - thief, delinquent, drug addict, bully. She had been in and out of Youth Offender Institutions and then prison. I hadn’t thought of her for years because she had been off the scene.

“She’s back in Earlstone then. Wonderful.”

“Didn’t recognize her at first. She’s put a bit of weight on. Fatter in the face. Dyed her hair red. Same crazed eyes though - like sky-blue marbles. When I wouldn’t let ‘em in, she kept shouting that I’d always picked on her because of who she was. That’s when I clicked. She used to bully my lass when she was at Juniors - lived round the corner. Nasty piece of workmanship.”

“And was she this foreign bloke’s girlfriend, you reckon?”

“Hard to say. It was a very sad story, the Wright-Goodings. Family of four, two daughters. They split down the middle. Zoe’s mother and the elder one left. The dad got Zoe, lucky man. He killed himself. Remember? Lay down on the railway off Common Lane. Poor devil.”

“Harry - if they show up again, or you get wind of what they’re up to, let me know. I might even turn out to have a look at him.”

“Right. And I’ll ask my ex about Zoe - she knew more about her than me.”

Why would Zoe Wright-Gooding come back here, in that dubious company? Harry has a good nose for trouble. And so do I. I currently have a very unpleasant whiff of rat.

I phone Harry a few days later on another matter. He is very despondent. Clive Bates, the landlord of the King George has told him his services are no longer required. He said he he’d been rude to a customer who had then complained.

“The foreigner?”

“Dunno. Clive seemed nervy when he broke the news.”

“Who wouldn’t be - bloke your build?”

“No - nervy, as if it went against the grain. Very nervy. I’ll be in touch - I’m going to the Nite Owl to have a chat with the manager. Clive promised to put in a word. Be in touch.”

I suggest to Moxie that we have a change of venue for our aperitif that evening. I want to have a word with Bates at the George. There are few drinkers in at six. On the big screen a pop video is blaring. Moxie winces and I nod in sympathy.

“Just for one night, Gem. OK?”

It’s my turn to buy. The Goth-girl behind the bar tells me the boss is in the back when I ask for him.

“Who shall I say?”

“Paul Box. He’ll know.”

Bates is a bald man with a large stomach, part-product of propping up the bar for years and allowing his youngsters to rush round pulling pints and collecting glasses. Disgustingly, he pads in wearing shorts and sandals without socks. His feet are stubby, as if attached to the wrong legs, making those Henry the Eighth calves of his look even more gross.

“Ah! Mr Box! To what do I owe the honour? The Union shut?”

“Harry.”

He goes all grim and his eyes shoot around the room, unwittingly telling me part of the story.

“What about him?” he says, all fake nonchalance.

He turns his back on me and fiddles with one of the optics. He places a measure of scotch on the bar and pushes it towards me. Moxie has already sat down with her back to the screen.

“On the house, Mr Box.”

Am I impressed?

“Why did you let him go?”

“It’s confidential. I can’t discuss an employee.”

“Ex-employee. Harry kept you in business, Clive. Seems ungracious. If it hadn’t been for Harry Ormonroyd, you’d have lost your licence a hundred times.”

“Look, all I can tell you is - there was a spot of trouble. Harry acted unprofessional. That’s all I’ll say.”

“If it’s a police matter, there’s a lot more you’ll say.”

“It is not.”

“Well what?”

“He was rude to a customer.”

I laugh. The barmaid pretends she hasn’t been listening, but I’m just in time to see her stiffen her

shoulders and toss her red-streaked jet hair.

“Harry is a gentleman, Mr Bates. He never swears, never loses his temper. A God-fearing man. We could do with more like him.”

“I had to sack him - and I was sorry. It’s not agin the law. It’s got nothing to do with you. You’re off-duty. Please, Mr Box, sit down and drink your drinks.”

The girl goes to the end of the bar and furiously rubs at a splash.

“What’s all that about?” asks Moxie, a bit exasperated.

“Nothing. Just enquiring about Harry, an old mate of mine. Leave the cider. Let’s go to the Union. I’m buying.”

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“A call has just come in from a girl. Asking for you.”

“Put her on.”

Was I Mr Box, who had come in The George the night before?

“Detective Inspector Box, yes.”

That sweet voice? Instantly the great dark eyes, the pallid face and the ring in the upper lip fly into my mind.

“You the pretty girl behind the bar?”

She is (and I wasn’t being flippant). Turns out she has a very interesting tale to tell. It had been her who had taken a call in the afternoon from *a very posh man* the same day that Harry had been sacked.

“This bloke sounded like Prince Philip. *Could he possibly speak to the licencee?* I though the fat bastard was in trouble with the magistrates again. When Batesy took the phone he stood up straight like a soldier. Kept saying - *leave it with me, leave it with me, I’ll have a quiet word with him, I’ll sort it* - then he starts blustering like he does when he bars somebody, but in the end he was all apologetic, three-bags-full-sir as if he was shit-scared. Anyway, as soon as he put the phone down he could hardly pull a pint, he was shaking so much. Kept putting his fat head round the door - *is Harry in yet? Tell me as soon as Harry’s in. Send Harry in to me* - and shit. So I did. When he came out he had a tear in his eye. Wished me all the best. Kissed me on the cheek. Fat wanker had sacked him. After all he’s done....”

“Did you catch the posh bloke’s name?”

She hadn’t. I consider what to do and by mid-afternoon I’m still so angry I decide to phone The George. The girl doesn’t answer. It’s Master Bates.

“Who complained about Harry Ormonroyd? Was it a foreigner?”

“*Mr Box?..... A foreigner? No way.*”

“Who then?”

“It’s a private matter.”

“If you say “private” or “confidential” to me again, Bates, you know what I’m going to do? The very next time we log trouble in your noisy, filthy bar, I’ll make sure there’s an objection to your licence when it’s due for renewal.”

“That’s intimidation! I’ll complain!”

“Intimidation? Why were you intimidated into sacking Harry?”

“Who told you that?”

“Harry said you were scared. Now, who phoned you?”

“Didn’t say. A posh guy. Really posh. All he said was, his client would be lodging a complaint for racial discrimination with our Head Office if I didn’t discipline the doorman.”

Client? A solicitor then. A voice whispers names to me sometimes. This time it's loud and clear. Leonard Truslove, the millionaire solicitor on Holycroft Park, the snooty estate I mentioned earlier. I just know it must be him - he sounds like he's tenth or eleventh in line to the throne. I have never quite taken to the arrogant man, poncing around the Magistrate's Court as if it belongs to him - as well as half of Earlstone - bulging out in his three piece suit and with a spotty tie deliberately thrown over his shoulder.

"Was the man's name Truslove, Mr Bates, by any chance?"

He denies it but his stutter and bluster confirm I am spot on. Now my antennae, rolled up for so long, are fully unfurled. Why would Truslove lower himself to phone a dive in Earlstone on behalf of some upstart foreigner? Who consorts with such a vulgar woman as Zoe Wright-Gooding? It smells worse. Has this S-A-C fellow come over here to pick asparagus or mend pipes? I doubt it. My nose is smelling drugs.

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I'm at Harry's place, a studio-flat in one of Earlstone's new brick barracks, part converted factory. It's tiny, especially with Harry in it. It looks like they've tried to fit a rhino into the macaque house at Twycross Zoo. I've just told him again how sorry I am to hear his bad news. He forces a smile.

"I'm not that bothered, Paul. I've got my little delivery job in the van - and one or two other irons in the fire. It was only ever really pin money at the George."

"You still want to be my sixth sense, Harry?"

"How can I be? The Nite Owl is shutting down."

"Mollie at the Union owes me one. I've put in a good word for you. Her Denis is a bit past it and could with a bit of help - if the price is right."

So here I am, doing my daily good deed. Harry will be a better friend than ever - and that's good for business. Fridays and Saturdays he'll be working cash in hand and if Mr S-A-C turns up again he's promised to grit all his teeth, apologize and let him in.

"Just say it was a misunderstanding, mate. Best keep your enemies close, I reckon. Try and get a look at who he meets, if he ever shows."

Harry's eyes are glistening in his great, round head when I go to leave him. They're telling me he loves me. He gives me a bear hug and squeezes the breath out of my lungs. I love him too.

"And don't give our friend any reason to make more fuss, Harry. And try to read the rest of his hand."

I'm about to open the door when he remembers something he wanted to tell me.

"That Zoe. I didn't get to see my ex-wife - her mother's poorly - but I was talking in church to an old friend of the Wright-Goodings. Until Zoe came along, she says, they were a happy, normal family. But she turned out so naughty that it drove the parents gradually apart, each blaming the other for spoiling her. The truth was - and they never saw it apparently - she played one off against the other. He became convinced that she victimised the girl for not being the son she wanted so badly. She reckoned he was too lenient with her. By eleven she was in trouble with the police. She hated the elder sister for being so good at school - she played the flute and won prizes, and such. Opposites in every way. The father maintained he could talk Zoe round and cure her faults with love. The mum and her finished up hardly speaking. She got it into her head that Zoe was not her daughter at all - she resembled neither Mum nor Dad, nor any relative - and the mother convinced herself that the maternity nurse had even given them the wrong

baby!”

The parents had become irreconcilable and a family split inevitable. Harry said it had arrived when the school was able to prove that Zoe had strangled a rabbit on the school farm for a dare. This causes me to flinch. It was a sure sign of a psychopath to kill small animals in childhood. Didn't a poet once say something about mum and dad effing up the kids? Well, I reckon it can work the other way too.

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The annual crime figures are due out. You always know if the crime figures are good the day before the Chief releases them. Everyone is accosted by their Christian name and he goes la-la-la-ing or whistling and a mix of Jupiter and Jerusalem along the corridor. And he leaves his door open to remind us that *every officer has the right to come straight to him if they need to!* If the figures are bad then the corridor is silent and the door remains shut - and it would take a brave man - even in the direst need of counsel- to knock on it. This year we hear in advance the figures aren't half-bad and his number two, John Thorpe, wears the foolish and confused grin of a Janus, due to his mixture of pleasure and embarrassment. Thorpey is still in touch enough to recognize the smell of bullshit when he whiffs it - a smell which the canteen finds overpowering.

“.....and burglary's down 2,6 percent” - (*he means percentiles, but it's wisest to say nothing..*) - “...and assault 5.1! Detection's up as well across the board!.... But drink-driving's not budging.”

Somebody points out that drink-driving doesn't get reported - unlike *all* other crimes. Our hook-nosed herald does not spot the irony.

“Quite so. But keep up the good work everybody. Chief's over the moon! Keep it up!”

Moxie raises those eyebrows of hers. There is a thoughtful silence until Thorpey has drained his tea cup and left. Moxie has followed him out. She seems to hate the canteen these days. Now there is headshaking and chuckling. I push back my chair making a horrible scraping noise as I get up.

“Look if they're pleased upstairs then be pleased for them. Good show, everybody! Just keep up the bloody good work!”

A few minutes before Thorpey's sheepish entrance we had been having quite a laugh.

Various reports had been coming in of a flasher on a bike.

“Perhaps he's wholly innocent - wears skimpy shorts - got a big'un and don't know he's doing it.” somebody had said, as if speaking to nobody in particular. “You know, it pokes out - smiling - as he peddles along - now you see me, now you don't. An accidental flasher.”

“No. An *intermittent* flasher.”

The five or six descriptions we'd had were contradictory and somebody else reckoned there might be more than one - a team of cycling flashers. Synchronised flashing.

“Nah. I reckon folks weren't really concentrating on his physog!”

Somebody else reminded us all of the old lady who had reported her next door neighbour for walking around in his garden, masturbating.

“You couldn't see anything from her lounge window. So *she* says you have to go upstairs - - and stand on a chair.”

We'd all heard this one five or six times before, but it was worth another airing. Moxie had come in at that point as we were laughing but was clearly in no mood for humour. She'd been to court. An employee of the canal ferry and barge-hire company at Suttington wharf had stolen an entire

day's takings - over two thousand pounds - and had only been given a community service order. "Eighty hours" snorted Moxie, silencing us all. "And he won't even have to pay a penny back! Owner's furious! It took me an hour to get the git to confess... That Maskie-Green, that silly woman... the villains are laughing even before they leave the dock. No wonder the public have lost their faith!"

A neighbour agreed with her.

"She let a Bragwell youth off the other week who had been absent from his Community Service - again. His latest excuse was that somebody had stolen his dog and he'd gone looking for it." For Moxie's sake I'd tried to keep a straight face but this did it. We all burst out laughing. "Stolen his dog? In Bragwell? Why bother? There are three or four strays running sideways in every road!"

Moxie did not join in. She put her arm behind her head, breathed out heavily and stared at the wall. Her face became a challenge for Sergeant Wills. He began to recall old Sam Ladkins, our resident practical joker. A report had come in of a Pakistani wailing in his back garden one night. Sam used to work in the radio room. The foot patrol lads he had contacted were reluctant to go on such a futile errand. Sam had advised them to attend promptly - as the gentleman had been reported to be in the possession of a harpoon. It was only when they arrived at the address - in a bit of a sweat - that they had twigged.

"His best one" said Wills, looking directly at Moxie "Was the green junction box in the hedgerow by the Common Lane. It always worked on the rookies. A safe had been stolen and reported dumped in the ditch - and they should investigate. Two recruits - one's a DI in Leicester now, God help us all! - were so convinced that they hailed down a motorist and borrowed a rope to tie around it. They spent nearly half-an-hour trying to heave it out!"

Poor Moxie. Her poker face made Wills and the rest laugh even louder and longer. I told her quietly that if she needed some time, she could take the afternoon off.

"It's OK, Paul" she answered. "I'll work my way through it."

*

It's my turn to buy a round in the Grand Union.

"Didn't you get enthused by the crime figures, Gemma?"

"A little bit. Doesn't it show?"

I try a bit of sarcasm to cheer her up.

"It's such a shame that drink-driving's up though - but that shows how good we are at detecting it. Because it's really hard to notice when somebody pissed mounts the kerb, jumps a light or drives down the middle of the road. It takes real forensic skill and years of experience...."

".....And of course, when they wind their windows down the reek of alcohol is so hard to detect" she whispers, and I laugh.

"But that's not the main point, Gemma. Let me tell you about Judy Kinder."

Judy Kinder. God bless her. She's dead now, poor lass, but she was a spirited woman, wife of a local union leader - a friend of mine - and was nothing if not direct. It had been a hot July day and she had left her front door open when she went to refill her watering can. Coming back through the hall, she noticed straightaway that her mother's gold locket had disappeared from the half-moon table, as well as an umbrella from the coat stand and even a Leicester City scarf.

"She'd removed the locket from her senile mother's neck two days previously because - ironically - there had been some thefts reported in local care homes. The locket had a little

picture of her father, long passed on.”

Gemma looks up at me bright-eyed from the table, showing I’ve got her interested at last.

“So.....she reported it stolen?”

I take a swig of bitter, shake my head and smile. No, she had not reported it stolen. It had come to her immediately where the locket must be - in the home of two notorious drug addicts two or three streets away who would sell any part of their body - and had done - to still their cravings.

“So she marches round and bangs on the door. No reply. I bet they heard her yelling in Holycroft Park! *Look- says she - you can keep the broolly and the scarf! It’s my mum’s locket and she’s dying. I’m putting thirty through the letter-box in an envelope - when you’re feeling up to it just bring it back - and it’ll go no further - or words to that effect.*”

“You’re kidding.”

“No. That evening she hears the letter-box go, and guess what?”

“The locket?”

“Yep - and a ten quid refund. They only needed twenty to score.”

“Amazing! So - what’s the moral of the story?”

“The moral of the story is that if Judy reports the locket stolen to the police, it would be five or six days before anybody gets round to investigating it - if ever.”

“And the locket would be long gone?”

“Correct. So officially the theft never happened. Smiles all round.”

Jupiter and Jerusalem.

“So,” says Moxie with that leaden growl in her voice when she pretends to be slow on the uptake

“Are you saying that the figures are not definitely down because of our crime prevention measures and lightning-quick response? People aren’t reporting it??? It doesn’t make sense.

They *do* get a crime number.”

“People can’t be arsed to report it, Gemma! Crime happens to folk who have either got bugger-all worth nicking or who can’t afford the insurance. And even if they can, they have big excesses - and who wants to claim and be refused insurance the year after just because you *have* claimed?”

“I bet they’ve got insurance up there in Sowerbutts Lane with all their antiques!”

“Course they have! But do they need it? - with their state-of-the-art locks and security? And the Jasons of this town are either too stoned or knackered - or fat - to walk all the way up there. He can’t afford the bus and if he turned up in a rusty old nail and parked for a while, the good burghers would have the Law on him quicker than it takes to open a jar of caviar. Told you, crime happens to a few folk in a small area, by and large. If the police helicopter were to drop a big bomb over Park Road, Strathmore Lane and The Meadows - instead of just hovering in wait for the car-thieves to come out of the jitties - we’d be laid off.”

This fails to amuse her. I tell her we should bring back the good old days before targets and mission statements were dreamt up.

“The villains are now under such pressure, loads are suffering from stress and anxiety.”

*

“Ken, I’ve been meaning to have a word. Got a sec?”

The thought of that snooty-pants solicitor - the one who got Harry the push - has been gnawing at me. Ken Lines is one of our duty solicitors - an old hand - and I have a lot of time for him. He usually tells our clients to come clean when they’re in the wrong and have a poor defence - and

to throw themselves on the mercy of Mrs Maskie-Green, who appreciates it. Ken knows she has a soft heart. But when he senses his client is getting a raw deal he'll fight like a tiger - which inclines Mrs Maskie-Green to think the accused is quite likely innocent. I take him into my office and ask if he knows what Mr Truslove is up to these days.

"Old Truslove? You know I haven't seen him in ages."

"He's not been strutting around at the magistrate's since God-knows-when. Has he semi-retired?"

"I reckon he must have. He probably just has his small circle of rich clients to live off."

"A bit of a parasite then?"

"Is that how you think of us all?"

Yes, in a way - a bit like me.

"No, not at all. Not *you*. You tell our clientele how it is and they generally plead guilty. Saves us all time and money."

He smiles. Flattery does it every time. He says he'll make a few enquiries.

"He's not in his Brunel Rd office any more - I know that for a fact. It's a dentist's now."

"Better be discrete, Ken. Just ask casually."

"I'll mention him at the Golf Club."

It is an afternoon soon afterwards when Truslove comes striding into my office - well almost barges in after a cursory knock, beating me almost to the word "Come." Is that dark three-piece suit of his even more bulgy? He tells me that he won't beat about the bush. (He's renowned for his outspoken and pungent remarks which have left many a witness or defendant quivering.) Some like him for it. For me the jury has always been out. He has a sharp nose and chin and he can turn his face into a hatchet when he wants to intimidate - which he does now.

"I shan't beat about the bush, Detective Inspector Box... It has come to my attention that you have been making enquiries about me. And I would like to be enlightened as to **why**."

He can stress the aitch in *why* better even than Margaret Thatcher used to - which is bloody hard work. He is wearing rimless glasses and they have slipped along his long nose almost to the tip and stopped. He is gazing down on me as a biologist might inspect an amoeba through a microscope. As he bends forward I notice how his hair has thinned to no more than fluff in the light of the window behind him. He reminds me of Mr Punch crossed with Mr Lenin. My heartbeat has quickened at his impertinence but I am not getting into a slanging match with him. I put the file I have been inspecting slowly to one side and notice his hand is shaking.

"There is nothing sinister for you to worry about, Mr Truslove. I was simply passing the time of day with one of our duty solicitors. It occurred to me I hadn't seen you for a while in Court. That's all."

"That is certainly not all. Discrete enquiries have been made - and not only through Ken Lines either. You know perfectly well what I refer to."

I pretend to miss this oblique reference to Master Bates. I tell him I can't answer for what Ken had said or his manner of saying it.

"That is a disingenuous remark if I ever heard one! It would - I do however concede - be totally out of character for an officer as renowned as you are, Box, for being very laid-back, to show any curiosity and initiative, but that is the only construction which can be placed on your actions. **Why?**"

I smile. I have rarely been wound up. I have no wish to give him that satisfaction. I tell him he's overreacting.

“Why on earth, *Mr Truslove*, would I wish to make official enquiries into such a respectable and well-regarded member of the community as your good self?”

I haven't meant to take the piss but that's how it sounds

“Don't be facetious with me. I shall complain to your *Superior* if I hear any more references to me from this quarter.”

My *Superior*. He has made it sound as if everyone - including Marge in the canteen - is one of those.

“May I ask you a question Mr Truslove - unofficially?”

I do not wait for his assent. Why, I ask, if he has nothing to hide, has he bothered to come into Earlstone police station? In *person* - when he could have phoned? This makes him stare at me more contemptuously but as he delivers his next speech the fury I have just tried to provoke by choosing the word *hide* is tempered by something like embarrassment. Has it just occurred to him that he has blundered?

“How dare you? I have nothing, of course, to *hide*. But if you - a serving police detective - albeit not amongst the most energetic in the force- are asking your....*agents*...I might say spies - and those I have to contact in a professional capacity about *me* and my affairs, it might cause *them* to wonder *why* - and begin to harbour suspicions. *That* is utterly unacceptable.”

Perhaps he detects hurt in my expression and realises he has gone too far. For, remarkably, that cratered, bleak half-moon face has not only softened but has even begun - oh joy! - to beam at me like an part-eclipsed sun. I sense that I am being salved in his blessing now that he has enhanced his well-nurtured reputation for being an acerbic, cantankerous but likeable eccentric. I play the role he has invited me to play - the grudging admirer - and smile back. The storm is over and the clouds have parted.

“Moreover, Paul, now that we understand each other, allow me to say that I also wanted to renew our acquaintance. Face to face works best in these matters, I find. Perhaps we could have a round together some time? Take good care.”

As soon as he is strutting down the corridor, I release the giggles I have been stifling. Pompous arseholes never allow themselves to forget what serious and weighty people they are. They fail to see the funny side of things and cannot laugh at their own foibles. It's a major flaw, as they miss out on how the rest of us see them. His great mistake was to come storming in. He might as well have said - *There's something not quite right going on*. He has no idea that I know about his client's link to Zoe Wright-Gooding. But he is a fine, upstanding pillar of the Earlstone temple and I decide to give him the benefit of the doubt - just for the time being. I make myself a shocking cup of coffee and begin to ponder. If he is no longer active as a solicitor, how could the foreigner contact him for representation? I begin to feel convinced that Truslove must have done someone he knows an off-the-cuff favour on his behalf. The Romanian? His neighbour? What's his name? Begins with C.....

Is it not the often case that conceited masterminds make their crucial mistakes in areas they consider trivial and casual, or do not even consider at all? Like our fat friend who neglected to piss himself? With a grimace I drain my coffee and go cold. I might be facing precisely the dilemma which Moxie has mentioned. What would the Chief say if I went in and said I suspected Leonard Truslove, committee member at the Golf Club and stalwart of the Rotary Club of being in some way connected - perhaps altogether inadvertently - with narcotics?

Exactly.....

*

I'm driving to work through the town with things on my mind. Moxie, for one thing. She has never looked so gloomy. It is a wet September morning and Earlstone is very dismal. I thought I had worked the town out and knew most of her secrets worth knowing. That Earlstone hangs on to its population is remarkable. Only the more enterprising are able to escape - the rest seem to lack the means or the drive. Amongst those I must include myself. I would like to say I have been often tempted to move away, but the truth is that something akin to nostalgia - albeit gritty and grimy - keeps me in its grip, as if I feel obliged to remain close to an ailing relative. Sometimes I think I almost like the place. Earlstone, Leicestershire, dull pendant in the clasp of a beautiful county. If the town were a star, it would be a collapsar. The housing estates creep ever outwards and their residents look away for enjoyment and employment. There are supermarkets stationed around the periphery and from one year to the next most people have no need to set foot in the brutal precincts of the centre. It resembles scores of other British towns. There is a railway station a mile outside, largely busy only after dawn and before sunset. During most of the day it is unmanned. The shops I am now driving past are stripped out and boarded; and right at these lights, past the factory, lies a derelict bus station where no buses pull in or out - only trapped motorists doing u-turns, and the obligatory skateboarders. I know this place inside out, the Christian and last names of its minor villains, where they live and drink, and what they might be up to. I'm feeling uneasy this morning looking at these squat and square buildings silent in the rain. I sense there's a big secret they're not telling me. And I'm dying to know what it is....I am looking now at Croxall's and miss the lights changing. I have just strayed down a corridor into my past. Somebody hoots at me. I hold up my hand in apology, drive on a few yards and then pull over.

Croxall's. It stands in the centre of Earlstone, that large factory, looked down only by the church of Saint Martin's, its rival for supremacy in the thoughts of men. The church appears to have won, but it is a hollow victory. One is deserted and disused, the other going that way. I used to work at Croxall's in summers long ago. I was a big lad for fourteen and had no trouble persuading them that I was two years older. In my mind I'm revisiting the ground floor. It's divided into two areas, one being the yarn shed. There are bulky cartons piled up containing bobbins of tricel and occasionally wool. Roy is loading a carton onto his wheels and muttering to himself how he would *gi'e a pound to belch*. He was always a great belcher, Roy. I wonder if he is still alive and belching. I hear his metal heels clicking as he takes the bobbins through the polythene doors into the other area - the machine room - letting in the horrific whines of those monsters which can spit out scores of white shapes at a time - the fronts, backs, necks and sleeves of garments, like ghostly body-parts not yet assembled, neo-natal. Sometimes the machines shriek in unison, sometimes in counterpoint. Sometimes there is even a short silence, the eye in a tornado of sound.

Those colourless pieces are loaded into a van - John the driver is a bigot with a lovely wife in the office who I imagine would be horrified to hear his unvarnished views on women, the blacks and the Reds - and then driven to the dye-works on the edge of town near the railway station, joining thousands of others from other factories. Back they come transformed, all colours imaginable, to be taken in the lift in brown skips - by me - up to the first floor to be stitched - "linked" - together into the complete item by rank after rank of women leaning over machines which make

soothing, pattering sounds, allowing Radio 2 to be heard above them. The smell is stuffy and slightly sweet, not unpleasant. Once assembled and steam-pressed, the jumpers, tops and cardigans are delivered to the second floor where men and women in aprons - counter-men or examiners - stand at counters folding and bagging, doing also a last inspection and throwing any faulty garments to the menders at nearby tables, heads bowed, mostly bespectacled after years of ruining their eyes, picking up pull-threads with their bodkins, discarding the few beyond redemption into bins. One mender is Nell Croxall - a distant relative of the big boss - who takes a delight in making me blush with her salty remarks. Did I hear she died last year or the year before?

And after being packed, half-a-dozen at a time, into white boxes and tied in a special way with string, the goods make their next journey to the second floor to be piled as high as gravity allows, either to remain there gathering dust as stock, or to be fitted into large cardboard cases - again by me - and labelled with the addresses of English department stores, or sometimes with addresses in Scandinavia, Germany and Switzerland - (I remember Winterthur) - and finally sealed with brown tape. Then they return by lift to the yarn shed where their life-cycle began, to await despatch by means of any number of small haulage firms which rely on Croxall's and many other lesser knitwear and hosiery manufacturers.

But after the sixties had swung into the seventies the amount of stock being made slowly began to overtake the orders - which were waning under competition from the Far East - until one day in the eighties the strip-lights began to go out at Croxall's and all over Earlstone. The shriekers and the patters fell silent. The massive dye-works closed and the town settled down to a long and slow decline.

Croxall's windows at ground level and on the first floor were boarded up, leaving only those beyond the stone-throwers to gaze down blankly on the town, as if in bemusement at the silence and emptiness they contained. Since then, the bottom boards have come off for a while - once for a DIY outlet and subsequently for a tyre-and-exhaust place. Bill Croxall-Booth's extortionate rent was blamed for both failures. I forget - one corner was briefly - very briefly - a snooker parlour where some of our clientele could be found if they were not in the Dead Ferret. Now all the boards are back. Every so often there is talk of the whole building being converted into flats - like the residential barracks where Harry lives. The Earlstone Gazette ran a story not so long ago that a hotel chain was interested in it, causing those amongst us who know better to shake our heads in silent wonder. Why would anyone come to Earlstone for business or pleasure? (When I was a child there were always rumours that the railway station was to be converted into a main junction with several platforms.) Equally as silly. You know, if I could have a pound for every pound invested from someone's savings into Earlstone enterprises that failed - shops called things like **This N' That, Odds N' Ends, Sew N' Sew, Bits N' Bobs** - all dreams turned bad - then I'd be rich indeed.

Croxall's Fine Knitwear stands not only as a monument to the death of the town as a manufacturer, but also as a symbol of something else: its lack of a certain future. There are grandiose projects which surface from time where millions will be spent transforming the whole town centre. Its advocates then do battle in the Gazette with their adversaries who would rather see it all dug up, greened over and planted with trees. But like the station, things never alter. How will it all look in two hundred years time? I would love to come back and see - which brings me neatly to the next point.

I can't remember exactly how and when, but Croxall's eventually acquired a ghost. I think The Gazette must have picked the tale up one uneventful week and breathed fresh life into it. There had been reports of machine-noise and of lights at the upper windows - and late-night revellers, staggerers and hoaxers would contact the paper now and then to keep the story alive. Mr Croxall-Booth - quite a sour man in spite of his huge wealth and mansion in the elite Sowerbutts Lane, overlooking the woods and golf course - would not comment on the stories when pressed. He was understood to be furious already that his factory had had listed-building status - however lowly - imposed upon it, making it complicated and expensive to interfere with it, and putting it beyond the range of the demolition ball. But the story persisted and a Leicestershire ghost-hunting society got interested, as did a local history nut who had a dream of a Heritage Trail which could begin at the site of the Battle of Bosworth and end with a Ghost Walk in and around Croxall's. The usual heads shook again and smiled. A wag at the Comedy Warehouse picked up on the idea and suggested the trail should pass through the Dog and Weasel bar - a.k.a. the aforesaid Dead Ferret - which would be a far scarier experience than Croxall's ghost could ever manufacture.

The story, however, would not die down, and Mr C-B got so fed up of hearing it that he condescended to descend from his Sowerbutt heights into the moraine where his family fortune had been made, to open up the factory for inspection by the Gazette's photographer, old Jim, and various ghost-hunters. The photograph which subsequently appeared had me staring. It was far more spectral than some fuzzy cloud of white ectoplasm. It was a photo of the first floor, the linking room. Only the snake-heads of cables and metal fittings at regular intervals on the concrete floor showed where those pattering machines had stood until their removal to the Far East, and where my auntie and mother, and my grandmother before her, had sat linking and singing along with the radio. They were the real ghosts. The story ended in low farce - one of the spectrologists Mr C-B had permitted to stay, had had to be removed by ambulance at four in the morning because of a suspected heart attack - not because of any ghost - but due to a severe attack of indigestion brought on by an underdone pie from Pete's Quality Fish 'N Chips van. Subsequent requests to inspect the second and third floors were turned down flat by our local worthy.

*

We're in the Grand Union again and it's my turn to buy. My poor girl sits staring into her cider as if it's poison. I could cry for her.

"Is it anything we need to talk about, Gemma - I mean - about *work*?"

"Why?"

"Why? You seem so down, that's all. I know you're fed up with Earlstone. A lot are...."

On the table next to us there is a copy of the Gazette. She picks it up and faintly smiles.

"Not that old chestnut again!" she says. "Have you read it? Listen.*Mr Asif, taxi-driver, left the rank at two to turn in for the night, and whilst waiting the lights to change at the Coventry Rd junction he happened to look up and saw a woman with a candle at an upper window. "She looked very distressed" said Mr Asif. "I got out to get a better view but when I looked again she had vanished.*" Well, it just goes to show what a quiet week it was.....It's not particularly the job, Paul. Only in a way. It's Andy. He knows I want to move, but he's depressed. He can't go to work at the moment. He keeps getting phoned about starting jobs and that makes him feel

guiltier. He's going to make an appointment at the doc's. So he *says*."

Her silence does not invite further enquiry. Then she drops the bombshell I've been fearing. She's thinking of resigning. She explains that she had seen a programme about the setting up of the Health Service by a man called Aneurin Bevan. There had been so much excitement and expectation.

"The people looked so shabby and poor - but their eyes were full of hope. They lived in filthy homes in filthy streets. They were gaunt and bony. Bevan was determined to help them. Where are the likes of him today?"

"My dad went on about Bevan. Hero of his. But so what? We have the NHS now."

"It's sixty years on. But how much further on are we? OK - we live a lot longer, but there are so many people at the bottom of the heap - the ones *we* deal with. I just think I'm standing at the end of a conveyor belt...catching them when they fall off. Who's intervening further back?"

I tell her she should have been a teacher or a social worker - or maybe a politician. She closes her eyes and tells me it's hopeless.

"There are people out there who...it's not that they can't but they *won't*. They can't get up, can't get a job, can't get on - with each other or with their lives. We're down to the bedrock. What is the point?"

"Gemma. At least the rest of us are quietly getting on with our lives."

But of course she isn't doing any such thing. How stupid of me to forget what she's just said about Andy. Pale, she gets up and drifts through the door - like Croxall's ghost.

I happen to know that Kerry, one of our promising young constables, knew Andy at school. I ask him in passing if he still sees him. I hate to be nosy but I hate to see Moxie suffer. He says that Andy had stopped coming out.

"As soon as he got in with DS Moxon. And who can blame him? Always a quiet kind of guy. A bit nervous if anything"

"Nervous?"

"More nervy. Very shy. Went to college but had to pack it in - couldn't settle and make friends. Missed home. Clever guy, though. Turn his hand to anything."

The next Monday Moxie fails to appear. There is no message. So in the end I phone. Sunday had been a particularly bad day, she says, and Andy couldn't be left on his own. But she promises she will come in the next morning. And she's as good as her word. She almost seems cheerful even. Andy's at his mother's being looked after.

We have a cracking week, Moxie and Boxie. We manage to track down the phantom car-scratcher on the Eskdale, and, as an added bonus he admits being responsible for the scrawl on the war memorial too. Asked to explain himself, he just says he's fed up and likes reading about his exploits in the paper. He's only twenty-seven years old. He says he's been depressed because his dog died. But the Chief is all smiles! There had not been one arrest for drunken violence or rowdyism that weekend. Nobody has thought to tell him about the running battle outside the Dead Ferret. While two constables looked on, waiting for the meat wagon to turn up, it had all ended amicably when the two main combatants, upon being told by a middle-aged bystander that they were half-brothers, had gone back inside to kiss and make up over a pint.

I had asked Sandra during that week what she thought about Moxie's bloke going home to his mum. She was astonished.

“He must be barmy! If I were her, I’d give him an ultimatum - sort yourself out or go for good.”

“But he’s depressed - clinically by the sound of it.”

“Is it affecting her work?”

No. She had been as incisive as ever - not that Earlstone’s villains need much penetrating. She had fibbed to the car-scratcher - reported to us for the odd hours he kept - that a neighbour of a victim had snapped him in his hooded top - the same one we had noticed on a peg as we came in. While I waited with him, she had gone to the car and fetched a camera - her own - and made believe she was scrolling through the *neighbour’s* camera - to find the photo. Unnerved, he had confessed. The photos were all of her new extension.

*

It’s early Tuesday morning and the rain is beating at the window as if to rouse me. But it’s the phone which has woken me so early. It’s Sergeant Wills and he is very apologetic - but he’s at his wits’ end.

“Can you come down? It’s a foreign girl crying and screaming. I’ve tried my bit of French and Shirley has tried her holiday Spanish... We’re a bit short of female staff. Shall I give DS Moxon a ring?”

“No. Is there a WPC with her at the moment?”

“Yes. Shirley Evans. Till seven. I’m not sure if Carole will be in then with that stinking cold of hers.....”

“Leave Moxie. Give me half-an-hour.”

The girl is tangle-haired and draped in a blanket. Some plastic shoes have been dug out of the Forensics cupboard for her. She has been picked up at the railway station wearing nothing but a pink bra and knickers. Wills had been in two minds about sending her to Casualty, she was so distressed, shivering and cold. When he had tried to put her in a cell she had screamed, so she had been installed in an interview room with a mattress. The police doctor has just left, having given her a sedative. I have tip-toed in on seeing Shirley come out into the corridor with her finger to her lips. The girl I am looking at is very pretty but starved. Her hair is drying blonde and her pale blue eyes are staring at the wall - and out beyond the wall as if at some horror she has witnessed. She is sitting propped into the corner on the mattress and doesn’t notice me. From the bridge of her delicate nose up she reminds me of Moxie. She might be her angelic younger sister. I sit and watch her eyes close. Shirley lays her down and for a split second I glimpse her immature naked body.

“Did the doctor examine her for.....you *know*?”

“No” says Shirley. “He wanted to wait a bit - till we have an interpreter to explain. She’s been hysterical, and wouldn’t take it too well if the doctor...well....”

I look at my watch and tell her to go off-shift. The girl will no doubt sleep for a while.

*

Moxie has fetched our foundling a bacon sandwich from the canteen. She inspects it suspiciously then devours it. Moxie writes her name on a flipchart and points to herself, saying *Gemma*. The girl looks clueless. She is offered the pen but shakes her head. We wonder if she has lost her memory. Moxie tries out her German but the reaction is blank. Is she deaf? I remember a few

foreign words from my days of innocent stamp-collecting.

“Polska?”

She shakes her head and begins to cry. Am I getting warm?

“Russki?” says Gemma, provoking a torrent of anger. She slams her head down on the table and crosses her hands over the back. She is obviously not keen on the Russians. Maybe she’s from Chechnya or somewhere similar.

“Where the bloody hell is she from - and how did she fetch up in Earlstone?”

“Asylum seeker?”

“Could be. She might be Romanian or Czech. Who else is in the EU these days?

Slovenia?.....Hungary!”

I try her out with *Magyar Posta*. She looks up and shrugs. Moxie tries pointing at herself again and saying her name, then at me and saying mine, before pointing at her and holding out her hands in curiosity. No response. I turn to Moxie.

“You know, she doesn’t want to tell us her name. She understands well enough. She thinks she’s in trouble.”

“Thinks she’s in trouble? Running around the town at two thirty in her bra and pants? She’s scared to death.”

“We need an interpreter.”

“Which language? Hold on - I’ve got an idea.”

Moxie leaves the room and returns with a European map-book from her car. It’s one which has the whole continent spread over a double-page at the front with all the countries written in their own language. Moxie points to central England and encourages the girl to look. She hesitates and then seems to see she has no excuse now for non-comprehension. Her finger trembles over the page and then comes down in the east. The Ukraine.

Gemma points to herself and writes 32 next to her name. She writes my name down and my age, 46. The girl pulls Moxie’s teddy bear nightdress tighter around her and slowly writes a word in Cyrillic script. Then 15.

*

The interpreter, a pleasant middle-aged lady has finally arrived from Leicester University. She embraces the girl - Katya - like a mother and whispers words of comfort to her. Gradually her astonishing story begins to emerge. The doctor does not need to return to do his inspection for rape.

It had been put about in the town where Katya lived that a new hotel near London was desperately looking for chambermaids. The recession had hit the Ukraine like a tornado and Katya’s cousin - seventeen and jobless - had made up her mind to go. Katya decided she would join her. She was not getting on well with her mother, her father was an unemployed drunk and she was doing very badly at school. Reasons for staying were few. So one early morning before dawn she had packed a few clothes and left a note for her mother and gone. It was early May. She had just turned fifteen.

The first part of the journey with her cousin Oksana and seven others in a minibus had been fun. They had told jokes and sung songs. The woman they had been told to call Aunt Luba - their chaperone and recruiter - had given them cakes and sweets and she and the driver had laughed along with them. It was a beautiful spring morning. After a few hours they had stopped. Luba

had told them they had to wait for a lorry in which they would cross the border into Poland - and the European Union. Then the minibus would meet them again to take them all the way to the Channel Tunnel - and England!

The journey was costing cost Katya 300 *hryvnia* - about thirty dollars - but with the promise of a welcome payment in London of £300 and a first month's salary of £900, this had seemed a tiny fare to pay - and the hotel would sort out work permits.

The interpreter asks Katya a question of her own at this point and she blushes - then begins to sob.

"She is upset because she thinks she will get into trouble with police. Police will make trouble for her if she tells truth, she thinks."

"Tell her she must tell the truth. She will not be in any trouble."

The interpreter whispers again to her and slowly out it comes. *How had she afforded the fare?* Katja confesses to stealing it from her grandmother's biscuit tin when she had gone to the toilet. We tell her that it is no concern of ours and we return to the wait for the lorry.

The assurance that the minibus would meet them over the border proved false. As soon as they had been loaded into the lorry, Aunt Luba and the driver vanished. They found themselves kept like cattle in stifling heat behind packing cases with a torch, some biscuits, bruised apples and a square bucket with a lid for a toilet. She had no idea of how many hours or days they had travelled. Every time the lorry slowed or stopped their hopes were raised. Then on again it would roll. Finally the doors were opened and cold air and a kind of light flooded in. They could hear the noise of a busy road. A tall man and a short woman were there to meet them. He spoke their language but was not Ukrainian. He told them they would all be well - they were in England and would soon be with their employer in London. A white van with back doors wide open reversed up to the lorry and they were made to scramble in and sit on benches along the sides. They had bread and cheese and ham to eat. But the doors slammed shut before all were on board - only five of them - not including her cousin. Katya had screamed until one of the others - a big, frightening girl called Halyna had slapped her.

We ask how long she had been in the van - she thinks about an hour. It had stopped and she had seen a clock which said it was ten past five. She recalls an untidy yard, double doors and a flight of stone steps until they reached their place which would be their home for the next weeks and months. There were a few tables scattered over a large area and ten small rooms in a row down one side, each with a whitewashed window looking onto the main area. Each girl had a room of her own with a bed, a bedside cabinet, candles, a paraffin heater and a waste bin. There was no welcome payment, no job, no luxury hotel. The tall man who had seemed so reassuring told them sternly, each in turn, that in six months they would be allowed home if they were good girls and obedient - their employers would expect it. Another woman - not the short one, but a matronly woman had been introduced as their new auntie. She would bring them food and look after them. Each girl was like a horse in a stable. They were shown the toilets and washroom. One pedestal in one of the cabinets was reserved as a bidet - and there was a camping stove to provide hot water to mix with the cold in the bidet and sinks, as well as water to make coffee.

The next day the man had brought them wine and cakes. They were having a party! She soon began to feel very drowsy and drunk, hardly able to move her arms and legs. And that was when, she admits, with a terrible deep sigh, that her first employer arrived. Auntie had brought him into

her room - a fat man who sweated a lot. She was too weak to struggle and make more than a token protest as he lay on her. She had been a virgin and he hurt her. She bled afterwards and after another employer had taken one look and walked out, she was forced to show herself to Auntie who was very angry. The tall man had come back and asked her with a red face how old she was. He slapped her when she replied seventeen. Then she had said sixteen - not daring to tell the truth. The man had taken out his phone and had a terrible row in a language she did not understand with someone on the other end.

After a while she healed. She got used to hearing the other girls cry out feebly in protest and men grunting. Gradually the protests stopped. Daylight came and went like the men, sometimes as many as eight a day, and rarely less than five. She learnt to lie still and to do the things the employers wanted done to themselves and to accept the things they wanted to do to her. Most were gentle, a few were rough. Tania, whose English was quite good, told her that rougher meant dearer. A kindlier old man had told Tania that fifty pounds - an amazing seven hundred *hryvnia* - was the basic rate, and could be as much as a hundred pounds. Katya began to submit as quietly as the rest, looking forward to the relief which the cheap wine - and whatever else it contained - always brought the next day.

One night in the autumn - she had been counting the days - an employer had tried to do something to her so unspeakable that she is unable to tell the interpreter exactly what. The man had got angry at her disgust and walked out shouting at Auntie, who had come in and slapped her. She had phoned the man. He told Katya over the phone that if she ever refused again he would find out where her mother lived and kill her. That night, after trade was over, she had crept out into the main area to try and look through the window. Halyna had followed her, grabbed her back and forced her to the floor. *Did she want to get them all into trouble? In one month they would all be free to go home!* One month. Surely she could bear one more month after such a summer.

At this point she is so upset she cannot continue her story. Moxie stops the tape and goes to comfort her. She tells the lady to tell her how brave she is. "We only need to know now how she came to be at the railway station. She can forget the rest." She lays her head on Moxie's shoulder and even manages a smile.

One of the two other girls - two very pretty sisters, Klara and Iryna - had started vomiting one evening, and had been so ill that she had been unable to entertain. Auntie gave her medicine but it didn't work. Tania, brave Tania, had told Auntie straight that Iryna would have to go to the doctor's and had been shouted at. The next evening Iryna was even worse. The tall man had come and taken her away - dragged her away from a weeping Klara. He was furious - no business could be done. The smell of sickness and the disruption was too bad. Tania was told to tell Klara and the others that Iryna would be taken care of. Auntie went off with them, and the small woman from the first night arrived to supervise the brothel. When Iryna failed to return Klara was beside herself. The woman became so angry that she hit her until she stopped crying.

"Katya is saying me they were all too weak to help her friend, poor lamb."
Seeing how distressed Katya is becoming, I tell the interpreter to ask her now only how she had escaped. Other details can be recorded another time.

That very night the woman had drunk some of their drugged wine by mistake. Katya (although not very bright, it must be conceded) had concluded that the sick elder sister would never return. By the middle of a long night she had felt strong enough and desperate enough to risk waking the snoring woman to try and find a way out. The bully Halyna, who, she thinks, had seemed much less distressed than the others to be a prostitute, was also sound asleep. Katya had found herself beyond the washroom at the end of the forbidden corridor. She put her hands out in the darkness and touched the press-bar of the door she had yearned so many times to walk through. She knew it was tied with string to a hook on the wall. With one of her few possessions, a nail-file, she had sawn and sawn at it until it broke. Pressing down quietly on the bar, she found herself on a staircase illuminated by townlight and moonlight. There were three flights of steps. At the bottom, in the gloom, were strange doors of thick polythene. Through them, lit by a streetlamp shining in through a crack, were large tables....

“She says tables for sport - your game - how is it called? You English watch it a lot. With red balls?”

“Snooker?” says Moxie.

“Is correct!” the interpreter beams. “Is snooker! She says she goes by four tables and sees there is light under door. She opens door - and is free! In empty street. Easy-peasy.”

She had emerged into gusts of wind, only in her underwear, the girls’ own clothes having been taken away. The streets were quiet and empty - and then in the distance she had heard the dull rumble of a train. It had not occurred to her to knock on a door, only to run towards the noise - where there would be passengers, porters and the chance of escape.

Now Katya looks up at us with hope. She has told the truth and wants to phone her mother, wants to go home. Moxie turns to me.

“Well, here’s your Croxall’s ghost, Paul. We should go and free the others. Now.”

*

The threat of arrest has taken the nasty wind out of Croxall-Booth’s sails and he meets us at the corner of his factory, outside the door which leads into the snooker room. We have decided to play it low key - just one squad car and Moxie’s jalopy. Mr C-B, face blown up like a red football, declares that he will complain about this - he knows the Chief *personally*.

“Dragging *me* down here like a common criminal! What for??”

I tell him to unlock. Moxie pushes past him and I am in time to see her racing past the last table and through the strange, translucent doors I remember. This is part of the old yarn shed. Katya’s emergency exit with the push-bar is in the far corner.

It is, as I thought, the second floor on which Katya has been held prisoner. This used to be the folding, bagging and mending room. Along one side - opposite the windows which overlook the town centre - are the box rooms I had forgotten completely about. Two of them contain untidy mattresses. Scattered on the floors and in the waste bins in them, and in three others, are screwed up paper handkerchiefs. The girls have gone. Croxall-Booth looks around flabbergasted. He splutters about dossers and squatters.

“These were our offices!” he whines. “That one was my father’s. What would he say now?”

Thank God he's not around to see this mess!"

I have the waste bins emptied into a black sack for Forensics and phone to arrange for fingerprints to be taken. Moxie has stood looking utterly crestfallen while the owner has been working himself into a bigger lather about freeloaders and scroungers. Unexpectedly, she turns on him with eyes flashing.

"Why haven't you had it demolished?? It doesn't bother you, you make this town so ugly?"

He looks around at us all, expecting us to be his audience for his attempt at ridicule.

"Demolish it? How dare you, young woman!? This building has stood here for nigh on a hundred years - it's a listed building I'll have you know! - a part of Earlstone's manufacturing heritage. Thousands and thousands of Earlstone and Naunton people spent their whole working lives on these floors. Demolish it? You might as well say demolish Earlstone!"

But Moxie was not to be browbeaten. "Mr Croxall, you've only been waiting for an offer to turn it into flats or a hotel. It's nothing to do with heritage. Well, congratulations. You've ended up with a brothel."

His jaw drops. Before he can reply Moxie is on her way.

"She's upset, Sir" says I. "We don't know for sure what use the place was put to. I'd be grateful if you'd keep what she said to yourself. I'll have a word with her."

He sniffs and reflects. No doubt he would be the last to admit his premises had been housing a brothel. I distract him from his indignation by asking who has access besides himself.

"No-one! Well, apart from FSS from Atherstone - they have a key. They are Security. We have a contract. They check up now and then."

"They come inside and look around?"

"Well, no. They patrol outside and make sure the doors are secure. I shall be having strong words with their director!"

And I call the director too. But any hopes of a link to the missing girls through FSS are soon dashed. The key could have been taken from its hook and copied by any of forty-odd employees over the past year or so. In spite of the boss's protestations that he only takes on people with clean hands, many will turn out to have committed minor crimes - but none will exude that tell-tale vapour of guilt when questioned later in the week.

"Katya's coming home with me" says Moxie that afternoon. "There's no way she should go into a detention centre. She's suffered enough."

"You know that's out of order, Gemma. She'll have to be repatriated. She's illegal."

"Rubbish! We need her here to help track down the girls! She's seen the man and the women. She can ID them."

"Not repatriated *straightaway*...."

"But how can she help if she's in a place near Brum or London? See sense! Have a word with *Him*. Surely *He* can tell whoever needs to know that she's helping with enquiries. She's safest with me..... You tell *Him* - if she's removed from Earlstone, I'm bloody well RESIGNING. Tell him! Explain!"

"OK, OK! Leave it with me!"

We decide to give the case no publicity. To do so would endanger the girls. We share Katya's fears about the girl taken ill. These are ruthless people and the stakes are high. Five girls entertaining eight clients at £100 earns four thousand pounds a day. That makes 365 x 4 000 =

nearly 1.5 million pounds a year. The Chief's eyes open wide when I show him the sum. An enquiry from a sharp-eyed reporter at the Gazette about our morning visit to Croxall's is answered with a lie about a report about an intruder - which had proven baseless.

After a night at Moxie's, Katya looks and feels much better. Her clothes look a little big on her, but there is a hint of colour in her cheeks. She has had a long tearful conversation with her mother. Through the interpreter we had told her to say nothing about her prostitution, and to explain that she would be coming home as soon as her work permit expired. We want a description of the man and the two women, so our artist is summoned. Auntie is sketched with narrow eyes and sunken cheeks, reminding me of my sour RE teacher who had wanted to drill religion into me by force. Katya is not sure exactly what the younger woman's face is like, having only seen her twice in the gloom when she was tired or drugged. The interpreter turns to me and says "Tanya can only remember she was about one metre fifty - a little plump - and had red hair - dyed"

I drop my pen. "Dyed red hair?"

The interpreter re-checks with Katya and then nods. I pick up my pen and close my left hand into a fist. On three fingers below the knuckles I write an S, an A and a C. Tanya screams and knocks her chair over as she stands. She keeps saying the same words over and over. The interpreter stares in alarm. We send out for some sweet, weak tea. I ask what she has been saying as soon as she has been hugged and comforted.

"She says tall man will get her mother and sister killed."

"You tell her he will do no such thing - that he will go to prison - if we have her help."

The woman takes her hand and carefully explains what I have said. Katya considers. She reaches forward and takes the pen. She holds my fist and adds a trembly H and an A.

*

Moxie has taken Katya home under strict instruction not to leave the house. The interpreter has agreed to stay and look after her while Moxie is back at the station - and to teach her some basic English. When she returns I tell Moxie it's my turn to buy in the Grand Union. She looks at her watch and accepts. Once there, she decides to have a gin and tonic, not a cider. We sit on bar stools.

"So where did the name Sacha come from? And the redhead?" she asks.

"By the purest accident. A tip-off from Harry. Sacha's boyfriend - whoever he is - got him the sack. Race discrimination. "

"Sacha's *boyfriend*?"

"Of course! Ron in our quiz team has a daughter called Sacha..."

She sips her gin and shakes her head.

"Not of course. It's a boy's name in Russia. From *Alexander* - don't ask me how."

"So he might be Russian - or Ukrainian. Except Katya said he wasn't."

"I went to Hamburg on an exchange in the first-year sixth, Paul. My pen friend's brother's friend was called Sacha. And there were lots of Germans displaced from the east after the war. But he could be anything....Polish, Czech....."

"Anything. Anything except human."

"You mean humane. And Sacha might still be his girlfriend - or an old girlfriend he can't get rid of. But why come to Earlstone?"

“Because it would be the last place the authorities would suspect? Maybe. But I have a feeling there’s a more solid reason. Mr Codrescu.”

I explain to her that he is the Romanian who lives on Holycroft Gardens, the exclusive gated estate for the rich.

“And there’s a solicitor involved. Leonard Truslove - a bit before your time. Neighbour of Codrescu. I’m not sure he’s aware of what he might have got himself into. Arrogant, bumptious sort of bloke, but not a villain. He’s rather given the game away, though.”

I brief her on his telephone call to Bates at The George and his role in Harry Ormonroyd’s dismissal. And his courtesy-call on me.

“Truslove is the weak link. If I put pressure on him, he’ll bend. Thinks he’s a man with clout. Underestimated me, the fat twat.”

“He was threatening you.”

“I reckon so. Maybe on Codrescu’s - or Sacha’s - behalf. Me, a local flat-foot getting out of his depth. My trump card is they have no idea how far along their trail I am. Was it Mr Bonaparte who said, never underestimate your opponent? Thinks I’m a time-server.”

Moxie’s silence is deafening. I look at her. She can’t help but allow herself a faint smile.

“Is that what you think, Gemma?”

She picks up her glass and centres it on her beer mat.

“No. But you do give that impression sometimes. Going through the motions.”

“Well, Earlstone gets you like that. That’s why you need to make a move. Before you turn into a fossil like me.”

“But this is different, Paul.”

“This is very different, Gemma.”

“Why didn’t you tell me about Sacha and the woman?”

“I’m telling you now. There was nothing particular to suspect - till all this. And besides, you’ve had enough to contend with.”

A young woman is standing at the bar with failed dyed red hair and a sour face to match. I decide to tell Moxie the rest.

“The short woman with the red hair. I know who she is.”

Moxie thinks I mean the woman who has just walked in.

“No, not *her*. Sacha’s partner in crime, I mean.”

“Paul - you should get out more. Red hair is the fashion. Look. One over there...”

“No, Gemma!.Harry remembered her. A nasty piece of work come back to haunt us. Like Croxall’s ghost. One Zoe Wright-Gooding. The opposite end of the scale from what a woman should be.....such as you.”

I watch her pick up her glass and swirl the lemon slice around. She stares at the mirror behind the bar for a long time until I give up glancing at her lovely profile and look at her directly in the mirror. Is she is staring or glaring at me? Damn. I never intended a compliment. I must have looked at her too long.

“I’m sorry, Gemma.”

“What for? I was just thinking I ought to get back to Katya. Do her my special. Sweet and sour pork.”

Like I said, you never know what she’s thinking.

After Katya's and Gemma's departure that afternoon, I had returned to Croxall's to see how the forensic examination was progressing. The taking of only three mattresses, leaving the sick girl's bedding behind was a bad omen. There was sweet smell of sickness in one room and I took the room to be hers. In the working area I opened table drawers and found plastic bags and sticky labels, the residue of a vanished era. In a lone skip there were silver tricel cardigans with dirty marks and irreparable large holes, hurled away long ago as hopeless cases. I picked one up and felt a pang of recognition. I had packed this style for despatch to Switzerland - and I remembered my mother had bought one in a factory sale. On a window ledge there was a pack of playing cards and a tartan coffee flask. I shook it. The sound of shards said it was broken. Was that the table where Nell had sat, making her ambiguous remarks as I passed, and watching, in delight, my face turn hot and red? I smiled in memoriam.

My reverie was broken by the waving of a knotted condom under my nose. It had been found down the side of one of the mattresses. We had a lead. I asked if there were any prints and was told there were thousands, a real misch-masch; of absolutely no use whatsoever. Back outside I cursed the fact that no CCTV camera had been placed in the street. It was a short cul-de-sac with Croxall's main gates at the end - an ideal location for a nasty secret. Who had cause these days to walk or look down here? There was an empty carpet shop on the side opposite the factory wall - which housed the snooker room - and next to the shop on the corner stood the old Chinese restaurant, which had seen a few battles in its heyday. But the opening of bars and takeaways on the far side of the factory on Old Bond Street nearer to the old cinema and the Grand Union, had shifted the stage for Earlstone's late-night impromptu street-theatre from there and away from the Dead Ferret lurking just around the corner. I looked at the wide green gates, beyond which was the old loading bay. There was an inset door in one of them, and I wondered if this had been the access to the brothel. I walked up to the gates and shook them. They opened slowly. Inside I kicked through the empty bobbins and other litter. On the loading bay the roller door was also slightly open at the bottom. I turned to look back through the gates, back along the short street (imaginatively called Short St), across the busier road and into the disused bus station. It was now a car park. I could imagine the customers waiting their sweaty turn there until summoned to the gate. I walked out and turned right towards the crossroads where the taxi driver at the traffic lights had looked up and seen Katya, the ghost. Turning right again I was in Old Bond St. Which of these four routes had Sacha taken in his van, loaded with girls and mattresses in the middle of the night?

The camera in Old Bond St has shown one promising candidate - a white van sprinting past at twenty to five in the morning. It has no markings of course and the plate is not visible. We replay the frames over and over, unable to be sure if it is a woman with a chubby cheek just visible through the rainy passenger window. On the computer monitor, staring out at us in defiance is the teenage version of Zoe, courtesy of our criminal records file. Nobody who has been invited to look can swear that the two faces are of the same person. There are thousands of vans like this and thousands of fat faces. And besides, even if it does contain Zoe, Sacha and the girls, they could be miles and miles away by now. Or just round the corner.

*

I need to get my breath back. I've read the kids their bedtime story and now Sandra is settling

them down. I might not be showing it but I am desperately worried about the girls, particularly the poorly girl, Iryna. I sip my whiskey and imagine the panic when Tanya is missed; Sacha and Zoe screaming at each other; the girls sobbing; the frenzied search of the factory, and then of the immediate vicinity. I see Sacha's face as the dread realization dawns that Katya has disappeared into the night. Then comes the decision to abandon ship - *Croxall's* - and the hasty loading of the van.

Sacha must have a contingency plan, a place to fall back on for an emergency such as this. It was a brazen enough venture to set up shop in a town centre in the first place, even one as deserted as Earlstone's. So where next? How far would he drive at five in the morning? Could he really chance being stopped and searched, and of the girls being heard banging on the sides of the van? Maybe. I just have a strong feeling he is close. His client-base is here. To build up a new one would take time and cost money. His sponsors are nearby. What is he thinking as I sit here thinking about him? He must be puzzled that the discovery of Katya and of his den has not been on the news. He has surely found out through his contacts - Coderescu? - Truslove?? - Croxall? - (no, not Croxall - his shock and distress were not feigned) - that the factory has been raided. What is he thinking? Has he concluded that I - the detective dismissed by his solicitor as laid-back - is in fact thinking about what he is thinking? Or is he utterly oblivious of me?

"He's where I want him, Gemma. In at least two minds. He's more likely to make a bad decision if he's in two minds."

I do not wait for the Moxie in my head to make her imaginary reply. How many minds am I in? Finishing my whiskey, I decide I'll have an early night.

*

I've been in with the Chief again and persuaded him - *just* - not to go public.

"What good would it do? Would Sacha have a crisis of conscience and decide to let them all go? He's ruthless. If he thought they were a liability and a threat to him, what might he be driven to? They're witnesses as well as victims! We need to make him feel he's safe. Trust me, Sir. We have a semen sample from the brothel being analysed. I have other irons in the fire."

"Irons, DI Box?"

"Trust me. We'll interview every employee of FSS if necessary. One of them has been looking the other way. One of them had a key cut for Sacha."

"But that will only tell you who was involved at the factory. Now it's empty. Where is Sacha at this very moment?"

"Who knows? But telling the press isn't going to make him phone the news desk."

"But someone might have noticed something - a van - unusual activity - they might lift the phone."

"Do you want the girls on your conscience? Sometimes doing nothing - for a while - keeping your nerve - is the best policy. The girls are still an asset to him. For God's sake - let's do nothing hasty to alter that! Let's quietly pursue our lines of enquiry. Please!"

I sit down with Moxie and two others to consider our options and a way forward. My heart is still beating with indignation that we have such a stupid Chief Superintendent. Of course, they play golf with the right people, join the right charities, invite the right people around for dinner and then land the big jobs. Anyway...

The flipchart in my office, so long a part of the furniture, is dragged centre stage. Moxie takes

the pen and writes

PRIORITIES

Safety of all the girls

Finding Iryna

Arresting Sacha and Zoe

Arresting their associates and contacts

“Come on. I’ve got *Him* on our backs. We need to brainstorm some good ideas. DS Moxon?”

“Iryna. She’s ill. We have just got to assume that Sacha has some slight trace of humanity. Might he have just dumped her at Naunton General or maybe further away - in Leicester or Coventry?”

We’ll check out admissions.

“Friends of Zoe in Earlstone. Are they seeing her?”

Moxie says she will check it out. *And* relatives.

“Prostitutes - the regulars. What have they heard?”

“How did Sacha get clients in the first place? What about the Gazette’s sex-lines?”

“Maybe Sacha was leaving ads in the pubs! In the bogs? That might be why he was so mad about being not allowed into The King George.”

“And why that arrogant bastard on the Holycroft stuck his oar in.”

We end up with a number of avenues to pursue and I feel much better. I go back to the Chief. He turns away from his precious orchids on the sill, puts his sprayer back in his drawer and then wrings his hands together, his signature gesture which I think he imagines conveys exactly the right image of thinker and decision-maker, but which only puts me in mind of Fagin in uniform.

“We’re checking the Gazette’s sex-lines from May onwards, Sir - particularly any with a foreign angle - *Phone such-and such a number and listen to Zsa-Zsa* - The punters may have heard by word-of-mouth, but it’s worth a try. We’re checking on van hire, FSS in Atherstone and the owner of the Chinese. And I’ll go and have a word with Harry Ormonroyd again....”

The Chief seems impressed and as I close the door, relieved, I see him opening his drawer to retrieve his sprayer. I walk back to my office, seeing lots of lines in my pool. I decide that Truslove is our biggest fish - and I’ve decided to play him myself.

*

I go to Harry’s place and show him our drawing of Sacha as described by Katya.. He smiles and wrinkles his nose up.

“It looks a bit like him. The forehead was higher and the jaw not quite so square. Hold on a tick.” He goes to a drawer and fetches out a box.

“I knew these pastels would come in handy one day. I used to go to an evening class at tec.”

He has found some dark, grainy paper. He opens the box and takes out some chalks.

“The head’s roughly the right shape but the rest’s wrong.”

I watch fascinated as his great fingers chalk and rub in first the eyes, then a nose and a mouth. He sits back and rubs out the nostrils until he is satisfied. He adds a pinkish complexion and darker shadows, dots and dashes in the eyebrows and chin whiskers, finishing with the ears and a blonde stubble of hair.

“Hold on. The pupils. Let me try an icier blue.....That’s better. Cruel eyes. Same as Zoe’s.

That's why I refused him entry. I haven't quite got them, but that's as near as I'll come."
"You've missed your calling, Harry. Cheers mate."

Moxie tells me later that Katya had started to shake when shown the picture.

*

Martin at the lab has been as good as his word in hurrying things up. The semen sample has thrown up a definite DNA match. The name is Jonathan Ghent, a middle-aged man from Fairleigh Parva, now a respectable estate agent, if such there be, who had the misfortune to assault a previous wife in a previous life and duly get himself onto our data-base. He breaks down when we show him our photo of Katya and of the mending room. *My wife*, he keeps on saying, *will my wife have to find out? Couldn't you just give me a caution?* He swears that he will never, ever do such a thing again. We reassure him and smile. Moxie tells him that having sex with a prostitute is not illegal. He gasps like someone saved from drowning and sags back in his chair.

"Did you have sex with that particular girl?" asks Moxie casually, hands on her head like a naughty schoolgirl.

"Yes.....yes I did," he says confidentially. Does he even seem a very tiny bit proud of himself? Man of the world? A real man with his *needs* - you know, nudge, nudge.

"Oh dear. That is unfortunate." Moxie whispers this, apparently more interested in the fly on the wall behind Ghent's balding head. I sigh and tell her that she had better start the tape rolling while I caution the gentleman. Back in deep water, he splutters and babbles.

"But, you just said, you said it was not illegal!"

"But this girl is fifteen years and six months old. And that, Sir, is illegal."

"Oh my God! Oh my good God! No! She looked seventeen, eighteen to me!"

"Did you bother to ask?" inquires Moxie.

"No! She spoke no English anyway."

"I expect you had other priorities."

He wails, he howls, he wishes he could die. We leave him and let him microwave for half an hour under the severe gaze of WPC Evans who has been briefed to say nothing to him.

"Mr Ghent, we'll do a deal. I've seen the Chief and he agrees....But you must tell us all you know. Don't dare lie or hide a thing. Those girls are in danger."

Firstly, he must not mention to anyone what has been going on. Of course, he readily agrees.

"Do you recognize *him*?" I ask, pushing a photocopy of Harry's masterpiece under his snivelling nose. He shakes his head vigorously under Moxie's twenty/twenty gaze.

"What about her?"

He seems relieved. "Ah! That's Auntie. She looked after the girls. Never knew her real name."

"*Looked after*?" says Moxie flatly. "Very kind of her."

"And this person? She'll be twelve years older now. Her hair might well be - or have been - red."

He stares at the staring, defiant Zoe and pushes the photo away with a NO.

We encourage him further with a cup of tea - our first gesture of humanity. Quietly he begins to confess that he had gotten involved through a sex-line in the Earlstone Gazette. After the normal erotic talk, a phone had begun to ring and an accented voice had offered the services of a

beautiful Russian girl - the very same whose lewd suggestions had been beguiling him.

“She was about as Russian as me,” he adds. “I could tell it was just a local girl putting it on.”

A mobile number had been given out. Ghent had put it onto his phone directory but resisted the temptation to ring for a whole week.

“The second voice with the mobile number. Was it a local woman too?”

“No. It was a man. And definitely a foreigner.”

“What accent?”

“He sounded a bit like that muscly American actor - you know - mayor of California. Austrian.”

“Arnie?”

“Yes!”

So, was Sacha of Germanic origin?

“How much were you paying?”

“The basic price for three quarters of an hour, including drinks, was £80.”

We ask when he had visited, and he tells us it was always in the week, in the evening, when the town was empty. He had to wait in the car park across the road from the factory until his phone rang once, and then go straight to the emergency exit door of the ex-snooker parlour. If his phone rang again, he was to turn away and walk towards the Dog and Weasel.

“There must have been a look-out upstairs” says Moxie. “Did that ever happen? A warning call?”

“Once. I went back to my car and waited till I got another text.”

“And when did you receive your appointments?”

“I always got told the morning of my appointment and given a time. If I couldn’t make it, I had to text back NO. Simple as that. I was told to text BUSINESS? in block capitals to arrange appointments myself, otherwise I only responded to invitations. If the coast was clear, the door was opened from inside and you followed the auntie woman upstairs. She had a torch. In the cubicle there was candle. When your time was nearly up she’d knock the door. You had to take a torch from a table and show yourself out. And leave the torch on the counter downstairs. She’d shout down when it was safe to leave.”

“And did you ever bump into another client?”

“Never. I could hear them of course..... Auntie seemed to have it organized like clockwork.”

He swears that his last visit had been three days before Katya’s escape. We leave him under Shirley’s gaze and stand in the corridor outside. We have Ghent’s phone and are looking at the number he had stored. Should we send a text?

“Surely Sacha would expect enquiries if clients had no reason to suspect anything unusual. Not to call might be a mistake.”

We go back in and ask him when he had last texted BUSINESS?

“I never have. It didn’t feel right. To take the initiative. Can you understand that?”

Moxie and Shirley look at him with ill-concealed loathing. I calculate. Four days have passed since Katya’s escape, making a week since Ghent relieved himself. He confirms red-faced that he had weekly appointments.

“Are you telling me the absolute truth?” I ask.

“Yes!”

“And there is no other code to include? It’s definitely the right message to send? Because if there’s something wrong with it - and we send it - and we alert Sacha that we are onto him - and the girls come to harm - you know what I will do to you, Ghent? I will personally see to it that every charge I can sling at you will be slung - and you, my friend, will spend a very long time

staring at four fucking walls. Have I made myself crystal-clear to you??"

A fury I have rarely before experienced - professionally - has simply erupted from me, astonishing the other three in the room, but chiefly myself. My heart is racing, my face is hot, the other faces are alarmed. I go outside and breathe deep. The door clicks to. Moxie has joined me and has, I swear, a tear of admiration in her eye.

"He swears on everything he holds dear he's told the truth" she says. "I think I believe him."

"Right. We'll wait till tomorrow morning. Eight days. Then send the message. Tell him we're keeping the phone. You tell him. I can't stand to be in the same room with the man at the minute."

"You made him blubber again, Paul. He keeps wondering what he's going to tell his wife - about being arrested."

"He's an estate agent. I'm sure he can make something up."

It's my turn to buy. We have Ghent's phone after his feeble protests have been silenced by Moxie's look of scorn.

"All his business contacts are on here. How will the poor man cope?"

"He'll ring round and tell them he's lost it."

She places the phone on the table, and we look at that number - which Ghent has filed innocuously under Smith - in case, we suppose, his wife happened to look.

"I suppose there's no point putting a trace on it?"

I shake my head

"This wouldn't be Sacha's personal phone number, anyway. He'd know that we would be able to trace him to where he's phoning from - or where's he's living if he phones from there. As anybody else could for that matter - there are phone-tracing websites. He wouldn't make such a basic mistake. No, the phone that this number belongs to was only used at Croxall's, you can bet. And he'll drive into the middle of nowhere if he's forced to use it again, to send or look at any messages. But we'll put in a request - just to tick that box."

Moxie looks up at me slowly. An idea has occurred to her.

"You know, I can't believe Ghent hasn't seen Sacha and /or Zoe. Auntie couldn't run the place on her own. Five girls...up and down the stairs, looking out, providing the booze."

"I thought you believed him."

"About the code word, yes. But his story about the factory seems a bit too neat."

"So why would he not come clean?"

"Sacha has all these client numbers, right? Scores of them. He can find out on the net - just as easily as anyone else - and where they live. What's to stop him blackmailing them? What if Ghent is as much Sacha's slave as the girls are? Maybe he's sent him and the rest a threatening message already. OK - we've forced Ghent to give us a few scraps - but not the meat."

I think again of the car-scrawler and the way which Moxie had trapped him.

"You have a devious, criminal mind, Gemma."

"You wouldn't rather have it the other way round, would you?"

"How do you mean?"

"That the villains are more devious than us? No, think about it. Sacha would have a nice insurance policy - as well as a tidy stream of extra income."

We drink up. I follow Gemma home to see how Katya is coming on. She is beaming, her eyes are bright and her skin is clearing. She throws her arms around Gemma and kisses me on the

cheek. I express admiration for the beautiful, spacious home which Gemma and Andy have renovated for themselves. Everywhere is labelled with words for Katya to learn, and she takes us on a language tour, pronouncing most things pretty well, laughing hysterically when Gemma pats the small TV in the kitchen which Katya has called the fridge.

“I like Gemma...I like....*Paul*?...I like house....I like Rosa!”

Rosa is the interpreter who has agreed to stay around a little longer to look after her during the day. Gemma gets her map and calendar. She points to the Ukraine and to the end of the month of October.

“You can go home at the end of the month, Katya. Home, soon.”

She makes a roof with her hands and points at her.

“Soon, I go home?”

“Yes.”

Her eyes fill up. Gemma holds up one finger.

“But first we catch Sacha!”

She grabs me by the scruff ferociously as she says *catch* and I play along, looking very sorry for myself.

“Catch Sacha. Yes!” She laughs with delight at our theatre.

Gemma puts her hand to her brow and looks left and right.

“And we’ll find Tania, Klara, Iryna and Halyna.”

“Yes, yes! Find. And find Oksana!”

Her smile fills with tears.

“Are you hungry, Katya?” Gemma points to her stomach. “I’m hungry!”

I see it’s time to take my leave. I tell Gemma that she has missed her calling.

“You should have been a language teacher, Gem.”

She smiles. I dare to ask her the burning question.

“Andy still at Mum’s?”

She seems to be expecting it. “He still texts me....When he’s *good and ready*....”

A wave of generosity overwhelms me. I tell her to take the next day off.

“You’re owed leave. Take Katya to Stratford for the day. Show her another side of England. No. Don’t argue. That’s an order. Take Rosa. It’s going to be fine.....Why not take Andy too?”

Before she has a chance to reply, I’m gone. I plan what to do as I drive home. I wonder if there is any point asking the Gazette for the payment details of whoever placed the sex-line advert. Would Sasha use his own credit card? Would the paper tell me anyway? Bloody Data Protection. We could be forced to go to court but the editor *might* do us a quiet favour. I’ll give that job and the mobile trace to someone else tomorrow morning. As I pull onto my drive I decide my first visit of the morning will be to Ghent and Flavell, estate agents.

*

Having briefed my helpers about their tasks, I arrive at his posh offices at ten o’clock. The building is an Edwardian villa at a decent remove from the muddle of the town centre. I look up at the elegant windows and observe wistfully, not for the first time, that fortunes can be made in life without great effort. The secretary announces me and I enter.

“Mr Ghent. Please watch. I’m about to send your message. Is this exactly as you remember you were told to do it?”

“Yes”

“How were you told?”

“By text.”

“Did you save it?”

“No - of course not...my wife...”

He looks at the word again and nods his head. I know that with a press of my finger I could be making a big mistake, but I have to take the risk. I press. I wait and then see with a heavy heart **Sent** appear. Then placing under Ghent’s hairy nostrils the four newspaper pages I have had printed out at the Gazette’s offices en route, I tell him to show me the number he had phoned. He points. I phone. The tone is continuous. Disconnected. Another dead end.

When his middle-aged secretary puts her curly head around the door to offer coffee Ghent is surprisingly curt - even rude to her. Her large bespectacled eyes clearly show she is in her element. They had lit up to see me make my second appearance in two days, and betrayed that she had really little time or sympathy for Jonathan Ghent esquire, in spite of her deference.

“Please, DI Box” he whispers “This is very difficult for me. I would much prefer to come and see you at the station, than here. Mrs Perkins out there knows my wife. I’ve had to make something up about embezzlement - by a former employee of Flavell, my defunct business partner.”

“How very resourceful of you.”

“Please, officer, let’s just get this over and done with. I’m in agony.”

I feel for him. He is furious that he is quite at the mercy of one not his social or intellectual equal. Me. I tell him, not bothering to lower my voice, that I won’t be long. I explain that my sergeant is quite concerned.

“Concerned? About me?”

“Yes. She’s worried that you’ve held something back - because you’re being blackmailed by these people.”

He laughs miserably and unconvincingly. I tell him that my colleague is all for getting hold of his bank accounts and looking for regular payments - to track down Sacha’s bank and his address.

“My statements? That would be an unpardonable intrusion into my privacy, officer!”

“Why? What have you to hide?”

I study the bead of sweat on his yellow dome trickling like a raindrop on a dirty window. I watch his knuckles turn white as he grips his pen tighter. I imagine Katya’s disgust and despair to have his great ugly toby jug mug and its rubber lips move into her facial space and block out her light. Seeing once more contempt for me enter his eyes, I feel another surge of revulsion and anger.

“An unpardonable intrusion into *your* privacy! What about your intrusion into hers? Into her childish private parts? You just made up my mind! You’ll send me your statements for June, July, August and September to arrive first post tomorrow - or I’ll get a court order and be back to collect them, whatever Mrs Perkins thinks!”

I take my leave. The lady in question is at her desk, staring into her laptop and smiling like people do when they are aware of being stared at but trying to show they’re not. I nod a farewell to her and her eyes gleam back, telling me to drop by as often as I wish.

That same afternoon the print-outs are hand-delivered in a fat envelope. But there are no round-number monthly debits or withdrawals. One more dead-end - as the mobile number and the sex advert have proven to be. It turns out that it had been paid for by cash. A trawl of hospitals within fifty miles of the town has produced no sign of Iryna. And yet the news I am secretly dreading - of a young corpse stumbled on by a jogger or a dog-walker - does not materialise. I

had briefed our patrols to visit discretely every derelict shop and factory in the town, to try the doors and to watch and listen. But there has been no sign of activity or intrusion.

I am about to go home that Friday afternoon - as Moxie and Katya are no doubt feeding swans on the Avon - when I am summoned to appear before the Chief.

“How many days have we been at this?” he asks. “Are we any closer to an arrest? *No*. Do you have any new leads?”

I tell him about the mobile phone message I have sent from Ghent’s phone.

“Jonathan Ghent. Mmm. I never did like him. Something about those beady eyes. Like a kestrel. Not a gentleman at all.”

Something like despair seizes me.

“If all else fails, Sir, I intend to bring in Leonard Truslove in to help with enquiries. Suspicion of aiding and abetting in the procurement, abduction and false imprisonment of female minors for prostitution.”

If I had told him that the sun would be going out in ten minutes, he would hardly have appeared more shocked. His face looks like that painting - *The Scream* - onto which some passing vandal has drawn black glasses and a pencil moustache.

“Leonard Truslove? Are you serious, DI Box? I’ve played golf with the man! He’s an OBE!”

“He is involved. *Probably* unintentionally.”

Now I decide to mention the C word. “And I will also bring in a Mr Codrescu, his neighbour – who, I’m pretty sure, is involved.”

“Vladimir??”

Vladimir indeed. I examine the Chief for signs of phoney surprise but find none.

“He’s a member too! Charming man. I’ve played with him many times. He’s in Property Development!”

“Really? Well you should choose your golf partners a little more wisely, Sir. He’s involved with drugs - allegedly.”

“He is? Hold on - are you implying that I knew - or should have known?”

“Not at all. It’s not common knowledge. I heard it in a roundabout way. But something tells me he is definitely linked with our suspect, Sacha.”

At that point I decide I have no choice but to tell him the whole story. Afterwards, he is quite annoyed. Why have I not told him all that before?

“I’m telling you now - because my other lines of enquiry I had pinned my hopes on are fizzling out. If all else fails, I will be forced to bring them in and put them under pressure.”

“So Vladimir is not an *active* criminal here?”

“Not as far as I know. It’s hearsay, but I’ve heard it said more than once, so I have to give it some credit. His connection with Sacha – through Truslove - looks very probable.”

Why, he asks, if Mr Codrescu is such a big nasty fish, does he choose to live in such a small pond as Earlstone?”

I shrug and say “The reason lots of people do, Sir.”

“Which is?”

“The Council Tax is low. And, due to your leadership, so is crime.”

Flattery wins me a reprieve. The unspoken threat of bringing in a superior officer from Leicester has receded - for a while.

I am not good company that weekend. I go through the motions at the lads’ football. Sandra asks what is on my mind. Somehow Sunday is gotten through. I sit with a whiskey-nightcap as Sandra

gets ready for bed. What, I wonder, is Sacha doing and thinking now? It has been six, no seven days since the discovery of his den. He must be wondering where Katya is. Had she been taken in as a waif by some kindly passing motorist? Or is her keeper more a person like himself - a predator? If the police have her, why is there such a silence? Has my dilemma become obvious to him? Is he miles away - or expecting me to conclude that he is? The best place to hide might be closest to the search. His trump-card: *we haven't a clue where he is*. My trump-card: *he doesn't know I know who he is*. Frustratingly, to follow my best lead - Truslove + Codrescu - would be like pulling at web, sending Sacha at its centre scuttling into the undergrowth. He holds a better hand than me. A full house of frightened girls. I keep turning on Ghent's phone. But there are no messages.

At two something I am woken by a glaring thought. Would Katya have been able to point out the factory where she had been held prisoner - if Moxie had not had her insight? Her only thought had been escape. She had never seen Croxall's from the outside. Could she have retraced her steps there from the train station, had we asked her to do so later - in view of the panic and the half-drugged state she had been in? And derelict factories were Earlstone's speciality. There were at least twenty. Might this line of thought have occurred to Sacha too? Might this not explain to him the absence of Croxall's in the news? Might he not even be tempted to creep back in there? But when I wake again around dawn, these thoughts, quite persuasive in the lonely night, seem preposterous. Who is in two - or more - minds now? I wonder which of us - Sacha or me - is sleeping more soundly.

*

The Chinese restaurant on the corner of Short St has an upstairs dining room rarely - if ever - used. One of its windows overlooks the great gates of Croxall's and beyond into the despatch yard. On my way into work I first drive over the junction and then do a full circle at the mini roundabout further on. I need to put my mind at rest. I pull up outside the restaurant and ring the bell. It is only just eight o' clock and I'm telling myself I'm going crazy to expect there to be anyone around, and am about to walk away when I hear signs of life. The door opens a crack wide and I see the beautiful round face of a teenage girl. I expect to hear a Suzy Wong accent but to my surprise she speaks fluent Earlstone.

"Hell d'you want this early? We're shut."

I tell her "police" and show my ID. Now a middle-aged woman in a dressing gown appears, all alarm and anxiety.

"I need to look into the factory yard." I explain. The young girl translates and I am allowed in. I climb the stairs with both in tow. There is no van of course and no sign of activity. I ask them if there has been a van there recently. More interpreting. The woman nods. Over a week ago. I show them the photos I have brought from the car. Had they seen either of the two women?

What about the young girl? The man? They shake their heads.

"Any other girls? What about men coming and going?"

The woman tells me through her daughter that there had been one or two men - but she thought they were going into the snooker hall. I tell them that it's been shut for ages and leave. Another useless box ticked.

Moxie is already at her desk when I get in. She seems in good spirits despite - or due to? - Andy declining an invitation to go to Stratford. She and Katya had had a lovely day, and had spent the

weekend walking. Now she is anxious to know if anything had changed. I bring her up to speed about my chat with the Chief. She slowly shakes her head.

“What’s wrong with that?” I almost snap.

“Nothing. I just can’t believe that’s all we’ve got to go on.”

I do not reply. We check Ghent’s phone. No message. I stuff it back in my pocket and ask Moxie to pursue her enquiries into Zoe’s relatives. There are only ten entries for Gooding but nearly three pages of Wrights. I stare at my office phone. My next decision could be fateful - or even fatal. I pick up the receiver and dial.

“Paul Box speaking. I wonder if we could get together for a chat. I need you help - your advice really.”

I put as much humility into my voice as I can muster, to appeal to his vanity. He’s rather busy he says - he has a round booked at ten thirty, but we might talk in the afternoon. Ten minutes later he’s back on the phone.

“Paul? Me again. Do you still fancy a knock? My partner has just this minute cried off with gout. If you fill in, we can kill two birds with one stone - or sink two balls with one club!”

He laughs at his great wit and I join in. I tell him I haven’t been on a golf course for ages, and he says in that case, would I like to play him for fifty pounds? I join in with his laughter again.

What a comic genius he is.

Sandra comes outside to find me rummaging in the garage, sweating and swearing, surrounded by boxes, bags and brushes. Why am I cleaning out the garage *now*? - (She had been nagging me for quite a while) - Have I been suspended from duty or something?? I tell her I need my golf clubs. Has she seen them?

“I know I put the buggers in here!”

“You did. They’re hanging on that hook above your head. Don’t get so annoyed.”

I grab them and jump into the car. I wave to her as she stands on the drive staring after me. I like to keep her guessing. It adds to my mystique and charisma.

Leonard Truslove is in a good mood, and when I admit that I haven’t played for nearly two years, it seems to improve. I intend to let him win anyway. As we enter the clubhouse he waves away my concern that my membership has lapsed. This allows him to remind me that he is on the committee and has the right to sign me in as a guest for free. I select an *I am so impressed* setting for my face. He is wearing shorts to just below his chubby knees and puts me in mind of Bates at The George. There is something peculiar about the Englishman’s compulsion to remove his trousers at the drop of a hat. His buttocks - unmitigated by trouser legs - are expressed in khaki - two great cushions he cannot see and be appalled at - and they demand the full attention of all eyes as he bends forward to sign the register at the reception, under the forced smile of its permed occupant. I see the smile vanish as he turns to wink and wave me through. He looks down at my old shoes, goes to say something then changes his mind. His are cream and brown brogues. Green socks cling to his calves.

“You know, Paul,” he says as he bends to place his ball at the first tee “I’m glad you don’t bare a grudge over last week. It needed saying, and I’ve always believed in being absolutely forthright and clearing the air. No point paying a penny and only breaking a little wind. Right?”

He whacks the ball and it flies straight past the golden horse chestnut. My turn. He watches me over his glasses with such a smug grin that I am tempted to whack him accidentally on purpose. To our amazement my ball sails higher than his and surpasses it, almost trickling to the edge of

the green. His grin muscles tighten.

“Thought you said you hadn’t been playing” he drawls. “What’s your handicap?”

“Having to work for a living, Mr Truslove.”

“Oh very drole! Come on!”

I am playing Bond to his Goldfinger. With my shabby bag slung over my shoulder I traipse after him, avoiding the wavy lines made by his posh contraption on wheels, not a little impressed by the great welts his feet are leaving on the dewy grass. He is a substantial man. At least in Earlstone. I try to make up my mind how best to play him - and I don’t mean golf. At the first green I miss an easy putt and we draw the hole, four shots each. It’s a par four and I’m pleased. Gradually however, weariness from a sleepless night takes over as my re-beginner’s fortune wanes and his smug smile waxes. He looks more like Mr Punch than Mr Lenin now. There’s some congestion at the eighth tee - someone on the far green is slower and worse than me. Under a tree we sit on a bench because of the queue. I gaze into the distance attracted by the burr and rattle of a train threading through the woods, now fully visible as it hurtles across the ugly bridge over the Common. From the trees a terrible image of Iryna’s wet, leafy body invades my head. My heavy heart sinks further. I look at Truslove. Now is as good a time as any to tackle him, but it is he who takes the initiative. So, he asks, what do I have on my mind?

“It’s to do with your phone call to Bates, the landlord of The King George.”

“What about it?”

“You don’t deny it?”

“Why would I? You know how forthright I am!”

“You got a very good man the sack.”

“Me? Nonsense. If he did get the sack, it was due to his own incompetence - discriminating against a - a - “

“Client?”

“No! The friend of a friend. Not that I can see it concerns you - as a policeman - there was nothing illegal about it - apart from the attitude of the doorman!”

He is getting on his high horse and preparing to ride away from me in his insufferable indignation.

“Mr Truslove - please. This is a far, far more serious matter than you have been given to understand.”

He looks hurt that he should be considered to be in a state of ignorance. Conceited man! I choose to change tack smartly. I tell him I wish to confide in him over a matter of the utmost gravity.

“You may hold the key - entirely innocently - to solving a crime the likes of which Earlstone has never seen.”

A row has erupted somewhere ahead of us because of slow play.

“Bad form” he mutters. “Some people have the most deplorable manners.”

I do not comment because I’m not sure whether he is criticizing the complainer, the slow player or both. Now he looks puzzled.

“A key? What sort of key?”

“The gentleman in question was a foreigner, maybe an Eastern European or a German. Am I right? You needn’t tell me his name.”

“I was given to understand that he was half-German, half-Russian.”

“You needn’t tell me his name...” I pause, debating if my next words will be a blunder

“...because I already know it. Sacha.”

His eyebrows arch, telling me he knows it too.

“A man known to the *police*?”

I nod. It is time to give my little speech. Truslove is so distracted by it, he fails to notice a foursome inviting us to take our turn at the tee. I wave them past. I have just told him that what he had said about me in my office had hurt me. Because it was partly true - that I had been in second and third gear.

“This place encourages it. Serious villainy is the exception. Down the years, I’ve nicked ‘em and you’ve nailed ‘em - or got ‘em off. They’re usually guilty and they’re usually honest enough to plead it. You’ve advised ‘em to come clean in their own interest and they respect you for it. Don’t take this amiss - but what you said about me could apply equally to you. Our rogues are stupid and do daft things - but if they sobered up and came off the drugs they’d be pretty decent. I don’t *need* to be Hercule Poirot - and you don’t need to be Perry Mason.”

“But this man Sacha is different?”

“What I’m telling you now is in the strictest confidence. Three girls could be murdered if what I tell you now gets out. One already has been, if my worst fears are correct.”

I take a deep breath, tell him the story and describe to him my dilemma. When I’ve finished I am relieved that he looks genuinely appalled. I have judged him correctly. Now I am looking forward to administering the sting in my scorpion tail.

“Leonard.”

He looks up from the woods where he has been staring, and faces me.

“Leonard. I’m telling you now, both as a friend and an official, that if, when I catch these people - and I will catch them - if I find you are wittingly involved in this crime I will make sure you spend a good slice of your retirement locked up.”

He goes to speak and I seize his arm.

“Leonard. I slept badly. Spare me the speech. Just come clean now. If there is something, tell me. I need this. How did it come about that you phoned Bates at the George?”

“I already said. A friend asked me to.”

“A friend. Mr Codrescu?”

“A friend. I’m not obliged to tell you the name!”

“Leonard. Withholding evidence is a crime. Shall we do this at the station? Formally? Under caution?”

He looks appalled. “Alright. It was Vladimir Codrescu. Someone he knew had been denied access to licenced premises because he was a foreigner. A man called Sacha.”

“Surname?”

“I don’t know.”

“So why did you, Leonard Truslove OBE get involved in such a paltry matter? What relationship do you have with Codrescu? Do you socialise? Are you friends? Do you meet walking the dog?”

“We meet here in the main. He’s not a close friend.”

“So how did he approach you about Sacha? And why? You see, I’m baffled Leonard. He’s a man of some importance too - and yet he involves himself with a matter that occurs in Earlstone every Friday night. What *for*?”

“I was mowing the lawn. He leant over the fence and asked why the English still hated the Germans sixty years on from the war - when the Germans had lost. He was angry.”

“But why did you offer to get involved *personally*? Was it pressure? Money?”

“Of course not! It was a favour to Vladimir. I had represented him in a boundary dispute with a neighbour and had been handsomely - far too handsomely - rewarded. So I felt obliged. Vladimir is a foreigner himself - and he was furious that a friend of his should experience racist

discrimination.”

Racism - *hatred of*. Codrescu’s Achilles Heel. Will it prove tragic for him? I ask Truslove if he had met Sacha and when he says no, from my golf bag I whip out the picture under his nose. He does not colour or flinch. He’s telling the truth.

“Is that all you know, Leonard?”

“You have my solemn word. I did Vlad a favour. I wish I hadn’t.”

“I’m glad you did. Otherwise I’d be completely in the dark.”

I consider how he can help me now.

“I need to know Sacha’s surname and where he’s living. Is there any way you can think to ask without arousing suspicion?”

He reflects. He shakes his head.

“We’re not on such chatty terms. Believe me, Paul, I want to help, but if I ask a fishy question, Codrescu will smell it. No pun intended. He’s as sharp as a razor.”

“Did you know he’s a villain?”

“One suspects.”

“Tell me!”

“One *suspects!* Romanians are poor. He’s rich. How? Why is he here? How did he get the money to build up his property empire? He is the most charming of men. But what business is it of mine to be suspicious? It’s only surmise.”

Clouds have rolled in. Rain threatens. Neither of us is in the mood to play on. I concede defeat.

In the car park we take an uneasy leave of each other. He has promised to ring me if he comes by way of other information.

“But do not, under any circumstances” I tell him “Do not try to do any amateur sleuthing. If you have any ideas, clear them with me first. That most charming of men is ruthless. Remember the girls.”

There is something nagging at me as I drive back - to do with my chat with the Chief about Codrescu. There are so many voices competing for attention in my thoughts. What is it? I am turning left to reach the police station past the cinema when the **For Sale** sign catches my eye. Property. Codrescu is into *property*. And Truslove has just mentioned it too. He uses property to launder his drugs money and is providing a shelter for Sacha and his girls. I just know I am right. When I get into my office I phone Truslove and he tells me that his friend buys up clapped out premises - hotels mainly - to do conversions for flats and retirement homes. Bedford, Milton Keynes and the Northampton area.

“Anything around here?”

“I don’t think so. He likes to keep business and pleasure pretty much apart as far as I can see.”

I tell Moxie we may have a breakthrough. But after a while she begins to play Devil’s Advocate . She tells me I have no proof that Codrescu is bent, no proof that he wasn’t just doing a fellow-foreigner he had chanced to meet or hear about a favour. And how could he use property to launder money? I retort that it’s not difficult.

“He offers a struggling couple money - his drugs-money - for their house. They can’t afford the mortgage. He might buy part of the equity and they pay him rent. When they move out he sells it. Money in the bank - but now it’s digital and not dirty banknotes. This finances his other interests. His property empire builds. I’m telling you, Sacha has the girls holed up in a knackered hotel somewhere.”

“Somewhere? Great. How far afield do you intend to we go? Bedford? We’ve checked all the empty premises in town. And he’s not going to risk a rented house somewhere on an estate, is he, with nosy neighbours the girls can shout to?? No way. It’ll be somewhere isolated - off the beaten track like Croxall’s. Perhaps we should drive round and look for **To Let** signs and a white van outside. Simple as that.”

I study her face for traces of flippancy. She betrays none. We check Ghent’s phone already knowing it is futile. She almost slams it down.

“The bastard has sent him a secret warning!” she exclaims. “I say we charge him with having sex with a minor. Or pretend to. I sense there’s something he’s holding back. I smelt it on his breath. I say stick him in a cell for three hours - and then put a tail on him to see if he’s getting his filthy end away again.”

I am shocked to hear her be so explicit.

“Well, what do *you* want to call it?”

I shake my head and put my overcoat on because it’s turned so foul outside.

Mrs Perkins is delighted to see us, but regrets that her boss is out showing a client around a house in the absence of his assistant Suzy Flavell, who is ill. There is a box-file above her head on a shelf labelled LETS. Inspired, I tell her that maybe she could help us. I take out the photograph of Sacha and show her. Had he been in? She shakes her head of course. Moxie sees in which direction I am going, and tells her we need details of every property she has let in the last month. The box file is taken down from the shelf and its contents sifted through. Then there is hesitation. She is not sure whether she ought to give us such details without Mr Ghent’s permission. Her coquettish face tells us however that she would dearly love to, and she can’t help asking why we need to know. I ignore this and tell her that she can leave Mr Ghent to me. “He agreed to co-operate in full, Mrs Perkins.....”

Business has been slow. There are only eleven lets to look at. We settle down on a sofa and go through them. Most are on housing estates and two are in terraces. My heart skips, however, when we find ourselves staring at a majestic house in Fairleigh, in a location not far from Ghent’s own palatial home. It stands on the edge of the village on a large plot next to farmland. The blurb talks about privacy. The photo shows a tall, thick conifer edge separating it from its only neighbour, a squat bungalow. My eyes fasten on its *five bedrooms*. I look into Moxie’s eyes and see the same excitement. The date of the letting is the Friday before Katya’s flight. I ask Mrs Perkins to tell me the name of the tenant. At that very second in walks Ghent, wet and windblown, and then further crestfallen to see us. His face is thunder but he dare not create the lightning he would love to make.

“Mr Ghent!” I exclaim. “Just routine enquiries. We doing the rounds. We need to see who’s been renting property recently. Mrs Perkins has been most helpful. Can we have a word?”

He rushes into his office and we follow.

“I wish you would not come here!” he hisses. “It begins to feel like harassment, DI Box. Is this some sort of retribution for my sins?”

I almost have to restrain Moxie from hitting him.

“You arrogant man. Do you think we would waste our time pestering you when we have to find where those poor girls are?”

The answer is not entirely *NO*, but I choose to back her up. I tell him he should be ashamed, and to sit down. At that point I can sense his secretary is hovering near the door, and he is aware of her too. He blushes, closes his eyes and mutters something like *please*, but he is too upset to

finish the word off. I put my hand on Moxie's wrist to tell her enough said.

"Jonathan. I know you're going through it. We'll be gone in half-an-hour if you co-operate. If we're satisfied, it's the last you'll see of us."

This unexpected kindness has him in tears. It is not a pretty sight - akin to a steak thawing out - but I sense at last Moxie will get what she wants if there is anything else to be got. I ask him who had rented the Fairleigh property I have stuck under his snotty nose. He picks up the photo and looks. We're barking up the wrong tree, he snivels. Moxie gives him a handkerchief from her bag.

"How can you be so cruel when you look so kind?" he whispers to her. "I'm just weak. I'm unhappily married - again."

"Blow your nose - and tell us what you're not saying," she replies. "Then you might go up a little in my estimation. Come on! Lives are at stake."

He nods. He looks at the door and whispers that it might be nothing - or even misleading. He isn't even sure himself of what he saw one evening on the car park.

"One time I was going back to my car after...after...afterwards....when the door of a car parked further down opened. I was anxious not to show my face, but when I drew level with the man I couldn't help but glance across. He turned away, and because he did, it just came to me that he might be a client too. I knew the face was familiar. It kept coming back to me - like a name you try to remember and can't. I tried to see him in context - and all of a sudden it came to me. He reminded me of a man who ran the Fairleigh Arms some years ago. But it was getting dark...."

"Name?"

"It probably wasn't him - and he was probably on some innocent errand."

"Name!"

"He was called Jock. That's all I know."

"Right. We'll check. We're going into Fairleigh anyway."

I pick up the information sheet about the house and he tells me again I have the wrong idea. A Mr and Mrs Goadby have rented *Beaumont Villa*. He is an architect working on a development near the M42.

"The house is situated in an ideal position for him. He can be in Rugby in fifteen minutes for the train into Euston near his London office, and onto the M69 in two minutes. And then onto the M6 -"

"Please spare us the blurb, Mr Ghent" says Moxie, tugging at my sleeve.

"Do you believe him?" I ask in the car.

"I reckon so. But we have to check."

Five minutes later we are on a pebble drive speaking to a very pleasant Mrs Goadby in a pinafore, with not a Ukrainian in sight. We beg our pardons and return to the car.

"God's laughing at us Gemma."

"No he's not. You'll see. Let's try the Fairleigh Arms."

"If there's no mention of a Jock by the locals, we'll have Ghent in quicker than a dose of salts."

The Fairleigh Arms stands near the church under the shelter of its great yew tree. We enter. It must be twenty years since I was last in there and I am quite shocked to observe its decline. Gone are the two cosy snugs to the left and all is bare floorboards and open plan. Gone are the whispering, genteel couples and the fire-snapping peace and quiet. Loud music is seeping out from the bar area to the right, and through the serving hatch I can see the tables of the lounge at the rear with menus on but no diners. It turns out that there rarely are. A young man in a smart

waistcoat and a crisp white shirt is the only smart thing in there and he awaits our approach with a smile and hands flat on the counter. We tell him who we are and ask to see the boss, but he's out. In the corner two grey-haired men are playing chess and they will do nicely. We introduce ourselves and we soon have a name. Jock McAdoo.

"The brewery sacked him. He was a manager. Came in two or three years ago, promising to put the place back on its feet and brought it even lower."

His opponent is even keener to tell the tale. "His fault the place is empty. This used to be *the* pub in Fairleigh - weddings and funerals all came in it before and after. Not anymore. McAdoo let all the riff-raff into the bar and everybody else cleared out. Now of course, they're the main customers and Alec can't afford to bar 'em, poor bugger. We only come in now afternoons when it's quiet."

"Why did the brewery sack him?" asks Moxie.

"Ah! Goings on. Poker and brag in the back room after hours. Women upstairs."

"Women? Prostitutes?"

"You lot should know! Quite a few neighbours complained to the brewery about the noise in the night - and to the police. It should all be on record."

"How long's Alec been here?" I ask.

"He's the second or third since Jock. Only a few months."

A few months. Not long enough for him to know what might have happened to one of his predecessors. Neither of the two gentlemen knows either, but one had seen him earlier in the year at The Red Lion in the village.

"Just after Christmas. Didn't recognize him without his beard at first. Smartly dressed as ever. But the woman he was with looked dowdy and too old for him. Like his mother."

Moxie rushes back to the car to fetch the sketch of Auntie.

"That's her - or very similar" he says, looking up from the chess board.

The Electoral Register only throws up the McAdoos on the Eskdale, a family ever close to our hearts and often noisy beneficiaries of our evening hospitality. There is no Jock and no John. But it doesn't mean, I tell a disconsolate Moxie, that Jock had left the area. He might not be registered or might be renting. Once again we will have to ring round the letting agencies, as well as hotels and other providers of beds.

"Every time we get close, they slip away again"

I tell her to cheer up. I'm buying and I have an idea. Mollie.

I bring back our drinks and am smiling. Mollie, the landlady of the Grand Union used to be the chairwoman of the LVA and is a scandalmonger into the bargain. I have an interesting tale to tell.

"McAdoo actually left the Fairleigh Arms before he was pushed, around eighteen months ago. Mollie there advised him to just go. Otherwise he would have faced a disciplinary, been sacked and put on a black list. As it happened, he managed to get relief work - filling in for landlords going on holiday etc. But Mollie - and even Batesy - wouldn't touch him. He filled in for the newer managers and in some of the struggling places which are always changing hands."

"*Filled* in. So where is he now?"

"Listen! This where it gets really interesting. The old Holycroft Inn - up by the nick? Well, Mollie says he got involved with that doomed project - sank a lot of money into it. Him and some Indian fellow called Asif. It was going to be a weird mix of Belgian brasserie and curry

house. Jock was going to run the cellar - all sorts of ales and continental lagers - and his partner - his girlfriend - was going to do all the mussels and stuff - while Asif did the exotics. But then Jock and Asif fell out and Asif pulled the plugs - and his money. It went from bad to worse. The builder went bust and he'd been paid a load in advance. McAdoo must have lost his shirt. Ten-to-one he's so skint he needed to get involved with Sacha. He wasn't a *customer*, Moxie! If he's in with Auntie, he's on the *payroll*. And get this! Last year he came in here - after the wheels fell off - to see if Mollie could put any work his way. Guess who he was with?"

"You showed Mollie the picture of Auntie?"

"Yep. It's her. Might be a rich widow or divorcee, she said - *because he'd have needed one.*"

Moxie looks at her watch. She has to be back home in twenty minutes - for Katya when Rosa goes. After she's left, I'm in two minds. Then I decide to phone Sandra. I need to tidy a few things up and will be home at nine with a takeaway, I tell her. She sounds surprised. I assure her there's nothing wrong and I ask her to kiss the kids goodnight from me. It's been a long day and I'm exhausted but my new line in this dirty pond has filled me with exhilaration. All I need to do now is to tick a few more less promising boxes. Then I will sleep soundly. I struggle against the wind back up Old Bond Street to collect my car. It's gone six o' clock, and on such a dreadful October evening, darkness has already fallen. I can hardly believe I have been on a golf course that morning. It feels like an event from a previous day. I remember I have not looked at Ghent's phone for a while. I turn it on but, of course, there is still no word. Then I come to a halt outside The Holycroft Inn and look up at that flat-roofed building, which some Earlstoners want listing because of its thirties art-deco style. It forms one point of a triangle base, of which the Classic, the last of three cinemas to close in the town, is a second, and our nick is the third, at the apex. It is a supreme irony that it lies barely thirty paces from our main door, and is linked to our most promising lead to date, Jock McAdoo. Then, recalling Moxie's lack of enthusiasm in The Union, I too have my doubts. It will no doubt prove to be yet another cul de sac, like the alley running next to the pub. The Holycroft has new brass wall lights and the old sign has been taken down, leaving holes like wounds. The outside has received a partial coat of cool green and the doorway a fake portico. But the windows are all boarded. I look down the hill into the town and smile. The Holycroft Brasserie. Who would want to struggle, pissed, all the way up here late at night for moules marinière - *in Earlstone*? Or waddle up for a curry when the centre is stuffed with curry outlets? I'm a copper and no entrepreneur, but even I can see it's an idea doomed to fail. Middle-class frequenters of brasseries would not be seen dead in Earlstone much after five - and most would never come in at all, even during the day. I walk into the alley and try the side door. Locked. I listen long for sounds. Silence. But my counterpart would surely not be so brazen.....*Would he?* Across the road The Classic is all boarded up too. I imagine all the excited faces crossing the street from one building to the other, as they did between the nineteen thirties and the eighties, chattering in anticipation of a film or of a nightcap. Their Earlstone has gone and their voices fallen for ever silent. Most of their world is demolished or derelict. And quite possibly in one of those many buildings - possibly one we have already checked - buildings raised for good and decent purposes - an evil trade is about to be restarted - or has restarted - and four frightened girls, subdued by a little wine-diluted GHB, or one of the other date-rape drugs, are sitting shivering in trepidation, wondering what foul body will impose itself upon them next. They are Sacha's slaves, but I have no idea where they are. No. Surely not here. Too many people about. Too risky. Too exposed for those furtive men with one thing on their minds. Double yellow lines. Nowhere to park. And a gloomy police station stares disapprovingly out and down the hill. And yet.....I walk across to the cinema and try all the doors there. This road

is one of two routes out of the town to Leicester. Regular traffic *would* be good camouflage. And there are parking spaces further up the hill, past the police station for Sacha's clientele to sit until summoned. I feel uneasy again. Wouldn't we look chumps if he and the girls had been under our noses all the time? I look up at my office on the second floor. Tomorrow I will come to the window at regular intervals and look down. Another box to tick, and to keep ticking. I walk off to collect my car. I shall drive around the Eskdale and then go home.

The Eskdale housing estate is Earlstone's worst. It lies above the natural bowl of the town but has no reason to look down on it. Of course there are responsible people - most of them are - mixed in with the non-copers, and Judy Kinder had lived on the edge of it, refusing to join the lower middle class refugees as the estate deteriorated in the nineties. If I were Sacha and wanted a safe-house I might go there. Threaten the girls, drug the girls, lock the windows, play music loud, draw the curtains, tape them together.....

I find myself in the labyrinth of streets near Eskdale school which works tirelessly to undo the harm secretly done in many of these grim houses. I turn corners left and right until I arrive in The Meadows and pull in. Rain streams down crazily and spatters the windscreen as soon as the wipers come to a grateful rest. The Meadows. This is the progenitor of Earlstone's worst non-copers. Some of the front doors are of white plastic, emblem of Thatcher's new vision for council house tenants, and remind me of occasional teeth in a mouthful of decay. The dull doors and low concrete front walls of the majority of houses indicate a failure or a refusal to be part of her enterprise culture.

I wind down the window and listen. At first I hear nothing. Gradually a backcloth of sound develops - the rhythm of drums and piercing voices. Somewhere two dogs - one bass, one tenor - are barking without let-up. On the right, an upstairs curtain is lit and behind it there is a flag of Saint George. The window opens and the music comes instantly loud. A shape leans out - a young head smoking. From inside a voice screams incoherently in fury and the silhouette retracts. The window slams shut. I get out and walk. There are two **For Let** signs further along on the left, both outside houses in darkness. I walk down the paths and open their letter boxes to listen. Nothing. Across the road, a house with a white door has been let and all the lights are on. Down the side a white van is parked. The house is almost the last in the row and its semi-detached neighbour is boarded up. At the end of the road there only garages. Have I found them? Should I knock or wait? Upstairs curtains are drawn back and a blonde head looks down on me full of anguish. It is the head of Katya, who then becomes Gemma Moxon.....With a jolt I wake soaking wet - but not with rain - and my heart is pounding. I look at the dark strip where the curtains fail to meet and grab the alarm clock. I stare in disbelief. It should be six or half-past but the clock has stopped at two thirty-eight. The second hand jerks and the thing ticks, and I groan. Sandra stirs. I slide out an inch at a time and go into the spare room. The cold sheet is like a splash of icy water and I find myself fully awake, eyes closed, watching a procession of images from the day - golf-swings, a worried solicitor, a weeping estate agent, his smirking secretary, a gossiping landlady, pieces moving on a chessboard, a sceptical Moxie, the blank face of Ghent's phone, a series of dull front doors I decide in the end not to knock.....I concentrate on a woodland scene of bluebells until strange creatures and images tell me I am losing consciousness....when I stumble on the white body and face of Iryna staring from beneath bracken. The word *obsession* will not stop speaking itself in my head.....

I must have lain two hours desperately trying to clear my head of thoughts and plans for the day.

When I wake again it is gone six - and I have had the most vivid nightmare - the kind you only have when your sleep is shallow, and which you can remember in detail. This was a nightmare I used to have years ago, but with a novel twist.

I appeared every year in the school play, but learning lines was difficult for me. My dream would begin with me being roped into a new performance. The dream would progress over many weeks, each episode becoming more disconcerting as the date of the first night came closer. I did not know my lines and had no idea what the play was about or how the scenes I appeared in fitted in with the whole. These serial nightmares usually came to nothing, but on one awful occasion one of them did, and I found myself standing clueless and alone on the stage, mocked by the audience into head-hanging shame.

The new version of that dream has been even more frightening. The audience is arriving soon, but not only do I not know my lines, I have no idea when to come on, where to stand and who will be on stage with me. The stage is an utter mess with books and properties scattered everywhere. The other players are oblivious of me staggering about picking up things, looking for a script. No-one will lend me one and I envy their assurance as they walk around practising and declaiming their speeches. Suddenly I am in the costumes room. Coats, shirts and trousers are slung everywhere. As I sift through them, I realize with terror that I do not know which to put on, and as I stand in bewilderment, the worst realization of all arrives and wakes me up in another sweat - I have no idea which character I am. The relief I feel to know that it was all a dream vanishes when dreadful thought of the missing girls comes to me. Are they now waking somewhere nearby after their nightmares? I am exhausted and miserable. I have lain there a few moments, wondering how on earth I can go into work, when Sandra pushes the door open. She asks why I am in the spare bed. I tell her I have been dreaming all night.

“You woke me up about two talking in your sleep” she says. “Something about slasher.”

Sasha. I am walking into the police station when it comes to me that my character in the play was Sasha. It disturbs me so much that I almost turn to leave, but Sergeant Wills tells me the Chief wants to see me that very moment.

Tuesday

He is telling me he is not happy. He has put his little green watering can down on the window sill and is turning his orchids around until he is satisfied. Three are white, one is yellow and one deep pink. His pride and joy. He has a new pair of fashion glasses on - those with the solid sides and he has no idea what an even bigger twat he looks in them.

“I’m not happy Paul. We need to clear this up. Possibly you’ve been - we’ve been - unlucky. I’m thinking we should pass it up - to County.”

CDI Craddock. A man I loathe possibly more than Sacha. An impulse seizes me.

“I guarantee to you, Sir, that I will have the girls safe and their keepers in custody by Friday night. If not, you will have my resignation on this table.”

I stride down the corridor and recollect a grey Alf Ramsey promising that England *will* win the World Cup. Had my dream been a premonition? Will today be the day that the scent of Iryna attracts the nose of a dog in the woods? I pray it is not - not only for her sake - but for the others. Her discovery would lead to the whole nasty story escaping and Sacha reacting badly.

“God, Paul. You look dreadful.”

I toss Ghent’s blank and silent phone onto the table in Moxie’s direction. I tell her that my daughter Debbie had a nightmare and woke us all up. And then I confess.

“I’ve made *him* rather a rash promise.”

I tell her, and mention Craddock. She rolls her huge blue eyes. They are saying - God help us - not Craddock! *No, God help the girls*, I reply in thought.

“At least now we have a deadline to work to,” she finally growls. I grab the flipchart and throw over the useless page I had scribbled on the week before. We decide to send out for a list of all let properties and knock on every door. And we will rattle the doors again of every single boarded up premises in the town. Moxie has a good idea about the medical angle. Iryna was not admitted to a hospital - so how did she get treatment? She was a valuable asset which Sacha would dispose of only as a last resort. What about local medics with records? What about medical kerb-crawlers? Maybe there is one who is a client in thrall to Sacha. Moxie gets up and writes Codrescu on the flipchart.

“We can’t find McAdoo. Ghent’s phone won’t ring. Codrescu’s our best lead. We need to find out what property he has on his books. Paul, we’re going to have to bring him in and sweat him.”
“But Sacha would get to know. Too risky.”

“Look - if we’re no closer on Friday - promise me you’ll change your mind.”

“If we have to bring him in, we’ll be out of shots. It won’t work. He won’t confess. He’ll have Lines or Truslove in to represent him. All delay and denial. Then as soon as he’s out of here, he’ll text Sacha to say he’s rumbled. This is like having a precious thing dropped down a drain, resting on a ledge. Try to touch it and it’ll be gone for ever.”

And it’s driving me mad. A waking nightmare.

“What is Codrescu’s motive? He must be a multi-millionaire! Why risk involvement in this enterprise which is chickenfeed in comparison? Maybe we’ve got this all wrong.” She throws the felt-tip pen on the floor and goes to the window.

“But Gemma, you’re judging him with *your* mind. Maybe he does it simply because he can. A sideline. A new departure. Perhaps he has a taste for young Slav women.”

“Would he descend into Earlstone town centre to get laid?”

“Perhaps Sacha operates a delivery service too.”

I go to the window and look down at the cinema. I tell her that I’m so desperate I’d even considered the old Classic or The Holycroft as Sacha’s new hideout. We look out together over the square skyline of the town. The sun is refusing to come out. Hold on! Is there a tale we can tell Codrescu about Sacha - totally unconnected with the girls - which he might believe, so that he’d tell us how to get in touch with him?

“What about this, Gemma? We tell Codrescu we’ve heard about the discrimination Sacha suffered from Harry - and we want to prosecute. We need to contact him for a statement. We know through a casual chat with Truslove at the golf club that Codrescu was kind enough to act on the foreign gentleman’s behalf. Earlstone Police have a zero-tolerance policy of racism.....and Harry’s been cautioned over it before, over the gypsies.....”

She is underwhelmed. She shrugs. She says it’s a bit thin. I turn away and sit down heavily in my chair.

“Gemma. I’m struggling. Perhaps this really is beyond us - I mean beyond me.”

She looks alarmed. No, she says, we’re doing all we - or anyone can.

“The girls are hostages. If it wasn’t for them we’d have Codrescu in like a shot.”

“Maybe we do need fresh eyes on it. Maybe we’re missing something obvious.”

“Well, by Friday night there will be. It’ll be out of our hands and we’ll be minor players.”

I tell her that I’ve promised to resign and she stares in disbelief. She notices the pen she threw down and crouches down to pick it up. Slowly she straightens up and her eyes shine with a new inspiration.

“Paul. We need a photo of him to show Katya! Put him in a line-up. She picks him out - *the dirty bastard who paid for me*. Then we could really sweat him! And *keep* him. No phone call, no contact.”

We jump in the car and drive to Holycroft Park, the private housing estate a quarter of a mile from the station. The gateman lets us pass when we produce our Ids. Codrescu lives in palace number 4 and Truslove in number 5. I knock on door number 4 and a maid opens up. I show her my warrant card and tell her I need to speak to the owner on an urgent matter. She goes back in and I hear first her voice then his - dark and angry. A tall dark man in a dressing robe appears and asks me what I want. I stand back so Moxie has a good view.

“Mr Truslove? Leonard Truslove?”

The stern face breaks into a smile.

“No, no. Len is in next house. My neighbour!”

I apologize and leave. I go back to the car. Moxie has taken a few photos. We drive to her house and find Katya watching something inane with Rosa on TV. She looks at the camera but she is not sure about Codrescu’s face. He may have been customer.

“I don’t give a shit” says Moxie as we drive back. “If he’s innocent, he’ll get over it. We have to do this, Paul. Friday morning at the latest.”

The phone goes off in my pocket. *Here* - I shout – *pocket your side!* She wrenches it out and presses *accept*. She listens without speaking - I hold my breath - she slumps back in the seat and tells the caller that Mr Ghent is no longer available on this number and rings off.

“Maybe God is laughing at us, Paul.”

“I thought you were a god-fearing girl, Gemma.”

To my amazement she begins to weep and I pull in. Andy, she tells me, is not coming back. I can’t help it. I tell her that he must be effing mad.

“And don’t you take that as a back-handed compliment. It’s true.”

“No, he’s ill. I’ll wait till he’s better. His mother rang - he couldn’t bear to. She said his dad had the same problem - only worse.”

Her voice trails away and she stares through the windscreen. I ask her if she would mind me giving her a hug. I do not wait for her permission. I hold her close and pat her on the back as if I’m winding little Debbie. Sandra would understand. Sandra wouldn’t mind.

“His dad committed suicide when Andy was twelve. He lay down on the railway. So I don’t want to put pressure on him too much. Two is enough.”

I ask what his surname was.

“Barnes. Why?”

“I just wondered. There have been quite a few suicides on the Common Lane. I just thought I might remember it. I don’t. Come on. Let’s go back for a cup of my horrible coffee.”

Gemma feels better. She has had a good idea. She wants to speak to Harry the bouncer. Her search of the Wrights has produced nothing. Hadn’t I told her that Harry’s daughter had been bullied by Zoe? *Had I?* I couldn’t remember.

“Maybe she could give us a list of her close friends. If Zoe’s back after a long absence, wouldn’t she be likely to look them up? We’ve been concentrating on the men in all this. It’s got to be worth trying the women!”

We separate in the car park. I’m on my way to Earlstone College - once Upper School - on a similar errand. There must be someone there who remembers our Zoe from the nineteen nineties.

She was bad news and staff will have suffered from a bad dose of her. The school lies high up along Sowerbutts Lane looking down on the woods. It is the closest that most of its pupils will come to affluence. In my uniformed days I had been here once, it being the policy of the then headmaster to summon the police should there be a fight. This policy had quickly persuaded his thugs to settle their grievances off site.

I ask to see the present incumbent, a Mr Rofe, and he remembers Zoe. His wife had been a magistrate until illness had forced her to retire. He - or his staff - had frequently written court reports on Zoe's behalf. When I tell him that she is back in town his reaction is not wild excitement.

"She was a sad case, though, Zoe. Very bright, but driven by some internal - I don't know - *demon* almost. If there was trouble to be gotten into, Zoe would be there or thereabouts. I had to expel her in the end. Some of the staff bought me wine. Her elder sister was an angel and no-one could understand why Zoe was so different."

I tell him I need to find her and speak to her about an urgent matter; I need to find out who her friends are. He lifts the phone.

I find myself in a tiny office with a Mrs Grewcock, a grey slender lady in sober dress. I have a feeling, having been a pupil there myself, that she taught History in a younger existence. She turns out to have been Zoe's Head of Year in the nineties and has arrived with an armful of record books, meticulously tagged with colourful markers. She wonders aloud whether these come under Data Protection and even whether she should have kept them. Then she winks. At Christmas she's retiring anyway.

"Poor Zoe was often in my office in those days. Staff hated her, but they never saw her in tears like I did. She always left the room promising to try to be good, but the least provocation, the least temptation and she would be back in here again. She was a very troubled and very troubling girl. You could never believe what she said. One day a colleague came to me and asked if I was aware that Zoe's aunt had died in the night and that she'd been at her bedside till three. I phoned the father and he told me she didn't have an auntie any more. He was at his wits' end with her. One day she told me she'd been abused by him in her infancy. I didn't give it any credit but I was duty-bound to report it. He was hauled in for interview by the police and in the meantime, at fifteen, she had been expelled for attacking another girl with a hockey stick. It was a terrible tragedy. The poor father walked down that lane down over there by the woods and just lay across the railway line. Zoe went completely off the rails after that - no pun intended - drinking, shoplifting, fighting - ended up in a Youth Offender Institution after stabbing a girl in the face with a steel comb."

I tell her I remember the incident - the victim had almost lost an eye. I ask who Zoe's close friends at the school had been. She replies that she hadn't been popular - only in so far as she had false allies egging her on. She flicks through her record books and then reaches for a folder labelled **Incident Forms**. Notes are stapled to the pages and she opens them out and reads. Her eyes widen.

"Of course! How could I forget? Little Louise! Louise Reynolds. They were a double-act. Little and Little somebody called them. She had a baby on her kitchen floor when she was fifteen - she didn't even know she was expecting! Last we saw of her. Her lad will be thirteen or fourteen now. I shall *just* miss him coming here, the little darling!"

I ask her if she might have any idea where Louise lives. She thinks somewhere in Fairleigh.

"Zoe came from Eskdale High and Louise came to us from Fairleigh High. We called the Fairleigh High girls the Angels, because most of them were. These days the joke's changed a bit.

Drugs are being pushed there, you see. Is Zoe in trouble again?"

"I can't say. You've been a brilliant help - but there's one thing bothering me. You say Zoe was fifteen when her dad committed suicide. Did she go into care? What happened?"

"They tried to trace the mother, but she'd remarried miles away and wanted nothing to do with her. But Zoe would never have gone to her - she used to tell me how much they hated each other. She said the mother refused to believe she was her daughter. She was a totally mixed up kid. Zoe was only a few months away from doing as she pleased and Social Services turned a blind eye. She just vanished off the radar as far as I know. I had to give up being Head of Year a while back. I just felt overwhelmed by the kids' troubles and took it all home with me. What some of them go through is just dire.....I shan't be sorry to leave."

We feel the same way. This is a good woman giving up the fight. Her records show how conscientious she is. The job has hollowed out her eyes and aged her. I wonder how many hours she had spent on the phone or face to face in her office trying to unravel the unravellable and comforting the distraught and pacifying the indignant. We coppers pick up the pieces she cannot put together. The college sends its high-fliers to university and its low-fliers come crashing into the town centre to populate the grim estates and high-rises, and the poky flats above its clapped out businesses, charity shops, pound shops and cafes.

The woods are just on the turn and beautiful in the low rays of the sun. I wish I could be walking there today. I think of Iryna. I climb back into my car and drive to Fairleigh High School. I reckon Louise Reynolds's surprise-package son should be a pupil there. It's nearly lunchtime and the secretary, most officious, refuses to give me the Reynold's address, but lets slip that his name is Ryan. I ask to see the Head and am told that she is busy with a parent. I can take a seat in reception. A tiny boy is sitting on a chair looking glum. I guess that he is a naughty boy, and that if he is, he should know other naughty boys. I ask him when it's all quiet if he knows Ryan Reynolds. He does. He *is* Ryan Reynolds.

"My mam's in there with *her* now."

"You getting a merit mark, then?"

He smirks. No, *she's* sending him home.

I wait in the car park chomping a pastie I have bought in the school canteen from the cheery roly-poly cook who'd said she really ought not sell it to me, until I'd showed her my Id and ordered her to - which made her laugh. First a trickle and then a stream of pupils emerges after the bell goes. Amongst them I spot Ryan and his mother, who is short, very fat and very furious. I wait until they are outside the gates and walking down the hill. I catch them up and stop. I walk around to confront them and Ryan smirks. When I tell them who I am the smirk vanishes. I ask her if she is Louise Reynolds and offer them a lift. She demands to know what extra trouble the *little bastard* is in now. I realize his chances of deliverance from the influence of such a mother are remote, and that he will, in turn, bring her more and more grief. A feedback equation. I shake my head and tell her it's a routine enquiry which has nothing to do with Ryan. They get in.

As we drive to the address she has given me, in a road in the least salubrious area on the edge of this chocolate-box village, I wonder what story to spin. We climb a staircase to a first floor flat above a chippy in a parade of shops near a boarded-up pub, The Woodville Arms, which is still absurdly advertising a curry night and a two-course Sunday lunch for £5-99. Another board declares what a good business opportunity it is. It stands behind a low chain fence skirted by a large car park, not immediately overlooked. It is yet another candidate for a brothel, I tell myself wearily.

“I had no idea The Woodie had closed, Louise.”

She hands me a mug of tea and shouts to Ryan to turn his effin music down. She tells me the boards had gone up the other week.

“The recession. And it’s a shithole. All sorts of scumbags went in there. Biscuit?”

I decline and put the mug down. What to say? Zoe has absolutely no idea that she is suspected of running a brothel. If it gets back to her, through Louise, that the police want a word with her, it would be wise to make the enquiry seem as innocent and routine as possible. I come to the point, watching carefully for signs of fake surprise.

“Remember Zoe Wright-Gooding, Louise?”

Her rotund face is genuinely astonished

“Zoe?? Yeah! But you mean Zoe Wright. She hated the Gooding bit. Reminded her of her mam and goodie-goodie. And her snooty sister. What about her?”

“Little bird told me she’s back in town. Just want a word with her to catch up on her news, that’s all. Wondering why she’s come home. You seen her?”

“No. Who gave you my name?”

“A friend you have in common. She had no idea where Zoe might be but thought you might have. You were a good friend at school. Thought Zoe might look you up. If you tell me where she is, she won’t be in trouble. It’s just routine.”

She says she hasn’t seen her since she was fifteen.

“As soon as I had buggerlugs there, my teenage was over. Never knew her after that. *Is* she in trouble?”

“No way. I just like to keep our town nice and safe, for all our sakes. Defensive policing, we call it. Any idea where she might be staying?”

She says no, and I believe her. She is an honest person. I look out of the window again. Below is a group of pretty schoolgirls eating chips, encircled by two or three boys on bikes. I look again at the estate pub built in sickly yellow brick. There is no white van on the car park. I can just remember The Woodie being completed. The off-licence part, long since absorbed into the main body, used to be our gathering point when we were teenagers. I tell Louise it’s sad to see it shut.

“Sign of the times? I used to get bottles of nut brown from the off. I was only fifteen but I was taller than the rest, see. The gang sent me in.”

“You, a copper? What a bad example. Don’t let *him* hear you say that!”

He was too surrounded by his noise to hear anything. I tell her I was no angel. I ask what Ryan had done to be sent home.

“Called the ICT teacher a nigger. But he’s Asian! Don’t know where he gets it from. I ain’t racist. He’s got to write an apology and take it in tomorrow. I’m grounding him for a week.”

“Dad not on the scene?”

She emits a short snigger, bitter and sardonic. He was in prison the last she heard.

“*He*’ll finish up the same. Takes after him, looks like him. Little ferret. I was only fifteen. Didn’t think you got pregnant if you were a virgin. Shit for brains, me. When *he*’s gone, I’ll start to live again. Promised mysen.”

She had dolled herself up to go into the school. I feel sorry for her arms, wobbly before their time, her double chin and her big rump. She is two or more years younger than Sandra, but looks nearer forty. She has the heavy face of a woman who cannot sleep, sagging with years which have brought no respite from a narrow life. Looking away from her as she stares into the dreams she has promised herself, I survey the scene below. The girls and boys have gone back for afternoon school, leaving their chip papers to pirouette on the paving stones. The yellow brick of

the houses puts me in mind of jaundice. I watch a fat woman struggle painfully uphill with her shopping. The car mechanic in the garage opposite throws away a fag end and goes back in. A man waits for his dog to finish crapping before kneeling down to bag it up. A sullen young woman with a failed blonde hair dye enters the launderette below. Who would be amazed if one day a general lament went up across the rooftops from residents who have as much choice and freedom as the rain clouds now being driven in from the west? The image of the railway line near the Common displaces the estate. A mere stile is the gateway to instant oblivion. Shouldn't we be scraping bloody bits of people from the sleepers and shale every day of the week? Perhaps I'm wrong. Perhaps they're content - or as content as they can expect to be. I can remember Wright-Gooding's suicide. Messy. Had he lain down in despair or guilt? Surely despair. Poor bugger.

"I'd appreciate it, Louise, if you can give me any idea where Zoe might be. Here's my card. Something's cropped up she might have an interest in. Give me a ring if you remember anything."

I leave it at that. As I go, I look in on Ryan and smile. I tell him to be a good lad to his mam. His eyes are stones. They say he will soon be one of ours.

I walk around The Woodville Arms. The upstairs windows are not boarded up. A woman's face is looking down at me and she motions me away. I stand my ground. The window opens. The face is bespectacled and ugly but it is not Auntie's. It tells me the pub is shut - *am I blind?* - and I am *trespassing*. I ask her, if it's shut, what she is doing there. She asks what business it is of mine, and I tell her. She explains that she and her partner are moving out soon. I tell her I want to have a look round. If I'm so curious, she says, there is a gate in the fence. I go to it and hear the latch lift and a key turn. The back lawn is overgrown and benches seem to be sinking into it. A parasol, blown inside-out, has lost its fabric and puts me in mind of a huge dead spider. The ugly woman stinks of sherry.

"I want to ask you a few questions. I shan't be long."

I follow her in. Her slippers slop about, not properly on her yellow feet. She turns on the light and the lounge awakens, almost in hope. She lights a cigarette and says it's not against the law.

"It's a public house - but not a public place *anymore*." She belches politely.

Here I had spent many evenings in my teenage. Many times you couldn't get a seat. Now there are plenty to be had. I ask her if she's alone and she says her partner is asleep upstairs. Do they have any - or would they have paying guests? She wrinkles her face in surprise.

"Do you know a relief manager by the name of Jock McAdoo?"

"Never hear of him. Only been here seven months. Relief? We never had a day off. It'll be a bloody relief when we're out of here. Waste of time. Waste of money. Waste of effort."

I place my card on the bar with the plea to contact me if anyone wants room there, and go. She turns out the lights and leaves the card where it is.

Gemma has had much more luck. That eager gleam in her eye which had vanished in the car as she answered Ghent's phone, and which had been missing for such a long time, was back.

"We might have a breakthrough, Paul."

"Harry?"

She nods. But it is not the name of a friend of Zoe's she has been given. It is a total surprise.

"He said he's joining the street pastors. He's a lovely man and he really wanted to help but couldn't, so I'd given up and was about to go. I just turned at the door and asked him if he knew

McAdoo. Jock McAdoo, he says - he was the bloke in charge of The King George the night Harry turned Sacha away. Bates had the night off.”

“But Mollie said Bates wouldn’t touch him.”

“Well she was wrong - or he changed his mind. That explains why Sacha and Zoe were so upset. They obviously had some business to discuss with Jock.”

It is not a pretty sight - Clive Bates in nothing but a short Tigers shirt over his beer belly, with the beginnings of an erection, like a white slug with a smile. He grabs his boxer shorts and his bedfellow covers her porcine body with a pillow. Moxie is unfazed. Only now does Bates begin to shout and swear. I close the door and avoid Gemma’s smirking gaze. I open the door an inch and tell him to get dressed - he’s coming with us.

“What the fuck for?”

“Jock McAdoo. We’ll wait downstairs.”

My gorgeous Goth, Andrea, cannot conceal her utter delight. She had told us her boss was with *someone* and had given orders not to be disturbed all afternoon. She had held up the glass she was polishing and winked through it. She might as well have told us to go straight up. When Bates descends, he gives her an angry glare and she turns away to serve a customer.

“I’m sorry I was forced to overrule your barmaid, Clive. She tried her best to stop us. This is really urgent.”

Andrea manages to look so virtuous and angelic that her Gothiness is utterly destroyed.

Bates assures us, Bates swears on his mother’s grave that he is not involved with any prostitution. The woman in his bed was his brother’s partner. He is on his way to Elland Road to see Leicester City play Leeds United.

“We have an on, off relationship. I do her a favour, really. He can’t get it up so well and I take pity on her once in a while. He’s a season ticket holder. She told me last Christmas. About his problem, I mean.”

“You are the soul of generosity Clive. Shagging her must be a labour of Hercules.”

Has Moxie really said this? Bates stares at her in incomprehension. Is it a compliment or is she taking the piss? If I was not so knackered and bothered, I might let the vaudeville carry on a little longer. I intervene.

“No, Clive. You’ve got the wrong end of the stick. I wasn’t saying *you* were involved with prostitutes. I’m saying that we have reason to suspect that your colleague McAdoo might be able to assist us in such enquiries.”

He sits back. His Tigers shirt rides up revealing his belly flap. He tells us that McAdoo is not his colleague, only his relief. Moxie now produces her ace of trumps - literally - and astonishes me into the bargain. She takes something from her pocket and in the palm of her hand slides it across the table, only turning it over at the last second. It is a mock-up of the ace of hearts and in the centre a pouting young blonde, fondling her invisible but conceivable nether self, is staring out with an expression that is not saying let’s have a cup of hot chocolate and an early night. At the bottom is a phone number. I am amazed. It is Sacha’s number. The number on Ghent’s phone. Before I can ask her where the hell she had gotten the card, she is standing over a bemused Bates and slapping more of those cards down like a croupier, until there is nearly a clock patience set of them.

“You are involved, Bates” she says quietly. Had she screamed he might have withdrawn into his shell.

“One of your barmaids gave them to me this lunchtime when I went in. She’d been collecting them from under the beer mats.”

“Which one? Andrea?”

I cannot help it. The question and his nasty, obese, stupid face and have enraged me. I stand up and put my palms flat on the desk to stare into it.

“Which one? Why? Are you going to go back and give her the sack like you did Harry, you fat piece of doo-doo?”

He almost falls off his chair. Moxie stands in front of me and whispers to me to take five. I leave.

I tell Wills to summon Shirley Evans to go in. I walk past the Chief’s office and through a crack in the door see him rearranging his orchids. I walk all the way up the stairs and then back down them, breathing deeply. When I re-enter the room Bates has his head in his chest and Gemma is organizing her paperwork. Shirley Evans is standing by at the tape machine.

*

“You in trouble, Paul?”

I look up and see Sandra’s anxious face. I tell her no - and manage to look quizzical.

“You just sit there staring at nothing, or your nails. Hardly a peep out of you since you came home. And what was all that about yesterday? Ranting and raving about your poxy old golf clubs? And you’ve hardly touched your take-away.”

I push the tray to one side.

“And you’re drinking. You promised me never to bring it home. The children know there’s something up.”

“I’m really sorry, sweetheart. I’m not in any trouble. We have a situation. People are depending on me and Gemma Moxon to sort it. And we’re *this* close.”

I hold out my forefinger and thumb. I register they are shaking. She gets closer and asks me if I want to talk about it, if I can talk about it. I consider. I tell her only that young lives might be at stake. And I need to sleep. She tells me to sleep in the spare room. I agree.

“Just till the weekend, Sandra. Then it’ll be back to normal. If I blow this, it will be my career. Just a slow decline into retirement. Side-lined and whispered about behind hands. Just fetch me one more whiskey and I’ll go to bed.”

To stand any chance of sleeping, I need to extinguish the traumatic scene I have in my mind. I decide that re-running it from start to finish might do the trick, but like a tune you have to erase - an ear-worm as Moxie once called it - before it drives you insane, it seems to be on a loop. As soon as it stops, it starts again. Excess alcohol consumption is supposed to provoke such mental torture. I push the glass of whiskey that Sandra has placed on the occasional table away. But the gleam of the fire it has imprisoned invites me, like a genie, to sip at it again. I close my eyes and watch Moxie who has begun to pace the floor as Bates drones on about having no idea that anyone was putting those cards under the beer mats. And neither has he any idea *when* the cards appeared. Moxie stops and snaps *Wednesday night*. He takes no notice of this but mutters how *disgusted* he is that his staff, instead of giving him the cards, have shown them to a *woman policeman*. I flinch immediately at this idiotic and disparaging description of Moxie. There is no need to look at her to gauge her reaction. I see Shirley’s eyes engage with the ceiling. Silence. Bates is insensitive and foolish enough to take this pause as a sign that his stock is rising and begins to assert his authority. *Failing to report soliciting in his licensed premises? It would have*

to be a disciplinary matter! Is Bates trying to create a fog to obscure his own guilt? Before I can open my mouth, Moxie has almost grabbed hold of him.

“You will NOT sack or reprimand anyone over this! You should be vigilant in your own premises - that is a condition of your being granted a licence! How *can* you be - if you’re upstairs having it off with your brother’s partner? Do you want that to come out? Because it will! I’ll be at the magistrate’s to object to you as an unfit and improper person to be a licensee! Not as a *woman policeman* but as just a member of the public!”

She waits a second and then, her face in his face, demands McAdoo’s telephone number. He denies that he has it. Moxie declares him to be a liar. How had he arranged for the man to come in and sub for him that Friday night? Bates replies that he’d called in three nights beforehand.

“I knew him from his Fairleigh Arms days. My brother always goes out Friday nights. I thought Maisie - his bird - would appreciate an extra sesh, so I took McAdoo up on it.”

“Sesh?”

“*Sess-ion.*” He says this with so much contempt, as if questioning Moxie’s command of English, that she cannot stop herself picking up a cup of cold tea and pitching it just over his low bald head and against the wall. A little tea trickles down his forehead and drips off his nose. A lot of tea dribbles down the wall. Apart from the tea, the action freezes itself for a minute. Moxie unfreezes it by grabbing the door and storming out. I tell the tape machine the time, and that DS Moxon has left the room and that the interview is suspended. Revived, Bates appeals to Shirley and me. *Assault! Abuse! Harassment and intimidation!* Shirley takes no notice, much more concerned with picking up all the green pieces of the municipal cup which she throws into the municipal green bin. She wipes Bates’s head with a wad of green municipal paper towels and restores the yellowy-green sheen on the wall to her satisfaction. She nods vigorously when I deplore DS Moxon’s clumsiness in knocking a cup onto the floor. I inform Bates that the tape would only reveal the sound of a smashing cup. Nothing untoward has happened. Bates insists that he can be of no help whatsoever with McAdoo. He shows me the directory on his mobile. No Jock. No McAdoo. In the end I feel so demoralised that I just let him get up and leave. In the empty room I look at the pouting faces on the calling cards speckled with tea. I feel desperately sorry for Moxie, for myself and finally for the girls. Another dead end after a promising beginning. I turn on Ghent’s phone in the empty interview room. Nothing. We have nothing. I wait for Moxie to slouch back in and apologize. I have a little speech prepared. But I do not give it. I half expect her to be waiting in the Grand Union for me. It’s my turn to buy, but my money remains in my pocket. She’s not there.

I toss back the whiskey and climb the stairs. The interview scene begins again in bed but I do not witness the end. I sort of sleep. I wake at five to see Andrea furiously rubbing at the splash on Bates’s bar. Now Batesy is climbing into his underpants and getting one stubby foot caught in the crotch. He falls. Moxie is grinning around the angle of the door. Next it is Iryna’s turn. She stares out through the bent grasses and bracken; a beetle crawls out of her nostril. I screw my eyes shut and turn over.

To search the woods is my natural instinct. To search the woods would be a mistake. How could a police search go unreported? I turn back onto my right side in the dark and it is then that I have, by a somersault of logic, my brainwave. I am so excited that I can stay in bed no longer. I creep downstairs and make a brew. In the bin, the aluminium tray of Chinese food I had not eaten explains why I am so hungry. It is not yet going up for six but I decide to celebrate with a huge breakfast. Two eggs, bacon, tomatoes, beans, mushrooms, fried bread and sausages! Afterwards,

at six, I am so full and content and exhausted that I get onto the sofa and sleep soundly for nearly two more hours, waking with our cat rising and falling on my stomach like a black buoy at sea. My new idea springs to mind. I test it out for the stupidity that half-baked ideas conceived in the middle of the night should have, but it passes as clever with flying colours. I get up and in twenty minutes I am ready and on my way out, leaving Sandra on the doorstep bemused in her dressing gown.

Wednesday

“Did you believe Bates knows nothing about what’s going on? Really doesn’t have McAdoo’s phone number??”

I have found Moxie in my chair waiting for me. She looks so pale it crosses my mind she might have been there all night. She is staring at me oddly, maybe looking for signs of reproof. I tell her that Bates is just an idiot, a bit player; that I believe him.

“He’s into Maisie, Gemma. That’s what makes him tick. I *did* threaten him. He’s either involved and so scared of Sasha that he’s prepared to endure his brother’s fury - and his own partner’s if he has one - and the loss of his licence *OR* he’s nothing to do with it and telling the truth. I dunno. What do I know? Sod all.”

“And what’s he going to do about...*me*? I assaulted him.”

“Nothing Gemma. It’s all sorted.”

“And what are *you* going to do about me?”

“I’m angry. You beat me to it.”

I go to the window. The Holycroft Inn and the cinema have not altered. There is no sign of activity within or without. The Leicester bus waits at the lights, impatient to be on its way. Gemma is at my elbow, looking up at me. I put my arm around her shoulder and hold her close. She shudders with sorrow and sobs that she’s sorry. I am speechless. She breaks free and dabs at her eyes and nose. What can I say? I offer to make her my most appalling cup of coffee ever and she smiles through her tears like a sunbeam breaking into a rainy day. I can hardly bear to look at her. Shirley is at the door. The Chief wants to see me. I tell her to go back and tell him I’ve popped downstairs.

“He’s really on edge, Sir. I wouldn’t leave it too long. His door’s tight shut this morning.”

“Tell him ten minutes.”

I need to put my plan to Gemma before I take it to him.

“Think. Why hasn’t Sacha sent Ghent a message? How many possible explanations can there be? One, he’s aware it’s a trap because Ghent has let him know it’s a trap. Two, he’s given up the game and the girls are on their way back to the Ukraine in a mini-bus. Three, he’s biding his time before he opens up shop again.”

“But that might be next week or later! Craddock would get all the glory after we’ve done all the work.”

“I know. But it ain’t gonna happen! Sacha is ultra-cautious, right?”

“I wouldn’t call setting up a brothel in the middle of the town exactly cautious.”

“No, Gemma. It was the perfect place. No-one lives there, goes there, no-one bothers. But hear me out - I want to make sure I’m thinking straight before I go and see *Him*. Let’s assume number three, he is being ultra-cautious. What might persuade him he’s in the clear? So far he must be confused. His girl escapes but he hears nothing on the news. He can’t believe the police are in the dark so he deduces we are waiting for him to make the first move. How would he give his

position away? The only way would be to call his clients. So he doesn't. He looks at all the messages he's getting. BUSINESS? Which one - out of ten or twenty-odd - might be a trap? So he texts none of them. He'll bide his time - weeks if necessary - until he gets some sign he's safe. We have to give him that sign. We have to convince him that we're barking up the wrong tree - not only the wrong tree - but we're in the wrong woods! We need to raid somewhere so far from the bulls-eye that he thinks we're too stupid to ever get close to him. And make it look as if we're after completely the wrong gang"

In the corridor I pause. I take Ghent's phone and text BUSINESS? I add a second question mark and press to send. Gemma has turned to see why I have stopped. I catch her up. We look at the tightly shut door and Gemma knocks.

"A cod raid?"

"We really need this, Sir. Three squad cars, the helicopter and two meat wagons. Just for half-an-hour."

He folds his arms and looks worried. Is he doing a calculation? Gemma is behind me and I sense her uneasiness.

"All those resources? All for a cod raid? Out of the question."

He seems more pleased with this turn of phrase than anything else. I reckon if he says "cod" once more Gemma will storm out or scream at him.

"Why not just release it to the media that we've done one? If this man, Saxon -"

"Sacha" growls Gemma.

"- Sacha, if he's not in the town centre - as we assume he's not - then he'd be none the wiser."

"Sir. I want to bring everything to a halt. I want everybody talking about it. I want it on local radio, in the Gazette, the Naunton Wotsit, the Mercury, the Evening Telegraph...I want to convince him he's so far off our radar that he'll laugh out loud. This, for the sake of those frightened girls, miles and miles from home. You gave me till Friday. I need this to flush him out."

"No. absolutely not, DI Box. Is this the best idea you have? A *cod* raid?"

Gemma has gone. I follow. I sit at my desk but can put my mind to nothing. My bright idea is a joke. Is there any line I can now pull or recast to tempt a fish to bite? The pool is stagnant and covered with algae. Moxie and Boxie? I get up to go back and tell *Him* that I wish to be taken off the case. But Iryna is staring at me again through the bracken and Katya is wrapped in her blanket. Harry's original pastel of Sasha cellotaped to the wall seems to have acquired a slight grin. I jam the kettle plug into the socket as if it's that cruel mouth. I'll have a really nasty coffee and *then* go and see him. Gemma comes in smiling.

"I've dug out a letter a neighbour sent to us about The Fairleigh Arms. Says there were prostitutes upstairs. McAdoo is definitely our man. There must be a way to find out where he is. We could try the hotels and all the estate agents. I'll get on to it. I'll get Carl to help me. Best get started this morning so we can get ready for the raid."

"What?"

"He's changed his mind."

I rush over, pick her up and twirl her round like an ice dancer.

"How did you manage that?"

"Told him what a triumph it will be for the force. And him. Told him we might even nick Mr Big. "

“Is that all?”

“Well, maybe it helped a little the way I stood right close to him and admired his orchids....”

Mr William Croxall-Booth, I had been informed by his housekeeper, was abroad. She had no idea where the keys to his factory might be - and even if she did have, she could not possibly let me have them without her employer's *express* permission. I was secretly delighted as I sighed with disappointment. Because the battering rams have just done a great job on the door of the ex-snooker room and the clatter of the helicopter has brought the town centre to a standstill. A police car has stopped the traffic around the corner and there is quite a crowd gathering as the officers - who have no idea it is a sham - sorry - a *cod* raid - go charging up the stairs screaming. They have been briefed that the factory is stuffed with illegal immigrants and therefore needed no further encouragement. Somebody close asks me what's going on and I tell them. I reckon that within two minutes the immigrant story will be in *The Dead Ferret* and not long afterwards all over the town. I stroll into the premises and climb the stairs. I pass disappointed officers coming back down. I tell one to push the crowd back and let it be known that it's a false alarm - the place is empty. Gemma is not present. To humour the Chief further, she had volunteered to take over a stalled investigation into forged bank notes in the absence of a poorly colleague. As the crowd disperses and the town resumes normal service, I drive back to wait at my desk for the phone to ring. I e-mail an official statement to all local editors and check Ghent's phone but there is no reply. I make coffee and sit back. The desk phone finally rings and a reporter from Radio Watling is put through. Trying to sound red-faced on the phone proves to be quite easy. I confess that we were a little embarrassed at Croxall's.

“We had a tip-off from a Ukrainian source that the factory was being used as a depot and distribution centre for illegal workers in the run-up to Christmas.”

“And?”

“We found two mattresses and evidence of food being prepared - but no sign of recent activity. Our enquiries are ongoing.”

“Two mattresses? Perhaps some derelicts had broken in?”

“Maybe.”

“Or the Croxall ghost fancied a lie-down.”

I reprimand the young cub for being flippant and stress how serious a matter illegal immigration is.

“Aren't you worried about illegals coming over and taking our jobs? You might lose yours to one.”

He asks me eagerly if he can quote me on that and I tell him to please himself. He asks me if I mind having egg on my face.

“*You* might call it egg, young man. We had a tip-off and were bound to act on it. Good afternoon.”

A warmth spreads through me like the glow after brandy. Such reports would surely be the syrup of figs needed to get things in motion. I decide to tie up a few loose ends. McAdoo has proven to have a criminal record - but it is only for the fraudulent use of an out-of-date tax disk in the eighties. Sneaky man. I think again of *The Woodville Arms*. If McAdoo had had plenty of work as a relief manager, then he would have had the opportunity to copy keys. But how many derelict pubs are there within a thirty mile circle of Earlstone? In one of them the girls must be imprisoned. Or maybe in one of Codrescu's properties. But would he really want to risk his empire for - by his standards - such paltry rewards?

Copying keys.....I have a hunch. I phone FSS in Atherstone, Croxall-Booth's security firm. I am DI Box of Earlstone Police. Had one John or Jock McAdoo ever worked for them? A pause. The secretary hesitates and I tell her that it is vitally important she tells me the truth. She confirms that a man called Jock had been an employee. Until May or June. She tells me to hang on.....I wait.....She returns and says how very sorry she is but there is no address and no contact number on file. I hear God chuckling again. Despondently, I walk down to the canteen for a sandwich and notice eyes avoiding mine. If the silence could speak, it would shout *what a cock-up!* Radio Watling has probably been scathing about us, about me. I try to rejoice in my humiliation. Back in my office I decide to phone little Louise in Fairleigh. She tells me she has asked a few friends about Zoe but nobody has seen her. She agrees to keep her eye on The Woodie for signs of life.

"You don't reckon there are asylum seekers there as well, do you? I heard it on the radio. Keith and Cheryl cleared out this morning, so there'll be people parking on there for the shops and the chippie. She used to shoo 'em off and threaten to have 'em clamped. Nasty woman."

"Was Keith the landlord? Listen, did you ever get served in there by a bloke called Jock?"

"There was a Scotsman one time. Smart fellow. Fancied his chance. But not with me. As for Zoe, she'd never look me up, even if she knew where I lived. We fell out. Over the lad that knocked me up. Weasely little git. Must have had shit for brains. Ryan's suspended. Went in this morning and beat up a Year 7."

"So he's grounded good and proper then?"

"No way. He's out somewhere. Don't want him anywhere near me. I'll keep my eye on the pub for foreigners. Give me summat to do. Ryan? I can't look at him without seeing his dad."

Like undertakers, we will never be short of work.

Gemma is back from interviewing the young woman about the six forged twenties she'd passed in the supermarket. She thinks she must be losing her touch though. No change in her story - she had no idea of the name of the man who had sold them to her in a Leicester pub for sixty good quid.

"Heard the report on the radio. Mentioned the Keystone Kops. I wish I'd been there. Have you been to see *Him*?"

"No. He's at a function. Come on. There's no point hanging about here. Fancy an aperitif? My round."

*

"All men are potential paedophiles, Paul."

I'm so shocked I miss my mouth and the beer goes down my tie. We'd been discussing a report on the front page, of a headmaster suspended for having images of children on his computer.

"When I was ten or eleven I began to notice a strange light in men's eyes. Even my dad's. Most suppress the impulse to exploit, a few can't."

I tell her she's wrong - that she's confusing men's admiration of beauty in a young girl with the sexual urge to possess.

"You think you can read men's minds behind their strange eyes? What if it's guilt or anxiety - that their interest might be misread if they stare too long or too honestly? *That's* why they look furtive. If I admire a lovely rosebud, it doesn't mean I'm impelled to pluck it! I wouldn't dream

of it. You're wrong, Gem."

She centres her glass on her beer mat but doesn't look up.

"I see how you stare at me sometimes, Paul. It's the same way. When you think I'm unaware." Her growly Yorkshire candour again. I tell her - for heaven's sake! - that I have to look at her *sometimes*.

"Why does it make you uncomfortable to be told such things?" she asks. "I saw how you looked at Katya as well."

She continues to play with her long fingers around the edge of the beer mat and I wonder with a hot tingle in my cheeks whether she *wants* me to watch them. As matter-of-factly as I can, I tell her that it must be wonderful to be admired for one's beauty.

"Pretty girls like you and Katya must get used to the idea they attract attention. And you in particular. If I tried to imagine what a beautiful child you must have been, would that be that sinister?" I laugh stupidly as much older people often do, I have noticed, when they have ventured to declare something out of context. "You must have been a delight, Gemma!"

She shakes her head and straightens out her fingers as if to say stop, you've gone too far. I apologize. My cheeks are glowing. I seek to alter direction.

"Katya is a lovely teenager - but I would no more be tempted to lie with her than...."

"Than what?"

"I dunno. Let's change the subject. "

She looks at me directly....those eyes.....that slight drop of the bottom lip.....I study my glass stupidly, completely at the mercy of her stare.

"You know I know you admire me, don't you? And you know I admire you, Paul."

"I'm delighted you do - we do admire each other! We're a team. Moxie and Boxie. Come on, we're getting too heavy. Alright?"

"Alright."

All that evening I keep reminding myself that I know most of Sandra's secrets. If I knew Gemma's, then my fascination would fade. But I keep seeing her profile and her fingers turning the beer mat, and I must erase the image. It is imperative I sleep tonight, on the eve of my last-but-one day.

Thursday

It is a day like the last day of the world. It will grow dark without getting properly light. I had been dreaming as I woke that I was climbing a stile. Looking along the track, I had seen a dot growing rapidly in the distance. The rails were trembling.

I stand at my office window as purple and black clouds fight to embrace Earlstone's flat rooftops, a run of up-down, down-up steps like a giant's obstacle course. Ghent's phone lies discarded on my table. I promise myself that my last act will be to stamp on it. I have asked the Chief again to be patient - told him that the mobile phone *will* ring - as soon as Sacha persuades himself he is safe. For him to set up a new client list would be awkward and take time. He would much prefer - surely - to stick to his old recruits if he could persuade himself they were safe and reliable. Part of him must be dying to get business rolling again. I leave the Chief with the thought that greed will overcome caution, if caution can be reasoned with. I tell him to trust me, knowing well that I cannot trust myself. I phone Leonard Truslove and ask him for a big favour. Could he call on his neighbour and invite him to a round of golf?

“Today?? It’s foul! Are you serious DI Box?”

“No, sometime, any time. Mention in passing the raid.”

“Raid? What on earth are you talking about? What raid?”

Can I believe he has said that? With an even heavier heart I put him in the picture, but do not explain fully the background rationale. He sounds distinctly unimpressed, and asks how on earth - and why? - he’s supposed to drop it as a *by-the-way* into a conversation about *golf*?

“Because I want him to think I’m as useless as you believe I am. Buy today’s Mercury and show him. If Codrescu really is involved with that scheme we discussed, he might pass it on to Sacha. Your good deed for the day. You promised to help.”

He laughs a little nervously - and says he *would rather* enjoy being rude about me. He will think it over. I sense he thinks I’m one or two short of a set of marbles.

Gemma has asked how long we wait before we pull Codrescu in. We agree Friday morning, early, at five, if the Chief can be persuaded. We’ll break his bloody posh door down. I tell her to go off and plan our interrogation of him, starting with the picture of Sasha all the way through to the identity parade with Katya, and the subsequent sweating of him. I have to leave the planning to her, being unable to put my mind to anything systematic. I stare at the blank face of Ghent’s phone, urging it to light up. It remains stubbornly dark. Gemma returns at twelve with two neatly typed sheets of strategy. I will read it later. She has had a call from the forgery suspect who’s had second thoughts and wants to talk. I congratulate her on her knack and arrange to meet her in the Grand Union if she’s not back before five thirty.

Truslove phones back. Vladimir has not been in the twice he called. He is sorry, but he cannot see how he can be of further assistance in this or any *ancillary* matter. The pompous ass hangs up. I phone Louise Reynolds but get a recorded message. I think about leaving her a message but can’t think of anything worth saying. Carl Mason hangs his head around the door and shakes his head. No joy tracing McAdoo to any address. I phone Ghent and tell him his assistance will be needed in the event of a message from Sasha. I give him no chance to protest. After lunch I am summoned again to the Chief.

“Well?”

“It’s just a matter of waiting, Sir.”

“Well, you don’t have much time left. We look proper Charlies in the paper. What a blow to our reputation.”

“That was sort of the point, Sir. I want Sasha to think we couldn’t catch a one-legged mouse.”

“This your one and only ploy now? Your incompetence? No other fish to fry?”

“Just my biggest. Vladimir Codrescu. I have reason to believe he has had sex with a minor. Our girl Katya described him perfectly. I intend to raid his house tomorrow first thing. He will give me Sacha’s whereabouts in return for immunity - or a promise of it.”

“She can recall one man from heaven knows how many clients? A girl drugged to the eyeballs? How would that stand up in court? Against a half-decent barrister?”

“She’ll pick him out at a parade. Guaranteed. And it won’t come to court. He’ll do the deal - by the time we’ve finished with him.”

He is reluctant to sanction the plan. He talks about risk. I bridle.

“Risk? What about the risk to the girls? If I’m wrong - or if it misfires - I’ll be off the case anyway. Then Craddock can pick up the bits and do it his way. I have the full support of DS Moxon and the team.” Now I take a risk myself. “Simon.....I would appreciate you support too. This is crucial.”

He raises his eyebrows in surprise to hear his first name. He agrees to think it over and I thank

him. At four I curse him. He has phoned to refuse permission for a raid. Vladimir can be invited to the station to help with enquiries, but at a *godly* hour. I crash the phone onto its cradle. I remember my conversation with Truslove and phone him again. One last favour....can he check that his neighbour is back? He puts the phone down.....then returns. The house is in darkness. No-one is in, not even the maid.

The longer Sacha's silence continues, the further my confidence ebbs. If he is nowhere near, he will not have heard of the raid. If he is near but isolated - out of the loop like Truslove - then he will not have heard of it either. But there is an even worse possibility: - that he has seen straight through me. My reference to a Ukrainian source was meant to half-explain to him the Katya mystery, but only two media reports have mentioned it. I had gambled that it might just be conceivable to him that his runaway had stayed doggedly silent for a whole week - or had been too ill or traumatised to speak of her ordeal - and had eventually made up a lie to save herself from the shame of acknowledging her trade. Such were the seeds I had hoped to sow. How ludicrous my ingenuity looks now. Everything I have scattered may have fallen on stony ground; a sick parable of why it is absurd to trust in an ultimate Goodness at the heart of senseless matter. It is going up for six. Gemma is not back. My office light makes Earlstone look blue through the window. The clouds have not cleared and it is raining again. The blue window is half a mirror and I am half an image in it - a huge gloomy ghost hovering around the church spire and over Croxall's roof, an absurd saint, the patron saint of Earlstone's vulnerable and needy, the impressive projection on the twilit sky of an average man in a shabby, municipal room, a paltry wizard of Oz, almost out of spells and miracles. I will drive down to the Grand Union. It is not fit to walk. I am half way down the stairs when I remember Ghent's phone. I go back. No messages. I send BUSINESS and add a third question mark. Who knows what the right thing to do is? And then as I reach the bottom of the stairs, I am shocked to realize that I have done something I have not done since childhood. I have prayed.

*

"You need - *we* need....*we need* to keep our nerve."

"I have kept it. Just about. But we're nearly out of time. Fate has been bloody unkind. We can't keep waiting for the wind to change. Codrescu's gone away by the look of it. Coincidence? Or just our usual luck? Whatever. Suppose now we *do* go public and make Sacha's name known? Wouldn't that be likely to deter him from harming the girls, if he knows we know who he is? Wouldn't he be more likely to just abandon them and make his escape? And then, as soon as he's safe, he'd let us know - surely - where to find them."

I wait for Gemma's eyes to approve this new theory of mine, but she just stares into her glass as if it is her private crystal ball. Her silence points out the fallacy. It is the worst kind of anthropomorphism to attribute decent values to such a callous bastard - as irrational as liking the robin redbreast for being good and hating the magpie for being bad. And it is arrogant of me to pretend I can read Sacha's cold mind. *If-I-were-him* logic is not logic. I am not him. He's just as likely - or more likely - to do something astonishingly unexpected than what I would do in his place, or what I might want him to do.

I ask her lamely what she is thinking about. She replies that we just have to work with probabilities. She mentions Judy Kinder. I ask what she has to do with it.

"The locket. She suspected the drugs couple because they looked *probables*. And she was right.

You have to keep believing that it's more likely than unlikely that Sacha will feel confident and arrogant enough to start up again. It will be his big mistake. He's greedy, sitting on valuable assets earning nothing. You have to stick to your instincts with this, Paul, like Judy did."

"But I can't win! If I keep it secret and the girls die, I will appear to have dragged my feet and done nothing. Then I will be called idle and a time-server. And there will be plenty of Truslove's ilk at the golf club to nod in agreement. But if I make it all public and the girls die, I will be called dim and insensitive. A bull in a china shop. I'm ready to let Craddock and his team come over and deal with it, Gemma. Or let the Chief take the decisions. That's what he's paid for. I'm ready to admit I failed. I'm exhausted."

She swirls her cider around her glass and shakes her head.

"We're in this together, Paul. I agree with everything you've done and how you did it. We're closer than you think. I mean, he *will* call Ghent. Check the phone."

I put it on the table and look. There is nothing. I do not know how I resist the urge to hurl it at the wall.

"Pray to your God for a stroke of luck, Gem. Drink up. It's my turn. Let's get drunk and get a taxi."

"I have been praying.....Paul.....I think I'm in love with you."

My beer goes down my tie again.

"You....mustn't say.....your mustn't be - and that's an order!"

A drinker nearby looks up at me. Gemma places her hand on mine. I think of little Debbie and break away. I whisper that she is vulnerable after Andy's departure. Things look black at the moment and she is under pressure. I could never betray Sandra.

"You must see that."

"I do see that. And I don't want you to. But it doesn't alter the way I feel."

"But why tell me?"

"But why make me have to? Why have you been so blind? You pick up all the clues from the villains - but nothing from me. I can't help it. I love you. It's half the reason Andy left."

She steps down from the high stool with my empty glass and walks to the bar, just in time to join Sacha there as he walks in. My guts freeze. She stands next to him and looks up into his face. She speaks. He looks down at her, smiles and replies. I watch fascinated to see that vile, handsome man project his hologram of charm and geniality. She returns with just a bag of crisps and sits with her back to him. I watch his eyes follow her and finally fix me oddly before returning to his order at the bar.

"I read his hand. It's him."

I watch him being handed a pint of coke.

"If you go and sit in the car, I'll pick him up and you can follow. I'll tell him you're a colleague, not my boyfriend. Which is the truth."

"Absolutely not."

"I can handle myself."

"You're too late."

A redhead has joined him at the bar. Zoe Wright-Gooding. He stoops to peck her on her ruddy cheek so that he can glance at Gemma again who steals a quick glance herself.

"I can't get off with anybody at the minute," she says grimly. "Let's go and sit in our cars. If we both follow, we'll have less chance of losing them."

I notice he has passed something to the barman - or rather, the barboy - and watch as he slips the something - furtively? - into a shirt pocket. Money? New calling cards? Is he abandoning his old

client base after all?

I phone Sandra to say I have been delayed at work. I can just make Gemma out through my rainy windscreen. She is sitting facing in the opposite direction to me as arranged. The pub doorway is right in my line of sight. There is no other exit. I get out and survey the other vehicles parked nearby. There is no white van, but the rugged off-roader on my side pointing the same way as Gemma's jalopy seems a likely candidate to belong to Sacha. I watch the pair exit, pass Gemma and enter the King George across the road. The conviction grows that they are recruiting. I restrain the impulse to go in and see. Within ten minutes they are out again and walking further away in the direction of Croxall's and the church. Gemma's headlights come on and she pulls out. In my wing mirror I see the off-roader move off. I speed towards the mini-roundabout and come back the other way. But by the time I reach the lights at the junction they are changing and I watch the two vehicles vanish into the rainy murk.

*

"I'm in a layby. Take the Wolverton exit at the M69 island. I'm just past Beatty's fishing lake."

"Before or after the hall?"

"After. Just before the Ravenswood turn. They pulled in at the hall! The girls have got to be there!"

"No, Gemma, not there. Wolverton Hall's been turned into luxury flats. And we couldn't raid it anyway. It's just over the Warwickshire border. Stay there. Be with you in five minutes."

I pull in behind her car and get in.

"Good work, Gemma. Now we've got them."

"I asked him at the bar if Sacha was his girlfriend. He just grinned. I wrote my mobile number on his beer mat. Think he'll ring?"

I am speechless. She smiles.

"You go fishing, don't you Paul?"

"I do."

"Catch much?"

"No. Not really."

"Perhaps you're using the wrong bait."

I call the Chief to tell him that the brothel may be in Warwickshire. We need an unmarked car to relieve us but we will hang on till nine on the Leicestershire side of the roundabout in case the couple venture out again. He agrees to contact his Naunton counterpart to arrange a similar watch to be kept in our lay-by. We sit in an awkward silence which intensifies to almost a level of pain. In the end I take Gemma's hand and look at her very frankly.

"I wish you hadn't told me that," I say.

"It was very wrong of me. I'll get over it. After this is sorted I'm resigning. Now let go. We have to concentrate."

A squad car from Naunton arrives and I brief the officers. Gemma drives to the roundabout to await the Earlstone car. I park up by the Grand Union. But caution stops me from going in to browbeat the young lad behind the bar who took the bribe or whatever. If I do need his help, he's going nowhere. And neither is Bates almost next door. To cause alarm bells to ring at Wolverton Hall at this stage would be a Craddock-like error of judgment. I drive away and call in for a Chinese take-away before going home. In a despondent silence Sandra pours me a whiskey. I tell

her to put it back into the bottle. Tonight I'm not going into the spare room and am counting on lots of good, deep, contented sleep.

Friday

The Chief has his door open and is whistling Jerusalem. His orchids are looking very fine indeed. "They like the warmth from the radiator but not direct sunlight," he tells Gemma who has been admiring them again. "But the secret is - *my secret* - is to mist them once a day. That's all."

I smile with fake admiration and tell him that he should have been a nurseryman. He fails to spot the barb and I carry on rapidly, while Gemma conceals a smirk, and declare that we should have a result by that evening, but that we might need Saturday if the couple stay put - as they have done all night. He sniffs and asks if it wouldn't be more sensible to have the Naunton police just arrest them both.

"We have Katya as our witness. Surely that would be enough?"

Fool.

"But as you said yourself, Sir. How good a witness would she prove? And while we're arguing the toss with the CPS and his lawyers, what state would the girls be in? Sacha couldn't acknowledge them."

"But you said that this Auntie woman and McAdoo are their keepers. We must assume they have some interest - even if it's only to save their own skins - in keeping the women out of harm's way. What if Sacha and Zoe manage to give us all the slip? And I wouldn't put too much faith in Naunton. Or is it that you want all the glory for yourself, DI Box, and not share it with our cousins across the border?"

I take a very deep breath.

"If the brothel is in Warwickshire, then the glory will be all theirs anyway. My motive is solely the wellbeing of the girls. There is one aspect of this that I need to stress to you, Sir. Sacha and Zoe - according to Katya - took great care not to be involved in the day-to-day running of the business. We need to lure them there. I want them nicked red-handed - so there is no debate in the CPS. I want to free the girls and nick those two bastards at the same time. And as many hangers-on and clients as possible. What did you tell Naunton?"

"What you asked me to. Just that they were suspects in a case of false imprisonment."

I decide not to tell him what my ace of trumps is. The fact that Sacha has Gemma's mobile number. He sniffs again, wrings his hands and comes to a difficult decision. He grants me the whole weekend, with the proviso that we review the situation on Saturday, if nothing has happened.

The headline of The Earlstone Gazette this morning is scathing. RAID GOES WRONG. The Naunton Observer of the previous evening is only a little more lenient. Surely now Sacha and Zoe know of the raid? Their little tour of Earlstone cannot be an accident. They have probably left their calling cards at the Dead Ferret too. What better night for a grand-reopening than a Friday? We just need to be patient. The phone lies in between us. Gemma is reviewing another case and I am tidying my files. The bitter coffee I have made sits half-drunk in its green cups. The clock is edging towards eleven and I notice Gemma glancing at it, more and more troubled, thinking, I reckon, exactly what I am thinking. Finally she speaks.

"Is Sacha playing hard to get with the girls - making Ghent and the rest hang their tongues out? He has to be careful he doesn't overplay his hand."

"And if invitations are going out for later today and the weekend, then he can't leave it too late. Maybe he has a new client list after all."

I tell her about what had happened between Sacha and the bar-boy. I explain why I had not followed it up and her glare of displeasure softens.

“What if he has started to use a brand new phone number on his cards? The old one might be in a ditch somewhere. If so, no wonder there’s no answer! Then what have we got? Zero.”

She gets up and spins Ghent’s phone around like a top. If there is no message by two, she says, we ought to go and see the boy behind the bar.

“Or Andrea. They went into the King George as well.”

“Andrea?”

Gemma is gone in a second. Twenty minutes later she is back.

“Bates says she’s left. Of her own free will. Lying bastard. I asked him - as casually as I could - if more cards had turned up. *No*. So I went in to see Mollie to ask if any had turned up in the Union. I showed her this one. *Not seen any*. She gave me this number to ring. What about the young barman. Shall we have him in?”

I tell her we’ll give it until three - if nothing else turns up. I can tell she disagrees. She turns up her nose at my offer of coffee and flounces out. The desk phone rings. It is Sergeant Wills. A Mr Ghent is calling. In expectation of good news, of a breakthrough, I have him put through. He is wondering, he says, when he can have his phone back. I look at it and tell him by the end of the afternoon. The bloody thing.

The woman’s voice on the phone is familiar. She tells me in a whisper that she is the receptionist at FSS. She has had two sleepless nights - a man called Jock had been a casual worker - not strictly legal. Her boss would know more about him. She had no official records on her computer and I would have to speak to him, though she pleads with me not to mention she had phoned. I tell her to tell her boss I will be straight over, that I had phoned *her*. I look for Gemma but she is not around. I take the Watling Street northwards, passing the Naunton turn and then the Warwickshire village of Mancetter where Boadiccea’s tribe is reckoned to have been slaughtered by a Roman legion. It is only six or so miles to Atherstone and soon I am on the dual carriageway which bypasses the town, looking out for the disused petrol station which has been converted into the headquarters of FSS. I turn in and park next to a white van in gaudy company livery. I show my ID to the receptionist who is rather nervous. I tell her not to worry - I have a story ready to get her off the hook. Frank Shaw, her boss, is rather discomforted to see me. I throw the list of employees he had given me the previous week onto his table.

“Why isn’t Jock McAdoo on this list?”

He jumps. He begins to lie and I tell him to grab his coat - he’s coming to the station.

“I phoned your receptionist and she said a man called Jock had worked here in the spring. But she said she couldn’t give away confidential information. But *you* can. You’re the boss.”

He looks even more uncomfortable. His eyes tell me he is still searching for a convincing lie.

“Did you leave him off the list on purpose? Because if you did, that is withholding evidence, so get your coat. You’re under arrest - *you do not have to say anything, but if you -*”

He holds up his hands in surrender. The omission had been inadvertent. He had forgotten about Jock because he was a casual.

“You mean you paid him cash in hand - no stamp.”

“Times are hard, officer. It suited us both. Jock filled in from time to time. He did me a big favour once.”

“You know him personally.”

He hesitates. I warn him not to even think about lying - I can smell it on him.

“I’m in a big hurry, Mr Shaw. Has McAdoo been blackmailing you?”

“No! Nothing like that! Not for money. It’s rather a delicate matter.”

“I swear if you tell me the whole truth, any secrets you have will be safe with me. You’ve already admitted he was illegal. I couldn’t care less. Come on - out with it! All of it. Lives are at stake.”

Shaw takes a breath and explains that he is an ex-Fairleigh Parva man, ex-drinker at The Fairleigh Arms in the days when it was run by McAdoo. He had had a very brief affair with his young barmaid on her Tuesday night off and had asked Jock to provide an alibi after his wife had become suspicious.

“He agreed to swear I’d been out with the dominoes team for three Tuesdays on the trot.

Anyway, I got away with it, and then after he had his row with the brewery and left The Fairleigh he phoned me, wanting casual work. That’s all there is to it.”

“He is a friend then.”

“No, no friend of mine. In fact I can’t stick him. He comes across as genuine and kind but he’s false. He wanted to use a van to move furniture one weekend - and, of course, I didn’t mind. Then it became a regular thing. I found him in my office near my desk one afternoon and he made some crappy excuse. He let me down badly in the spring over a job and I had to turn out myself. Since May or June he’s not been around, I’m glad to say.”

“Did he do Earlstone? Croxall’s?”

Possibly. Probably. Almost certainly. So, it must have been him who copied the key to the ex-snooker parlour. I ask Shaw if he had seen Jock in the company of a rather dowdy lady. He shakes his head. He swears he has told me all there was to tell and apologizes for forgetting to include him on the list. I look at his filing cabinet and he sees me look.

“He’s not on file. Hold on! Hold on... You must promise you won’t let him know I’ve been speaking to you. I swore to my wife, you see, four years ago, that it would never happen again. It would finish us if she found out.”

We soon have a pact. Under no circumstances would he alert McAdoo of my interest in him. Taking out a desk diary, he tears out a page, folds it and hands it to me. He holds his mobile phone in his palm to prove to me that he is deleting Jock’s number. Shaw is a handsome fellow but not arrogant. I read in his eyes his weakness for women who are attracted to him. I realize he does his best to resist and see in an instant why he employs a receptionist who is fat and plain. Are a few moments of delight worth days and weeks of anxiety and guilt? I think of Ghent in tears. The answer is clear.

“I had a feeling that McAdoo was capable of something very nasty, officer. He is a real sweet talker, but you just sense it’s all put on and done for a reason. What’s he been up to?”

“Nothing I can prove as yet. But if you did have a change of heart, Mr Shaw, and did contact him, you might be an accessory to some very nasty stuff.”

Outside, I open the page. Besides the mobile number I have an address in Bragwell, the grimy village to the north of Earlstone. I phone Gemma and tell her to meet me there. It is nearly two o’clock. I park behind her a few doors down from the bungalow in question and get into her passenger seat.

“McAdoo lives in the white bungalow, Gemma. He worked for FSS. He’s definitely our man.”

Gemma turns and stares at the bungalow and shakes her head. I phone HQ and am told that it is the home of one Alice Duffey. Aunt Alice? It is a beautiful little house. There are wall pots overflowing with orange, red and yellow begonias and the garden wall is set with flowers too.

The lawn is immaculate. Can such a place contain such terrible people and their secrets? Who would ever suspect Aunt Alice and Uncle Jock? They wave and say hello to their neighbours and smile at their children. They put up lights at Christmas. In a tree there is a bird-feeder. To be sure, I check the house number again. It is still correct. There is no car in the drive and even if they were in I would not ring the bell and cause consternation. We have them now. If they bolt for home, we know where to come. And I can always give Jock a ring.

“You sure it’s not the shabby place next door?” asks Gemma.

“Yes. I’m sure. Aunt Alice lives in a lovely bungalow when she’s not keeping the brothel. Life is full of surprises.”

I take out Ghent’s phone. It is half-past two.

“He’s not going to text him, is he?” says Gemma. “I say we have one more go at Ghent. Just for luck. And I feel like getting something off my chest.”

“Mr Ghent. You rang about your phone. Can we have a quick word?”

He closes the door behind us as quickly as he can, cutting short Mrs Perkins’ enquiry about tea and coffee. Did it really need the both of us to bring the phone back? I tell him to sit down. Has he heard by any other means or media from Sasha? E-mail? Another phone he has not told us about? He miserably shakes his head.

“Send the message - again. I want to watch *you* do it,” says Gemma. Deliberately and slowly, he complies. She watches and nods and whispers SENT. All three of us stare at the device. Many minutes of silence pass and he wonders if we are going to be there all afternoon. He has a lot to do. A lot to do? Has the housing market revived so much? I will the mobile to ring, to vibrate, to light up. It is a shock when it goes off. It has the same ringtone as Gemma’s. But it has not lit up. Instead, Gemma is now speaking on her own phone.

“Hello? Sacha? Hang on.”

She leaves the room. I ask Ghent to leave his evening free as we will probably need him. And the weekend. He protests that he is taking his wife out for dinner on Saturday night. I shake my head. Something important will crop up, I guarantee it. Suddenly I ask “Are you contacting these people in order to warn them, Mr Ghent?”

I have in mind Codrescu’s disappearance. And McAdoo’s being nowhere in sight. He hangs his head again. Is there anything else he’s not telling us?

“Because if you are, and it comes out, you’ll be charged with a lot more than sex with a minor.”

*

We are back in my car. She has saved Sacha’s number. It is not, off course, the same as the other. I ask her as calmly as I can if she has a date.

“No. Just chatting. He’s a real charmer.”

“Did he ask why you’d given him your number?”

“No. I reckon he must get picked up a lot with a face and a body like that.”

“You won’t make me jealous, Gemma. Does he want to meet you?”

“No. He’s playing hard to get. Mentioned his partner. Trying to make *me* jealous, I reckon. Said he’d call back next week. I shall enjoy nicking him. To see his face.”

The mobile rings. Not mine. Not Gemma’s. I do an emergency stop and yank it out of my pocket. The message reads *send photo*. Within five minutes a delighted Mrs Perkins is knocking at Ghent’s door, and showing us in again. I let him read the message.

“What photo does he mean, Mr Ghent? Is it like one of those you get to authenticate a website? A teapot? What is *your* secret picture?”

He swears he has no idea what is meant. Gemma breathes in deeply as if to control an impulse to attack him. He reflects. He does not know what else he can say to persuade us he’s telling the truth.

“In that case, all I can think is they must have taken a photo of you on a mobile or a security camera. They want to check you out. Smile a little, Mr Ghent, but not too much. If you can help it.”

It takes a while but after a few failed attempts where he looks suicidal, I manage to take a presentable snap on his phone. I send it. We wait. My phone rings. It is Sergeant Wills. Mollie from the Grand Union wants to speak to me. I leave Gemma with Ghent and go out into the chilly late October afternoon. It is more good news. She had mentioned McAdoo to an old customer at lunchtime, and he was able to tell her what he was up to. I jump in with The Woodville Arms. But I’m wrong.

“Heard tell of the Country Club at Allingworth? Just off the Watling? Members only. It was a glorified knocking shop. Strippers. Roulette. Well this gentleman was a member and when I mentioned Jock McAdoo he said he was working there.”

“Was? Till when?”

“Till it went bust. He went the other week only to find it boarded up.”

Boarded up? I go colder than the chilly wind.

“A foreigner took it over in August, so it was a bit of a surprise when he found it shut.”

“A foreigner? A German?”

“Not German. I think he said he was a Roman.”

“A Roman? Or a Romanian?”

“That’s it!”

Allingworth is five or six miles further along the A5 towards London. It is in Leicestershire. For a start, I cannot think of any club just off the old Roman road. And then I see it. The Barnwell. It was a pub Mum and Dad used to drive us out to on warm summer Sundays to sit in the back garden when we were kids. I had never given it a thought in all these years. I hurry back in and Gemma is a picture of glee, holding Ghent’s phone aloft. The message, just arrived, is a phone number, a land line. The code is not an Earlstone code. She asks for a directory to be sent in. I tell her not to bother.

“It will be the Country Club at Allingworth. McAdoo is working there. And Auntie. And the girls. Hopefully all four of them. Mr Ghent. Phone and arrange an appointment for this evening. Do it calmly. Do it confidently - your best estate agent manner - and you will be completely in the clear.”

He turns away from us. And turns within seconds from a cringing mass of self-pity into his persuasive, charming alter ego. *He has been requested to phone for an appointment.....He is Mr Fox.....Yes, seven thirty would be fine.....Allingworth Country Club? Yes, he can find it.....No, no preference.....He’ll leave it up to them.....It’s been quite a while.....He’ll look forward to it.....Bye, bye....*

He slumps into his swivel chair and swivels, looking heavenward.

“You never told us you were Mr Fox,” growls Gemma. “We could have been really caught out, if Auntie had phoned us.....How the bloody hell did you know it was in Allingworth?” she asks me.

“Did you speak to Auntie, Mr Ghent?” I ask. He nods.

“Right. We’ll be back here at seven. You’ll drive. We’ll be in the back.”

He grimaces but Gemma jumps in before he can protest.

“Can I ask you something, Mr Ghent? I’m really curious. What pleasure was there for you in hiring the body of a young girl who was so obviously a slave? Who so obviously hated you being with her? Did you kiss her? Did she flinch? How could you possibly get an erection? Why not just masturbate with some dirty pictures? Do you lack imagination?”

He groans under this onslaught and I hold up my hand to signal enough, thinking *at least Katya was anaesthetised throughout such an ordeal*. Has Mrs Perkins caught something of Gemma’s outburst? As we take our leave of him, her expression of smug delight seems to be verging on something like astonishment.

“Fancy a spin, Gemma?”

“Where?”

“Oh, just along the Watling Street. Do you know it?”

“Only north of here.”

“Let’s head south then.”

It is quite a nice day in spite of the chilly wind. The trees have had a touch of frost after a clear night, and many more are turning gold. To our right, as we head dead straight past the Fosse, lies Warwickshire; to our left, Leicestershire. The vanished villages of Smockington and High Cross - one of the centres of England - are still signposted, but there is no sign of them. We are right on the ancient frontier of King Alfred’s Danelaw. All the Scandinavian *-thorpe* and *-by* settlements lie to the east, the left-hand side; to the Anglo-Saxon west - with the eccentric exception of Rugby - there are none. How strictly was the division observed and patrolled? Perhaps the founders of Rugby had crept over no-man’s-land one foggy night.

I slow down for the S bends - surely a modern not a Roman aberration - in Wibtoft and see on the horizon the white oblongs of the Allingworth industrial estate rise up. I need to take the next left turn, if memory serves me correctly, along a narrow lane into the backs of the town, past the old aerodrome on the left; and the old pub on the right. I take a right-hand bend slowly below a canopy of trees no official has ever considered trimming and the white building springs into view with - of course! - tall red chimney pots. Gemma leans across me and takes a photo of the cars - six of them - in the car park on the right hand side of the pub as we look at it. Further along I pull into a farm gateway and turn around. PRIVATE CLUB - MEMBERS ONLY warns a sign as we pass again, but Gemma is not daunted from taking more snaps. She smiles. We are in Leicestershire. The glory will be ours and not Naunton’s, she declares.

It is gone four thirty. We are sitting outside The Navigation, a pub which borders the Grand Union canal on the outskirts of Earlstone. We make phone calls about the vehicles Moxie had photographed. I had hoped that the huge Mercedes parked at the club might be Mr Codrescu’s but it belongs to a Mr Ashcroft of Naunton. A customer taking advantage of an early-bird discount? The white van is registered to an Alice Jane Duffey - our Aunt Alice? The four others may well be customers or staff. No mention of the elusive Mr McAdoo. I check on the movements of Sacha and Zoe and am informed that they had been out to a supermarket and then returned to Wolverton. I notice that The Navigation does meals all day. I suggest to Gemma that we eat *now* and she agrees.

Over fish and chips we debate whether it would be wise to bring Katya along in one of our back-up vehicles. It occurs to me that we will need to reassure the girls, so we ought to have our

interpreter Rosa along, and Katya should not be left alone. The girls must be as worried about her as she is about them. In the aftermath of the raid, when all danger is past, it would be good for them to be reunited. Gemma phones Rosa - and she readily agrees. She will tell Katya that we are all going to eat out. I phone the Chief and ask for five squad cars and a meat wagon to be at the ready a quarter of a mile away at the aerodrome by seven. And another car should pick up Rosa and Katya and wait in the lay-by on the A5.

*

We watch the light drain from the sky until it is deathly white, drawing up a blueness to creep over the flat meadows from the Leicestershire horizon. There is mist lolling down the canal, wrapping away the barges for the night. I phone Ghent to make sure he is at his office. He is grumpy but ready, having told his wife he is showing a client a property this evening. We will pick him up soon. Then disturbing news. Sacha is heading alone into Naunton. He will be nearly ten miles away when we raid and that might call for a change of plan. Gemma suggests texting him to arrange a date with her in Earlstone. I shake my head. We wait. Now a new report tells us he has gone into a pub on the Naunton ring road. I relax. But Gemma says she can wait no longer by the canal and urges me to drive to Ghent's office in case he has a late change of heart.

We are sitting behind Ghent, our chauffeur. He is nervous of course but I tell him that once he has shown his face at the door he will need to take no further part. My heart beat rises as we turn into the Allingworth lane. I have just been told that Rosa and Katya have that minute left Earlstone. I signal to the posse at the airfield to make their move. We are three minutes away. I tell Ghent to slow right down. It is twenty-two minutes past seven. I want to see the lights of the first squad car parked on the other side of the gentleman's club before he pulls onto the car park. We round the bend. I tell him to pull over until he sees lights flash once up ahead. And there they are! Gemma already has her head down and now I join her. Ghent does exactly as I have told him and parks just around the corner from the front entrance. As soon as he is out, we crawl out on the blind side and edge along the wall towards him at the door. I have dinned it into him not to turn his head to look at us and he remembers. I nod vigorously and he rings. An intercom crackles and a light comes on above his head, causing him to look up at the security camera. A voice says something inaudible to *us*, but now he replies confidently "Mr Fox". A shadowy figure half-appears by the far hedge to the right of the building. One of ours. A narrow lathe becomes a pillar of light as the door slowly opens, and Ghent's face goes from half-moon to full moon, his craterous eyes squinting. He does his best to beam. Slow, crooning music drifts out from the bar. He stands still as I have instructed and now I place myself swiftly in front of him and put my foot in the door. I am face to face with a woman who is too shocked to do anything but stare and gape. She looks kindly and matronly enough to be running a care home.

"Alice Jane Duffey?"

She whispers yes but shakes her head.

"I am Detective Inspector Box. You are under arrest for running a brothel. And other stuff. Read her her rights somebody."

Emma handcuffs her as other officers pour in. In the dim light two men in a corner stand up from a table where they have been sharing a bottle of scotch. One is smartly dressed. He is indignant - and Scottish. I go straight to him and ask him where they are. He cannot help but glance at a door beside the bar counter. It is marked HOTEL and TOILETS. At the other end of the room three

men are playing cards. I tell them all to stay exactly where they are. I tell John McAdoo - who is astonished to hear me name him - that he too is under arrest. I tell five officers to cuff everybody and the other four officers to search the downstairs.

Gemma follows me up a gloomy, creaking staircase. I am reminded of a boarding house at a rundown seaside resort. We find ourselves on the landing looking along a corridor with two wall lights trying their pathetic best to glow. I count in all six doors along the corridor. There are two on the landing. From one comes the sound of coughing. It is our turn to be astonished. Out steps Zoe Wright-Gooding who should not be here. *What sloppy police work.* She stares at me and tells me officiously that I have to wait downstairs till fetched. Gemma steps out of my shadow. Zoe drops her wine glass and stains the dirty beige carpet red. She finds her voice.

“What the fuck are you doing here?”

I begin to caution her. “Zoe Wright-Gooding, you do not have to say anything -”

“Why are *you* here? Not you, you dickhead. Her!”

“She’s a police officer! DS Moxon. She’s with me.”

“DS? Detective Sergeant? You fucking creep!”

“Do you know this person, DS Moxon?”

“It’s OK, Paul. I should have told you but you’d have had me off the case if I had. I’m afraid this person is my sister.”

I drag one old man out of a room in his underpants and throw the rest of his clothes onto the corridor. The naked girl on the bed pulls the sheet around herself and screams in an alien tongue. There turn out to be *seven* of them. The groups separated at the motorway services have been reunited. Like crumpled butterflies freed from chrysalises, they emerge from the dark doorways. One - a tall one - is hurling abuse at the uniformed officers in broken English. *Now what happen - we have to go fucking home? No! No!* She is pretty drunk, and turns to me to beg for support. A very pretty one, from the nearest room, staggering, has tried to throw herself with helpless fists on Zoe who is standing handcuffed to Shirley Evans. Emma catches her gently and leads her back to the others who are hugging each other.

I hear a shout from behind me. “Oksana? Oksana!!”

It is Katya. She runs to embrace her cousin and is taken into the heart of the huddle with shouts of laughter and sobs. Katya has singled out one lovely girl to bring to us.

“Look - it is Iryna! She is good! Not ill!”

I cannot help it. I shout for joy too. Now Rosa arrives, panting from the stairs and is soon wiping her tears away. She joins them and begins to speak reassuringly to them. A WPC is bringing *another* girl from the far end of the corridor, an eighth, found hiding under a bed. She is placed quivering on a chair. Rosa comforts her.

“The poor child.” she tells us. “She come to pick apples. She is only thirteen.”

Katya brings her friend Tania - the one whose English was the best - to meet me. She smiles suspiciously when I take her hand.

“I am Paul Box. I’m very sorry that you have had such a terrible time. I want to apologize to you on behalf of all the decent people who live here. Please tell this to your friends.”

She looks at Zoe and declares she will be our witness against her. Zoe shows not a jot of shame. The sarcastic smile has faded, leaving only sheer malice glittering in her eyes.

The ambulances have taken the girls to Naunton General. The five men from the bar are on their way to the station. Auntie is still below with the WPC. Gemma has brought a chair out for Zoe to

sit on. She is a little unsteady and smells of wine. Her red hair is a mess from struggling, revealing her brown roots. I notice for the first time that she has given big Shirley a good scratch on the cheek. I think of what Harry had said about a mix-up on the maternity ward. Gemma and Zoe are nothing like each other.

"I'm sorry we had to meet again like this, Zoe," says Gemma. "I just thank God Dad's not around to see it."

"So do I," she replies. "Thank God he ain't around. Good shut. Bloody paedophile."

Gemma slaps her so hard that she falls her off her chair.

"You are a bloody liar! He tried his best for you. You wrecked his life, my life and Mum's."

I pick her up and sit her back down, shocked into silence. Both of us. That the red welt on her cheek can be explained by the struggle with Shirley, is my prime thought.

Now Zoe has her say. "He couldn't wait to see the back of you and her - so he could finger me whenever he wanted!"

"I do not believe you!"

"Leave it, Gemma!" I shout. "Her teacher told me no-one could ever believe a word she said."

I turn to Zoe. Had Sacha dropped her off here, I ask. *No. She had come in her own car.*

"I want you to text him and get him here. If you cooperate it will go in your favour in court."

"Bollocks! I've never been a nark! I'm not starting now. Do your own dirty work."

We search her and her room for a phone. She has none. I shout down for an officer to assist Shirley and for Auntie to be brought up. Soon Zoe, issuing foul curses, is on her way downstairs and Auntie sits in her place. She is genuinely upset and willing to cooperate. She says her cuffs are hurting her and is dying for a smoke. I nod to Gemma, so she removes the cuffs and picks up her handbag.

"We want you to send Sacha a message and tell him one of your customers has gone crazy. He's knocked out Jock and Zoe, and has barricaded himself in a room with a knife at a girl's throat. Will you do that?"

She nods. Zoe throws her the bag. I watch her red marbled eyes - eyes that barely sleep - as she rummages through her things. *There* she says with a smile. She takes out something and draws her hand across her collar. She gets to her feet and takes three steps. Amazingly, she is spouting blood. She collapses. We stand speechless, surveying the gory mess on the carpet and the wall as Auntie shudders a while and then dies. I stare at her contorted face. How manipulated and trapped must she have been? Trembling, Gemma fishes out Auntie's phone from the bag and looks in the directory. Under **Sacha** she finds the same number as she has on her own mobile.

"Let's just hope there's not a special emergency password," she says as she composes her dire message. "Hold on."

She looks in Templates and finds SOS. She prefaces her message with that.

"Let's hope he doesn't smell a rat because it's text and not a call. Shall I send?"

I tell her we have no choice.

"But what if he calls back, Gemma?"

She shrugs. We wait five minutes. Finally he does call. Auntie was an Earlstone girl. So, originally, is Emma. She whispers *you should come quick - customer's got a knife to Tania's throat* in a near perfect imitation of the dead woman, and switches off.

"Moxie. There is just no end to your talents."

"He's a foreigner. He wouldn't be able to tell."

She shows me Auntie's directory. The names are animals - Fox, Goose, Halibut.... We have them all - the whole clientele. Can we make a conspiracy charge stick against them? They must have

known the girls were held against their will. I call the Naunton car and tell them not to follow Sacha any longer. I go down and tell the remaining officers to return to their vehicles. And we wait.

*

The silence is only occasionally disturbed by the cracking and creaking of the old house and sometimes by the approach of cars. But none slow and stop. How long does it take to drive from the outskirts of Naunton? Twenty minutes? We have just passed the twenty-six minute mark. Has he realised it's a trap? Done a bunk?

"I think this must be him" calls Gemma from a window overlooking the road. "Yes. A four by four. He's turning in."

We have switched all the lights out in the rooms, leaving only the corridor lit. The front door below has been left open. A car door slams. An angry slam. There are urgent footsteps in the bar - and finally on the stairs. We go into the bedroom and I sit on the end of a bed. I think I can risk one of Auntie's fags and strike a match. I study the crack of light at the door left ajar. He is on the landing and he has just shouted something in German on seeing all the blood. The louder shout must mean he has just lifted the sheet we have covered Auntie with. He yells Zoe's name. He begins to open doors, cursing louder as he discovers each one empty and girl-less. Finally my door widens and the glow from the corridor covers me. He stands, a huge silhouette in the frame. He switches on the bedroom light and I take a smoke. In a husky voice he demands to know who I am. I smile and say nothing.

"And where are the others? The girls? Zoe?"

It is as if Harry has magically animated the pastel sketch he did.

"And Jock? Where are they all? Are you the bastard with the knife? Did you kill Alice?"

Something in his hand is catching the light.

"No, Sacha. She cut her jugular vein with a sharpened nail file. I got the impression she felt pretty bad about what's been going on. Put the knife down."

"You know my *name*?"

"Yes. I'm Paul Box. I'm pleased to meet you at last. You've been on my mind so much recently that I've hardly slept. How have you been sleeping?"

"You are the police?"

"Yep. And there are plenty more of us outside. What persuaded you to start up the brothel again? Was it the cod - I mean, the *pretend* raid on the old factory?"

"Cod? Why are you talking about fish? What raid?"

I cannot help but throw back my head and laugh. He demands to know what is funny.

"What was it then made you begin trading again today?"

"This place. It was ready. Why? Did you think you were the great detective? Who gave us away? That bastard McAdoo?"

Gemma growls that I *am* a great detective. She has emerged from the blind side of the wardrobe. Sacha grins, switching on his charm - then just as quickly switches it off.

"You are a policeman too?"

"No. A police woman."

"You - are a bitch!"

He holds the knife out straight and tells us he will kill us both. He lunges at Gemma. Big Shirley steps from behind the door and brings her truncheon down on his wrist, sending the knife

spinning. In swift succession the blunt end of the truncheon arrives in his teeth then just under his ribs, and he staggers back with a howl of pain. Finally, she cracks him on the bonce and he is sprawling, out cold. We stare at him, this German Goliath, now massive and totally harmless on the carpet. I look at Shirley.

“I think he was at the very least resisting arrest, don’t you DS Moxon? Justifiable force. No need to worry, Shirley.”

*

“Here’s to Moxie and Boxie!”

I raise a flute of the champagne I’ve found in the cooler. Auntie has just been stretchered down and Sacha escorted to hospital spluttering blood and threats. We can celebrate at last.

“To the great detective,” growls Gemma, with irony. “And here’s to his ingenious cod raid.”

“For God’s sake, don’t tell *Him*. He’ll have a fit!”

She laughs. I have never seen her laugh before. She throws her head back and laughs until there are tears. Her laughter gradually stops but the tears do not. She whispers something about shame.

“No shame at all, Gemma. Not on you. But why ever did you come back to Earlstone? Because of Zoe? Did you know she had a record?”

I top up her glass. She stares into space for a while and then begins to explain

“When my dad killed himself I was just turned seventeen. My mother was going for a divorce and planning to remarry. A lovely man, a baker called Ernie, from Chesterfield. I would take his surname. One fine day a friend of Mum’s phoned her to tell her what Dad had done. Granddad Wright wouldn’t speak to her. He blamed her for the suicide - leaving Dad to cope with Zoe on his own. In the end she decided not to go to the funeral, and she persuaded me to stay away as well. I’ve regretted it ever since. I never really wanted to leave him. I was forced to choose Mum because she was breaking down. Anyway, in my late twenties I started to think that Zoe might have grown out of her ways and that we could even be reconciled. My mother had a serious cancer, and I hoped that the family could heal before she died. My granddad had passed away but I had an Uncle Jim, Dad’s brother, living in Stapleford, and I got in touch. He told me that Zoe had got herself into a lot of trouble and had gone to prison. I kept it from Mum. I blamed myself.”

“Yourself? Why?”

“Because we used to argue all the time, Zoe and me. I reckoned I was part of the reason for the split. In the final massive bust-up we had, Dad told me I was a snob like Mum. That I could pack off with her. I honestly believed we’d just spent a few weeks in Derbyshire with my Auntie Gooding, then come back and all make up.... Anyway, truth was I just couldn’t get Zoe out of my thoughts so in the end I got a transfer back here after Mum turned for the worse and died. I looked for Zoe on file but her last address was in Leicester and she’d disappeared. When you mentioned her out of the blue that day in the Union I went so cold. But you didn’t seem to notice that..... *either*. Ever since that evening I’ve been hoping to get to her before you and persuade her to change. I phoned every Wright in the book hoping for a distant relative who could help. All the Goodings were Earlstone folk - my mother came from Chesterfield.”

“I honestly think Zoe is not capable of changing, Gemma. There is a malice in her I’ve never seen in any Earlstone villain.”

“No, Paul. When she’s put away I will write to her. You see, I do believe in God. Nobody’s beyond redemption. But now I’ve gone and hit her. I didn’t mean to. But when she said that

about Dad. I couldn't help it. Do you believe her? I - I Surely it's not true... he never laid a finger on me...."

I think suddenly of what she'd said about the way he used to look her. I try to pour her more champagne but there is no cause for celebration in this and the bottle will not tip.

"My dad did his best to keep us together. Kept telling Mum that Zoe would grow out of it."

"Did she honestly think Zoe wasn't really hers? Deep down?"

"No. it was just a weapon she used to fling in arguments. My childhood was a torment. Now you should report me."

"Whatever for?"

"For not declaring an interest."

I study her more frankly than I have ever dared to before. She is so beautiful in her tears. The clock above her head tells me it's nearly ten. Sandra will be worried.

"You know, Gemma, it's a shame, but a double-barrelled name is no guarantee of good breeding these days. You are Gemma Moxon. You had no idea of Zoe's surname. I never mentioned it to you. My fault. So there. I'll ring the Allingworth station for a lift home."

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Sacha's phone proves to be a mine of information. Many of the foreigners on his trade route, such as Aunt Luba, are of interest to our colleagues on the Continent. It is not against the law to be on the directory of a criminal, but it causes a file to be opened on you which means that you can be cordially invited to assist with police enquiries. These are the first steps in the process of being nailed. Offers of immunity can be made and bargains for leniency struck. And yet, to borrow and elaborate on Gemma's despondent metaphor, the rusty old merry-go-round of crime will never stop. It only slows a little, and as riders are unseated, there are many in the crowd only too eager to clamber on and grab a vacant mount. I happen to remind Gemma of this as she considers making her application to Europol.

One number on Sacha's directory is Mr Codrescu's. He is furious to be arrested in his pyjamas and glossy dressing gown one early November morning to explain this. Leonard Truslove huffs and puffs at us on his behalf but we are not to be blown down. *Of course Sacha is acquainted with his friend and neighbour - he had gotten involved with him because of anti-German sentiment outside an Earlstone public house!* But it cannot be satisfactorily explained how or why they had become acquainted. Sacha refuses to say and his Romanian friend cannot remember. Zoe and Jock, incidentally, have not spoken during any interview. Then, unexpectedly one afternoon, Sacha decides to desert the demons and join the angels as he contemplates being in prison until middle age for a range of offences - the attempted murder of a police officer not being the very least. But Vladimir Codrescu, since discovered to be the owner of The Allingworth Country Club, and therefore criminally responsible for the existence of a brothel and child abuse there, having been granted bail (strenuously opposed by the Prosecution) on condition of the surrender of his passport, is discovered to have fled on the very day of Sacha's conversion. Such men as Codrescu have hidden resources and influential friends. I think of him as a scuttling thing whose stone has been turned over, and he is still scuttling, even as I write, to stones elsewhere, though greatly inconvenienced, with his respectable camouflage in shreds. He may never be caught up with and imprisoned, but his peace of mind is at an end and his accounts in Britain frozen. He is in a kind of limbo, a mental prison.

After much debate, the animals on Auntie's phone from Alligator to Zebra have not been

charged for lack of conclusive evidence. But, anticipating that lenient outcome, I did ensure, with the merciful exception of Steven Ghent, that we made a big show of arresting them in front of their mothers, wives and girlfriends. They would need all their resources of imagination to explain away their detention against the backcloth of the sensational news of white slavery in Leicestershire. Unofficial punishment can be far harsher than what the courts can impose - especially by courts run by the likes of Mrs Maskie-Green.

The hundred percent success rate in detecting the trafficking of girls and their false imprisonment will look good in next year's crime statistics. Jupiter and Jerusalem will go echoing down our main corridor - although Jerusalem will not quite yet have been *builded here*, in the troubled and shabby streets of Earlstone.

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Gemma has called in to bid us farewell. Moxie and Boxie will be no more. She is looking forward to moving to The Hague to begin her career with Europol. Her first task will be to turn over a few stones in search of Codrescu. She has brought the Chief a present. It is not hard to guess what from the shape of the wrapping. He tears it off and gasps. It is a yellow orchid, brimstone yellow, which, he declares will be the new queen of his collection. We smile at one another as he adjusts his pots to make room for it at the centre. There are nine of them.

"Whenever you mist it or feed it, Sir, I hope you will think of me."

"Of course. It is almost as pretty as you are Detective Sergeant."

How, he wonders, will I be able to cope without my better half, then blushes at the unintended connotation. I sigh in semi-mock despair and offer to make Gemma a fabulous farewell cup of coffee. I have thrown out the kettle and bought a machine and some proper beans. However, she refuses. She hopes the Chief won't mind if she takes me to The Grand Union for an early lunch. It is her turn to buy. He looks at his watch, and wrinkling up his face and eyes with the effort of making such a tough decision, he nods almost imperceptibly.

"But," he says "I meant to mention that gentleman to you, DI Box, that gentleman on the bike who is still at large. I'd be grateful if you got on to it this afternoon and gave it your full attention. Mrs Maskie-Green phoned me this morning and was most upset....her friend was on her way home from bell-ringing last night when he came riding past - and indecently exposed himself. She was so surprised she fell into a puddle."

We stand on the steps of the police station and look over the town's chaotic skyline.

"Moxie. How can you give all this up for The Hague?"

"I don't know Boxie. I shall really miss the art deco style of The Holycroft....the old picture house....the industrial heritage of Croxall's.... the quaint bar of the Dog and Weasel..... The narrow jitties with the splashes of sick and the aroma of greasy takeaways....and of course eccentrics like Bates with nothing on but a Tigers shirt. But there are too many bad memories here, Paul. I'm never coming back."

"Come on. Let's eat."

We stroll down in the drizzle. I have not dared to ask about Andy but I deduce with my great detective skills that he is history. And I am the history that never was. I slide my arm around her slender waist and she winks and kisses me on the cheek. I cannot pretend that my thoughts are of the chastest. A frightening vicar told us all once in school assembly that to think a bad thought is

as wicked as committing the sin. But I don't think so. If more people just thought their sins, then the world would be a better and safer place.

And Earlstone certainly would be.