
Chapter One

Augustus Henry sniffed. The chill morning breeze pricked tears from his eyes. He could smell — and taste — snow on the air. He ignored the mournful *kaah-kaah* of a nearby parliament of nesting rooks, pushed the gate open and stepped into the field. The frost-brittled earth cracked under his brogues.

He surveyed the ploughed field. Ice-flecked hedgerows glistened in the thin pale light of the rising sun. A spindly copse stood frightened on the near horizon — its silhouette a skeletal fairy dance.

He sniffed again, pulled a canvas wrap from a pocket deep inside his woollen overcoat, tugged at the drawstring and removed two L-shaped copper rods. He pressed his maroon scarf against his neck, dipped the brim of his hat to deflect the fretty gusts, pinned his elbows to his sides, pointed a way with the rods, and began pacing along a furrow.

The rods remained rigid and parallel — resolute — defiant against the eddying swirls of bitter, late winter breath. Nothing, it seemed, would make these pointers shift.

At twelve paces the rods swung inwards to form a definite cross. He paused and looked down at the patch of earth immediately in front of his size-ten feet. He chipped at the shivered soil with the points of his shoes.

Something.

He straightened himself and paced across a dozen more furrows toward the middle of the field. The rods parted — swinging outwards ninety degrees.

Something.

He refused to reflect and continued plodding back and forth — *something, here, yes*, — the rods crossing, parting and re-crossing, — *here, yes, something* — and tracked out an area approximately ten by thirty metres.

Sensing all done, he pulled up and dropped his arms to his sides. The rods, like idle fingers, dangled limp from his hands. He pivotted through three-sixty degrees and scanned the ground, as if studying a chess board, or contemplating a work of land art.

Something — something forgotten — or something hidden.

He heard the sound of an approaching machine and looked over his shoulder. He turned to watch a tractor cobbling towards him.

The tractor stutted to a halt.

He looked up at the cab. A grey, weathered face greeted him. 'Now then, Olly.'

'Now then, George,' he said.

'Bloody starvin' tint it? Nithered me.' George clambered from the cab.

'Cold all right,' he said.

'Well? As found owt?'

'Think happen have,' he said.

'Then?' George pulled his greatcoat collar up around his ears and tugged on his checked cap.

'Burnt pit. And a few cists by the seem. Early Bronze age probably.'

'Bronze age?' George looked up, his eyes seeming too quick to count unpromised fortune. 'Treasure?'

He shrugged and shook his head. 'Doubt it. Few shards of pottery, maybe tool fragments, bits of antlers—'

'So, how happen then they've sat here all them years and not never caused no bother 'til now?'

'Well, that's what we'll likely find out.' He sniffed again and swaddled the rods in the canvas wrap. 'Had field always been rough pasture?'

George nodded. 'Very rough, rough pasture. Never a yield worth owt. Since puttin' field under plough had nowt but trouble. As said on phone — black soil keeps coming up. First thought it were pitch or tar, but t'aint. Soil itself black through, like crumbly licorice.'

'Fits.' He stuffed the canvas wrap into his overcoat. 'Burnt pit, probably used for human cremation.'

'Thought I knew every blade of grass, every stone, and more 'bout this spread.' George looked to the ground, folded his arms across his chest and shook his head. 'Never thought we'd be fightin' one of our own fields. But's how it feels. Wouldn't have called you, Olly, if we could handle this oursels.'

'Reckon you've a sacred site here, George. Need go over maps again, check portable antiquities database and see how it figures with other logged sites and settlements.'

'Do what you have to, Olly.' George seemed not to be listening. 'Just want us field back.'

'Give it me best shot, George. Put up a plan. But, you know, can't guarantee owt.' He wiped the tip of his nose with the back of his hand.

'Know you can only do what you do, but folks tell me you've a way of mending these things. Just get us field back.' George turned away, screwed his grey leathered face into a hard squint and focussed his stare on a section of drystone wall.

'So, George, why put field under plough anyway?'

'Thought to put down some spring wheat as a cover crop.'

'Get more life back into soil?'

George turned to face him. He nodded. 'Ay.'

He couldn't feel his toes. He stamped his feet against the ground. He heard the rooks again; their mocking cries lent voice to his discomfort. 'Gotta get gone, George. Get out of this cold.' He pulled at the cuff of his glove and checked his watch.

'Do have tell arkologists?' George asked.

'You're not obliged to tell anyone. Not found owt yet. Can have word, if need, with Finds Liaison Officer. But, archaeologists wouldn't thank you for wasting their time rooting 'round for nowt.'

'So, don't have to tell them idle buggers at university then?'

He smiled — he enjoyed George's blunt way with words. 'No. If it were Roman might be different. But no, can't say they'd be interested.'

'Thank Christ for that, don't want them shitheads up here poking about.'

'Shitheads? Why the animosity, George?' He fumbled in his overcoat pockets for a handkerchief.

'Prodding about with their spades and poles.' George pivoted on his heel and viewed his family's property; a tear dribbled over his cheek.

'Sorry, George, really have to get gone.' He brushed his nose with the handkerchief.

'Hast heard 'appen over Heavensfield?' George asked.

He shook his head. 'No. What?'

'Right much pissed off folk in village.'

'And, you care? Thought you farmers and Heavensfield folk were never best pals anyway? Troglodytes, remember your dad calling them. Pit and Plough — Town and Gown. Never any love lost there.' He looked at his watch again.

'Rather sup with a Pitman than a Gownie any day.' George turned away and marched toward the tractor.

'And?' He watched George haul himself up into the cab.

George dropped into the seat. 'And what?'

'Heavensfield? What happened?'

The tractor's engine clattered into life.

George stuck his head from the cab. 'Pigeons. Gone,' he shouted. 'The lot. Every one. Gone. Disappeared.'

†

She mounts the final riser of the unlit, narrow flight of stairs leading to Henry's attic office on the Georgian terrace of Old Cumnor. Her pale cheeks are blushed with cold. She carries the day's mail in one hand and two crash helmets in the other.

When she reaches the office door she shoves the mail into the crook of her arm, dabs four numbers onto a keypad and swipes a card through the lock. She pushes the door open, switches on the lights, puts a testing hand on the storage heater, walks across the office, sets the helmets and gloves on the windowsill behind her desk, tosses the mail into the in-tray, drops her shoulder bag onto the desk and falls into her chair. She removes her boots, stands up, strips out of her leathers and looks around the office for somewhere to stash them. She curses herself for having forgotten, again, to order a locker from the stationer's online catalogue. She folds the leathers as best she can and dumps them on top of a filing-cabinet in the corner. She opens the bottom drawer of the filing-cabinet, removes a pair of flat shoes, slings her boots into the drawer, closes it, uncurls herself, draws breath, and slips her feet into the shoes.

She flicks her painted nails through her feathered, blonde hair, adjusts her clothes and reminds herself to order a mirror. She steps to a windowsill, rips a swatch of paper-towel, mops small puddles of condensation, and preps the coffee-machine. She returns to

her desk, hits a button on the telephone answer-machine, and fires up the pc. As the machine boots she opens paper mail.

The room fills with both familiar and strange voices. Amid requests for appointments, sales calls from office suppliers, and an order for two family-sized pizzas with chips'n'dips, a strained, faltering female voice demands her attention. She turns her head and stares at the answer-machine.

'Mr Henry? A mutual friend gave me your name. Cornelia Heartisett? You were colleagues at library before you moved on. Known Connie a good many years. Suggested I call you regarding my daughter, Beverly, who...who...well, has disappeared.'

She reaches for a pen and a sheet of yellow paper, stretches across the desk and hits the replay button.

'Mr Henry? A mutual friend gave me your name. Cornelia Heartisett? You were colleagues at library before you moved on. Known Connie a good many years. Suggested I call you regarding my daughter, Beverly, who...who...well, has disappeared. She was at Burleigh agricultural college...her first year. Been a year now. Police haven't turned up anything and...and...sorry, finding this difficult. She's a lovely girl...she wouldn't...she wouldn't just...I think, Mr Henry, she's been abducted.'

The voice carries an evident pain. No name. No number.

She heads the paper, Missing Woman, and scratches a note of the date and time of the call, jots key names, and sets the paper in the centre of her desk.

She takes an ipod from her shoulder bag, plugs it into the pc and cranks up the volume. The room fills with the sound of her own voice, accompanied with guitar, bass and drums, belting out a version of Dylan's *It's All Over Now, Baby Blue*.

She smiles, returns to the coffee-machine, swaying her hips with the music as she pours a mug of coffee. She lifts the mug with both hands, sniffs deep on the black brew, and gazes through the window, beyond the neighbouring rooftops and castle keep, toward the cathedral tower. Monday, Monday. Another Monday, another week, another twenty paid hours of what next?

She sips at the coffee and turns away from the window.

A man stands next to her desk.

She pulls a sharp breath and winces. The mug slips from her hands. 'Shit!'

The intruder's face flushes with surprised concern.

She steps to her desk, grabs the ipod and yanks at the cable.

Silence.

She places the ipod in the in-tray, puts both hands on the desk to steady herself, takes a long breath and looks to the intruder.

Tall, neatly groomed, wearing a black overcoat, charcoal lounge suit and tightly knotted black tie, the interloper, probably in his late-thirties, has the bearing of a mourner.

'Sorry, ma'am,' he says. 'Didn't mean to startle you.'

'Slinking in here like a cat,' she says, and turns away, angry with herself, nerves still rippling through every limb. She steps to the windowsill and grabs the roll of paper towel. She senses him watching as she snatches at the tissue. She takes a deep breath, exhales, puts on a smile, and turns to face him. 'How can I help?'

'Need to speak with your boss, Mr Augustus Henry?'

'Well, as you can see, he's not here.' She drops to her knees and mops coffee from the floor. She notes the brilliant shine of his shoes. 'Tell me your name, what it's about, and I'll make you an appointment.'

'Don't really have time for that, ma'am, I—'

'You're American.' She stands up and screws the damp mop of tissue into a tight ball.

'Correct, ma'am. Special Agent Frederick Brannin.'

'What kind of special agent? Insurance? Travel? Or estate agent?'

Brannin smiles and reaches into his jacket. 'Law enforcement, ma'am.' He proffers a credible looking badge and ID.

She dabs her fingertips with the ball of paper towel and examines his credentials. 'I see. But, unless you can tell me the nature of your business with Mr Henry I really can't—'

'Please. It's important I speak with him.'

She returns his ID and drops the used paper towel into a bin. 'Sorry. Can't. Can't contact him. Can take a message.' She turns away and pulls a dustpan and brush from the cupboard under the sink. 'Write a note and I'll make sure he gets it.'

'And you are?' Brannin takes a pen and notebook from a jacket pocket.

'Sorry?' She kneels and brushes fragments of the mug into the dustpan.

'Your name, ma'am.'

'CK.'

'Sorry?'

'Sorry what?'

'Your name, ma'am?' He poises his pen ready.

'That's my name, CK.' She dumps the shards of mug into a wastepaper bin. 'Or, for you, Ms Kearn.'

Brannin shoves his notebook and pen into a pocket and tugs at the cuffs of his jacket. 'Ok, Ms Kearn, I need to know where your boss is right now.'

She glances at her wristwatch. 'Well, he's probably plodding around a field over at Kenthorpe, or on his way back into town for a breakfast meeting.'

'Which is where?'

'Beg your pardon?'

'His breakfast meeting. The venue?'

'Can't tell you that.'

'Think you can.'

'It's confidential.'

'It's important I speak with him.'

'Always is.'

'It's important I speak with him now.'

'Important for who? You or him?'

'Look, Ms Kearn, we don't have time to—'

'“We”? Who's “we”?' She rises onto tip-toes and looks over both his shoulders in exaggerated fashion.

'Ma'am, please? I need your co-operation.'

She looks him up and down. 'And I need you to give me your message and leave.'

His posture softens. He looks deflated. 'Can you give me his cell number?'

'Cell number? He's not in nick.'

'His mobile phone?'

'Doesn't have one.'

'You are joking, yes?'

She shakes her head. 'Nope. Says the signal interferes with his thinking.'

'Then, guess I'll wait here 'til he shows.'

'Be a long wait. And, I can't offer you coffee,' she says. 'That was the last mug we had.'

Brannin surveys the spartan office, a sour disdain clouds his features as he contemplates his next move.

She sits at her desk, reaches for the mouse, clicks open a new document and begins typing.

He plucks a business card from his breast pocket. 'Here,' he says, passing her the card. 'Have him call me.'

†

From the conservatory of the Riverside Hotel, the sluggard River Dere seemed a muddied mirror, absorbing every glint of sunlight. Henry floated his gaze over the cinnamon tinted water as he listened to Mike Veigh clarify the brief.

'You'll probably find our professor a bit prickly. Busy type. Not likely to be very helpful. However, I have a duty to members to find who stole his koi.'

Henry thought his architect friend too restrained, too straight; all lines and dims, too much function, not enough form; too many rest-homes, not enough cathedrals.

'What's his area of research?' he asked, and sipped at his tea.

'Earth sciences. Very well regarded. Based in the Department of Geosciences, in the new Advanced Science Park. Microbiologist I believe, though couldn't swear. Whatever it is, there's often controversy around his work. Such as last night.'

'Sorry?'

'You still live up by castle, in Old Livery Yard?' Veigh asked. 'And, you didn't hear it last night?'

He placed his teacup on its saucer. 'Hear what?' He pushed the teacup and saucer toward the centre of the table and fell back into his chair.

'The attack on the Advanced Science Park?'

He focussed on Veigh's face.

'They ransacked Berenguer's laboratory.'

He pulled a notebook and pen from his jacket.

'Set off a couple of explosions. Andrea heard them. Woke her up.'

He scratched two words in the notebook.

'Then, she woke me up.' Veigh took a sip of coffee. 'Thunderflashes, someone in her office said. Just a distraction while they broke into the lab.'

He pictured deafening bangs, smoke, confusion.

'You hadn't known anything about it?' Veigh asked.

He shook his head. 'No idea at all.' Balaclavas, axe handles, smashed glass, lab rats, more smoke, gas and toxic liquids.

'Suppose they're trying to keep it out of the news. All part of the new security strategy.'

'Sorry, Mike, you've lost me.'

'University has been given an uplift in funding to improve security for sensitive areas and key staff. Animal libbers are playing hell with research. They're getting extra University Police, with beefed up powers of search, arrest and interrogation.'

'How do you know all this?'

'Andrea works in university central administration.'

'Of course, yes.' He jotted names and places. 'Does she know Berenguer?'

'No, but she knows Sue, his departmental secretary.'

'And, what's word about him?'

'Not very chummy, bit distant. According to Sue a lot of his colleagues have grown very thin with his maverick behaviour. Can be very short, very sharp. But, he's a member of the society and, as such, he's entitled to our best efforts.' Veigh took another quick sip of coffee.

'You've informed police?' he asked.

Veigh shuffled in his seat. 'Our executive committee decided a private, discreet investigation would better serve the interests of our members. Besides which, I'm sure the police have far more pressing—'

'Anything else you could tell me about Berenguer you think worth knowing before meeting him?'

'Well.' Veigh flicked flecks of dandruff from his lapels. 'You could ask him about his poetry.'

He jotted 'poetry' in his notebook.

'Rather good. Three or four collections. And, he has poems in a couple of important anthologies. Doesn't make a big thing of it. Only know because he turned up at Andrea's Wednesday night writers' group—'

'Tony Morgrave's group?' he asked.

Veigh nodded. 'You know Tony?'

'Known Tony years.'

'Of course, the library. That's right.' Veigh scratched at his chin. 'Stopped her going of course. Too embarrassed to read her stuff in front of him. He put them all, including Tony, I think, quite in the shade.'

'Should be seeing Tony tonight. Maybe ask him.' He looked again at the river. Seagulls mobbed a small boat puttering against the tide. He recalled George Scarrow's comment about the disappearing pigeons in Heavensfield.

'What's wrong, Augustus? You seem, how can I say, a bit distant, a little less than enthusiastic?'

He dangled his pen between his fingers. 'Not sure, Mike. Not convinced. Something about case ... don't know... doesn't sit right. Seems a lot of effort, and expense, for something inconsequential.'

'Inconsequential?' Veigh said with a huff. 'Hardly. We're not talking replacement costs here, but increased insurance premiums for all our members. If we can establish this was a one-off, unrepeatable incident then our negotiators can probably head off a hike in premiums, saving members, in this region alone, around £50,000 in just one year. Nationally, the savings could be huge. Year on year we could possibly save—'

He raised a hand to still his friend. 'Ok, Mike.'

Veigh stood up and pinched his tie. 'Need your report by April twenty-eighth. Is that doable?'

He closed his notebook with a deliberate finality and placed his pen in his breast pocket. 'You know my terms. CK will send confirmation with invoice for initial advance payment. Meantime, get on and arrange a chat with his colleagues, and see what's what about last night's break-in.'

'Good luck with that,' Veigh said. 'Grand official opening of the Advanced Science Park tomorrow. They won't be wanting anyone sniffing around asking questions until that's all done with.'

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She couldn't let it go. Something haunting about the voice. She imagined the minutes, the hours, the days ticking by — a grief savaged mother, alone, waiting for news. She'd bottled that sense of loss for a year. *Why?*

With nothing more pressing she played the message again, and focussed not on the words, but on the timbre of the voice. Deep hurt. Pain. Loss. Certain notes and accents reminded her of Billie Holliday.

She thought of her oldest daughter, Pearl, attending Exeter University, about as far away as she could be; and Lucy, her youngest, at a local comprehensive. What if... no, she couldn't go there. What if... no, and no again. She reached for her ipod then checked herself. Was she really intending to drown this woman's plea, and her own conscience, amid the tracks of a playlist?

She glanced at her watch. Henry wouldn't be back to the office any time soon; she'd diaried him an eleven o'clock meeting with a science reporter. Given his absence, and given she couldn't share her feelings of concern... *or impotence?* She felt obliged, impelled, to do what she could.

She flipped through Henry's address book, found a name and number and lifted the desk phone from its cradle.

'Is that Cornelia Heartisett?' She gripped the phone with the same intensity as she would grip a microphone when launching into the first number of a new set in front of an unfamiliar audience. 'I'm calling on behalf of Augustus Henry.'

'Olly? Oh yes.'

'Olly?' She reached for a notepad.

'Yes, that's right, dear. Never called him Augustus, and he doesn't look like a Gus, and Aggie doesn't sound quite right now, does it?' Cornelia Heartisett giggled like a cheeky girl. 'We all knew him as Olly.'

'You used to work with him in library?' She pictured a shelfin of female librarians cluttered around an issuing desk, giggling.

'Haven't spoken, or heard from, Olly, what? Four, no, five years. Yes, five years, must be. We were separated—'

'Separated?' She tucked the phone into the crook of her neck and shoulder and readied a notebook and pen.

'Yes. Re-organisation. They split us up. Such a good team as well. Olly was transferred to the Dryford branch, up at the head of the Dale. That's when he started thinking about voluntary redundancy. He'd had enough. Then, when he got news of his inheritance, that made the decision easier for him. How is he? Hope he's keeping well. Very nice man to be around. Always helpful. And, he loved his poetry. Quite the expert, you know?'

She allowed Heartisett's fond words to fade. 'Mr Henry has been contacted by an acquaintance of yours.'

'Yes, dear?'

'Regarding the disappearance of her daughter.'

'Yes, dear. That will be Jean, will it?'

She scratched the name on the notepad.

'Yes, Jean; as in denim, singular. Not plural as in family. Jean Norrup. My best friend's younger sister. Known her years. Married a bad 'un. None of us ever got on with him. After she moved house we lost touch, apart from the odd Facebook chat now and then.'

'And, she contacted you about her daughter?'

'Well, yes, dear, in a way, I suppose. Came out during a call. Phoned her, let's see, about a month ago. Had to go to Litton Bar, where she lives now, for a proddy-rug demonstration. Being just around the corner thought we might meet for a cup of tea. And she broke down I suppose. Very upset she was. Think losing one of her cats prompted it. She loves her cats, does Jean. And then it all came out. Being on her own all the while, with no-one to talk to, I suggested she contact the bereavement counselling service. Know they hire a room in a branch up the dale. But she wouldn't. Can understand that. As a mother you never give up, do you? Every day, she says, she expects Beverly to turn up at the house, as if nothing has happened, with her backpack, college books and laundry. All very distressing. So, I thought Olly might be able to help. Know he's good at finding

things. Of course we used to tease him about his dowsing, with those rods of his. But he's a sincere, honest man. And, if he says it works, then I believe him.'

'Could you give me Jean's number?' she asked.

'Of course, dear. No problem. Here we are—'

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Squeezed between gift shops shouldering the approach to Castle Green and the Cathedral, Paola's Café hummed with the genteel murmur of silver-haired sightseers. Henry nibbled at a fat rascal. He felt a draught of cold air and looked to the entrance. He straightaway recognised her from her photo byline; Jane Preest. He parked his cake on a plate, brushed crumbs from his waistcoat, stood up, filled his face with a smile and stepped toward her.

'Good morning.' He reached a hand to shake hers. 'This is all very exciting,' he said. 'Subscriber to *Frontier Science*.'

She offered an unsure smile, removed her woolly hat, shook out her black hair and tugged her gloves from her hands.

'Mainly because of your work,' he said. 'Especially your series on free energy suppression.'

'Thanks for agreeing to meet,' she said.

'Honoured,' he said.

She shrugged her overcoat from her shoulders.

'Allow me.' He stepped closer and helped remove her coat. He caught a whiff of subtle scent. She passed him her scarf. He pulled out a chair, invited her to sit and turned away to hang the coat and scarf on a hook by the entrance.

'Damn difficult getting here this morning. Police checks on every corner. Stopped me twice.' She placed her hat and gloves on the table.

'The Trod.' He hitched his trousers and sat down.

'The what?' She hung a satchel and small handbag on the back of the chair.

'Angerman's Trod. Every seven years. Ceremonial robed procession convened at behest of University Chancellor.'

'What for?' She tugged folds from her cardigan and smoothed her skirt.

'The route follows path taken by Hangman and condemned prisoner, from castle dungeons, via castle chapel, to Market Square gallows, only in reverse.' He interrupted himself. 'Sorry. Would you like tea? Or, something else?'

'Coffee, please.' She looked about the place, tracking a gaze over the lemon washed walls, spotlit prints and paintings.

He signalled the waitress, ordered a coffee, another pot of Darjeeling tea, and returned his attention to Preest, still looking around the room. He studied her profile, noting her smooth, flawless complexion, lightly ruddied by the cold. She appeared to be not wearing any make up, and her eyes seemed sharp, quick, intelligent; sort of, he thought, vulpine.

'Why?' she asked.

'Why what?' He checked her ring finger; unmarried.

'Do they traipse around the city?'

'Celebrate significance of a liberal education in creating understanding, justice and human rights. First Hopeful was a Quaker who campaigned against slave trade. Brave choice, given Quakers were not then allowed admission to University.' With his every attempt to make eye contact she dropped her look to the table.

'Hopeful?' She tucked a few stray strands of hair over her left ear.

'The Chancellor invites a luminary whom some committee considers embodies Faith and Justice to accompany them. The person is awarded title, Hopeful. Previous Hopefuls have included Woodrow Wilson, though he never made trip; Aung San Suu Kyi, whose brother-in-law used to teach at University, and Dalai Lama.'

The waitress appeared at the table, as she served their order Preest looked around the room. He looked on at her jawline, chin, mouth, cheeks and neck. He sensed a kind of stirring, a fascination, an ineloquent attraction. Here now was the woman who had regularly and reliably stimulated his brain, his mind, his thinking, and now, in the flesh, stimulating his libido. Smitten.

He fiddled with the cups and saucers. 'Milk? Or cream?'

'Milk please, just a dash.' She sat upright. 'And all this Trod business happens today?'

'Tomorrow.' He tipped a splash of milk into her cup

'So, who's the Hopeful?'

'Couldn't tell you. Nobody could. Best kept secret.'

'Must be rumours, surely?' She lifted her eyes to meet his.

He smiled and shook his head.

'But, the locals, aren't they excited by it all?' she asked.

'Nope. Town and Gown; never got on. As far as locals are concerned all University has ever done is force up house prices. And Trod, well, roads are closed, shops are closed, market's closed. Bloody inconvenience all round. Prob'ly why happens only every seven years.'

'So, when do we find out who the Hopeful is?'

'Tomorrow. Hopeful is revealed in Market Square on final stroke of eleven o'clock chime, when Chancellor, flanked by Lord Bishop and array of robed dignatories and distinguished alumni, removes a hood and noose from Hopeful's head. All very dramatic. Well, that part is, rest is pretty solemn affair.'

'They just walk through the city?'

He nodded. 'Hopeful accompanies Chancellor and Lord Bishop and places hood and noose on altar in Castle Chapel and leaves handwritten prayer. Then they all process into Cathedral for brief service, then back across Green to banqueting hall in Castle for lunch.'

'Then what?'

'Wouldn't know, never been, and never likely to. Lived here all my life, but no idea what goes on. Town does its thing, University t'other. Town and Gown.'

'All very illuminating,' she said. 'Surprised no-one has mentioned it before. But that's not why I'm here.' She reached into her satchel for a notebook.

'So, why are you here? What's brought you all the way up from London?'

'Several reasons.' She opened the notebook and placed it on the table. 'Doing a puff-piece about the new advanced science-park for a *New Scientist* recruitment supplement, and attend the official opening. And, while here, looking to gather background for a longer piece I'm working on for *Frontier Science*, about the ethical risks inherent in universities tying themselves too closely to investors' financial objectives, with particular reference to the bio-tech sector.'

'Heady stuff,' he said.

'Quite. Our taxes fund some very dubious areas of research.' She tested a biro on a page of her notebook.

'Such as?'

'Bacterial agents designed to target people with defined racial characteristics. Super-resilient parasites which can reduce a nation's base crop to nil in a single season, and—'

'Doomwatch stuff.'

'Quite.' She jotted a few letters in her notebook, placed the biro on the table and took a sip of coffee. 'Do you know a Professor Berenguer?'

'Yes,' he said. 'Due to meet him later this week.'

'Any more you could tell me?'

'Such as?'

'Why you're meeting him?'

He smiled. 'Can't. You know that.'

'You're a private investigator.'

'Special investigator,' he said. 'Special, not private.'

'Meeting with a distinguished professor. I'm intrigued.'

'University town, contact with academics hardly unusual.'

'Is he a client? Or, is he advising you? Or, have you been asked to investigate him?'

'Sorry, can't help you.'

She looked over his shoulder toward the café window. He turned his head to follow her line of sight. Nothing.

'You do know his laboratory was trashed last night?' she asked.

'Yes, had heard.'

'Any thoughts on why, or who would want to attack the Professor's laboratory?'

'You're a reporter, surely you have access to better placed sources than me?'

'University press team has put a lid on the story.'

'You perhaps need talk with Noddies. Could give you a few names.'

'Noddies?'

'University Constabulary. Called Noddies as they spend most of their time, abright and obliging in their antique uniforms, nodding and smiling for tourists. Can't recall the last time they apprehended a villain. But, they usually know what's going on across city.'

She reached into her satchel and extracted a phone.

'Why are you so interested in Berenguer?' he asked.

She tapped at the phone. 'Could ask you the same.' She fell back into her chair and switched focus to the phone.

He watched her scroll through messages. 'Would you like to see Cathedral? Shouldn't waste your visit. Mustn't come all the way to Northchurch and not see

Cathedral. Why most people come here.’ He signalled the waitress for the bill. ‘Only across way. Three minute stroll.’

She tapped and swiped the screen as she spoke. ‘Looks like I’ll have to if I’m to find out what business you have with Berenguer.’

†

So, here he was, Northchurch, in merry old, mirthless, northern England. Like a hound, always out front. He needed to get a lay of the land ahead of his rendezvous with a native. Third on the right going up the hill the concierge told him. He glanced at the city centre map and looked up to see a mock-baronial building occupying a triangle formed by the junction of Grey Scot Road and Perth Terrace. This must be it — The Baird. Yep, this was it — the pub where he was to meet his man.

He paced the perimeter. Two single door entrances, one stepped, the other street level; both push to enter. He stepped into a small vestibule. To his left, an etched-glass paned door clearly marked ‘Saloon’. Immediately in front of him an opened door giving onto a narrow passage which dog-legged to the right past three doors to his left marked, Private, Snug and Gents; and on his right, two doors, marked Games and Ladies, separated by a polished oak staircase. At the end of the passage, another door giving onto a small, enclosed, walled outside area, no exit, decorated with potted plants and a large ashtray set on a pedestal.

He backtracked along the passage and entered the gents; three urinals, one stall, sink, hand-drier, condom dispenser, air-extractor, no mirror, no windows. He checked the ladies; three stalls, two sinks, a large mirror, hand-drier, condom machine, a sanitary products dispenser, a large plastic flip-top bin, and two bucket-sized bins. He looked into the snug: small bar, carpet, wallpaper, two gilt-framed prints of landscapes, five small round tables, a middle-aged couple, coal fire in the grate, two curtained windows, cushioned banquette type seating along two walls. Games room: pool table, bar-skittles, an empty grate in the fireplace and a large etched window. He swung into the saloon; waxed wooden floor, tiled fireplace, a modest blaze in the grate, large mirror, chandelier, square and round tables, chairs and stools, bar, piano, dartboard, and another door. Only four customers.

Quiet now, *but at nine-thirty tonight?*

‘Are you all right there? Or, are you looking for someone?’

He turned to the bar and a silver-haired, well-groomed woman, late fifties, maybe early sixties; her ears studded with rubies. She exuded poise; a certain suburban regal elegance. Her hands, both wrists cluttered with turquoise studded silver bling, were clasped across her midriff. She smiled.

'Can I get you anything?'

'Soda, please,' he said.

'Soda?'

'I mean Coke.'

'Sorry, we only have our own brand of cola.'

'That's good.'

'Ice? Lemon?'

'Just ice, thanks.'

It was his man's idea to meet in this pub. He didn't like the idea but, unwilling to risk the six months' research it had taken to find and cultivate his man over a spat about where to meet, he bowed to his operative's superior local knowledge.

However, when planning the mission he hadn't factored in a posse of U.S. security personnel being in the vicinity, now busying around the streets, invisible to most natives. He hadn't travelled all the way to Europe to complicate his life, nor complicate life for his fellow nationals; his fellow professionals. He hadn't come this far to screw up. Mission failure was a habit he left behind at an extraction point on a beach in Honduras in '89.

He sipped at the soda.

'Everything all right there?' The landlady offered him a bright, friendly smile.

He nodded. 'Sure.'

'You must be with them then?'

He sharpened his focus and looked to her. 'Excuse me?'

'Security. Watched you checking the place out when you came in.' She pointed to a small CCTV screen above the bar.

He lifted the glass of cola to his face, deliberately obscuring his embarrassment. This woman was no fool.

'Take it he won't be calling in here then? Won't be popping in for his photo op pint?' She turned away and began fiddling with a column of beer mats stacked next to the till.

He tilted his glass very slowly and swallowed, keeping his eyes focussed on her. 'Why you so sure?'

'You haven't asked to check upstairs.'

†

Henry and Preest strolled along the nave. He took proud delight pointing out features adorning the building. He hoped she could still warm to his company.

'This.' He pointed to a large stained-glass window depicting a man wearing a helmet and lamp surrounded by a young family in mid-20th century dress. 'Commissioned and paid for by local miners.'

As well as the usual quota of visitors, staff and faithful, the cathedral echoed to the sounds of stage-technicians erecting a dais.

'Concert tonight. Northern Sinfonia,' he said. 'Enjoy music?'

'My sister is a cellist,' she said. 'London Sinfonia.'

He raised his eyebrows and looked to her. 'Really?'

She nodded.

'Believe it's Vaughan Williams, Ireland, and Holst. They're attempting Holst's *Somerset Rhapsody*. Could be good. Let me invite you.'

She turned away to look more closely at the tomb of a forgotten, thirteenth-century earl. 'Love to, but can't. Have a dinner appointment.'

'Appointment? Sounds important.'

'It is.' She lifted her eyes to view the ornate painted bosses buttoning the ceiling. 'What do you know about Berenguer's work? Are you aware of his research?'

'Know he's a poet,' he said.

They paused at the crossing. The low watery mumble of visitors' shufflings seemed to still. Harsh rays thrown from the crossing-tower window speared the dusted air, mottling the floor at their feet.

She dropped her head back and peered up into the tower.

He could see, despite a certain resistance, she was in awe. He was unsurprised, it was, after all, a magnificent structure, one of the grandest examples of late Romanesque architecture in the world.

'It is believed... ' She corrected herself. 'No, more precisely, trusted sources tell me Berenguer is working with a plant that thrives on polluted soil. When processed, this plant can provide a source of fuel. And.' She dropped her gaze from the tower. 'I believe,' she continued, unhurried, enunciating each word with care. 'Berenguer is currently running trials at a former pit village called Heavensfield. Do you know it?'

'Yes,' he said. 'Seems locals are a bit put out out by strange goings on with their pigeons.'

'Sorry?'

'Their racing pigeons have disappeared.'

She turned to face him. 'There's a public meeting Wednesday night at the community centre. Could be a story. Locals are suspicious. Demanding assurances they're not being used as guinea-pigs.'

'Can't blame 'em. Well and truly dumped on during foot and mouth crisis,' he said. 'Physically and figuratively.'

'Would you be interested in going along?'

He smiled. 'Wednesday? Yes, why not?'

'Do you have a car?' she asked. 'Not an easy place to get to. Would you mind driving?'

'No problem at all,' he said. 'But, Berenguer and this plant? What's so special about it?'

She folded her arms and turned away to inspect a wooden medieval reliquary, an intricately fashioned miniature casket mounted on a carved stone plinth. It was empty. 'Sources tell me it can yield a source of energy, which, by volume and weight, is thought to be about sixty times more efficient than any carbon-based product.'

'Incredible,' he said.

'If true,' she said. 'Berenguer is headed for a Nobel Prize, or an early, mysterious demise. The man is in serious danger. Very serious danger.'

+ + +

Chapter Two

Comfortable, cobbled Old Cumnor, with its set of barristers' chambers, university reading rooms, quirky ethnographic museum, country gentlemen's outfitters, coffee-roasting house and quayside gastropub, possessed a certain, irresistible charm. Visitors appeared to think so, he thought, especially the increasing number of Asian and north American day-trippers, up from York, beguiled by its northern posh Englishness.

Never imagined he'd one day have an office here. When growing up on the outskirts of the city Old Cumnor was a part of Northcurch his family, friends and neighbours would never visit, unless summoned to appear before justices — Accused Alley they called it, the quickest cut through the core of the city to Crown Court. Yet here he was, ensconced amid the lackies of the local landed classes; an outsider on the inside. 'Our outsider-insider right in middle of wrong left side,' his uncle Bert, a lifelong trade unionist, quipped at a rare family gathering. 'Never forget where you started from, and never recall our pains and incertitude. Cripple you else.'

His attic office formerly served as a city library store, stuffed with plans, maps and charts. One of his tasks as a librarian had been to supervise the transfer of the material to a purpose-built storage facility and develop a retrieval service. He recalled those dusty late-spring weeks with his happy gang of helpers, like grateful inmates on day-release, and their daily picnics and impromptu poetry recitals by the banks of the river. He smiled.

Once they'd shifted the last box, swept up and bolted the door, the room remained abandoned for four years, fit only as a pigeon roost. During talks regarding his voluntary redundancy he negotiated a five-year lease for the room; the first year rent-free,

conditional upon investment in bringing the room into life as a serviceable office. Oh, happy days of promise.

He dismissed his recollection with a gruff sniff and stepped into the building. The floorboards let a gentle squeal.

Busy morning. Hardly typical. A site visit, a client meeting, and an encounter with a journalist all before lunch. *Things picking up?* He hoped so. As things stood he could barely afford to keep CK on, but he couldn't afford to let her go. Somehow, and he didn't understand exactly how, she kept the work and the money trickling in. He'd give up the lease and retreat the business to his flat if needs demanded, but he wouldn't give up CK. A diamond in the treacle.

He swiped his keycard through the lock, dibbed four digits and pushed at the door. Nothing. He stepped back, inspected the lock and swiped and dibbed again. Nothing. No flickering green blink, no sound — nothing. He tried again.

Nothing.

Locked out of his own office.

He rapped on the door with his left hand and pressed the bell with his right thumb. If wearing her earphones he was bugged. He pressed the bell again. The door opened.

'Sorry,' CK said with a huge, wide smile. 'Changed the passcode.'

'How did you do that?'

She held up her phone. 'With the app. Simple.'

He shrugged and stepped into the office.

'It was fifteen twenty-six, now it's twenty-six fifteen,' she said, and closed the door. 'You should try it before I leave today, case there's any problems.'

He removed his hat, parked it on the coatstand and ran a hand over his thin, silver hair. 'And, how are you today?'

'Very well thank you. But, don't you want to know why?'

'Why what?' He pulled his scarf from his neck.

'Why I changed the number?' She strolled to her desk.

'Must have had good reason. Trust you.' He smiled. 'Don't need to know why. But guessing, we likely had an unwelcome visitor?'

'Sort of,' she said.

He tugged his leather gloves from his hands.

'Have a date last night?' She dropped into her chair.

'No, no date. Why do you ask?' He shoved his gloves into a coat pocket.

'You seem, well, you seem very calm, very cheery for someone who's just been locked out of their office.'

'Have just had lunch with a very intelligent woman.' He unbuttoned his overcoat.

'The journalist? How did it go?'

'Couldn't give her what she wanted.' He wrestled himself out of the coat.

'And she didn't want what you had to offer?'

'Possibly.' He hung his coat on the stand and removed the canvas swaddled rods from the inside pocket.

'Will you be seeing her again?'

'Seems so.' He stepped across the office to the filing-cabinet, opened a drawer and placed the rods inside. 'We're off to Heavensfield Wednesday night.'

'Hardly Vegas.'

He closed the filing-cabinet drawer and turned to face her. 'Quite.'

'And I encountered a handsome and intelligent man this morning.'

'Our unexpected visitor?'

'Yes.' She took up a business card from the desk and raised her left hand. 'Gave me this.' She continued scrolling with her mouse, her attention focussed on the monitor. 'Very insistent.'

He stepped to her desk, plucked the card from her fingers and inspected it. 'A joke, yes?'

'No. For real,' she said. 'Showed me his badge.'

He slipped the card into his breast pocket. 'Well, he'll be back.' He rubbed his hands together. 'Now, what do we have lined up this week?'

She snatched a handwritten list from her desk. 'One lost dog, a missing horse, two disappeared pensioners, and a graveyard apparition.'

'Ok.' He dropped into his chair. 'We don't do dogs. As you know. Give them a ring.' He brushed a hand through the air. 'Dump 'em.'

'Missing horse and pensioners?'

'Give me their numbers.' He pulled a letter from the in-tray and scanned it.

'Anything else?'

'Something you should listen to. Heard it over a few times and, well, you'll hear. Listen.' She readied a finger on the answering-machine. He nodded, and she hit play.

They listened to the message.

He looked to her. 'And that's it?'

'That's it.'

'Hasn't left a number or anything?'

'Nope.' She shook her head. 'Number withheld.'

'Not much we can do then, is there?'

'Well—'

'What?'

'Followed it up, and a missus Heartisett—'

'Connie?'

She nodded. 'Gave me the caller's number. Jean Norrup. So I called. Arranged a meeting, Wednesday morning, ten o'clock, her house.'

'Where?'

'Litton Bar.'

'No can do. You'll have to do it.'

'But—'

'What? Bike playing up?'

'No. Bike's fine. It's just—'

'What?'

'I'm not an investigator.'

'Not asking you to investigate anything. Just get yourself up there, get basic information, ask a few questions. Report back. Easy. And, if there's anything worth following up, we'll take it from there.' He noted her frown. 'Don't look so worried. Nice trip out. Enjoy.'

'But—'

'Might first want to get yourself across to library and do some basic research. Help frame some searching questions. Might lift your confidence.' He knew her well enough to know she was unconvinced. And, he knew her well enough to know that she'd get the job done; she'd make it a matter of pride. 'And, while you're out, you could pick up a couple of mugs. See last one's gone.' He nodded to a shard of broken mug under her desk.

She retrieved the fragment of china and dropped it into the bin. 'So, where will you be Wednesday morning?'

'Meeting at Advanced Science Park.'

'Not in diary.'

'Not yet. Will be in about ten minutes, after my call.'

She darted him a sharp look. 'You bugger.'

'What?' He feigned offended innocence.

'You know exactly what.'

'All right,' he confessed. 'Think you need to be getting out of the office a bit more. You're a people person. That's a great asset. You need to be among people more.'

Though poised ready with a barb she checked herself. She turned back to the monitor and began typing. 'Work in a pub. Get more than enough people stuff already, thank you.'

He allowed a brief silence to heal her sense of injury. 'Are we set for the week then?'

'What about the apparition, the ghost? Dunside churchyard?' she asked.

'Ghost? That's right. Do we do ghosts? Yes, why not? Could be interesting.'

†

Monday night, ten to ten, and, as every Monday night for the past fifty years, the folkies were in full swing, driving up a racket in the back bar.

Henry propped himself against the upright piano and surveyed the crowded scene.

The Baird, an early-Victorian pub, with stained-glass transoms, an altar-like polished mahogany bar, a jug & bottle, coal-fires in each of its three rooms, nictotine lacquered ceilings, and the best kept beer in the city. For him the most diverse and most convivial pub in Northchurch — a rare oasis where renegade townies and rebel gownies

met and mingled. He knew, any night of the week, when feeling need of company, he could squeeze himself onto a table and join in animated conversation with, for example, a Russian music post-grad, a railway worker, a Canadian Theology student, a shop-assistant, an Indonesian maths post-doc and a recently released convict. He knew half a dozen and more locals who had been inspired to go on to university through beer-fuelled encounters with characters in this pub. The place was abuzz with rumour and prittle-prattle. Here's where he knew he could always find someone who knew someone who knew something about someone else's doings. The Baird — always his first point of call after taking on a new case.

Above the noise of the music he heard the announcement: 'Haway lads and lassies! Move along the bar now! It's The Baird's very own bar-room bard!'

He looked along the slaphappy shoulders scrummed around the bar and saw his good friend, Tony Morgrave, poet, pamphleteer and municipal gardener.

'Now then, Augustus. How's it hanging?' The tall, thick set, barrel-chested, shaven-headed poet clapped his hands on his shoulders. 'Best for me, when you're ready.'

He stepped to the bar and found two freshly pulled pints of bitter, a friendly smile and an outstretched palm. He paid, pocketed the change, and turned to see his friend in full vocal flow.

'Poetry? You want to see some poetry? I'll show you some fuckin' poetry!' His friend grabbed a customer's arm, marched him out of the saloon and through a gaggle of smokers cluttering the pavement.

The hapless customer's friends, laughing, watched the scene through a window. Everyone in the bar could hear Morgrave's booming voice; the music no match for his baritone delivery.

'See that biddy?' Morgrave pointed to an old crone wearing a headscarf, stooped on the opposite side of the street, throwing breadcrumbs into the gutter. 'She believes this neighbourhood is one big rest-home. She's convinced the street is a river. She thinks it's mid-afternoon. She's feeding the ducks. That's poetry!'

He marched his victim the few yards to the corner of the street and stabbed a finger at the railway viaduct spanning the huddled terraces below.

'See that?'

The 22:05 Edinburgh train, carriage lights aglow, a string of milky white opals, slid silently across the viaduct.

'That's poetry!'

He left his victim on the pavement, barged through the smokers thronged around the entrance, re-entered the bar and grabbed one of two pint glasses in Henry's hands.

'What was all that about?' Henry asked.

'Stupid English teacher opining on the Poet Laureate's latest injunction about poetry in the national curriculum,' he said, his gold earring glinted in the light thrown from the coal fire.

'Can't resist it, can you? You're here less than a minute, and straightaway you're into a verbal ruck with a stranger. You need to cool your angst, mate, otherwise someone will clock you one day,' he said.

'Doesn't have a clue.' Morgrave glugged at the beer.

'Who? The English teacher, or the Poet Laureate?'

'Both.' Morgrave smiled and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

'So, how's life in Outer Bohemia?' he asked.

'Not bad, butt, not bad. Except that bloody library needs sorting out.' He took an angry pull on his beer.

'Why? Stiff you for unpaid fines?'

'Multi-million pound, state of the art, public library with wi-fi, playstations and espresso machines, and doesn't have a single, fucking copy of *Leaves of Grass*? What's that all about? What happened to public libraries being the working man's university? You used to keep best poetry shelves in the north, man!'

'Thank you.'

'Don't thank me. Get your arse over there and do something about it!'

'But—'

'No buts, butt.' Morgrave jabbed at the air. 'Here we are in the city which birthed the finest early English poet-historians, which succoured venerable scholarly enquiry, and the scripting of our first words. Here we are, in one of the most ancient seats of learning in Europe, and it's not possible to visit the central library and browse Walt Whitman? Come on, butt, get real.'

'But, I don't—'

'Know you don't work there any more, but you must have some residual influence?' Morgrave looked around the bar. 'You and I should buttonhole a councillor and get them to knock a few heads around. Ok?'

'Ok.' He shrugged and sipped at his beer.

'Are we having another, or what? You'll have to get 'em in, butt, skint 'til Friday.' Morgrave swigged the last dreg from his glass. 'Anyway, how's things with you?'

'Good. Busy. New case.'

His friend shook his empty beer glass. 'Well, get another in and tell us about it.'

He placed his unfinished pint on top of the piano, caught the barman's eye, signalled two more pints, and turned back to his companion. 'Heavensfield—'

'Hardly the fields of Elysium,' his friend scoffed.

'What have you heard about pigeons?'

Morgrave shrugged. 'Pigeons?'

He nodded.

'Nowt,' Morgrave said.

'Disappeared,' he said.

Morgrave chuckled.

'What's funny?' he asked.

'Proof! Proof animals have more sense than us poor sods. I'd disappear too if I had to live there.' Morgrave looked around the room, nodding and raising his glass to four or five customers.

'Have you come across a Lluís Berenguer at your writers' group?'

'Yep. Works at University. Scientist.'

'And?'

'What?' Morgrave peered around his shoulder at a young woman ordering drinks at the bar.

'What do you think of his work?'

'That's not Tom's daughter is it?' Morgrave nodded toward the woman.

He refused to be distracted. 'Tony?'

'Nice arse.'

'Tony?'

'What?'

'Berenguer?'

'Work's all right, s'pose. Nothin' special.' He shrugged, keeping his eyes on the young woman. 'Usual dry, self-conscious lit'ry stuff.'

'What's his theme?' he asked. 'Come on, Tony, need to hear what you know.'

'The eternal — love, loss, nature.' Morgrave reached for his drink on the bar. 'Have you paid for this?'

He realised his friend wasn't in the mood to talk about anything other than his own concerns. He changed tack. 'Heard you had over sixty people here for last Friday's poetry gig.'

'Yep, that's right. Sold a fair few books too.'

'Going well then?'

'Well, pub's paying me now. Sort of. Get a chitty for ten pints. Gets me through weekend. And then there was a researcher here from some TV production outfit. Talkin' about me fronting some sort of regional cultural magazine show.'

'All happening for you then?'

'No, not really. Can't remember last time had me leg over.'

He smiled and took a long swig of beer. 'Came across something today that reminded me of you. Caused me to recall Blake's grain of sand.'

'What's that then?'

'Did you know that there are more microbes in a fistful of healthy soil than there are humans on the planet?'

Morgrave rolled his eyes. 'Bollocks,' he said, and turned away to tap the shoulder of a woman waiting at the bar.

The raucous chorus of fiddles, whistles, bhodrans and squeezeboxes fell silent. A reverent hush introduced an unaccompanied female voice, soon overcome by the loud chatter and banter of the front bar.

Amid the mustered medley of accents he caught sound of a distinct north American voice. He turned attention from his friend, laughing at his own jokes while chatting to a brace of young women, and followed his ears across the room.

An earnest young man, local by the sound, sporting a scratty goatee beard, swaddled in a baggy green pullover and wearing glasses, seemed to be imploring an older, more urbane looking companion. The older man, in a sharply fitted grey lounge-suit, crisp white Oxford shirt, and perfectly pinched blue tie, seemed unfazed by the younger man's pleas.

Though they were unlikely to be on the same cribbage team, such diverse conversational couplings were not uncommon in The Baird. The American was likely a visiting academic, the younger man a post-grad. No one, except himself, lifted an eye, nor bent an ear, toward their animated conversation.

'You done good again, Jonah, but it's no use pushing,' he heard the American say.

He took one last look around the bar, placed his drained glass on the counter, pulled on his trilby and slapped his friend on the back. 'Away, Tony. Off. Long day today, and a full day tomorrow.'

Morgrave kept his eyes fixed on the two young women. 'Ok, me ol' mucker. Go steady. Give my regards to CK, ok?'

†

'You won't ever know who my client is,' Harvey Abbot said, conscious his was the only American voice amid a roomful of accents. 'Just park it there ok, Jonah?'

'But, I need—'

Abbot raised his hand. 'All you need know is my client is very pleased, thus far, with our arrangement and your proven abilities. If you can keep it together, and there's a long way to go, then, who knows? My client may choose to reward you personally with a trip to the States.'

Jonah Wells's face brightened.

'Anyways, what does a guy have to do to get a drink 'round here?'

Like an eager retriever, Wells sprang to his feet and wriggled a way between tables and stools to the bar.

Abbot scanned the crowded room, uncomfortable with meeting in so public a place. Wells had insisted. He didn't like it, and he didn't like Wells, but he needed Wells more

than Wells needed him. The job demanded he suck it up, and the job bought him his ticket out.

Wells possessed what he could never obtain — a profound understanding of the minds of disaffected animal rights campaigners, their compassion soured by the failure of both the public and politicians to meaningfully engage with their concerns. Keeping his punk on board required he balance a line of flattery and respect; he doled out flattery and demanded respect. Suck up and fear. Pride insisted each time he sucked up he followed through with a threat.

Suck up and fear. Just six more months. In six months, come the fall, he'd be out of it — for good. Come the fall he'd collect his Army pension, his 401K, convert his bonds, cash up and finally sink all his reserves into the fixer-upper he'd bought in the Ardeche.

Wells placed two pints on the table and perched himself on a stool.

'So, how's life at school, Jonah? Happy in your work?' he asked, his mind still misted with images of chestnut trees, farmhouse cheeses and rustic wine. 'And, your diabetes? Managing that ok?'

'Never told you where I work, or about my diabetes.'

'Didn't need to. Know more about you than your mother.'

He knew this diabetic son of a department-store floor-assistant had lost his father to mesothelium at age fifteen. Knew he worked as a school science-technician at a mid-table comprehensive school. And he knew, psychologically and temperamentally, this embittered, angry jerk-off was motivated enough, reckless enough and ruthless enough to get the job done.

Time to suck up. He raised his glass. 'To a job well done. Here's to you, Jonah.'

They clashed glasses.

Wells grinned and nodded acknowledgement. 'So, what's next?'

'Know a place called Heavensfield?'

'Sure. Shithole. Used to be an abattoir there. Slaughtered thousands. Got burned down. Never rebuilt.'

Wells's satisfied, knowing grin told him his man was not only simpatico but also somehow instrumental.

'Well, here's a thing, our professor has a site there where he's testing transgenically modified feed crops. Poisoned feed crops that will one day end up in the bellies of defenceless animals. Cheap feed, cheap meat. We need to break the chain.'

He allowed Wells a few seconds to acknowledge his message. 'We need you to break the chain.'

'Terminate the experiment?' Wells asked.

He nodded.

Cue fear.

'Remember, you fuck up on any aspect of this operation and I'll have no problem letting your police know what you and your gang have been up to. You'll be looking at ten, maybe fifteen, years in the can. And, if things start heading that way don't even think about putting me in the frame. Your mother's life isn't worth it.' Abbot took a deep slug of beer.

'Last orders please!' a voice bellowed above the chatter layered over a spirited rendition of The Land of Cockaigne.

†

Henry strolled up the hill toward the castle and his studio apartment in the Old Livery Yard. The noise of a gully-cleaning machine, wobbling over the cobbles towards him, drowned the eleven o'clock chime of the cathedral clock. He recognised the driver hunched in the tiny cab and nodded a greeting.

Late, very late. But if it means the drains get cleaned and we avoid flooding then...

He continued along the narrow street and passed three men in overalls and helmets, one kneeling, inspecting an opened manhole with hi-beam lamps.

Gas leak?

The gully-cleaner cut its engine. He straightaway heard the crackle of walkie-talkies. At the entrance to Skinny Boys' Alley he caught the distinct sound of American voices. Tourists, he supposed, lost and looking for a way back to their hotel.

He turned up onto The Rise, the short, steep final approach to Castle Green, and crested the slope. A tall, uniformed figure stood next to his Traveller, the only car parked on the square.

'Hello, Eric,' he called.

The uniformed figure nodded. 'Evenin', Augustus.'

'Still out and about? Thought you were doing two 'til ten this week?'

'I am, mean ... was.' The university police sergeant looked serious but seemed friendly enough. 'Overtime.'

'What's to do?' He plucked a polythene envelope from his Traveller's windscreen. 'What's this? Come on, Eric, you know only renewed residents' permit last month.' He scanned the official notice ordering him to move his car before eight the following morning. The notice included a free pass for the city-centre underground car-park, five hundred metres away. 'The Trod?'

Eric nodded. 'Need your help, Augustus.'

'Ok, Eric, it's done.'

'No, not the car. We need your expert help.'

'Expert help? Depends.' He sniffed. 'Who's we, what help do they need, and when do they need it?'

'Step across to station and I'll explain.' The Sergeant nodded across the square to a modest two-storey Georgian building, its blue door lit by a swan-neck lamp bracketed to the lintel. 'Only take a few minutes.'

'Sorry, Eric, rather not. If have to shift car, then by time—'

'If you agree to visit station I'll have someone park it for you.'

'It's ok.' He dug into a coat pocket for his car keys.

'How much have you had to drink?' Eric asked.

He grudging a smile, acknowledged the fait accompli, and passed his keys to the Sergeant.

'Please.' Eric swept an arm through the air and ushered him toward the police station.

He hesitated, unsure whether he felt an intuitive reluctance or a truculent defiance.

'Come on, Augustus. Be reasonable. Only doing me job. Not like you've anyone at home waiting on you. Only take a few minutes.'

'If you want my help need more than that.'

'Don't make me, Augustus.'

'Don't make you what, Eric?'

'Use my powers to enlist you.'

'Enlist me? What the hell are you talking about?'

'As Master Sergeant of University Constabulary I am vested with the power to enlist all able persons above the age of fourteen and residing within a twelve furlong radius of Castle Green to aid the City's efforts to thwart all those who would usurp the rightful influence of the Chancellor and Lord Bishop.'

'Come on, Eric, what's this all about?'

'The Trod. Someone in Hopeful's team requested we ask for your help.'

The interior of the station appeared very much as he imagined an Edwardian police museum would look; solid oak desks, huge bunches of keys hanging from the walls, wooden filing-cabinets, pearl white globular pendant light fittings, all permeated with the scent of pine disinfectant. Only the phonesets, and the single modest pc monitor offered any clues to the approximate year.

He pulled up a chair at the Master Sergeant's desk, removed his hat and gloves and unbuttoned his coat. 'So, what's to do?'

'We've placed three fake explosive devices on and near the route of the Trod. Like you to tell me precisely where they're located.'

'This is a joke, yes?' He placed his hat and gloves on the desk.

Eric shook his head. 'We have intelligence that certain elements may try and disrupt tomorrow's proceedings, and I've been instructed to seek your assistance.'

'Should be flattered.'

'Your prior co-operation with the force was noted. Finding those lads trapped down Duggan Pit last summer helped swing it with the Commissioner—'

'But you Noddies don't come under Police Commissioner.'

'No, correct, we don't. Not presently. But she still has influence.'

'And someone representing the elected Hopeful leaned on her to involve me?'

'Couldn't possibly comment.'

'Ok. Let's do it.' He ran a hand through his hair. 'Do you have a map?' He rubbed his hands and flexed his long fingers. 'As detailed as you have.'

Eric swivelled a half-circle in his chair and opened a drawer in a large teak chart desk. He removed an Imperial-sized map of the city centre and spread it across the desk between them.

He scanned the map, noted individual buildings, mains water runs and sewers, gas pipes, electricity and phone lines, and a series of tunnels emanating from the castle, the cathedral and the old Guildhall.

'Well, never knew that,' he said.

'What?'

He jabbed at the map. 'Tunnel here connecting Masonic Hall to Assembly Rooms.'

'Backfilled years ago,' Eric said. 'That's not important. Look, can you help?'

He dipped his fingers into his waistcoat pocket and extracted a pendulum on a chain. 'Need a few seconds to focus, ok?'

He held the pendulum in his right hand above the map, closed his eyes for three seconds then opened them to stare into the mid-distance. The pendulum rotated in a clockwise motion, curling a sedate ovular pattern in the air.

Without moving his eyes he held his left hand aloft. 'Could you pass me a ruler or straightedge please?'

Eric passed him a wooden ruler.

He laid the ruler flat on the map and began sliding it across the printed terrain.

'Pencil?'

Eric passed him a pencil.

He put the pendulum down, drew a line on the map and took up the pendulum again. A few seconds later he drew another line. Where the lines intersected he drew a quick circle. He continued to mark the map, placing four small circles on the route of the Trod and a fifth on New Bridge, six hundred metres distant from where they were seated.

He replaced the pendulum in his waistcoat pocket, leaned back in his chair and massaged his eyes with thumb and forefinger. 'There are five devices,' he said.

'No, just three,' Eric said. 'We only planted three.'

'When we check with rods certain we'll find five,' he said.

'Very impressive, Mr Henry, so far.' A loud female American voice filled the room.

He looked over his shoulder. A tall, cropped haired, African-American woman strode towards him.

'How soon can you test the sites with your rods?' she asked.

'Well, now, if needs be. Just need nip across to flat and—'

'Good. Do that.' The woman looked at her watch. 'You have ten minutes to get whatever you need get. I'll have an agent escort you.'

He looked to Eric. 'What's happenin' here?'

'Augustus, Special Agent June Morrow, US Diplomatic Security Service,' Eric said.

'My team planted the extra two devices. We had to be sure. You understand,' Morrell said.

'So, let me get this right, have been pressganged into working for the US Secret Service?' he asked.

'No, Mr Henry, you have been temporarily enlisted by Northchurch University Constabulary and have agreed to co-operate with, and place yourself under the temporary command of US Diplomatic Security personnel.'

'And, what if —'

'Refusal is not an option, Mr Henry.' Morrell moved her right hand to brush the corner of her jacket to reveal a gun clumped to her side, and rested her hand on her hip. She focussed her eyes on her wristwatch. 'Nine minutes and counting, Mr Henry.'

†

The persistent staccato rain pattered an erratic rhythm on the brim of his hat.

'Before I forget.' Eric passed him his car keys.

'Thanks.' Henry shoved the keys into a pocket. 'But, it's well past bloody midnight. It's freezing. It's pissing down. Been up since six and am hungry, shivered and needing sleep.'

'We'll be done soon enough,' Eric said.

They watched a police officer in white paper overalls extract a plastic box from a hole in the wall of Skinny Boys' Alley. The police officer turned to face them and signalled a thumbs up.

'Ok, where next?' Eric asked.

'Follow me,' he said.

They marched the puddled street to a corner of Market Square. He took up his rods and paced toward a bronze statue of a young woman carrying a basket filled with flowers. 'Here,' he called, the rods stuck fast in the form of a cross. 'Inside pedestal, behind inlaid plaque.'

'Ok, Augustus, we got it.' Eric signalled the overalled police officer and pointed to the statue.

'Right, New Bridge next,' Henry said. 'And that's it — done.'

They were met at the approach to the bridge by three American agents, sheltered beneath umbrellas.

'Ok, Mr Henry, let's see you do your thing,' one of the agents said, a Tennessee twang slowing his words.

'Gentlemen, good to see you all, but would you mind standing off a way? Feel crowded. Need to clear my thinking. Need focus.' He covered his eyes with his left hand. An icy trickle of rain ran down his sleeve.

Eric and the three agents stepped from the street and huddled in the doorway of a trattoria.

'Thank you, gentlemen,' he called over his shoulder, and set the rods in front of him.

He took a single step, halted, closed his eyes and shook his head, scattering drops of rain. He sensed conflicting signals. He shook his head again, opened his eyes and took another pace; both rods swung a single complete circle and came to rest.

He stepped backwards three paces and the rods swung another full circle in the opposite direction. He took a deep breath and exhaled, letting the air quit his body at its own slow and deliberate pace. He snatched a quick breath and marched six steps, the rods swinging two complete circles. Conflict. He marched toward the apex of the bridge. The rods rotated at speed, their spinning motion accelerating as he crossed the centre of the bridge. Four paces beyond the apex the rods ceased spinning, and came to rest pointing directly ahead. Another four paces and the rods turned a half-circle to point at his diaphragm with a resolute unanimity.

He strode to the end of the bridge; the rods relaxed and moved to their starting position.

'Gentlemen,' he shouted through the rain, unsure they could hear him. 'Stay where you are. Do not move.'

'Augustus?' He heard Eric shout.

He wrapped the rods, tucked them into his coat and cupped his large hands around his mouth to form a megaphone. 'We have a problem, gentlemen,' he called. 'A very serious problem.'

Silence.

He took a deep breath, cupped his mouth and called again. 'There are two devices. Repeat. Two devices. One is real, primed and live.'

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RETURN TO
Haarlson Phillipps
[Home page](#)